Beyond Berlant's Impasse: Cruel Optimism, Material Constraint, and Counter-Infrastructures

Ahmed Hassan Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed

Philipps-Universitaet Marburg

North American Studies (MA)

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Abstract

Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism offers a powerful account of why people remain attached to promises that obstruct their flourishing, especially under conditions of neoliberal precarity. Its strength, however, is primarily diagnostic: it explains the affective persistence of compromised attachments more fully than it specifies institutional routes out of them. This paper develops a materialist supplement to Berlant rather than a rejection of affect theory. Drawing on Karl Marx's account of alienated labour, Nancy Fraser's analysis of social reproduction, and Erik Olin Wright's theory of real utopias, it argues that cruel attachments persist not only because subjects desire the fantasies attached to them, but also because material dependence raises the cost of detachment. Platform labour and educational credentialism illustrate this problem. The paper therefore proposes the concept of counter-infrastructures: institutions and collective arrangements that reduce dependence on harmful objects by providing alternative sources of security, care, income, and social recognition. The central claim is that affective diagnosis becomes politically stronger when joined to institutional analysis: people can relinquish cruel promises more readily when viable material alternatives exist.

Keywords: Lauren Berlant; cruel optimism; affect theory; precarity; alienation; social reproduction; counter-infrastructures; neoliberalism

Introduction: From Diagnosis to Strategy

Lauren Berlant's Cruel Optimism has become influential because it names a familiar contradiction of contemporary life: people remain attached to objects, institutions, and fantasies that promise the good life while increasingly obstructing the conditions under which that life could be realized. Berlant defines cruel optimism as an attachment to a desired object that becomes an obstacle to flourishing (24). The concept is especially useful for understanding a

historical moment in which promises of stable employment, upward mobility, durable intimacy, and social security continue to organize aspiration even as the institutions that once sustained those promises become less reliable. Berlant's achievement is not simply to say that people hold false beliefs. The theory explains why attachment can remain necessary even after its object has become damaging: abandoning the promise may threaten the continuity of the subject's sense of how to go on living.

This paper accepts that diagnosis but asks a different question: what follows politically once cruel optimism has been identified? Berlant's project is deliberately concerned with affective adjustment, endurance, and the experience of the historical present. It is not a program for institutional design. That distinction matters. A theory should not be faulted for failing to solve a problem it did not set out to solve. Yet the distinction also reveals a limitation when cruel optimism is used as a broader theory of political transformation. If the problem is partly that people depend materially on the very institutions to which they are affectively attached, then recognition, recalibration, and alternative ways of relating cannot by themselves lower the cost of exit.

The argument developed here is therefore supplementary rather than dismissive. Cruel optimism should be connected to a material analysis of dependence. Marx's theory of alienated labour clarifies how subjects can be subordinated to social relations that they themselves reproduce. Fraser's account of social reproduction shows why capitalist crisis is sustained through infrastructures of care, housing, education, family life, and public provision that are not reducible to individual psychology. Wright's work on real utopias, finally, provides a vocabulary for thinking about institutional alternatives that can exist within the present while reducing dependence on dominant arrangements. Bringing these approaches together makes it possible to formulate a more precise political claim: cruel attachments become easier to relinquish when people possess alternative material supports. The problem is not that feelings do not matter. It is that feelings are organized inside infrastructures.

Cruel Optimism and the Politics of the Impasse

Berlant's concept begins from a relation rather than from an object. An attachment is not cruel because the desired object is inherently bad; it becomes cruel when the relation to that object sustains a fantasy of flourishing while undermining the subject's capacity to flourish. This

relational account is more sophisticated than a simple ideology critique. The subject may know that a job is exhausting, that a degree does not guarantee security, or that a social institution is failing. Knowledge alone does not dissolve the attachment because the object organizes continuity, expectation, and practical orientation.

The concept of the impasse develops this insight temporally. Berlant describes the impasse as a stretch of time in which the present is intensely lived but difficult to narrate, a period of adjustment in which people improvise ways of staying afloat without knowing where those adjustments lead (4, 199). The impasse therefore names neither passive resignation nor a clear path toward transformation. It is a condition of ongoing activity under uncertain historical pressure. This is one reason Cruel Optimism remains useful for thinking about precarity: subjects are not simply duped by ideology, nor are they fully free agents who can abandon harmful arrangements at will. They adapt because they must continue living inside them.

The difficulty arises when the descriptive sophistication of this account is treated as if it already contained a politics of exit. Berlant's attention to alternative modes of living, improvisation, and relationality can reveal practices that exceed dominant fantasies of the good life. But such practices do not automatically change the distribution of resources or the institutional conditions that make some attachments difficult to leave. The analytical question is therefore not whether Berlant offers an insufficient emotional solution to a structural problem. That formulation mischaracterizes her project. The sharper question is whether an affective theory of endurance requires an institutional supplement when it is asked to explain emancipation rather than survival.

Material Dependence: Marx, Alienation, and the Cost of Exit

Marx's account of estranged labour provides one way to specify the material dimension of attachment. In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx describes labour under capitalist conditions as an activity in which the worker's own productive power confronts the worker as an external force. The product belongs elsewhere, the activity is organized by another, and labour becomes primarily a means of securing subsistence rather than an autonomous expression of life (Marx, 'Estranged Labour'). The important point for the present argument is not that cruel optimism simply repeats alienation. The concepts operate at different levels. Berlant analyzes attachment and affective continuity; Marx analyzes relations of production, ownership, and dependence.

Their intersection lies in the fact that a subject may be attached to an institution not only because of fantasy, but because that institution controls access to necessities.

This distinction changes the meaning of exit. Consider a worker attached to the promise that long hours, flexibility, and self-discipline will eventually produce security. If the same job also pays rent, health costs, food, and debt, detachment cannot be understood as a purely affective reorientation. The object is simultaneously symbolic and infrastructural. It promises recognition and upward mobility while also supplying the material conditions of survival. The subject's attachment is therefore overdetermined: desire and dependence reinforce one another.

Seen this way, the cruelty of optimism often lies in a structural asymmetry. The institution can withdraw its promise while the subject cannot easily withdraw participation. A worker can cease believing that employment will provide a good life and still need the wage. A student can recognize that a credential offers uncertain returns and still face labour markets that reward credentials. A tenant can understand the speculative logic of housing and still require shelter. The persistence of attachment is not evidence of psychological weakness. It may be a rational response to constrained alternatives.

Social Reproduction and the Limits of Affective Recalibration

Nancy Fraser's analysis of social reproduction extends this materialist perspective beyond the workplace. Fraser argues that capitalist accumulation depends on activities of care, household maintenance, socialization, and community reproduction that it simultaneously tends to destabilize. Her account of the contemporary 'crisis of care' treats affective and material labour as conditions of possibility for the formal economy rather than as separate private concerns (99-101). This matters for Berlant because many objects of cruel optimism are embedded in precisely these reproductive institutions: family, education, housing, healthcare, and the expectation that paid work will support a viable life.

Fraser's framework also prevents a false opposition between feeling and structure. Care is affective and material. Exhaustion is bodily and institutional. Attachment is emotional, but it is shaped by schedules, wages, debt, public services, and legal arrangements. A politics adequate to cruel optimism therefore cannot simply choose structure over affect. It must ask how institutional arrangements distribute the capacity to detach, recover, and reorganize one's life. The same

promise can be merely disappointing for someone with savings, housing security, and social support, but existentially binding for someone without them.

This is where the language of vulnerability requires precision. Berlant's attention to vulnerability should not be reduced to Nietzschean 'slave morality.' Nietzsche's critique of ressentiment targets a reactive moral valuation in which powerlessness is transformed into moral superiority (Nietzsche I.10). Berlant, by contrast, is not praising weakness as virtue; she is analyzing how subjects live through conditions they did not choose. The comparison becomes useful only at a more limited level: both thinkers are interested in what happens when action is organized reactively around forces experienced as external. Treating the two positions as equivalent would erase important differences in their objects, methods, and political commitments.

Two Illustrative Cases: Platform Labour and Credentialism

Platform labour offers a clear example of how affective promise and material dependence can converge. Companies in the gig economy have often marketed platform work through the language of flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurship. Alex Rosenblat's study of Uber shows how this entrepreneurial rhetoric coexists with forms of algorithmic management that shape workers' access to information, earnings, and opportunities (138-66). The promise of autonomy is therefore not simply false; workers may genuinely value schedule flexibility. Its cruelty emerges when flexibility becomes tied to risk transfer, opaque management, and dependence on a platform whose rules the worker does not control.

Berlant helps explain why the promise remains compelling. Marx helps explain why the platform can become an external power over labour. Fraser helps explain why the worker's decision is also shaped by care obligations, time poverty, and the reproductive work required outside paid employment. None of these approaches is sufficient alone. Together they show why telling workers to abandon the fantasy of entrepreneurial freedom would be inadequate if no alternative source of income, care, or scheduling autonomy exists.

Educational credentialism provides a second case. A university degree can function as an object of optimism because it condenses several promises at once: intellectual development, professional recognition, social mobility, belonging, and future security. The attachment can become cruel when the credential remains psychologically and socially necessary while its material payoff becomes uncertain. Yet the appropriate conclusion is not that education is

inherently deceptive. The relation is contingent. A degree becomes cruelly optimistic when the institutional environment makes continued investment necessary while progressively weakening the conditions under which the promised future can be realized.

This example also clarifies why purely individual exit can be misleading. A student who recognizes the uncertainty of the promise may still continue because leaving carries sunk costs, status losses, immigration consequences, debt, or reduced access to professional labour markets. The more accurate question is therefore not 'Why does the individual refuse to let go?' but 'What institutional conditions make letting go prohibitively expensive?' That shift moves the analysis from personal endurance toward political economy without abandoning Berlant's insight into attachment.

Counter-Infrastructures: From Endurance to Material Alternatives

If cruel optimism persists partly because people lack viable alternatives, then a politics of exit requires more than critique. It requires arrangements that reduce the material risk of detachment. I use the term counter-infrastructures to describe institutions and collective practices that create alternative sources of security, capacity, and coordination within the present. The term does not imply a complete replacement of existing systems. It identifies practical structures that make dependence less absolute: worker cooperatives, mutual-aid institutions, public services, collective bargaining, community-controlled resources, social housing, portable benefits, and other arrangements that expand the range of livable choices.

Erik Olin Wright's concept of 'real utopias' provides a useful framework here. Wright rejects the choice between accepting existing institutions and imagining a total break whose feasibility cannot be specified. Instead, he examines institutional forms that embody emancipatory principles while operating within existing societies. Worker cooperatives are one example: they do not abolish markets, but they can alter relations of ownership and governance by making workers participants in organizational control (Wright 168). Their importance for the present argument is not that cooperatives solve capitalism, but that they demonstrate how an alternative can change the practical cost of refusing a dominant arrangement.

Counter-infrastructures therefore address a problem that affective critique alone cannot solve. A person can relinquish a harmful job more readily when healthcare is not tied to that job. A caregiver can resist exploitative schedules more readily when childcare is publicly available. A

worker can reject unilateral platform control more readily when collective organizations provide bargaining power or alternative employment structures. A student can reassess the value of a credential more freely when social status and material security are not concentrated in a narrow set of professional pathways. In each case, the affective attachment is not simply argued away; its infrastructural necessity is reduced.

This proposal also avoids the opposite error of structural determinism. Institutions do not automatically generate new desires or identities. People may remain attached to old fantasies even when alternatives exist, and new institutions can reproduce hierarchy, exclusion, or domination. Berlant remains necessary precisely because material alternatives still have to become affectively inhabitable. Counter-infrastructures must therefore be understood as both material and cultural projects. They create resources, but they also create new scenes in which different forms of the good life can become imaginable.

Beyond the False Choice between Affect and Structure

The strongest version of a materialist critique of Berlant is not that Cruel Optimism is merely aesthetic, apolitical, or consolatory. Such claims underestimate the political work performed by affective analysis. Berlant shows why damaged attachments cannot be dissolved by exposing them as irrational. The theory captures the ordinary labour of remaining functional when inherited genres of the good life no longer fit the world. That is a substantive contribution to political analysis because it explains why crisis does not automatically produce rupture.

The limitation appears only when diagnosis is asked to become strategy. Affect theory can show how subjects endure, improvise, and become attached; it cannot by itself determine which institutions should be built, how resources should be distributed, or how power should be reorganized. Materialist theory has the opposite danger: it can identify structural domination while underestimating the attachments through which people inhabit those structures. A more adequate account requires both.

The resulting synthesis changes the political question. Instead of asking subjects to become emotionally detached from compromised promises, it asks what conditions would make detachment survivable. Instead of treating vulnerability as either a moral virtue or a weakness to be overcome, it treats vulnerability as socially organized and unevenly distributed. And instead

of imagining emancipation as a purely internal transformation of desire or a purely external transformation of institutions, it understands the two as mutually conditioning.

Conclusion

Cruel optimism remains valuable because it explains a central paradox of contemporary precarity: people can recognize that an attachment is damaging and still experience it as necessary to living on. The concept should not be dismissed for failing to provide a ready-made political program. Berlant's project is diagnostic, historical, and aesthetic rather than institutional. But once the concept is used to think about emancipation, its strategic underdetermination becomes visible.

A materialist supplement clarifies what is missing. Marx shows how dependence can be produced through social relations that confront subjects as external powers. Fraser shows that those relations extend through the infrastructures of social reproduction on which economic life depends. Wright shows how institutional alternatives can be judged not only by their ideals but by whether they expand social power and create feasible alternatives in the present. Together, these perspectives suggest that cruel optimism cannot be overcome by affective recalibration alone, but neither can it be overcome by structural reform that ignores desire, identity, and attachment.

The concept of counter-infrastructure names the practical bridge between these levels. People are more capable of abandoning harmful promises when they have somewhere material to go: another source of income, care, housing, recognition, collective power, or social belonging. The political task is therefore not to teach subjects to feel differently while leaving the conditions of dependence intact. It is to build institutions that make different feelings, attachments, and futures materially possible.

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