Prefatory Remarks: Crisis and Critique

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This inaugural issue of Critical Times takes the pulse of the current global political condition, engaging with contexts at once marked by the crisis of liberal democratic regimes and the emergence of new authoritarian political and cultural formations. Some of the essays in this issue analyze the sudden consolidation of right-wing populisms, their underlying totalitarian undercurrents, and the attendant shattering of the political and juridical regimes of truth that held sway until recently. Other contributions aim at exploring the popular potential for progressive forms of governance on the left, observing its current achievements and pitfalls, or seeking radical precedents in the historical past.

It seems as though in recent times those political-economic features of globalization that generate an intensification of local differences have overpowered the global processes that tend toward a homogenization across regions. The recent dominance of late liberal neoclassical economics over the logics of political programming has surely curtailed any form of democratic governmentality that would attempt to restrain the deep social exclusion and fragmentation generated by the absolutization of market logics and their production of truth. This context raises the question: how much exclusion and social conflict can liberal democracy contain, so that these processes can become immunizing elements and not deathly substances that threaten to destroy these regimes?

The contributions on India, Turkey, Greece, and the United States included in this issue provide examples of the ways in which discourses and structures of liberal democracy are in crisis throughout the world, under the mounting pressure of financial capital and in light of the explosion of cultural localisms and political particularisms and polarizations. Another key factor underlying this crisis is the action of subaltern groups around the world. Such groups—in India, Turkey, South America, or the US—are producing a re-materialization of the political, surpassing the limits of liberal democracy either through electoral votes supporting conservative populisms or through protest and direct action in collective assemblies tending toward progressive politics and renewed forms of popular sovereignty. An examination of these dynamics at work in concrete, particular spaces and practices (actions on bodies, lived space or monuments, protests against various forms of violence) reveals populist projects that eschew or exceed liberal democracy and resist the violent logic of abstraction of the entwined systems of finance capital and the rule of law.

In the contemporary moment, liberal democratic systems are thus, as in a version of the state of exception, “in force without signification.” Rights are enforced and certain economic social justice programs are still implemented, yet, under the dominance of orthodox economic ideology, the law
turns toward norm and normalization, amidst an increasing breakdown of systems of equivalence (citizenship, markets, programs of social inclusion) that have regulated democratic regimes during the last decades. These financial and techno-political dynamics reveal a void at the core of the sovereign power of democracy. They also illustrate the demise of the promise of emancipation once embodied in the now decaying figure of the universal democratic citizen.

The main current political conundrum seems to be the way in which only one possible model of democracy, its liberal-financial version, has become hegemonic since the immediate post-Cold War period, excluding other, more advanced, radical perspectives on popular sovereignty and regimes of rights.

The various essays assembled here perhaps implicitly indicate that the current global crisis of democracy does not merely reflect the action of forces external to the rule of law, but rather arises from the immanent deficits of liberal democracy itself: through its governmental practices and structural aporias, which simultaneously produce both inclusion and the exclusion of vast sectors of the population; or through the ascendancy of finance and technocratic rule, which exacerbate the bureaucratic flattening of the political dialectics of equality and freedom.

As in the 1920s and 1930s in Western Europe, in various world regions today, left- and right-wing populisms simultaneously threaten the stylized logic of democratic systems and the sluggish temporality of their parliamentary procedures. These populisms may be of an emancipatory nature (as in Latin America, South Africa, or Greece) and organized around future-oriented temporalities. Or they may instead defend conservative views on the state and society, using past-oriented temporalities to shape political programs that advocate a return to a prior, idealized version of the nation, usually predicated on ethno-nationalist forms of exclusion (as in Eastern Europe, India, the Philippines, France, or the United States).

While the accelerated velocity of global finance erodes the temporality of liberal democracy—its long-term planning and laborious, ritualized practices—newly strengthened centralized regimes with authoritarian contours generate new modes of managing people’s conduct and their social imagination. These paradigms legitimate themselves through the promise of being able to govern the accelerated flows of financial capital by means of more centralized, faster decision-making processes that bypass democratic protocols (as in Brazil, India, or Turkey).

Let us briefly consider how the essays gathered in this issue engage some of these processes, while recasting the intellectual traditions of critical theory for a contemporary late capitalist moment that calls for immanent critique on a global scale.

The article by Wendy Brown provides an analysis of continuities between neoliberalism and conservative populism in the United States and Western Europe. Bernard Harcourt’s essay produces a parallel analysis by considering changing politico-economic epistemes and regimes of truth. Banu Bargu’s critical genealogical intervention and Nandini Sundar’s political ethnography uncover, for the cases of Turkey and India, respectively, the nuances of the consolidation of centralized, authoritarian regimes, which restrain the scope of the rule of law through new ethno-nationalist ideologies or by way of the dialectics of religion and secularism. Stathis Gourgouris’s intervention is an intellectual provocation to think about the limits and potentiality of left populist logics and practices of government, centered on the Greek political process, but with broad implications for current
conditions in Latin America or Southern Africa.

The essays by Alliez and Lazzarato and Tomba generate theoretical-political interventions leading toward a rethinking of social projects on the left: in the case of Alliez and Lazzarato, a critical genealogy of articulations between violence and the accumulation of value, up to current late liberal formations; in Tomba’s case, a recuperation of abandoned figures and categories from the historical past that can be reactivated in the present to redirect the emancipatory project of democracy.

The special section on transnational feminist strikes edited by Ramsey McGlazer illuminates the groundwork organizing and direct action of collectives that, throughout the world, contest the connected, exclusionary logics of capital, patriarchy, and the politics of discrimination and segregation organized around class, caste, and gender. The four cases presented through short essays, documents, and an interview (Poland, Argentina, Turkey, and Italy), point toward emergent forms of transnational solidarity among social movements. The accompanying texts by Rita Segato (Argentina-Brazil) and Françoise Vergès (Réunion-France) are dazzling enactments of critical theory and feminist perspectives generated from the South that provide frameworks for analyzing those latent forms of joint, global political action.

The next issue of Critical Times will be devoted to the political tasks of the university and higher education at a global scale, and it will feature a special section on student movements and protests around the world. Among the various threats against university research and teaching prevalent today, we are mindful of the fraught situation of scholars at risk and academics currently under surveillance and censorship, who are subjected to harassment by governments and sectarian political groups, or have been dismissed from their position in the academy and have been banned from teaching and expressing themselves.

Turkey and India are two paradigmatic cases in this current context, among many others in the world today. We refer readers to the statement on the situation of scholars in Turkey published by the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs on its website, as well as to the earlier article coauthored by Judith Butler and Başak Ertür published in The Guardian. One of our most esteemed editorial board members, Nivedita Menon, continues to face with great courage the harassment and intimidation of the Indian government and an extremely conservative academic leadership. One of our contributors in this issue, Nandini Sundar, has also suffered political and legal persecution in the context of the conservative Hindu regime in India. Sundar and others filed public interest litigation against the State of Chhattisgarh and the Republic of India in 2007 for large-scale human rights violations against Adivasis, or indigenous people. Since then, the government of Chhattisgarh has subjected her to continuous harassment, including false murder charges in 2016. In that case, however, the Supreme Court and National Human Rights Commission provided immediate protection.

Finally, I want to extend my deep thanks for all their outstanding work on the production of this first issue to the journal’s team: Breana George, Donna Honarpisheh, Ramsey McGlazer, Kevin Stone, Saniya Taher, and Katharine Wallerstein; to our authors, reviewers, and editorial board members; as well as to Judith Butler, Co-Director of the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs. The journal is supported by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.
About the Author
Juan Obarrio is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. He serves on the advisory board of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes. His areas of expertise are critical theory, political anthropology, and postcolonial studies, and he has worked on program building fostering South-South collaborations. Obarrio is the author of *The Spirit of the Laws in Mozambique* (University of Chicago Press, 2014); *Corps étranger* (Éditions Belin, 2014); and *A Matter of Time: The State of Things in Southern Africa* (forthcoming, Duke University Press). He is the co-editor of *Legados, genealogías y memorias postcoloniales* (Ediciones Godot, 2015) and *African Futures: Essays in Crisis, Emergence, Possibility* (University of Chicago Press, 2016). His current research project on temporalities of accumulation of capital and resistance is entitled, “The Event of Appropriation.”