

Discussion

Hope and the Future: Temporal Agency and the Politics of Hope in Late Capitalism

This special issue on the *Labour of Hope* constitutes a most welcome milestone in the ongoing debates around hope and capitalism. To kick-off this discussion, I offer three observations on the context in which it emerges.

The first observation is historical. Arguably, this collection has been written at a moment when hope has become a scarce resource for many people around the world. Not because of the recent global pandemic, but because of the current political economy, which, like the pandemic, does not appear to be on its way out any time soon. Many people, including progressive and critical academics, have observed how the long hoped-for end of the post-Cold War global reign of neoliberal capitalism has not yet materialised. It seems unlikely to end, despite humanity's many unresolved challenges, and after decades of crises there is still no clear alternative to capitalism in sight. Wherever we look, capitalism rules supreme and all hope in a non-capitalist future has thus far been disappointed. In this context, it is not surprising that the authors presume that both 'capitalism' and 'hope' are terms that readers of this journal and beyond can easily understand. And that in their various ethnographic contexts, they appear to encounter the same kind of 'hope', and the same kind of 'capitalism' without much variation. This seeming ubiquity of 'capitalist hopes' apparently confirms an unquestioned understanding of hope as a human universal, and capitalism's presumed omnipotence. However, the contributors also depict a certain ambiguity not just towards hope as the phenomenon studied here, but also towards capitalism.

The second observation is theoretical. To paraphrase Bruno Latour (2004), after all these years of studying it, hope seems to have run out of (analytical and theoretical) steam. As this collection shows: it has not (yet). Still, the field in which a new claim on the viability of the concept of hope can be convincingly made, is already quite settled. For more than two decades (not coincidentally of neoliberalism's arguably most undisturbed rule), the concept of hope has sparked widespread interest amongst the humanities and social sciences (for example, Harvey, 2000; Anderson, 2002; Zournazi, 2002; Crapanzano, 2003; Miyazaki, 2004; Berlant, 2011). Its analysis usually fell on either side of what appears to be both, an ideological and a logical divide.

On one hand, hope was seen as positive and progressive. When times are bad, it seems to offer an idea of—and way towards—a better future. Some would contend hope is a key agent of change: something fundamentally human that keeps the world going. It seems hard to envision any human context without it. On the other hand, hope was seen as negative, because it hinders and blocks change. Hopes for the future can mire people in an unchanging present, preventing them from overcoming current realities. Lauren Berlant (2011) has described this form of hope as *Cruel Optimism*: People think that the future can and will be better, and thereby reproduce the structures that harm them in the present. They endure conditions they should fight against. This obstructive notion of hope could potentially be labelled 'false', but it has the same content: an idea of a better future. It just does not lead to same progressive actions and effects in the present.

Having read the individual pieces with pleasure and curiosity, I am reminded of this divide. I am left with the somewhat awkward feeling that over the last two decades we have not yet got hope quite right, nor neoliberal capitalism for that matter (see Ferguson 2009). We either overburdened it with our own expectations and—yes—hopes. It was to be the magical force that

will help people overcome capitalism. A cure-all revolutionising force. Indeed, in more or less Deleuzian frameworks of emergence and becoming (see Ringel 2014), most affects had to produce a disturbance in the reproduction of what we deemed dominant and oppressive. Not to great avail, both empirically and theoretically. Or we condemned hope outright, perhaps in some dialectical move, as an ever-more subtle and vicious bedfellow of capitalism, indicative of an even more intimate hold of power on our existence. However, this issue's title already gestures beyond this division: the labour of, with and by hope appears to have a more empirical, practical perspective in mind. What role does hope play in a particular social, historical setting?

My last observation is empirical and already answers this question to some extent. The same concrete, day-to-day labour of hope is also relevant to the reproduction of the power relations that determine work in the academy. Reading a special issue entirely produced by early career scholars evokes memories of my own often precarious hopes for a secure professional career in my discipline. The focus on precarious contexts and relevant, political or in some way fashionable topics, too, can tell a story about chances on the job market, individual hopes and the presumably shared politics in our respective disciplines (see Ringel, 2012). Although privileged in comparison with their interlocutors, the authors will have their own hopes (and concerns) that affect their writing and thought. But, again, this is the point: these hopes neither necessarily result in better or worse—or more or less critical—academic outcomes. Rather, hope is in some sense as much part of these scholarly practices as it is part of the practices studied by these scholars—not innocently, but also not oppressively so. Hope should therefore not too easily be subsumed by the specific logics and politics we or others imbue it with.

In contrast to such unambiguous claims on hope, this timely collection provides a wonderful set of different case studies of the actually existing complex and contradictory relationships between capitalism and hope. In their geographical, social and cultural variety, these examples throw fresh light on hope's role in the contemporary (arguably not so) late capitalist era. In all of them, capitalism is alive and well, and respective interlocutors continue to struggle with the different precarities capitalism has produced around them rather than standing up against it. They even aspire to becoming a more integrated part of it—to more of capitalism, so to speak. The stories should be clear: hope is bad since it does prevent people from changing the circumstances they find themselves in. However, for very good analytical and theoretical reasons the authors more or less abstain from choosing a side in the aforementioned debates on hope, and hence do not dissolve the term's inherent ambiguity.

Instead, they offer unique analyses that explore three aspects of the idea of hope: its relations to agency, politics, and capitalism (the latter via the detour of labour and precarity). By that they relate the mature academic discourse on hope, mostly grounded in the literature on affect, to three recently more prominent debates: on ethics (through concerns for sustained and reflexive practice), maintenance (with an interest in endurance), and the future (with an eye on agency and a presumably different idea of politics). The contributors, all in their own ways, thereby update the study of hope. From a grounded, ethnographic perspective, they push what Ernst Bloch described as a principle and later Hirokazu Miyazaki as a method into a vantage point on less principled and methodological, but more existential everyday struggles, practices, routines and endurances in contexts of late-capitalist precarity. They thus offer a standpoint that goes beyond hope's usual conceptualisation as an affect. As I will unpack below: beyond familiar takes on hope, they provide insightful materials and analyses on contemporary relations to the future—irrespective of whether these relations were initially framed and promised by capitalism or not. At the same time they still manage to make their material speak to issues with the broader political economy.

In the remainder of the discussion, I want to follow this issue's invitation and reconsider in more detail and with the help of these evocative ethnographic examples what a reconsideration of

actually existing hopes can contribute to the study of the future. As an ethnographic object, I argue, hope invites similar empirical, analytical and theoretical questions as does the study of the future more broadly: some concern its actual effects and ongoing social negotiation; others the development and testing of a more precise analytical toolkit; others again more abstract reconfigurations of agency, power and change. With more recent work on the anthropology of the future in mind (Guyer, 2007; Graham and Thrift, 2007; Bryant and Knight, 2019; Ringel, 2021) I hope to clarify what hope can be good for in the future.

Hope and the Future

So how was hope imagined to relate to the temporal dimension of the future? Initially, the study of hope in the 21st century was quickly absorbed in the academic discourse on affect, not least in human geography (see, for example, Anderson, 2002). Anthropology offered a few alternative perspectives which focused on issues of knowledge and its redirection (Miyazaki, 2004), and everyday practice (Pedersen, 2012)—approaches that are also picked up in this issue. There is obviously nothing wrong with the study of affect and emotions, and some of the contributions continue in this vein, looking at, for instance, the emotional labour that goes into upholding certain hopes. However, one of the problems with affects is that the ‘way of knowing the world’ (Thrift 2008) they offer, including this world’s future, is often vague and implicit, lacking detail and strategy. As I argue below, this has consequences for the effects that hope can (be seen to and hoped for to) have in the present in personal as well as political terms.

In his magnum opus *The Principle of Hope*, East German philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986[1959]) kick-started the study of hope, although of a very specific kind of hope. In his work, he identified a similar problem. He, too, approached hope as an emotion (and arguably affect), but had to go to some length to make hope the right kind of emotion that could fit his deterministic (Marxist) political framework. In his early discussion of Bloch’s work, another Marxist scholar, Frederic Jameson, expands on Bloch’s distinction between expectant and filled emotions, which ‘in the realm of existential emotions and affects’ constitute ‘two different ways of visualizing the future’ (Jameson, 1971: 126). What Bloch calls expectant emotions like hope and fear help to envision a future that is different from the present. In contrast, filled emotions like greed and envy ‘project... an “inauthentic future”’ that is ‘at all points identical to that of the present’ (ibid.). These filled emotions, Jameson claims, arrest all possibility of change and of imagining a radically different future (see ibid.: 127). Whilst I will look at the individual contributions to this issue from this perspective, let me underline that defining what a radically different future looks like, depends on the expectations you bring to a specific situation. As I argue elsewhere, working towards a future that looks like the present can also entail a certain kind of hope, temporal agency and progressive politics (Ringel, 2021).

Still, I agree with Bloch that essentially, hope and fear envision a future that is different from the present—better in the first case, worse in the second. This might simplify what Bloch means with the principle of hope, but the capacity to envision—as in: hope for—a better future is still hope’s main feature. But what kind of hope—as emotion and effect—is needed to have an effect on (for Bloch: correctly predict) the future? This question relates to the bigger claim that Bloch makes and that should feature more prominently in the study of hope. For Bloch, hope is central to his assertion that humans are determined by the future. Arguably the social sciences have only recently started to account for this determination. But if hope plays such an important role in human futurity, then we might as well judge it for the quality of the relation to the future it affords. If we take hope to be one of the many ways in which humans relate to the future (and are arguably determined by it), then what can the contributions to this issue tell us about hope’s future work that is currently done around the world?

Johannes Lenhart's evocative account of his homeless interlocutors' strategies to maintain their existence on the streets of Paris is a case in point. His informants' considered action to secure some form of income is infused with the belief that they will actually make it through yet another day. Some of them have developed certain regularities with their 'clients', which seem to mimic the expectability and stability of traditional wage labour relations. At the core of their practices is short-term survival. Where we would expect an inability to plan ahead and severe limits on their ability to work towards a future, Lenhart presents us with assiduous practitioners, who carefully navigate their everyday routines. Lenhart adds one more future dimension to his analysis, as he draws attention to the equally unexpected long-term hopes amongst his interlocutors to one day leave the streets behind and start a new 'normal' life. Both hopes, short- and long-term, sustain their practices. One is detailed, the other vague. The absence of either could result in despair, or a more general inability to act in the present. But it would be hard to envision how Lenhart's informants could do without these hopes in the first place. Despite their precarious existence, they enduringly and actively work on their futures.

Niamh Collard's Ghanaian weavers—also male, as the majority of interlocutors in this collection—similarly depict a rather vague notion of how a future elsewhere could look like whilst in the short-term keeping up their concrete weaving efforts for everyday economic survival. Arguably, Collard is similarly fascinated with their endurance, emotional and otherwise. And again it would be hard to simply see them give up all dreams of a better future life. Like in Lenhart's case, Jane Guyer's 2007 distinction between near and distanced futures makes sense, especially since religion plays such an important role in Collard's informants' lives. However, what stayed with me is the careful and ongoing negotiation of short- and long-term aims and objectives, in which individual hopes and expectations are constantly being readjusted. Whilst I fully agree with Collard's critique of the profoundly neoliberal individualisation of these hopes (like other contributors, she is keen to identify a late capitalist logic), I would also like to draw attention to the social nature of these ongoing negotiations. Not so much with regards to the actual practices, but through their comparative nature, when other people are seen to already embody one's own potential future, including the anthropologist herself. Also, the analyst's surprise about her informants' endurance, which she frames as being stuck, raises the question of what her interlocutor's expectation were in the first place. If it was further poverty, hardship and despair, then their hanging on in their hopeful efforts is already a realisation of a better future.

Ina Zharkevich's Nepalese interlocutors, in contrast, have already figured out how exactly they want to approach their futures. Their hopes have done their work. These soon-to-be migrants could be criticised for falling into global capitalism's powerful trap of promised 'connectivity', as Harry Pettit in his excellent introduction has described it, by following their dreams of being part of the global flows of value, capital and hopes of a better elsewhere. However, in contrast to the previous two settings, these young Nepalese men have made a decision and invested in their future, only to fall prey to a criminal-capitalist conglomerate of brokers and dealers, whose promise, in contrast to that of capitalism, is not vague at all, but very concrete. Zharkevich does therefore not explore her informants' careful negotiation of their own futures per se, but how they react in a situation in which their agency to work towards this future has been curtailed. Condemned to waiting, these not-yet migrants deploy a sometimes contradictory cost-value calculation in order not to be deterred from their future dreams. For obvious reasons, we learn less about the intentions, hopes and dreams of the criminals exploiting them. There is also less detail on what kind of future repercussions the relatives, friends and neighbours of these migrants-in-the-waiting will face due to the potentially wasted resources. Analytically, these different futures could be played off against one another, and underline the social nature of these future relations and how they are co-constituted, albeit from structurally different positions in a whole network of unequal power relations.

Jordana Ramalho's contribution equally presents a whole variety of people fully invested in their idea of a better future—their home on their own piece of land—and with a clear, if often disrupted, plan of how to get there. Like Zharkevich's informants, they have invested heavily into that path towards the future, not just by paying fees to the homeowner associations that should lead them into the aspired future. Arguably, they might be similarly trapped in their way forward. As Ramalho shows in much detail, to keep up these hopes is not an individual matter. What she calls the sociality of hope is to be found in existing social relations and their own hierarchies and inequalities. Her focus on gender and inequality is spot-on in that regard. However, again, we encounter a set of everyday practices that impress through their longevity: over years her informants have carefully readjusted their prospects and considered every step of the way. These practices constitute a kind of politics, also in their tenacity, but, at the end of the day, what else could her informants have done? They had to muddle through, for themselves and their families. Of course, their politics could always be more radical, organised, forceful or effective, and to name these and other practices explored in this issue as political in the first place pushes what counts as political in the late capitalist era. But such an analysis might fall short. At the core of Ramalho's interlocutors' politics is not the false hope for a future in which the Philippine state, neoliberalism or modernity will finally start to work (in general and for them). What is at the core of their politics is the act of making a claim on the future for themselves and their loved ones vis-a-vis the state.

In similarly adverse circumstances, Mara Nogueira's displaced street vendors in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, maintain an idea of the future that could almost be described as nostalgic. They want to return to a form of arrangement they had before their displacement—and in which, they presume, their livelihoods would be secured again in the future. Nogueira also offers a long term perspective and shows how the concrete political struggles of the stallholders' association were plagued with failure and deferral. Like in Zharkevich's example, although perhaps in a slightly less criminal way, Nogueira's interlocutors were made to wait. They had set their eyes on what they believe would be the key to a better and secure future and they stuck to it. Local state actors' ability to evade their demands continued at the same pace. Nogueira's focus is on the work of affect in the context of exclusionary urban governmentality, but I would like to draw attention again to the concrete nature of the relationship to the future that is contested in this context. Her informants know exactly how the future should be. Their enforced presentism, to use Guyer's (2007) felicitous term, is not due to a lack of imagination and conviction. Indeed, I am sure the association's leader has a clear plan ahead on how things could work out in the near future. The work hope is seen to do is not related to envisioning an alternative future that would help to recapture that future from other powerful imaginaries. No, in this example, affect shapes exactly these social relations, along which hope and disappointment travel. It does so with all the ambiguity that makes it so hard to decide on whether hope is a good or a bad thing.

As we see from this short, comparative discussion of the contributions to this issue, the futures being sought in each context together with the politics attached to them differ enormously. Some are concrete and have become objectives in clear-cut political struggles. Others are vague and generalised and seem to work mostly at the level of the—still socially embedded—individual. Ironically, in all of them, at the core of the hope depicted is more connectivity to capitalism rather than less. As if this era's expectations and hopes are haunted by the idea that capitalism could one day work.

Still, in all of these more or less hopeful and more or less precarious situations, there is an abundance of thought, planning, emotions and affects invested in the future. I have read them as expressions of temporal agency (see Ringel and Morosanu 2016) as each contribution described several ways in which people passionately work on, maintain and advance their sense of the future. Others scholars have also recently stressed these teleological aspects of human futurity (Bryant and Knight 2019). Following in Bloch's footsteps, this allows us to explore how human

beings are determined by the future, and constantly work towards it. But they obviously do so neither equally nor easily.

The way these telling, rich and thought-provoking examples have been framed seems to suggest that if hope would stop its work, or rather people would stop their hopeful labour, despair would ensue and therewith no constructive relation to the future would be possible. But as these articles also show, even in the most dire circumstances, humanity remains determined by its relations to the future—and we as analysts have to account for this fact despite all ambiguity. Side-stepping the loaded, contradictory term of hope would be the easy way out. But as this issue has successfully shown, another strategy would be to embed hope and the relationships to the future it affords even more thoroughly in the everyday practices of our interlocutors. They, I believe, do not have to choose between hope and despair. As I have noticed in my own precarious fieldsite (Ringel 2018), the absence of hope *could* refer to a present that does not need to be contrasted with a better future.

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