

Deflecting Crisis: Critiquing Capitalism's Emancipation Narrative

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Much has been said about the recent economic crisis and the ways in which capital has adapted to the exigencies of the present conjuncture, especially using this moment of crisis to increase its assault on labor and public organizations. Little is surprising about the sustained and systematic efforts to abolish collective bargaining rights and slash social programs in the United States and Western Europe. However, these hyperreal moments of crisis and reactionary policies should not distract us from the core point that crisis is immanent to capital, and that for a majority of the world's population, especially in the Global South, crisis is an everyday occurrence. There, capital constantly manages crisis through economic adjustments and political violence, and it must continuously sustain the pace of capital accumulation by all means necessary. As I attempt to argue in this paper, managing crisis, however, is not purely a matter of policies and political actions, but an exercise that also involves redirecting or deflecting discussions of crisis so that the business of accumulation can continue. One such exercise is to generate narratives that can explain away crisis and contradiction, and clearly, there are agents of capitalism, such as the global management firm, McKinsey & Company, who perform this task with great assiduity.¹ However, as I will claim in this paper, other narratives, what I will call, neoliberal *emancipation narratives*, often function in similar ways, even as they pose themselves as critical of existing practices within capitalism.

In the last decade, as the global economy has perpetuated increasing and vast inequities, there has been an attendant rise in narratives such as “poverty alleviation” that seem devised to address the inequities of capitalism. Many of these narratives, however, make no attempt either to recognize the traditional node of production, Marx's “hidden abode of production,” or to engage with the structural basis of poverty or poverty's links to exploitation. Although these narratives do not always avowedly or overtly promote the neoliberal ethic (indeed these discourses are sometimes framed as being in opposition to

¹ McKinsey and Company is the most powerful global management consulting firm in the world, serving two-thirds of the *Fortune* 1000.

the free market system), they subvert a broader politics of revolutionary solidarities within an ethos of “emancipation.” These narratives come in the form of literary texts, films, self-help poverty alleviation programs, such as micro-credit, “greening” visions, and so on. My point here is that many of these apparent emancipation narratives, at first glance so seemingly critical of unregulated, laissez-faire capitalism serve a normalizing function in the narrativization of crisis. They imply or suggest that crisis and indeed the conditions affecting the well-being of millions around the globe can be alleviated by attention to specific disjunctures within capitalism, eliding the need to transform capitalism itself. David Harvey reminds us that during an economic crisis it is always important to ask, “what is it being rationalised here and what directions are the rationalisations taking, since these are what will define not only our manner of exit from the crisis but the future character of capitalism?” (*The Enigma* 71).

In the spirit of Harvey’s question, then, I will briefly explore features of a couple of specific emancipation narratives, deliberately selecting those that appear to be resistant to the dominant neoliberal paradigm. I will then suggest some possible ways to forge and to build on existing resistant solidarities, recuperating, in the process, the revolutionary possibilities of actual emancipation. My purpose here is not merely to reclaim the language of empowerment and emancipation but also to make transparent the hidden logic of capital. The first example I will examine is the narrative of climate change. In the version I highlight, the discourse of climate change is the default mechanism for comprehending and simultaneously taming the chaos unleashed by capital.

A notable example of this sort of narrative is Paul Krugman’s recent column in the *New York Times*, “Droughts, Floods, and Food.” In this piece, Krugman, the resident economist, takes on the topic of spiraling global food prices. He acknowledges that these soaring prices are “having a brutal impact on the world’s poor, who spend much if not most of their income on basic foodstuffs” (A19). Krugman then sets out to answer an important question, since that is what well-paid economists are supposed to do: “what’s behind the price spike”? Krugman considers a couple of possibilities, among them right-wing theories blaming “easy-money policies at the Federal Reserve” and blaming, as French President, Nicolas Sarkozy chose to, the speculators. But, Krugman concludes, the evidence “tells a different, much more ominous story.” The primary reason for the

global food crisis and the soaring food crisis, according to Krugman, is that “severe weather events have disrupted agricultural production.” Krugman concedes that economic growth, bad energy policy resulting in rising meat consumption, and subsidized production of ethanol, for instance, are also contributing factors, but ultimately (bring on the apocalyptic drum roll), the “weather struck.” Krugman then catalogs a series of weather disasters across the globe over the last year to explain rising food prices and concludes that climate change is the key factor in understanding the crisis. The column on the food crisis, written in the same week as the revolutionary events unfolding in North Africa ends with a call for the reduction of green house gases and a reminder about the need to take climate change seriously.

Now, it is quite clear that climate change is a factor in agricultural output and food production. No one, in short, could dispute Krugman’s point that we need to pay serious attention to and address expeditiously human-induced climate change or that resultant weather events are factors in food prices. It is true, too, that corporate policies and a reckless philosophy of “growth” are to a large extent responsible for climate shifts that have had a devastating effect on global populations, particularly in the Global South. These, too, should be acknowledged and opposed. However, what is so fascinating about Krugman’s economic column is not so much his unwillingness to uncover the inevitable links in any understanding of prices within a capitalist society to factors such as decreasing wages, the expropriation of arable farmland by global companies, and the need for ever expanding profit, but rather his apparent *inability* to do so. It is as if the social relations of production, indeed the very abode of production, are completely outside his theoretical purview. Thus he must adopt an extra-economic narrative that will provide a justifiable explanatory framework for comprehending why a vast number of people are unable to afford basic foodstuffs. Capitalism as the hegemonic, unquestioned economic logic makes it impossible for him to get to the rational core within the mystical shell. The only move he can make is thus encoded within capitalist logic, a logic which deflects attention from critical economic relations and explains away crisis and contradiction, attributing these instead to natural forces.

This deflection in Krugman’s piece is at the heart of the neoliberal emancipatory narrative. Social and economic problems are accommodated within narratives of potential

change that reside comfortably within the exploitative framework of capitalism. Krugman can only address the current food crisis by taking refuge in the environmental intervention narrative. In this narrative, humans who have created an ecological crisis can effect change by electing the green alternative. Herein lies the potential for emancipation. We can act within the boundaries of the existing system in an attempt to free ourselves from the consequences of climate change, but this possibility is simultaneously undermined by the image of environmental catastrophe. Neil Smith points out that much as “greenwashing” was used in the 1990s to recode environmentalism for the purpose of capitalist profit, the specter of climate change is “today deployed on behalf of a certain *nature-washing*,” a “process by which social transformations of nature are well enough acknowledged but in which that socially changed nature becomes a new super determinant of our social fate” (245). Krugman, however, is caught between environmental determinism and emancipatory possibility. He cannot resolve this contradiction, nor is he able to answer his first question – “So what’s behind the price spike?” – within the context of a systemic analysis of actually existing social relations. Therefore, he can only conduct a rhetorical sleight of hand by creating another question. Suddenly, the entire focus of the article shifts. For Krugman, “The question then becomes, what’s behind all this extreme weather?”

Krugman’s strategy should come as no surprise to anyone with any familiarity with Marx’s writings on commodity fetishism and his explanation of the ways in which social relations are mystified when money enters into consideration and everything is analyzed purely in terms of price. The physical – in Krugman’s case, nature and so-called natural causes – becomes the fulcrum of causal analysis as if prices had nothing to do with people existing together in specific class relations within particular social conditions of exploitation and expropriation. Indeed, Krugman’s position on rising food prices is hardly unique: in a report on the BBC news site on April 14, 2011, an article “Q&A: Why Food Prices and Fuel Costs Are Going Up,” puts the blame squarely on weather disruptions, even citing the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations) to emphasize that while speculators may have made matters worse, they were in no way responsible for the rise in food prices.

David Harvey, objecting to arguments by critics such as James O'Connor, that focus on barriers in nature as the second contradiction of capitalism, points out that “there is always a danger in overemphasizing supposedly ‘pure’ natural limits at the expense of concentrating upon the capitalist dynamics that force environmental changes in the first place and on the social (particularly class relations) that drive those dynamics in certain environmentally perverse directions” (*The Enigma* 77).² Of course, Harvey is right about this misplaced overemphasis, but Krugman in the *New York Times* column is not forming an analysis at the “expense” of understanding “capitalist dynamics.” Krugman is unwilling and unable to consider capitalist dynamics or contradictions in capitalism in the first place.

While the narrative of climate change deflects any real engagement with the ethics of neoliberal capitalism, the discourse of poverty alleviation directly engages the social ground of capital. There are many versions of this narrative, and one can pay attention to the policies of NGOs (Non-governmental organizations), aid organizations, micro-credit institutions, and so forth. Clearly, the narrative of poverty alleviation has a long history and is allied with the discourse of development so dear to the World Bank and to other Northern financial institutions. For my argument, I will briefly consider two prominent ways in which the narrative of poverty alleviation is performed.

One performance is positioned within “the people” themselves and is located in the ethos of “empowering” people. This version of the narrative relies on the notion that those in poverty are natural entrepreneurs, held back primarily because of the absence of capital. An obvious example of this model involves the institution of micro-credit loans.³ The strength of this narrative lies in the word “empowerment,” which indicates the potential freeing of poor people, transforming them into engines of enterprise. Empowerment, as Aradhana Sharma points out, “has become a ubiquitous term and a buzzword in transnational development circles. An anti-imperialist, radical, leftist, and feminist language that arose out of social movements, empowerment has now been embraced as a panacea – a means and an end of development” (2). However desirable,

² For a discussion about the ecological limits to capitalism, see also Giovanni Arrighi’s *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*.

³ For an extended analysis of the practices of microfinance in the global South, see Ananya Roy’s *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development*.

according to Sharma, “Strategies of empowerment, self-help, and self-esteem are a critical part of the neoliberal development package in that they enable the actualization . . . of the goals of the free market” (17). Of course, no mention is made in this narrative about the actual role of capitalist social relations as integral to an understanding of poverty, or, as Sharma puts it, to “the willful roles that powerful people and institutions play in the disempowerment and subjection of those on the fringes” (27). Instead, poverty alleviation narratives generally rely on a “naturalized picture of poverty and powerlessness, where certain people lack the requisite attitudes and means to become rational, economic agents” (Sharma 27). The implied argument in the empowerment narrative is that the cause of poverty is the lack of capital and access to capital.

More problematically, the focus on the individual and on self-governance enshrined in this narrative effectively replicates the neoliberal distrust of the state. Of course, as we well know, the neoliberal state by its very definition acts mostly on behalf of the guardians of international capital. However, the state must constantly be posed as a barrier against the “natural” laws of the free market since it remains a potential source for populist reinvention. Consequently, such an erasure of the state ignores the fact that individual betterment outside the context of macroeconomic changes and structural transformations can only be partial. In a country such as Bangladesh, where social spending has been severely curtailed as a result of structural adjustment programs, for instance, it takes only one health emergency to wipe out any gains that may arise from a micro-loan. This emancipation narrative, however, elides these concerns, sidestepping the essentially predatory nature of capitalism with its faith in individual actions. Indeed, these loans operate with a predatory logic of their own since the interest rates for repayment range from ten to over twenty percent. Recently, many of these programs have come under attack for precisely such practices.⁴ The point I am making here, however, is not so much about the fairness or viability of these programs, but rather about the nature of the emancipation narrative itself, functioning as it does as an empowerment story that papers over the contradictions inherent in the very system that produces the poverty in the first place.

⁴ See Vikas Bajaj’s “Microlenders, Honored With Nobel, Are Struggling.” *New York Times*. January 11, 2011 and Leo Hornak’s “Why the Dream of Microfinance is Turning Sour.” *The Independent*, May 8, 2011.

A similar function is apparent in the other reigning narrative of poverty alleviation. Unlike the previous narrative, this one attempts to correct the deficiencies of neoliberalism from the top down. This form is best exemplified in the notion of social business and social entrepreneurship. In a recent Public Broadcasting series, “The New Heroes,” social entrepreneurs are described thus: “social entrepreneurs act as change agents for society, seizing opportunities others miss in order to improve systems, invent and disseminate new approaches, and advance sustainable solutions that create new value. Unlike traditional business entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs primarily seek to generate ‘social value’ rather than profit.” In this model, then, profits are apparently not the goal; instead, the emphasis is on the ethical task of business, which is apparently to work as “change agents” for the social good. I will briefly allude to one version of this narrative method, partly because of its links to the first narrative of poverty alleviation.

This method of poverty alleviation is associated with the name that one most associates with micro-credit as well, Muhammed Yunus, who recently has been dismissed from his position at the Grameen Bank. His book, *Creating a World Without Poverty* reveals some fundamental ways in which the narrative of poverty alleviation and emancipation work. In this text, he puts forward the doctrine of “Social Business,” which, he argues,

is basically the same as the existing PMB [Profit Making Business]. But it differs in its objectives. Like other businesses, it employs workers, creates goods and services, and provides these to customers for a price consistent with its objective. But its underlying objective – and the criterion by which it should be evaluated – is to create social benefits for those whose lives it touches. (21-22).

Creating social benefits, however, does not preclude the importance of profitability: “Wherever possible, without compromising the social objective, social businesses should make profit for two reasons: First, to pay back its investors; and second, to support the pursuit of long-term social goals” (24). Nevertheless, Yunus is at pains to distinguish PMBs from social businesses. His position is best elucidated on his website, “Yunus Centre.” It is important to quote him at some length here since doing so allows us to see how this narrative functions:

In fact, the inclusion of Social Businesses alongside PMBs in the business world will give free market capitalism a larger, nobler and a more fulfilling purpose. One thing is very clear to me – that with the Social Business taking off, the world of free market capitalism will never be the same again, and it then will really be able to deliver a deathblow on global poverty. I am sure, many business wizards and successful business personalities will apply their abilities to this new challenge – the challenge of creating a poverty-free world within a short time.

There are many interesting elements to Yunus's language here, but perhaps the one that is most noteworthy is his attempt to separate the goals of social business and those of what he calls PMBs. According to Yunus's logic, while the goal of the latter is to generate profit, that of social businesses is to perform social good. What is entirely elided in Yunus's binary is the fact that social businesses form another node in the continuum of the financialization of development. As in the case of the micro-credit institutions, these businesses implicitly aid in minimizing the work of the state and in directing economies toward greater privatization. These narratives suggest that while it is possible for the state to assist in alleviating poverty, it is best that they "get out of the way." Similar to the discourse regarding empowerment, the state is written off as hopelessly bureaucratic and interventionist. Another problem with Yunus's rosy narrative is that these so-called social businesses are based on the same structural rules of capital – wage labor, surplus production, expansion, and exploitation – as their "for profit" counterparts. Needless to say, whatever the social good produced by these businesses, they function entirely within the institutional productive rules of capitalism. As Alain Badiou puts it, "All the efforts to construct an alternative economy [of this sort] strike me as pure and simple abstractions, if not simply driven by the unconscious vector of capital's own reorganization. . . . Capital is indifferent to the qualitative configuration of things. So long as it can be transformed or aligned in terms of market value, everything's fine" (106). In Yunus's narrative, social businesses will address the "problems of society," empowering those who live in poverty, once again attempting to banish forever into the margins the crisis that is, in fact, irresolvable.

Yunus's rhetoric about free-market capitalism and "freedom" within it is perhaps not uncommon in this day and age. Like many who are committed to the notion of

“responsible” capitalism, he imagines that its goal is to “deliver a deathblow on global poverty.” Obviously one need not take this statement literally, but rather as a rhetorical ploy to accommodate two sets of audiences. One is the “many business wizards and successful business personalities” who have to be wooed, while the other is a more general audience who have to be convinced that whatever the current crisis of capitalism, if there are enough good people to invest in the social good, then capitalism can still work for the benefit of the poor. What, of course, cannot be addressed or reconciled is that the tyranny of continual accumulation depends upon systemic and sustained acts of violence; that the practices of so-called social businesses are within the exploitative circuits of capitalism, not outside them; that profit is generated by value-producing labor.

I want to clarify that my critique of these emancipation narratives does not suggest that all reform activities within capitalist societies are doomed by the weight of their contradictions. Clearly, movements to gain workers’ rights, or to agitate for health reform, or to oppose corporate influence are worthwhile and important projects. Indeed, attempts to shorten the working day or efforts to fight for a greater share of corporate profits, for instance, are one of the most fundamental forms of class struggle, and such struggles mark transformational moments in forging a revolutionary consciousness. Therefore, in this essay, I am not interested in replicating the age-old discussion about the reform or revolution binary, choosing one over the other. Let me turn to Rosa Luxemburg, and in particular to a debate that took place towards the end of the nineteenth century, to clarify my position. In a series of articles in *Neue Zeit* (1896-98) and in his book *Evolutionary Socialism* (1899), Eduard Bernstein, a prominent leader in Germany's SDP (Social Democratic Party) considered whether reform or revolution was the best way to confront the global scale of capitalism. Bernstein concluded that capitalism had been transformed and could be further transformed through reform. Luxemburg's response was equally unequivocal, but more dialectical: she refused the apparent simplicity of this binary; there was no either/or for Luxemburg; both reform and revolution were necessary in order to chart the path toward socialism. What she clarified was something Bernstein did not address. “Legislative reform and revolution,” she said, are “different *factors* in the development of class society. They condition and complement each other, and are at the same time reciprocally exclusive, as are the north

and south poles, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat” (*Reform* 89). They are different “not in the *space of time* they take up, but in their *essential characteristics*.” “Revolutions,” according to Luxemburg, were “a qualitative change, the transformation from one social order to another: Therefore, whoever opts for the path of legal reform, *in place of* and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power, actually chooses not a calmer and slower road to the *same* aim, but a *different* aim altogether” (*Reform* 90) The reform narratives of Krugman or Yunus, although addressing crucially important crisis points in capitalism – the rise in food prices and rampant inequality of income – are qualitatively different from a narrative that recognizes the fundamental contradictions inherent in capital: these reform narratives postpone crisis, or externalize it, in effect supplementing the divisions of class society rather than resolving them.

A related question of interest is why these narratives are displacing existing revolutionary narratives at this particular juncture. Certainly, it is no coincidence that these narratives are proliferating at a time when revolutionary activities across the globe are increasing in number. Therefore, we must pay attention to these discourses and strategies to manage crisis and contradiction, partly because, as David Harvey puts it, in the Global South, “we are not confronting any simple ‘export’ of neo-liberalism from some hegemonic center. The development of neo-liberalism must be regarded as a decentered and unstable evolutionary process characterized by uneven geographical developments and strong competitive pressures between a variety of dynamic centers of political-economic power” (*Spaces* 41). According to Harvey, neoliberalism is characterized by a general sense of unsettlement. It is, after all, “an unstable and evolving regime of accumulation rather than a fixed and harmoniously functional configuration of political economic power” (*Spaces* 29). Perhaps these emancipation narratives reside in these in between spaces of accumulation, both inside and outside the “dynamic centers of political-economic power.” More importantly, it must be stressed that since crisis can be relatively deflected in the metropolis by shifting the burden to the Global South, the cost is greatest in these parts of the world. Thus, it seems logical that the challenge to neoliberal methods will likely continue to come from the societies in which these regimes of accumulation are being implemented with the greatest ferocity.

Uneven geographical development, however, is not merely a causal offshoot of metropolitan capitalism; in Harvey's model, the Global South too often looks like a largely passive object of western capital. Rosa Luxemburg reminds us of the examples of the Russia and China of her time, societies that "carry over outmoded pre-capitalist claims while on the other hand they already embody new conflicts which run counter to the domination of capital" (*The Accumulation* 399-400). Implicit in Luxemburg's insight is the importance of internal social mechanisms of so-called underdeveloped societies in undermining the domination of capital. One of the challenges capital faces in the present is to carry on the task that Luxemburg indicated as provoking a potential crisis for capital in her own time: to simultaneously underdevelop and violently incorporate into the world system those economic structures that do not fully serve the needs of capital. As Partha Chatterjee puts it, the universalizing role of capital has a

differential impact on pre-capitalist structures – sometimes destroying them, sometimes modifying them to fit in with the new demands of surplus extraction and the new procedures of governance, and at other times keeping intact, perhaps bolstering, pre-existing productive systems and local organizations of power while merely establishing a suitable extraction mechanism. (347)

Acknowledging Chatterjee's description of the complexity of this process and the actual agency of those resisting capital's impact means moving beyond Harvey's more abstract and western-centered characterization of uneven development and resistance. What might it mean for people in the Global South to assume, as does Harvey, that "it is the profoundly anti-democratic nature of neo-liberalism backed by the authoritarianism of the neo-conservatives that should surely be the main focus of political struggle," or that their struggles are merely "expressive of some version of democratic values" (68)? Already in South Asia, for instance, the promotion of so-called emancipatory poverty alleviation programs has been overshadowed by the rise of revolutionary movements, movements that directly address the root causes of poverty. The farmers, the landless laborers, and the fisher folk who are fighting for their land against the takeover by the steel company, POSCO, in Orissa, or the Adivasis fighting government forces in the mass movement in

Lalgarh, West Bengal need no lessons in emancipation from bankers, nor are they waiting for Social Businesses to pay attention to their needs, nor are they interested in mere reform.⁵ They are conscious agents who know that the existing class society is fundamentally antagonist to their basic economic rights.

In his speech at the Fourth Moscow City Conference of Non-Party Working Women in September 1919, Lenin criticizes the emancipation movements in Western Europe that have called for equality between men and women but have been unable to accomplish this goal because they have kept intact all the social relations of capitalism that help men retain their privileges. In the Soviet Union, however, within the framework of revolutionary change, Lenin refers to emancipation in an entirely different context: “We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for working women themselves” (79). In Lenin’s view, true emancipation comes from the people who are coming into consciousness through revolutionary knowledge and action.

In the present conjuncture, we must continue to challenge and work against neoliberal narratives of emancipation and poverty alleviation, pointing out the inextricable connections between these apparently oppositional strategies and the “stern laws of economic process,” as Luxemburg would put it. We must emphasize that these strategies are not separate from the “realm of capital’s blistering violence.” They, too, participate fully in creating the conditions for the reproduction of capital (Luxemburg, *The Accumulation* 433). It is this important link that must be reinforced in our appraisals of these narratives.

As I write these words, news about yet another uprising arrives. Street demonstrations in downtown Kampala in Uganda, in response to rising food prices, intensify, and troops fire on the protestors, killing at least five people. President Yoweri Museveni’s reaction to the peoples’ protest is telling: “Nobody,” he claims, “can take over power through an uprising. Whoever thinks like that, I pity such a person” (“Protests” A8). Those, like Museveni, who are locked within the hallucinatory walls of capitalist illusions may well think so and may well continue to revel in narratives that deflect crisis and contradictions. The people, however, may have other ideas.

⁵ Partho Sarathi Ray provides a detailed account of the movement in Lalgarh in *Sanhati*.

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