

AFFECTIVE COUNTRIES AND HETEROTOPIAS

Zombie neoliberalism

In recent decades, the figure of the zombie has provoked a morbid fascination within the imagination of the culture industry that is entirely unmatched. A mythological figure originating from Haitian voodoo culture, the zombie is one of the living dead, a resurrected corpse that provokes shock by wandering about, driven by its appetite for destruction while simultaneously devoid of everything that could characterize its past human existence: expectations, dreams, memories, emotions, or desires. The fascination with the figure of the zombie may very well be related to a certain catastrophic feeling that has lodged itself within the social unconscious and defined contemporary existence.

This is also why the figure of the zombie has been used to characterize the current phase of neoliberal governance, which began after the financial crisis of 2007–2008, and which sustains itself more by its destructive capacity than by the vitality it had aspired to decades ago. We are living in a new historical moment characterized by the intertwining of multiple crises: the financial crash triggered a crisis for the legitimacy of neoliberal methods for managing the state, the crisis of liberal democracy prompted the rise of new fascisms, while the pandemic and the consequences of climate change led to concern about a profound crisis in the reproduction of life. In this current situation, which we can call a “crisis of civilization”, neoliberal governance has lost its capacity to use ideology and utopian visions to win people over: the utopia of efficient democracies, prosperous economies, open societies, and happy individuals – which have also taken hold in societies in the Global South, as evidenced by the popular support that neoliberal “modernization” had in the early 90s in Latin America – have all revealed themselves to be empty promises.

After neoliberalism had exhausted the heroic stories it had been telling for decades, its discourse began to be dominated by a managerial vocabulary that aimed to do damage control, with expressions such as “structural adjustment”, “austerity measures”, “financial bailouts to credit institutions”, “strict fiscal policy rules”, and “control of the supply of money” becoming increasingly prevalent. This new face of neoliberalism is based more on coercion than consensus, on the invocation of necessity and urgency than on the promise of progress and welfare.

TECHNOCRATIC INTERVENTIONS

Gustavo Robles

In Europe, figures such as François Hollande, Mario Draghi, Gordon Brown, and Angela Merkel have personified this technocratic reaction to the crisis with varying degrees of success. Amidst its crisis, neoliberalism was briefly able to propagate a narrative that a specialized class of professional managers, consultants, and economic specialists would be capable of containing the dire circumstances. But this myth was even more short-lived than its successes in stabilizing capitalism. Faced with the decline of the progressive movements that emerged in the immediate post-crisis period, the world was shaken by a barrage of populist leaders and political forces in the middle of the previous decade, all of whom began to openly dispute the precarious technocratic consensus.

Figures such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Rodrigo Duterte, Nigel Farage, and others gave a face to this global authoritarian turn. On the one hand, this turn has posed a symbolic challenge to the globalist technocrats. On the other hand, at a deeper level, it presents itself as an opposition to emancipatory political imaginaries, social equality, and international solidarity that has historically distinguished the left. But this authoritarian regression contains much more than just charismatic leaders and political forces. It is based on discourses, representations, and identitarian and exclusionary sensibilities that take their impetus from the common sense created during the neoliberal times: competition, punitive sentiments, and eradicating solidarity².

In this context, it became common to quote Antonio Gramsci, according to whom “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”³ Today, these morbid symptoms appear in the form of an explosive dissemination of all kinds of conspiracy theories, apocalyptic fantasies, Cold War hysterias, or recycled forms of biological racism, such as white supremacy. Likewise, a curious combination of moral conservatism, nihilistic transgression, and neoliberal individualism is giving far-right forces across the globe all kinds of ideological ammunition.⁴

Nevertheless, it is important not to allow ourselves to be hypnotized by the novelty of all of this, since the authoritarian turn is taking place within a complex web of pre-existing discourses, representations, and social sensibilities born in the very heart of neoliberal culture, which ultimately aimed at converting politics into something that only the elites can participate in. But when governments are perceived to be mere (incompetent) managers,

apathy becomes one of the most common civic attitudes and a renewed emphasis on the individualistic and moral aspects of dissent stokes social polarizations, protest votes, and countless instances of social violence. However, it is not only a matter of describing these morbid symptoms, but of being able to grasp what makes them so attractive, and how they manage to channel the libidinal economy in a way that, paradoxically, reproduces those forms of suffering that spawned the discontent in the first place.

Sad passions

It has never been as clear as it is today that political choices and identities are presented more in emotional terms than in the form of ideas or principles; in other words, they are based more on experiences and sensibilities than on the clear presentation of interests or ideologies. This is evident in the strong polarization that has internally divided almost all societies, as well as in the resurgence of the extreme right and the different forms of social and political authoritarianism sweeping the globe. Of course, this emotional “excess” of our political life is not monopolized by the right wing alone, as can be seen in the way that public debates are frequently moralized and reduced to concerns around individual vulnerability or sensitivity, or what is now known as “woke culture”. But the degree of destructive intensity and the violence employed by contemporary right-wingers makes any comparison between left and right seem ridiculous. As a result, critics must turn their gaze to those emotions and affects that define these new forms of social authoritarianism. In order to do so, I would like to make some comments on two “sad passions” that encode a large part of contemporary collective sensibilities: fear and resentment.

Fear is perhaps the most primal feeling in human life, that part of us that is most visibly linked to the animal kingdom. Fear is an essential tool for our survival, since it activates defence mechanisms that alert us to what threatens us. Because of this almost natural condition of fear (and similar emotions such as awe, shock, panic, or fright), politics has revolved around the question of how communities can coexist in a state of fear without their members going to war against each other. The problem, then, is not our fears themselves – which are otherwise unavoidable – but situations in which these fears determine our social imaginaries and political demands. This danger becomes evident when fear becomes a direct consequence of social processes characteristic of the most recent decades of neoliberalism – namely, precarity and risk as ways of life.

The increase of social situations defined by instability, flexibility, insecurity, and ambiguity in contemporary life undermines the possibility of a peaceful coexistence. This is in part the case because the structures that had previously organized social life – class, unions, state, nation, neighbourhood, etc. – have been rendered derelict by the neoliberal atomization of the world. At the same time, the commodification of more and more areas of life has led to high degrees of conflict between different communities and has exacerbated the economic differences between countries and regions. In short, the combination of the expansion of deregulated capitalism, the hollowing out of political democracy, the digitalization of life and the attendant disintegration of societal networks, along with the fact that competition has become a new categorical imperative have all led to a climate of instability in which people feel they have lost control over their own lives. This increases our fears and anxieties.

One could conceive of today's capitalism as a machine that reproduces itself by exploiting anxieties and fears of social downfall. In a world that considers most of the population to be mere elements that can be sacrificed for the sake of systemic stabilization (for example, when making an ever-increasing number of former jobs superfluous), fear is no longer a side effect of capitalism, but the very core of its ethos. With this in mind, would it not make more sense to consider authoritarian movements as a kind of political management of fears and anxieties? The experience of having lost control over one's own living conditions, which is fundamental to our experience of the world today, makes it necessary to seek out strategies and subterfuges that aim to stabilize our precarious lives, making them more liveable. The different authoritarian movements on the rise globally today exploit these yearnings for identity, security, belonging, and stability, at least at a symbolic level.

If fear is the emotion linked to precariousness and risks, resentment is linked to the inequalities and injustices inherent in capitalist social relations. In general terms, we can describe resentment as an affect that originates in a moral grievance and is accompanied by a desire for revenge which must ultimately be repressed due to impotence. Resentment is not only an emotion that belongs to the inner world and is then transferred to the public space, it is a protest against an order or a state of affairs that is seen as harmful to an individual's self-esteem, or that does not fulfil its promises. In this sense, resentment allows those who feel this specific form of discontent to alleviate their frustration by constructing scapegoats.

This is a key point. In a neoliberal world in which success is considered an expression of the capacity for self-capitalization, and failure is considered to be a result of individual idleness, a lack of motivation, or bad habits, we should not underestimate the capacity of resentment to act as a palliative. All of this becomes more problematic when it is combined with a glorification of one's individual power and the construction of scapegoats who can be blamed for an individual's suffering. Here the emotion of resentment is transformed into a political program. Instead of articulating a particular grievance as a demand for recognition or social change, reactionary feelings appear in the form of identitarian defences of tradition or the fantasy of an existential threat: men threatened by feminism, Europeans threatened by "Islamization", native populations threatened by immigration, urban middle classes threatened by impoverished peoples.

Affective counterstrategies

The question, then, is what should be done with those sad passions that circulate through the social body and produce fantasies of destructiveness, seek out scapegoats, and create defensive forms of subjectivity? The right wing has chosen to affirm, use, and exploit these sentiments. But what about the left? To answer that, maybe it would be useful to remember one of the principles of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, according to which "an affect can only be controlled or destroyed by another affect contrary thereto, and with more power for controlling affect"⁵. According to this maxim, it is not enough for the left to denounce these fantasies, it must produce and circulate its own emancipatory, egalitarian, and critical affects. If the current neoliberal crisis channels sad passions into outright reactionary sentiments, it is then a question of inventing alternative dynamics in which passion can come to fruition.

It is precisely here where the aesthetic dimension of the struggles discussed in this book enters the stage. Aesthetics is not to be understood in its limited and academic sense as a theory of art, but rather in the way it was originally conceived, as a theory of sensibilities. This means that emotions and affects are also the realm in which aesthetics and politics coincide: the realm that hosts the dispute over how we experience the world and relate to each other, over the way certain emotions and passions relate to possible modes of subjectivation and fields of action. Aesthetics in this sense does not refer to the theory of art, its autonomy, and its authorship, nor is it the “aestheticization of politics” that Benjamin⁶ criticized, and which today becomes the aestheticization of neoliberal life through advertising. What we mean by aesthetics is the way in which artistic practices reconfigure the sensible by intervening in the coordinates of sensory experience, hegemonic codes, and social representations.

The potential aesthetic interventions have to deconstruct common sensibilities has been remarked upon by many authors, for example, by Jacques Ranciere in his idea of “politics of aesthetics”⁷ or by Nelly Richards in her reflections on “the political in art”⁸. Beyond their differences, they both agree on the key point that these relations between art and politics are not immediate, because unlike politics, art does not focus on generating an “us” or a “people”. Art does not produce collective identities on its own; rather, it generates material and affective counterstrategies aimed at questioning hierarchies, identifications, and hegemonic ways of seeing and saying. In this sense, we can say that the contributions in this book do not promise a concrete social order, but rather invite us to experience public space differently than under the status quo. Graffiti, stickers, songs, poems, murals, coloured scarves, forms of public sabotage, cell-phone pictures, beer labels, science fiction images, paintings, mocking designs, counter-mappings, naked bodies, radio broadcastings, post cards, board games, comics, coloured tarps, banners, and memes are all “emotional acts of dissent”⁹ and, at the same time, moments of “collective joy”¹⁰ which subvert the sad passions of our everyday life under neoliberalism.

Emotional counterstrategies refer to the collective production of materials and forces capable of affecting our sensibilities and promoting critical and strategic emotional dynamics. It refers to a form of aesthetics in which the figure of the author or the genius is no longer central, but where images and signs are presented as collective, collaborative, and anonymous in origin, and hybrid, public, and heteronomous in character. This form of aesthetics cannot be reduced to any authorial self, it is not limited to the institutionalized space of museums and galleries, nor is it addressed to spectators or audiences, instead it is aimed towards the social body and concerned with sharing images, slogans, sensations, and representations that belong to no one in particular because they are dispersed throughout the entirety of the social body. These interventions exist beyond the bourgeois division of public and private aimed at forging seek to generate affective ecologies and collaborative dynamics that account for collective experiences, sufferings, resistances, and sensibilities that cannot be tamed by right-wing politics. The question is whether all this affective and aesthetic *potentia* can add up to something more than just counterstrategies, whether it can fill the utopian space that has been left empty by the neoliberal way of being.

That well-known phrase that claims it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (whose authorship – Fisher? Jameson? Zizek? – is more difficult to locate than the end of capitalism itself) provides an apt definition of the ideological dilemma of our present. Mark Fisher popularized the term “capitalist realism”¹¹ to refer to this widespread inability to conceive of a world without capitalism, a kind of cognitive uni-dimensionality that blocks visions of the future, that rewrites the past in the form of nostalgic pastiche, and that incorporates the “alternative” and the “transgressive” into the cultural mainstream through capitalist desires, aspirations, and hopes. However, the problem we face today is perhaps less concerned with a lack of imagination as it is with the inability to transform these visions into a concrete project that appeals to the affective life of the majority. In fact, the contemporary left is not at all lacking in projects, imaginaries, and ambitious struggles. From the experiments in autonomy led by the Zapatistas or the Kurds, to the feminist “green tide”, to creative post-capitalist visions such as accelerationism, degrowth politics, and eco-socialism, to leftist post-humanisms, the utopias are there: the task is to infuse them with social passion.

As Enzo Traverso has shown, the fact that none of these utopias can be put into practice has led to a certain left-wing melancholy which can be designated as the “end of utopias”¹². Another reason why this situation is fascinating is because the relationship between the left and utopian thought was not always harmonious. Friedrich Engels accused utopian thought of being a mollifying illusion that reduced the scientific critique of reality to a moral judgement and the revolutionary energies to the good will of the heart.¹³ This anti-utopian sentiment is also present in some tendencies within the contemporary Lacanian or post-structuralist left, which fault utopian aspirations not for their lack of scientific dispositions, but for expressing ideological fantasies that conceal the conflictual and antagonistic character of the social world through an ideal of harmony that contains the germ of totalitarianism.¹⁴ However, especially after moments of revolutionary change such as the Russian Revolution, the movements of 1968, or the Cuban Revolution, utopia also served the left as a tool to imagine an escape from the rigid gridlocks of the present. Perhaps what we are lacking is not so much those utopias that aspired to be the horizon and the end of politics (and that may well be diluted in romantic daydreams or totalitarian nightmares), but those more modest ones that present themselves as instrumental to transcending the present of capitalist realism.

The point is that the utopias have an important impact on social passions, as we mentioned above. In recent years, it has largely been the right wing that has managed to win popular appeal with its solutions to the utopian question of how to break out of the current capitalist world order. The problem is not only that the right has given an identitarian and reactionary answer that reproduces the miseries of the neoliberalism to which they claim to respond, but that their answer seeks to overcome the present through the lens of an idealized past. For this reason, we can say that the political imagination of these contemporary fascisms is retrotopian rather than utopian: they want to sacrifice the present for the sake of a fantasy of returning to an imaginary past. Trump’s “Make America Great Again”, Modi’s Hindu nationalism, Putin’s or Erdogan’s imperial nostalgia, the dreams of ethnically homogeneous European national societies, or the repeated invocations to the military dictatorships of the 70s in the current Latin American far right, are all histrionic iterations of this nostalgia for a past capable of consoling the sad passions. We can say,

following Samir Gandesha, that these new fascist retrotopias are based “on the need of the people for meaning in their lives”¹⁵ in the post-utopian world of zombie neoliberalism. One potential strategy for modes of imagination that can surpass capitalist realism – without reactionary longing for the past or romantic fantasies of the future – are what Foucault called “heterotopias”¹⁶. Heterotopias are “*other* places” that are juxtaposed to the space and time of our everyday life; “counter-spaces” where the orders of the city and culture are “at the same time represented, contested or inverted”, dimensions that are traversed by multiple dimensions and multiple temporalities coexisting with one another, sometimes challenging each other, sometimes complementing each other. Let us then conceive of those anti-authoritarian interventions as aesthetic heterotopias that cut the circuit of movements and perceptions and attempt to establish sometimes a message, sometimes an emotion, sometimes a melody, or a communication. Without the ambition of utopias or the re-entrenchment of the retrotopias, these heterotopias seek that which Bolívar Echeverría considered proper to games, festivals, and art, “to become zones of social experience where everyday life is performatively interrupted”.¹⁷ The book you have in your hands deals with such heterotopic interventions.

Endnotes

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- 2 Gisela Catanzaro, *Espectrología de la derecha. Hacia una crítica de la ideología neoliberal en el capitalismo tardío*, Las cuarenta, 2021.
- 3 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, 1997.
- 4 Matias Saidel, *Neoliberalism Reloaded: Authoritarian Governmentality and the Rise of the Radical Right*, De Gruyter, 2023.
- 5 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Penguin, 2005, p. 7.
- 6 Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Reclam, 2011.
- 7 Jacques Ranciere, *Le Partage du sensible*, La Fabrique, 2000.
- 8 Nelly Richard, "Lo político en el arte: arte, política e instituciones", Hemispheric Institute, hemi.nyu.edu/hemis/es/e-misferica-62/richard, 2011, (last accessed 26 October 2023).
- 9 See: *Mediterranean Commotions*, p. 266.
- 10 See: *The Art of Sustaining a Movement*, p. 108.
- 11 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009.
- 12 Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, Columbia University Press, 2017.
- 13 Friedrich Engels, *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft*, Holzinger, 2016.
- 14 Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, Routledge, 2002; Vladimir Safatle, *O circuito dos afetos: Corpos políticos, desamparo e a fin dos indivíduos*, Cosac Naify, 2015.
- 15 Samir Gandesha, "Today's Fascism is based on our Need for Meaning in Life", interview by Börries Nehe & Gustavo Robles, IRGAC, irgac.org/articles/samir-gandesha-today-s-fascism-is-based-on-our-need-for-meaning-in-life/, 2023 (last accessed 26 October 2023).
- 16 Michel Foucault, *Le corps utopique, les heterotopies*, Lignes, 2009.
- 17 Bolívar Echeverría, "El juego, la fiesta y el arte", *Crítica de la modernidad capitalista. Antología*, OXFAM, 2011, p. 419.