# Pour Myself a Cup of Ambition: Towards an Affective-Feminist Theory of Labor

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# Introduction

**REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #19**
FOR THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN

if what you want is jobs
for everyone, you are still the enemy,
you have not thought thru, clearly
what that means

[…]

degrees from universities which are nothing
more than slum landlords, festering sinks
if lies, so you too can go forth
and lie to others on some greeny campus

THEN YOU ARE STILL
THE ENEMY, you are selling yourself short, remember
you can have what you ask for, ask for
everything[1]

This poem from Diane Di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* encapsulates the contradictions and inconsistencies in life under capitalism, revealing the tension between the reality of our lives and what we hope to achieve. It highlights the need for enriching our lives through material abundance, conforming to set standards, and the drive for upward mobility. Simultaneously, the poem shows the toxicity in these hopes and desires in our struggles for a better life. This tension is the central point of departure for this paper, by challenging current capitalist structures, particularly through an affective-feminist framework, and finding possibilities for resistance in the collective.

The focus on affect is relevant in rejuvenating anti-capitalist struggles, as it allows for a more comprehensive view of the emotional experience of existing power structures. While the writings of Marx live on in the struggle against capitalism, it is important to recognize the limitations of his work, particularly in recognizing the role of women in this struggle.[2] The

[1] Diane di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* (London: Silver Press, 2021), 28-29.
[2] Silvia Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage* (Oakland: PM Press, 2021), 36.

fight against capitalism needs to be of a fundamentally collective nature to succeed, connecting existing struggles to address the root of the problem. As such, this paper defends the thesis that though capitalism poses an emotional strain for all its participants, this is experience can differ due to varying levels of precarity. An affective-feminist framework for understanding the burden of capitalism underscores the stakes of collectivity.

This paper first introduces the relevant concepts needed to understand the emotional crisis created by capitalism: as neoliberal subjects under capitalism, we are victims of hyper-individualization, or the need to constantly work more and do better to reach what we believe to be 'the good life.' This good life focuses on individual, often career-driven goals, and the amount of work and exertion this requires poses an acute threat to our well-being. Following the identification of this problem, this paper argues why we should resist the desire for 'the good life,' followed by possibilities for reshaping our desires. The things strive for originate in how we experience the present, and in that stretch of time we can envision other ways of being to create a space for resistance. We need to identify the source of our oppression – even when these experiences and levels of oppression differ among people – to reject existing hierarchies and power structures. This paper focuses on patriarchal constraints and their effect on women to provide the tools for challenging these structures. This analysis relies on emotions, vital for creating consciousness of how we experience our living conditions. Lastly, this paper shows how different, existing struggles must work together to attack the root of our oppressions and explores alternative modes of living that recognize the importance of collective well-being.

# Chapter 1: Desire and The Good Life

Capitalism has seeped into our unconscious. In Mark Fisher's words, "what we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture."[3] The all-encompassing nature of capitalist production and its dominance over social relations shapes and produces our desires. As long as we live under the reigns of a capitalist system, we lose control over producing our desires and start desiring objects that allow the system to stay in place. As such, capitalism as a system creates its own conditions of possibility; it depends on its participants to survive, and these participants must *want* capitalism to survive in return. In this sense, the system and its participants are co-dependent, a dependency held up through the controlled shaping of the desires of the people living under capitalism. One significant way desire takes shape is through the glorifying work as a means of self-fulfillment. Under capitalism, we believe that through work, which takes up most of our time, we get to evolve, grow, and reach the goals set for us by the system. Capitalism transforms us into a neoliberal subject, using work to attain self-actualization and turning people into competitors by creating individual desires rather than collective ones. This echoes in Marguerite van den Berg's *Werk is Geen Oplossing*, who analyzes our flawed reasoning of depending on our work for a sense of security:

> In fact, no matter what new plans or cuts are announced, a certain compulsively optimistic view of the opportunities is what is required of us. Looking at opportunities is looking to the future. If we are not careful, we live only in the future and put the present in parentheses - entirely in the service of that future.[4]

For Van den Berg, work in its capitalist form demands that we always look ahead, living in the future, forsaking our presence in the contemporary moment. We are not in control of what we want, and what we think is good for us might, in reality, end up hurting us. It is important to note here that capitalism is not the only system that shapes the desires of its participants. However, capitalism is unique because it creates incredibly individualized desires; there is no sense of collectivity in what we want for the future. Instead, our desires place us in competition with each other. This system creates desires of self-actualization that depend on

[3] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009), 9.
[4] Marguerite van den Berg, *Werk is Geen Oplossing*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 85.

distancing ourselves from the people around us, and the fear of being left behind forces us to compete.

Capitalism seeks to appropriate humans as working-machines and tries to take away the shared consciousness of the people needed to organize resistance. As Silvia Federici puts it:

> "Primitive, or better originary, accumulation is the strategy the capitalist class always resorts to in times of crisis, since expropriating workers and expanding the labor available for exploitation are the most effective methods to reestablish the 'proper balance of power 'and gain the upper hand in the class struggle.
>
> In the era of neoliberalism and globalization this strategy has been developed in the extreme and normalized, making primitive accumulation and the privatization of the 'commonwealth ' a permanent process, now extending to every area and aspect of our existence."[5]

We can only do away with the hyper-individualization put forward by capitalism by resisting the very system that shapes our desires. This breaks the co-dependent structure between capitalism and its participants, reshaping the system by which we organize ourselves, and allowing for desires better suited to ensure our well-being. In her seminal work *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant argues that as soon as we lose the institutional support for our fantasies, slowly, the genres that a culture uses to make sense of the contemporary moment also start to break down.

This chapter first explores how Berlant makes sense of cruel optimism and how it relates to our fantasies and what we see as 'the good life.' Then, it highlights the affective aspect of Berlant's theory, focusing on experienced feelings and emotions, to relate the concept of cruel optimism to this paper's project of analyzing capitalism's emotional constraints through an affective-feminist framework. Lastly, it focuses specifically on Berlant's use of the term 'genre' to make sense of the present from *within* that moment. As such, this chapter introduces the first theoretical concepts needed for understanding the burden of capitalism and possible spaces for resistance.

## Cruel Optimism

Our desires require a sense of optimism; we must believe that what we strive for is an improvement of our current living conditions and that it is attainable. Only if our desires meet

[5] Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 87-88.

these two requirements will it inspire action or the motivation to move towards that desire. Important to note is that this desire does not need to be *realistic*; as long as we believe it is attainable, it generates enough optimism to make us follow that desire, even when it can be challenging to fulfill the hopes we hold for the future. Berlant defines optimism as "the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world."[6] As such, the drive to find or pursue something that we cannot do by ourselves is inherently optimistic. However, there is a turning point to this optimism. A relation of *cruel optimism* can develop, where what we desire gets in the way of our flourishing, becoming a burden to our well-being even when we believe it will help us. Berlant explains:

> But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving: and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.[7]

Even though the object of desire is in the way of attaining 'the good life,' working towards these fantasies has become a sustainable way of living. We still strive for better living conditions and believe this better future is attainable. However, this optimistic relation becomes a way of living in and of itself, rather than a passing stage towards the object of desire. Through normative optimism, "the exhaustion and corruption of families in the brittle economy produces, nonetheless, a desire in these children for the "normal" life, 'the good life.'"[8] Regarding the object of desire, Berlant states the following:

> To phrase "the object of desire" as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us and good for us while others, not so much. Thus attachments do not all *feel* optimistic […] In optimism, the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object.[9]

[6] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
[7] Ibid, 2.
[8] Ibid, 19.
[9] Ibid, 23-24.

The object of desire is thus not physical object that exists out in the world but a collection of hopes and ideas. It proposes a better future within our reach if only we take the necessary actions to work towards this future and the better life it represents. In a capitalist system, this desire is the promise of 'the good life,' where we reach a state of self-fulfillment through our jobs and the constant increase of our productivity. As long as we abide by the living conditions and desires projected onto us by capitalism, we remain in a limbo, or an intermediate state, waiting to reach the object of desire while this object prevents us from experiencing 'the good life.' To move away from this relation of cruel optimism to our hopes and desires for the future requires a radical break with the idealized image of what our lives should be according to capitalism.

**Affect Theory**

Our experience of the present and what we wish for ourselves in the future is affective by nature. Everything we do is motivated by emotion. Especially in analyzing the optimism we feel toward the future, it becomes clear that we can get so distracted looking ahead, that this optimism turns into normative optimism, a state of being in and of itself. Berlant notes on the affective structure of optimism:

> Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way.[10]

Any optimistic relation we have is inherently an affective relation. Our desires are situated in how we perceive the present moment. The present moment, in turn, is an affect, where our position in the social world dictates our experience of this present. The levels of precarity dictate the social position we experience. At its core, precarity is a condition of dependency as none of us are entirely self-sufficient; we need others to survive, for physiological and safety needs or a sense of belonging. A capitalist system does not prioritize the health and needs of its participants, but creates and destroys resources and people according to the market's demands.[11] Capitalism tells us that we need to work harder and in more socially valued jobs to attain what we believe to be a better future where we can reach self-

[10] Ibid, 2.
[11] Ibid, 192.

fulfillment, viewing work as a means of emancipation. However, work does *not* emancipate. As van den Berg puts it:

> Work makes us dependent on the market, and forces us to compete and to run in a way that exhausts many. The division of labor in which caring tasks came naturally to women was a form of oppression. But the model in which no one has time left for loved ones or housekeeping, in which no one has time left to be there for each other, to care, because everyone is too busy with paid work, is not a good alternative.[12]

We strive for a better future which seems attainable, thereby inspiring our actions to work towards 'the good life.' However, we get so distracted by trying to do and be better that we do not see that our desires are unreachable in the system that makes us want these things in the first place —a relation of cruel optimism par excellence. Objects of desire do not necessarily need to *feel* optimistic, and some scenes of optimism are crueler than others, but the promises put forward by the object of desire are always situated in the present moment. Again, the temporal aspect of this optimism is essential. What we desire is determined by the public and personal filtering of the situation and ongoing events. What we desire, or what attachment we have to our fantasies, is then dictated by the contemporary moment and how it presents itself to us. Only from the contemporary moment can we formulate what we would *rather* have or be, and these desires are subject to the context of our physical environment and emotions.

To prioritize our well-being and distance ourselves from the normative optimism that directs our lives, redefining how we experience the contemporary moment becomes essential. Our desires are rooted in how we experience our lives and the structures of oppression and precarity that come with it. Overworked, stuck in the routine of our daily struggles, it becomes challenging to identify capitalism as an overarching structure that keeps the systems of oppression we experience in place. In other words, capitalism prevents us from identifying the system as the root cause of our struggles by keeping us occupied with ourselves as the neoliberal subject *and* project. As such, moving to a system that prioritizes collective well-being becomes impossible without reformulating the object of desire. The object of desire, in turn, relies on our experience of the present. Then, the road to a world where care for ourselves and others requires reformulating our affective relation to the present moment. These different ways the present reveals itself tie into Berlant's conceptualization of *genres*.

[12] van den Berg, *Werk is Geen Oplossing*, 53.

**Genres**

Genres are emotionally charged systems of guidelines for behavior and interpretation. The acting and interpreting subject, their emotions and sensations, their conflicts, and their historical present are affectively organized inside these settings. Berlant introduces genres as a way of differentiating types of "historical duration that mark the unfolding activity of the contemporary moment."[13] The present first makes us *feel* before it becomes a thing in itself. As such, the present is inherently temporal, as it relies on personal and public processing of certain things that are happening. To make sense of the present from *within that moment*, Berlant uses genres, which provide ways of making sense of how the present unfolds itself. As Berlant puts it:

> Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold […]. The waning of genre frames different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates.[14]

The waning of genres is a decrease our expectations of how an event unfolds. With 'the impasse', Berlant refers to a time in which the present is still just an affect, and difficult to make sense of. The experience of the impasse depends on various social factors; our place and experiences in the social world guide how we compose ourselves in a state of impassivity. With explicating the impasse, it is also worth touching upon Berlant's understanding of 'the ordinary.' As we relate to the world around us in a state of cruel optimism, the ordinary takes shape as "an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to new proliferating pressures to scramble modes of living on".[15] In a capitalist system, we strive to live 'the good life' as an object of desire in the future, shaped by how we experience the impasse as we try to make sense of the present. The time between the present moment and the future where we hope to live 'the good life' is the ordinary, where things are *just the way they are*, and we try to find ways to make our lives bearable under precarious circumstances. In Berlant's view, capitalism does not *organize* the ordinary; rather, it *disorganizes* it. The ordinary is a zone of convergence where people come together and regulate their lives, faced with the threats of what we believe is 'the good life.'

As long as we make sense of the world around us through a relation of cruel optimism, we are unable to live in the contemporary moment. As already touched upon in the

[13] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.
[14] Ibid, 6.
[15] Ibid, 8.

quote by van den Berg earlier in this chapter, the capitalist system requires us to live in service of the future and put the present in parentheses. As such, it becomes impossible to fully make sense of the impasse, as we, affectively, are never fully present in the moment. While we need to make some sense of the present moment to determine our objects of desire, capitalism requires us to be so focused on this future goal that it becomes increasingly difficult to focus on the here and now. As such, we get stuck in the ordinary, where we normalize our shared suffering by defining our precarity as *the way things are* rather than rightfully claiming our experience of the present as shaped by crisis. To improve our living conditions, individually and collectively, the time in which the present has not yet fully unfolded itself to us and instead takes on a primarily affective form offers possibilities. The ordinary, as this zone of convergence where we try to make our lives bearable despite the levels of precarity we experience from it, is a variation of the impasse. By challenging the ordinary and focusing on other possible modalities of the impasse, we can restructure our affective relationship to the present moment and the objects of desire that flow from it, thereby allowing for a re-envisioning of our ways of self-organization and challenging the hierarchies and power structures immanent in capitalism.

By challenging existing hierarchies from the impasse, the concept of the impasse becomes two-fold; it is both a term to explain how we encounter the present, and a means of identifying the precarity experienced by people *in* the present.[16] By recognizing the present as an impasse, we create different ways to live, feel, and adjust the norms of the reproduction of life. As explained by Berlant:

> The impasse is a space of time lived without a narrative genre. Adaptation to it usually involves a gesture or undramatic action that points to and revises an unresolved situation […] An impasse is decompositional – in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading. That delay enables us to develop gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with in the world as well as of rejection, refusal, detachment, psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation.[17]

To challenge the ordinary, we must identify oppression structures projected onto us through capitalism. A mass rejection of these structures is needed to envision a different world. It allows us to move toward creating a different social structure that prioritizes the well-being of

[16] Ibid, 199.
[17] Ibid.

its participants above all. As a result, we get to reshape the impasse following the rejection of our being in the world in the ordinary and re-inventing how we relate to ourselves and each other.

# Chapter 2: The Feminist-Affective Framework

The previous chapter discussed our pursuit of 'the good life.' However, we can only do so through work, and it follows that work becomes a necessary part of the optimistic pursuit our desires. As such, capitalism made human labor the foundation of wealth accumulation and has needed to maximize its exploitation by treating our bodies like work-machines. [18] This creates a relation of cruel optimism, where we believe there is a better future ahead and that it is attainable by us, but where our optimistic pursuits are actually in the way of attaining what we believe is 'the good life.' How the present unfolds itself to us determines our expectations of the future, thereby dictating what desires we hold to be worth pursuing. However, in waiting to attain 'the good life,' we find ourselves in the impasse, where we try to find new ways of making the emotional crisis we experience  a result of capitalist exploitation bearable.

The experience of this exploitation differs among the subjects living in a capitalist society due to added social constraints. For example, "[w]omen, in capitalist development, have suffered a double process of mechanization. Besides being subjected to the discipline of work, paid and unpaid, in plantations, factories, and homes, they have been expropriated from their bodies and turned into sexual objects and breeding machines."[19] As such, it is crucial to examine how capitalism creates different levels of precarity for different members of society to understand how we can organize ourselves differently. This examination requires an affective analysis of the lived experience of capitalism; this chapter focuses specifically on women, many other positionalities can lead to more unfair treatment under capitalism. The analysis of the female experience allows for a blueprint of how we can rethink our desires and rise above the exploitative measures of capitalism.

It is essential first to specify the difference between *precarity* and *precariousness,* to allow for a more critical analysis of the additional constraints put on certain members of society. In her essay collection *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice*, Judith Butler explores matters of injurability and aggression, seeking to arrest cycles of violence in a way that does not generate *more* violence. At the core of this exploration is our fundamental dependence on others and the vulnerability that flows from it. However, within this interdependency system, vulnerability levels differ among individuals. Butler differentiates

[18] Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020), 11.
[19] Ibid, 14.

between ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarity,’ where precariousness is a physical vulnerability shared by everyone — everyone can come under threat of bodily harm and death. Precarity, in turn, is a specific type of vulnerability, limited to the underprivileged and disenfranchised, highlighting how some lives are more endangered than others due to sociopolitical circumstances. All bodies are threatened by pain, harm, and death and are thus in a state of precariousness, yet some bodies are more protected, and others are more exposed, creating differences in their states of precarity. [20] As such, corporeal fragility both equalizes and differentiates. Everyone experiences precariousness; precarity is unevenly distributed. We are socially constituted bodies, fundamentally, attached to the people around us, and our chances of survival follow from these attachments.[21] As established in the previous chapter, under capitalism, we tend to get stuck in ‘the ordinary ’and accept our current living conditions while we are living in a state of precarity.

To further develop this experience of precarity in capitalism, this chapter will focus on patriarchal constraints imposed on women to understand how, within capitalism, precarity distributes unequally. Then, this chapter will introduce the importance of framing life under capitalism as an *emotional* crisis. It will further clarify the affective structure of this burden, particularly the pain felt among the people experiencing it. Finally, this chapter looks ahead to identify alternative ways of living, particularly in the form of commons, to generate new ways of self-organization where we can respect our fundamentally affective relations to each other and to help us detach from the relation of cruel optimism we hold to our desires in a capitalist system.

**Patriarchal Constraints**

For women, capitalism creates a higher level of precarity by the reproduction of a patriarchal system. First, it is worth asking if "women" is still a necessary category for feminist politics, given the variety of histories and experiences that fall under this term. According to Federici, “Surely we can conceive of experiences like maternity, child raising, and social subordination to men as constituting a *common terrain of struggle for women* even if it is one in which contrasting strategies may develop.”[22] As such, we can define “women” as a collective social identity embraced through a process of struggle; “It is not just a performance, an embodiment

[20] Janell Watson, “Butler’s Biopolitics: Precarious Community,” *Theory & Event* 15, no. 2 (2012).
[21] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (New York: Verso Books, 2004), 20.
[22] Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, 3.

of institutional norms, but also a contested terrain, constantly being fought over and redefined."[23] This paper focuses on two particular patriarchal constraints women face within capitalism. First, there is the sexual division of labor. Undoubtedly, women are much less tied to the family and men than in the past. However, the relative autonomy women gained over time comes at a heavy cost. As Federici explains:

> Nothing has changed in the workplace. As we know, most jobs assume that workers are free from family commitments or have someone at home taking care of housework. But as 40 percent of women are the sole providers for their families and the rest have partners who are also employed, domestic work does not disappear when we work outside the home. It is done at night, on weekends, at times that should be devoted to resting and other activities. This means that for many women the workweek averages from sixty to ninety hours, like at the peak of the Industrial Revolution, starting at six in the morning and ending at nine in the evening.[24]

Capitalism has had to restructure the process of social reproduction to force people to work, whether paid or unpaid, changing how we relate to work as well as to our sense of identity, space and time, and our social and sexual lives.[25] Women are generally required to do more unpaid, emotional work. At the end of the 19th century, the bourgeois perception of female industrial workers was that they posed a danger to the establishment of a reliable labor force and needed to be subjugated. The "domestication" of the working-class family and the emergence of the working-class housewife as a full-time occupation became official policies, ushering in a new phase of capital accumulation.[26] Later, the institutionalization of the working-class housewife posed a new threat to capitalism. Women were getting increasingly frustrated with family discipline, resisting housework and sexual work, and increasing rates of divorce, putting the ideal of the working-class family in danger. As a result, the capitalist system allowed for women's sexual liberation and their re-entry into the job market, while still expecting caring tasks to be performed by women.

Second, there is the way women's bodies have become a territory of control. Capitalism needs workers, but it also needs consumers to survive. The size of the population, as a means of sustaining the system, then becomes of political importance. As such, women are defined by their bodies, that is, "as beings dominated by their biology, insofar as it has

[23] Ibid, 48.
[24] Ibid, 36-37.
[25] Ibid, 77.
[26] Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage*, 110.

appropriated reproductive capacity and put it at the service of the reproduction of the workforce and the labor market"[27]. State and capital take their domination further by exercising control over who is *allowed* to reproduce and who is not.[28] In the construction of capitalist society, female sexuality was, for a long time, regarded as service, not as pleasure.[29] Although the discourse on women's sexuality has changed over time, with a stronger focus on women's enjoyment of sex and the quest for the female orgasm, today's women can only be sexually liberated if they are freed from 'sex,' not if their sexual labor becomes more intense. "Liberation of sex" refers to escape from the constraints that force women to live their sexuality and turn it into arduous work.[30] This liberation is not defined how we can achieve 'the good life,' as we see in the reclaiming of women's sexuality; it is by overthrowing the power structures that dictate this 'good life.'

Focusing on patriarchal constraints gives insight into how to position ourselves in the struggle to reshape the system. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is only by defining the power structures that define how we relate to the world that we can reshape our relation to the present moment and how it unfolds itself to us. The impasse allows for a space of reconsideration, the space where we can reposition ourselves in regards to the present, but only through the analysis and rejection of the power structures that are held in place by capitalism. Interlocking systems of domination, such as that of capitalism and the patriarchy, create new levels of precarity and thus create a new reality for the dominated subject. In its focus on feminism, this chapter exemplifies the effect of hierarchies and power relations prevalent in capitalism. A rejection of the system as a whole requires a thorough analysis of how overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination operate, also known as intersectionality, which is further explicated in the next chapter.

**The Realm of Emotion**

In thinking about what cruel optimism means for how we relate to the world around us, it is essential to formulate neoliberalism as an emotional crisis. Affect theory provides a way of understanding the sensations and resignations of the present, the now-normalized exhaustion that comes with life in the new economy. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed

[27] Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, 23.
[28] Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, 16.
[29] Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage*, 114.
[30]Ibid, 121.

states, "Attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become invested in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of living death."[31] If we relate to the world of capitalism in a relation of cruel optimism, how come we willingly keep this structure in place? How come we *want* to work ourselves to death, living in a state of constant precarity? Ahmed notes the following:

> [E]motionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow 'others 'with meaning and value. […] I want to reflect on the processes whereby 'being emotional 'comes to be seen as a characteristic of some bodies and not others, in the first place. To do this, we need to consider how emotions operate to 'make 'and 'shape 'bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others.[32]

Ahmed's theory of emotion provides a crucial insight into the connection between emotions, power structures, how these structures distribute precarity, and the preservation of capitalism. Ahmed states that:

> Whether I perceive something as beneficial or harmful clearly depends upon how I am affected by something. This dependence opens up a gap in the determination of feeling: whether something is beneficial or harmful involves thought and evaluation, at the same time that it is 'felt 'by the body. The process of attributing an object as being or not being beneficial or harmful, which may become translated into good or bad, clearly involves reading the contact we have with objects in a certain way.[33]

We need emotions to analyze how we feel about our living conditions and to decide whether we are comfortable with maintaining current power structures. These emotions are contextual but also dependent on the moment they are felt before the emotion becomes a thing in itself. The way we make sense of our emotions in the contemporary moment can be described through genres. Capitalism requires us to constantly look ahead, taking away a very crucial moment in processing our emotions as it becomes impossible to make sense of the impasse; we can no longer make sense of the present, and thus our, object of desire becomes one dictated by the system rather than one dictated by our wants and needs. As such, we cannot accurately reflect on the power structures at play and our positions of precarity within the system.

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[31] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 12.
[32] Ibid, 4.
[33] Ibid, 6.

This emotional crisis pains us because it creates a relation of cruel optimism to what we believe to be 'the good life.' To better understand this pain and how we can use it to fuel our resistance, affect theory again provides some ways of comprehension. Ahmed notes that "pain has often been described as a private, even lonely experience, as a feeling that I have that others cannot have, or as a feeling that others have that I myself cannot feel."[34] The experience of feeling pain is often individualized, as something that is projected onto a person and experienced in isolation. We all experience pain differently, following our positionality and the different constraints we experience concerning the source of this pain. This idea is already mentioned in the classic medical textbook on pain, *The Challenge of Pain*, which states that pain "is not simply a function of the amount of bodily damage alone. Rather, the amount and quality of pain we feel are also determined by our previous experiences and how well we remember them, by our ability to understand the cause of the pain and to grasp its consequences."[35] Our experience of pain and the intensity thereof, then, is what materializes the world around us and which defines how we relate to ourselves. As Ahmed puts it:

> It is through the recognition or interpretation of sensations, which are responses to the impressions of objects and others, that bodily surfaces take shape. […] Sensations are mediated, however immediately they seem to impress upon us. Not only do we read such feelings, but how the feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings, in the sense that the process of *recognition* (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we *already know*.[36]

Living as neoliberal subjects under capitalism, we have lost the ability to interpret the sensations of our living conditions adequately. Capitalism and neoliberal subjectivity force us to step outside our bodily experience and look at ourselves as work-machines rather than humans. However, awareness of this pain is "crucial to forming the body as a perceiving surface."[37] Pain allows us to make sense of the world around us, and becoming aware of the pain of living under capitalism is essential for us to create a new social structure without this pain. Pain returns us to our bodies by "giving [us] a sense of the edge or border, a 'sense 'that is an experience of intensification and a departure from what is lived as ordinary. The ordinary is linked in this way to the absence of perception, rather than the absence of the

[34] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 20.
[35] Ronald Melzack and Patrick David Wall, *The Challenge of Pain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), 15.
[36] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 23.
[37] Ibid, 26.

body."[38] As becomes clear in Ahmed's text, in the ordinary, we cannot perceive our surroundings accurately. Thus, we cannot register the pain of our living conditions. We must locate that pain sensation again to bring us back to our bodies and remove ourselves from living in the ordinary. Capitalism, as a system, strives to extinguish the consciousness of the people participating to focus their desires on what is needed to keep this system in place. However, by connecting to the emotions felt in these desires and analyzing the affective relationship of the cruel optimism we feel towards our desires, we can rise above self-centered goals and gain a new sense of freedom.

**Commons**

Recognizing existing power structures in society emerges as a first step toward identifying new ways of social organization. Federici claims "We cannot change our everyday life without changing its immediate institutions and the political and economic system by which they are structured. Otherwise, our struggles to transform our 'everydayness' can be easily digested and become a launching pad for rationalization of relations more difficult to challenge."[39] To envision our lives beyond the ordinary it is crucial to understand and dismantle the structures that are organizing our lives in a state of crisis. Federici explains:

> [C]apitalism is 'unsustainable 'and creating a different social economic system is the most urgent task for most of the world population. For any system that is unable to reproduce its workforce and has nothing to offer to it except more crises is doomed. […] No political system, moreover, can sustain itself in the long term purely by force. Yet it is clear that force is all that the capitalist system has left at its disposal and can now prevail only because of the violence it mobilizes against its opponents.[40]

There is no moving forward in a social organizational structure that brings us so much pain. In organizing alternatives, the concept of 'commons 'is extremely valuable. Commons are autonomous spaces aiming to overcome divisions, defined by the existence of a shared property, conceptualized not at things but as social relations, functioning based on established regulations, requiring a community, constituted based on social cooperation, relations of reciprocity, and responsibility for the reproduction of the shared wealth, natural or produced, shaped by collective decision-making, committed to refusing labor hierarchies and

[38] Ibid, 27.
[39] Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of Commons*, 178.
[40] Ibid, 23.

inequalities in every struggle, and fundamentally differentiated from the *public*, which is owned, managed, controlled, and regulated by and for the state.[41]

Commons have suffered ongoing attacks that have recently become more severe due to the intensification of capitalism, which requires the destruction of communal properties and relations.[42] However, these attacks are precisely why commons are so attractive for our collective imagination; "their loss expands our awareness of the significance of their existence and increases our desire to learn more about them."[43] The challenge we currently face is not how to increase the number of commons initiatives but rather how to organize ourselves so that the collective reappropriation of resources and the elimination of social hierarchies take center stage.[44] As such, the idea of commons provides a logical and historical alternative to the market of the state and private property.

Also from a feminist perspective, commons provide means for re-imagining our lives. "[The feminist perspective] begins with the realization that, as the primary subjects of reproductive work, historically and in our time, women have depended on access to communal natural resources more than men and have been most penalized by their privatization and most committed to their defense."[45] From this perspective, it becomes possible that the ordinary is not a generic complex of events, attitudes, and experiences. Instead, we can recognize the organize as a world built around a particular production process, namely the production of human beings.[46] Dismantling these power structures allows us to do away with the isolation that underlies our reproductive process and forge the bonds of solidarity without which our life would be an affective wasteland, and we would lack social power.[47] In Federici's words:

> In this context, commons are both objectives and conditions of our everyday life and struggles. In an embryonic form, they represent the social relations we aim to achieve, as well as the means for their construction. They are not a separate struggle but a perspective we bring to every struggle and every social movement in which we participate.[48]

[41] Ibid, 93-96.
[42] Ibid, 87.
[43] Ibid, 88.
[44] Ibid, 96.
[45] Ibid, 107.
[46] Ibid, 175-176.
[47] Ibid, 184.
[48] Ibid.

The creation of commons is one possible solution among many. For any meaningful change to happen, we must first map the affective structures of current struggles, thereby exploring where the faults of the current system lie and looking for alternatives. Berlant also does not offer a way out of our relation to our desires under capitalism. Instead, she encourages us to fantasize and experiment with new structures that provide a way out of the structural impasse caused by capitalism. Berlant argues that we should experiment and try new modes of existence, while being patient when we fail because doing so does not make us any worse off than we are now. Therefore, now is the time to use the space provided by the deadlock of capitalism to gain new insight into how to envision improved economics of intimacy, labor, and public life. Taking an affective approach in this experimentation allows us to reconnect with the emotions we seemingly have lost touch with under a capitalist regime.

# Chapter 3: The Power of the Collective

The previous chapters have analyzed Berlant's conception of cruel optimism and equated it to the optimistic relation we hold to our desires under capitalism. Berlant herself, however, does not make this connection so explicitly. Instead, as mentioned previously, she positions capitalism as the cause of the disorganization of the ordinary, insofar as it threatens the area of convergence where people try to regulate their lives: "[T]he rhythms of ordinary existence in the present […] scramble the distinction between forced adaptation, pleasurable variation, and threatening dissolution of life-confirming norms."[49] As neoliberal subjects under capitalism, the lines between our desire for a better future and the things we need to tell ourselves to make our lives bearable become increasingly blurred. According to Berlant:

> [N]eoliberal economic practices mobilize this instability in unprecedented ways. The profit interests of the owners of neoliberal capital are served by the shrinkage of the social welfare state, the privatization of what had once been publicly held utilities and institutions, the increase in state, banking, and corporate pension insecurity, and the ever more "flexible" practices of contractual reciprocity between owners and workers, which ostensibly keeps business nimble and more capable of responding to market demand. Add to this the global transformation of unions from a force driving forward security and upward mobility to administrative entities managing workers' decreasing legitimacy for claims-making on profit and security, and you get a broad picture of the neoliberal feedback loop, with its efficiency at distributing and shaping the experience of insecurity throughout the class structure and across the globe.[50]

While Berlant overtly acknowledges the damaging properties of capitalism here, what should be made more apparent is that the relationship of cruel optimism we have with our desires perpetuates these neoliberal economic practices. For Berlant, "[c]apitalism […] stands in for the relations between capitalists and workers and capitalists and consumers amid the shifting character of capitalist strategies, and the net effect of the interaction of those strategies on already vulnerable populations […]."[51] It follows that capitalism is an inherently relational social structure, dependent on its participants as much as the participants depend on the system. Breaking this relation allows for new modes of organization to enter our lives; if we distance ourselves from the desires projected on us by capitalism and instead investigate which longings could *realistically* help us attain a better future – and not only for ourselves

[49] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 8-9.
[50] Ibid, 192-193.
[51] Ibid, 104.

but for all members of society – we can re-evaluate our priorities and collectively work towards abolishing unnecessarily high levels of precarity. This chapter focuses on the importance of the collective through the insights of Angela Davis, bell hooks and Sara Ahmed, who have all been involved in ongoing struggles of emancipation. Their experience in their struggles shows the importance of joining forces in the resistance against capitalism, to acknowledge different experiences under the same power structures.

**Feminist Struggle**

An example of the experimentation with new social structures, particularly about constraints put on women, is articulated by Angela Davis, who notes that "[a]s the main champion of Marxism for almost two decades, the Socialist party supported the battle for women's equality. For many years, in fact, it was the only political party to advocate woman suffrage."[52] She describes the unrelenting class struggle of political parties, proclaiming that there could never be a harmonious relationship between the capitalist class and the workers it employed. Following Davis, it becomes clear that change can happen as long as we know where the current system's problems lie and we remain in solidarity with the oppressed. As discussed in the previous chapter, commons provide a possible alternative social structure to capitalism. Through the exploration of commons, affective manifestations are made manifest materially. However, the creation of commons, or any alternative social structure to capitalism, requires a collective rejection of the current system and the hyper-individualization it puts forth. This sentiment also returns in the writings of bell hooks, who states the following:

> Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience. In our society we make much of love and say little about fear. Yet we are all terribly afraid most of the time. [...] Yet we do not question why we live in states of extreme anxiety and dread. Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies with sameness, then difference will appear as a threat. When we choose love, we move against fear and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect to find ourselves in the other.[53]

Hooks stresses the role of love in finding a connection to those around us. Love, here, binds us to each other, a way out of the loop of hyper-individualization that capitalism projects onto

[52] Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (London: Penguin Classics, 2019), 134.
[53] bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York City: William Morrow and Company, 2018), 93.

its neoliberal subjects. The importance of *love* works in tandem with the importance of *care*. We must care for each other to change the system rather than fall into individual searches for 'the good life.' Again, in the words of bell hooks:

> We all long for a loving community. It enhances life's joy. Nevertheless, many of us seek community solely to escape the fear of being alone. Knowing how to be solitary is central to the art of loving. When we can be alone, we can be with others without using them as a means of escape.[54]

It is important to note that in creating a community that goes beyond chasing our individual desires, we must make sure that this community fundamentally prioritizes the well-being of the collective; it cannot be an escape from individualization powered by the fear of being left alone. Progressive movements, be they centered on poverty, racism, repression, or other causes, are bound to fail if they do not also make an effort to raise awareness of the destructive promotion of capitalist individualism.[55] These movements have been resisting precarity, on varying scales throughout history. This does not mean that the struggles are endless; as Davis explains, "[…] as our struggles mature, they produce new ideas, new issues, and new terrains on which we engage in the quest for freedom".[56] In the previous chapter, this paper touched upon patriarchal constraints in capitalism as an example of power structures inherent to the system. Still, systemic change requires cooperation and solidarity between different struggles. Davis gives the following example:

> I think that movements, feminist movements, other movements are most powerful when they begin to affect the vision and perspective of those who do not necessarily associate themselves with those movements. […] That we cannot assume that it is possible to be victorious in any antiracist movements as long as we don't consider how gender figures in, how gender and sociality and class and nationality figure into those struggles.[57]

As such, a feminist struggle must involve a consciousness of capitalism. Not only can feminism assist us in recognizing a variety of linkages between discourses, institutions, identities, and ideologies that we frequently have a tendency to treat separately, but it also encourages us to investigate connections that are not as apparent.[58] By collectivizing

[54] Ibid, 140.
[55] Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (London: Penguin Books, 2022), 1.
[56] Ibid, 11.
[57] Ibid, 50.
[58] Ibid, 111.

struggles, fights against different precarities can work together, creating a space for radical system change.

**Community**

In this collective struggle, we still depend on an optimistic relation to the object of desire. However, rather than an *individual* desire, we ought to formulate a *collective* desire, a way of being in the world that prioritizes the well-being of all the system's participants. We can do this by becoming aware of our 'intersectionality.' This term originated in the research of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who employs it to describe how prejudice functions "like traffic across an intersection."[59] According to Davis, "A rich history of struggle lies behind this concept of intersectionality."[60] In keeping with Davis, it becomes clear that knowledge is not a one-way street; it does not originate in academics or academic fields and then finds its way into the hands of ordinary people and activists for use in day-to-day activities. Combining the forces and knowledge of different struggles allows for a force of change that will transcend the possibilities of individual struggles. Without stressing the importance of the collective, an affective analysis of the burden of capitalism can a push towards further individualism through seclusion from society, or the quest for more self-centered solutions creating further difficulties for others. Developing new modes of community can provide a sense of optimism in and of themselves – "it is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism."[61] We generate new concepts in the process and struggle to change old worlds.[62]

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same, that our pain is the same, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, lives, or bodies, we live on common ground.[63]

[59] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Politics of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics'." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989): 139.
[60] Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*,19.
[61] Ibid, 52.
[62] Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (London: Penguin Books, 2023), 133.
[63] Ibid, 85.

# Conclusion

This paper defended the thesis that despite the varying levels of precarity among capitalism's participants, capitalism requires collectivity as a force for change. First, this paper explored the relation of cruel optimism we hold to our desires, identifying the ordinary as a stretch of time where we learn to regulate our lives as they are and make peace with current living conditions. Losing ourselves in the ordinary gets in the way of the potential for struggle against the capitalist system. We must reformulate our expectations of the future through questioning and rethinking our object of desire. As such, we can reshape — and finally fully experience — the impasse in which we make sense of the present and reimagine ways of self-organization. Identifying the power structures that shape our lives is essential to challenge the ordinary. This paper focuses on the patriarchy as an example of existing power structures to acknowledge how levels of precarity differ among people under capitalism. While capitalism is a source of exhaustion for all its participants, the sexual division of labor and the way women's bodies have become a territory of control exemplify how the patriarchy holds capitalism in place while also adding additional emotional constraints for women. While these emotional constraints directly threaten our well-being, subjects can still become invested in particular structures. Due to our experience of our emotions and how they relate to our understanding of the present and our hopes for the future, patterns of domination can repeat themselves. A struggle against capitalism requires a thorough analysis of the pain we feel resulting from the system we live in to revive our emotions and question our shared suffering. This analysis shows that emotional constraints are evolving and reasserting themselves, identifying precarity as a systemic problem. To counter this problem, we must jointly formulate a new object of desire, acknowledging existing struggles and prioritizing the well-being of the collective rather than the individual. Without embracing the collective, the affective analysis of our emotions in the struggle against capitalism can fall into libertarian ambivalence or solipsism. Because the material world shapes affect, it cannot be disconnected from it either — the liberating aspect of affect needs to be collective.

In light of the collective in exploring our emotion, *The Phenomenology of Anger* by Adrienne Rich provides some concluding remarks.

> many sleep
> the whole way
> others sit
> staring holes of fire into the air

others plan rebellion:
night after night
awake in prison, my mind
licked at the mattress like a flame
till the cellblock went up roaring[64]

This stanza shows that when anger is directed toward something, it becomes part of it. This creates a sense of freedom. Following the conclusions of this paper, directing our anger towards capitalism allows us to free ourselves from this system. This freedom is referred to in Rich's poem as an awakening. Let us be angry, for ourselves and for our future.

[64] Adrienne Rich, Collected Poems: 1950-2012 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 453-457.

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