

## Open issue

**Heike Schaumberg, Levi Gahman**

The historical moment in which we are publishing this open issue of *Interface* is one of a deepening comprehensive global crisis of the capitalist system. The pandemic only hastened the contradictions and inequalities of the current conjuncture. ‘Communities’ and social movements across the world find themselves at once trying to cope with yet struggling to rectify and repair the lasting legacies, power imbalances, and worldviews of colonialism and the Cold War. Unfettered corporate power and continued militarisation flirt with fascism and imperial nostalgia. Authoritarian efforts to undo the emancipatory gains made by anticolonial liberation and civil rights movements that were fighting for freedom and equality over a half a century ago masquerade as ‘development,’ ‘growth,’ and ‘national security’ agendas.

For decades, the ‘trickle-down’ peace and prosperity promised by neoliberalism’s acolytes has resulted in nothing other than more power, profit, and privilege for the ruling classes. Conversely, more acute forms of austerity, risk, deprivation, and despair have defined the neoliberal experience of the masses. The current crisis is one that in some parts of the world feels like it has been dragging on as the result perhaps related to the Covid pandemic, or a crisis that originates in the ‘financial crash’ of 2007/8 or Brexit in countries such as the UK and other European countries, or elsewhere, such as parts of South America and the Far East, a crisis that originates in the puncture to the neoliberal bubbles of the 1990s. Irrespective of whether these perceptions are correct, the longevity of the crisis (or the crises) is today apparent to all, while the limits to its scope and depth is anyone’s reckoning.

We suggest that the crisis is one, but the experiences of it and responses to it are simultaneously multiple, diverse and alike. They are at once informed by historical and geopolitical particularities, as well as the homogenising impacts of socially and culturally brutal neoliberal remedies. As a systemic crisis it is also a crisis of institutions, structures and ideologies. The macro crisis penetrates all spheres of social, economic, political and cultural life, and threatens our very existence with alarm bells of climate emergency ringing but being ignored or silenced by the powers that be, even from corners where one would have historically expected a different response. Keir Starmer, Britain’s Labour Party leader and future Prime Minister in waiting, recently proclaimed his ‘hate’ for ‘tree huggers’, which followed his earlier purges of the Labour Left preparing to rule on behalf of British capitalist interests.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, across the Global South in particular, the accelerated exploitation and destruction of the planet by the world’s most powerful multinationals is fuelling hunger and inequality due in part to the G7’s corporate agenda for the food system.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wheeler, Caroline ‘I hate tree-huggers’ — Keir Starmer explodes over green policy *The Sunday Times*, 8 July 2023, see: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-hate-tree-huggers-keir-starmer-explodes-over-green-policy-6hhnj9r9x>

Globally, government commitments already watered down on saving the climate are repeatedly broken and ignored. Crisis then governs our personal and collective aspirations, hopes and desires, our visions and anxieties for the future.

As war continues to devastate towns and people in the Ukraine, the inherently violent inequalities of the global 'disorder' have, after a spate of unprecedented capitalist expansion and growth in Africa prior to the Covid pandemic, ignited civil wars in countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia. Such growth in Africa was always embedded in the continent's subjugation to the colonial and imperialist hunger for its natural and social resources. We have yet to see, whether today's young African working-class will be able to carve out an alternative path to the logic of competition of its local ruling classes over the crumbs left behind by its imperialist masters. Geopolitically, these war zones are today's front lines of capitalism's drive to demarcate new boundaries of global competition and to preserve the hierarchy of economic and geo-political power. Israel exploited the West's aptitude for war and launched its greatest military incursions to date of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank.<sup>2</sup> But if it was meant to dissuade Israeli anti-government protests, then that campaign has utterly failed, with the largest protests erupting yet in Israel against Netanyahu's efforts to politicize the justice system in the government's favour.<sup>3</sup>

Confronted with a ruling class incapable of seeing beyond its immediate profit margins, social movements come into being (including labour movements) that task themselves with saving the world from its demise, with the defence of working-class livelihoods, working conditions, and an array of human and social rights increasingly under threat in a marketised world where such rights are translated as unwanted costs. Social movements, frequently large-scale, have been pushing back against the capitalist offensives for the best part of two decades in various countries across Latin America (continuously so in some parts and sporadically in others), led by resurgent indigenous and women's movements (including abortion rights, against feminicide, and fierce teachers' struggles).

The US's and Europe's often racialised class conflicts and protest movements have been intermittent but also intensifying. Since the Black Lives Matter movement echoed anger across the world following the extra-judicial police killing of George Floyd in 2020 (see Special Issue of *Interface* 13.1) and generated a confrontation with the Global North's institutional legacies of colonialism, (anti-)racism continues firmly on the agenda. The recent police murder of 17-year old, Nahel Merzouk, a French citizen of Algerian and Moroccan descent, was the final straw that both ignited ongoing riots by the

---

<sup>2</sup> McKernan, Bethan and Peter Beaumont. Israel attacks Jenin in biggest West Bank incursion in 20 years. *The Guardian*. 3/07/2023. See:

[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/03/palestinians-killed-israeli-strike-west-bank-jenin?fbclid=IwAR2qVgGsK63M-JkcSlrNq-9QcF\\_sYTyFyloFR5Kl7otbyTsqt9uZy4ETw\\_A](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/03/palestinians-killed-israeli-strike-west-bank-jenin?fbclid=IwAR2qVgGsK63M-JkcSlrNq-9QcF_sYTyFyloFR5Kl7otbyTsqt9uZy4ETw_A)

<sup>3</sup> Reuters. Israeli protests reignite as PM pushes on with justice system overhaul. *The Guardian*. 8/07/2023. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/08/israeli-protests-reignite-as-pm-pushes-on-with-justice-system-overhaul>

‘dispossessed’ and disenchanted with Macron's neoliberalising efforts but it also mobilised France's eager right-wing strata, in a country where institutional racism is persistently denied and rarely challenged, but continues to be a prominent part of the fabric of social and spatial stratification of its cities. The movement of ‘*Les Gilets Jaunes*’ (‘Yellow-Vests’) with its night-time popular assemblies is a recent memory, but it is not clear whether the riots will generate a social movement with a clearer political perspective. In bordering countries to the East, the West and South of France, industrial action especially in transport and airport related industries have forced large cancellations of flights and tourism across Europe. In the UK, university lecturers have become an active collective voice since its trade union, UCU, launched a fight-back against the attacks on pensions in 2018, and have continued to build on its success and expanded into more comprehensive efforts against casualisation and profoundly deteriorating working conditions. Nurses and doctors have taken to industrial action for the first time in a hundred years, confronted with decades of severe underfunding and purposeful dismantling of the entire public health system, the NHS, to benefit the private sector and fill the pockets of profiteers. These conflicts intensify the rank and file struggle for collective autonomy and democracy within the trade union movement. Squatter and anti-eviction struggles for dignified housing also continue amidst the UK's ‘heat or eat’ cost of living crisis.

Direct action on the climate emergency has captured the imagination in various ways as communities across the Global North and South, as well as constituencies both young and old, strive to confront the uneven impacts of climate change, structural racism, exploitation and extractivism. Challenges to the exploitative and extractive practices of corporate power with state authorities as its executioners are seeing grassroots movements bring together marginalised groups to advance both environmental justice and economic alternatives. On this front, Indigenous and rural communities continue to play a vital role in resisting environmental destruction by defending their territories, asserting their ecological knowledges, and demanding rights to land and self-determination. Climate education and awareness campaigns as well as social movement and working-class solidarity are also promoting critical consciousness about the disproportionate risks faced especially by small island states and socially disadvantaged communities, which has led to more strident calls for decarbonisation, degrowth, and climate reparations. Through a diverse array of repertoires of resistance and mobilisation, justice-driven collectives and communities are actively working to address climate breakdown, redress the enduring aftermaths of Empire, and promote more equitable and sustainable futures.

Some of these aspects are reflected in this issue. Relatedly, movements responding to migrant injustice, border violence, and entrenched patriarchy are employing strategies to address human rights abuses, structural oppression, and gender inequality. Feminist and anti-racist activists alike are raising awareness about the gendered, racial, and classed dynamics of transnationalism and patriarchal norms while advocating for policy changes through public

education and media outreach. More broadly vis-a-vis borders, migrant justice activists are taking to the frontlines to provide legal support, document abuse, challenge policy-sanctioned neglect, and confront the callous decisions of political officials who are letting migrants and asylum seekers suffer the elements and even perish at sea. In turn, movements dedicated to migrant rights are offering humanitarian aid and essential services to those impacted by racist border regimes and intensifying forms of border militarisation. These sobering dynamics raise pressing questions about whose lives are grievable versus whose lives are not.

These inspiring examples do not represent a comprehensive list of social movement events. In fact, they comprise a small fraction of the social movements and protests that have developed around the globe, and only give an inkling of the intensification of class, geo-political and social conflicts while we were preparing the publication of this issue. There were the Greek revolts inclusive of mass strikes against the extorting austerity imposed by the EU and IMF, there was the Arab Spring and Syrian insurgence before it was bomb shelled back into submission, Spain's '*Los Indignados*' ('The aggrieved/enraged') movement fighting home possession and homelessness, and, more recently, the women's rights movements in India and Iran which powerfully challenge state oppression and repression. In addition, democracy and labour movements are less common but are intensifying in China too. 'Community' and social movement struggles against extractivism and the kind of government policies that further imperil the environment are intensifying across the globe. Between them, they offer powerful opposition not only to capital's offensives but to the violence of its far-right offspring and to war. In many ways they contain the ingredients of a new socio-economic system that is not based on profit but on the socialised collective good. The amplitude and complexities of the crisis are reflected in contemporary social movement articulations and demands. They are not the single-issue movements we used to know from previous decades in the last century. Instead, they interconnect a broad range of agendas and of social movement organisations. The eleven contributions and three book reviews in this *Interface* issue reflect at least partially several of these themes. They range from the defence or amplification of democracy, social movement adaptation to new challenges, transnational movements, migration, solidarity in the face of social decline and homelessness, to a general state of bewilderment or perhaps a feeling of being overwhelmed by the tasks involved to right the many wrongs. The social movements today, as several contributions in this issue echo, are embattled with the past as they strive to learn lessons to carve out a better future. Importantly, they constitute a powerful counter-tendency to the muscle-flexing of the Far Right.

### **In this issue**

In his article, 'Can we do more experimental research with/in social movements?', Jacob Stringer proposes that more experimentation should be conducted within social movement research. In doing so, the piece outlines the

necessary conditions for expanding experimental approaches, which depart from traditional research practices.

Next, in their paper, 'Rural social movements and sustainable agricultural development in Sub-Saharan Africa' Ellinor Isgren et al outline a collaborative research agenda focused on the role of farmer organisations in promoting sustainable and inclusive agricultural development. After having engaged in collaborative dialogue and conducted research with small-scale farmer-led organisations, local activist groups, transnational civil society networks, and varying academic institutions, their agenda aims to address the political barriers that hinder inclusive, sustainable development.

Fernando Velasquez-Villalba, 'When the anti-System is democratising: Fujimorismo, neoliberalism and rage in the Peruvian bicentennial generation,' critically explores political and historical contexts of the mobilisations against Fujimori in 2020 and its aftermath. The paper provides crucial insights and understandings of the implicit legacies of political and ideological interpretations of 'fujimorismo' that paved the way for the subsequent regime change and backlash. Nevertheless, the author argues that the 2020 mobilisations and its inherent struggles over memory had laid the ground work for furthering the movements for democracy.

Masoud Movahed and Elizabeth Hirsh's article, 'The regional determinants of collective action in the era of American Resistance,' examines the factors influencing collective action during the 'American Resistance' period after President Donald Trump's election. Utilizing data from Count Love, a machine learning tool that records protest details, including location, timing, and attendance, their research investigates how socio-economic factors, political partisanship, and demographic composition of states impact the frequency of protests and the number of participants.

In the article, 'Death of the arena in Occupy Los Angeles', Louis Esparza offers an ethnographic analysis of the rise and breakdown of Occupy Los Angeles. In the paper, Esparza examines the use of physical space as an arena where activists generate decisions, set rules, channel contention, and ultimately, how political differences took on spatial dimensions in Occupy LA.

In the article, 'The cruel urgencies of belonging: Neoliberal individualism in progressive community organising', Briana Bivens draws on conversations facilitated in 2020 with community organisers in the southeastern U.S. about tensions and stuck places in their organising to highlight how neoliberal, individualising logics can circulate in justice-oriented organising efforts, to the detriment of movement sustainability. The paper proposes that experimenting with capacity-building practices as an anti-oppressive strategy can disrupt neoliberal logics and support more sustainable and collectivist ways of relating in organising spaces.

Jeff Victor's piece, 'Organising the anti-war movement in rural America,' offers a personal account of organising against the Vietnam War in small town

America. The reflection provides insights into the challenges and opportunities of such work in the current moment.

Benjamin Duke's piece, 'UK squatters' social movement's crystal ball,' critically analyses the UK's Brexit as a socio-economic political decision that will have a profound effect upon the UK squatters' social movements throughout the 2020s. In doing so, Duke's piece offers a dire glimpse of the draconian policing, societal polarisation, intensifying division, and suppression of civil protest that are on the horizon in the UK.

In the article, 'Hacking' climate education methods within narrow policy frames to ask systemic and emancipatory questions. Practice notes from Leith, Scotland,' Justus Wachs argues that many climate educators operate within narrow policy frames that reproduce 'externalizing' views of climate change and aim to engender behavior change instead of inquiring into root causes and underlying assumptions. By reflecting upon a climate education programme Wachs facilitated over a span of two years, the piece illustrates how climate education methodologies can be 'hacked' to ask more systemic questions while achieving individual behavior change.

In the article, 'Incubating grounded transnational advocacy networks: The making of transnational movements for marriage migrants,' Shih Hsin shows why and how transnational movements for marriage migrants have been incubated from the grassroots level and developed into regional and international levels through continuously linking grassroots empowerment to transnational networking. In doing so, the paper argues that, in the case of transnational movements for marriage migrants, domestic transnationalism is the necessary condition for transnationalism beyond nation-state boundaries

In the article, 'The path is the goal: Utopia as process,' Matt York argues that if we are to move beyond our current states of bewilderment, disorientation, and denial, we will need to establish new grounded utopias that, rather than being not-now and nowhere, are co-imagined and lived right here and right now. In examining the anarchist concept of permanent revolution, York draws on classical and contemporary anarchist theory, as well as from a recent collective visioning project involving a global cross-section of anti-capitalist, ecological, feminist and anti-racist activists.

Finally, to round out this issue of *Interface*, we have three book reviews, including David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021), which is reviewed by Daniel Fischer; Darren Byler's *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* (2022), which is reviewed by Isaac K. Oommen; and Diego Castro and Huáscar Salazar's *América Latina en Tiempos Revueltos: Claves y Luchas Renovadas Frente al Giro Conservador* (2021), which is reviewed by Armando Bravo and Ricardo Miranda.