



‘No we can’t’. Crisis as chance

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In 1931 two friends, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, planned to launch a journal named *Krisis und Kritik*, thus linking ‘crisis’ directly to ‘critique’ in a manner that would become emblematic of the very idea of societal crisis in Europe during this decade. Spreading to Europe, a financial crisis in the US reinforced the dominant crisis of the Old World: a political crisis in the form of a fascist upsurge. Whereas fascism blossomed to its fullest in total annihilation, however, Benjamin and Brecht’s journal was never realized. The first victim of war is critique. Other casualties were to follow, and for Benjamin it should all end there; he later killed himself while fleeing the Nazis.

When observing the political development in Europe during this epoch, it seems as if the realization of a crisis will lead to a worsening and further dissemination of the problems that provoked the crisis in the first place: the Versailles Treaty inspired the Germans (as well as other European states) to stronger forms of nationalism. Will the current crisis in capitalism likewise intensify the problems it creates?

The ad from the *Financial Times* in the De Cock, Fitchett and Volkmann article in this issue provides a simple but strong image of the present crisis: ‘We Live in Financial Times’. If we indeed live in financial times, what that time is facing is currently a societal crisis or, to be more exact, our time is facing a number of crises, each of world-historical dimensions. Reading the ‘Myths of a Near Past’, De Cock, Fitchett and Volkmann dive into the present historical representation of finance capitalism.

“The hard lessons of history”, which Simon Critchley also calls “listening to the counsel of the dead”, should in any case teach us that such a crisis does not necessarily lead to a change in our political or, for that matter, organizational logics. *ephemera* of course seeks to phrase the question in organizational terms: the probability of changing our political logics is, this is our claim, tightly connected to our ability to change our organizational logics. Paraphrasing Latour: Organizations are politics made durable. They are what history is made of.

What, then, does organization studies say about ‘change we can believe in’? The dominant view still maintains that

only management can do organization, and that organizing always involves permanent hierarchies of status and reward, Business School credentialism, the separation of conception from execution, the dominance of the market and so on. (Parker, 2002a: 209)

Will the common crisis do anything to change this state of affairs? Or only consolidate it even further? We have seen banks, credit institutions and even countries break down in the aftermath of a neo-liberal market frenzy, yet the production of alternatives has not caught any significant media attention, apart, perhaps, from a short notice to the effect that Marx's *Capital* sells better in Germany than ever.

Might it be that while we experience a state of emergency in the financial times we live in, we do not see the annulment of its norms, but rather their revelation? Says Angela Mitropoulos (2006: 98):

The state of emergency is not the exception which suddenly takes shape under the geopoliticised heading of 'war has come home'; rather, it is the norm and the experience of the world, whose functioning is laid bare in moments of crisis.

The functioning of neo-liberal economics, coupled with insipid 'market managerialism', Parker continues (2002b), is our present predicament, so much has been 'laid bare'. Market managerialism is, as Parker further argues, in itself a wholly transcendent belief in the happy marriage between capital and humanism, that is, management composed as a mix between economism (in the form of neo-liberalism) and behaviourism (in the form of positivist science).

What on one level is a financial crisis, then, points on another to this marriage between capital and humanism. The question is whether the crisis only reveals the functioning of this marriage or if it is also able to shake it up. Does the crisis lead to a critique or is critique in fact the first victim?

Causes, conditions and creation ex nihilo?

When Benjamin and Brecht connected crisis with critique they reestablished these two notions with their ancient etymological roots. Both have their origin in the Greek *krinein*, which means 'to separate and decide'. Furthermore *crisis* designates, the OED tells us, 'the point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death; the turning-point of a disease for better or worse'. This allows a crisis to curl into a point where something changes, but also a point to be scrutinized and 'a point by which to judge'.

A dissection of the current crisis might for some involve finding the causes of the turning-point and showing their unjust and unreasonable character. Either by affirming that the neo-liberal market system is indeed a happy marriage between capital and humanism and the current crisis has more to do with the greed of people and less to do with the system itself, or by turning to the more social-democratic argument that the crisis is an effect of a wild casino capitalism, which respects the laws of neither state nor market. The problem with the happy marriage between capital and humanism, so runs this argument, is the slow deterioration of the classic welfare state logic, not the

relationship as such. The problem remains bound to its neo-liberal tendencies that have destabilized the institutions regulating the relationship between capital and the human.

Or perhaps a more Marxist route is the one to take. Here, then, greed does not explain anything; the Bernard Madoffs of the financial world are mere masks and capitalism creates and feeds on its own breakdown. The only lasting solution here seems to be a divorce between capitalism and humanism.

Or is it not really a matter of causes but the conditions of our experience. Whether transcendental in a Kantian sense or historical in a Foucauldian sense, critique is here the praxis of an analysis that examines a certain context (discursive, economical, social, mental etc.) in order to lay bare its conditions of existence. Critique, then, becomes a question of revealing these conditions to show how we became who we are and, hopefully, point to what we might become. The crisis becomes a mere symptom that allows us to point to the conditions of the marriage between capitalism and humanism. But symptoms, we may infer, are not merely given. They have to be interpreted and arranged to make sense. A true *symptomatology* would “not seek to *represent* the world by examining its symptoms”; it would “*intervene* in the world by rearranging its symptoms in thought” (Kristensen, Pedersen and Spoelstra, 2008: 2). In this way, finding the conditions of the crisis is already an experiment with what we can think, see and feel. By diagnosing the limits of understanding and action that these conditions put on us, we always participate in a rearrangement of symptoms paving the way for a new way of framing the problem of the crisis. Indeed by diagnosing and reposing the problem at hand we might then have the chance to do something differently.

Or we may situate our critique elsewhere. According to Meillassoux (2008) a proper post-critical and a-causal philosophy must understand everything as contingent. Nothing in and about thought and being is self-evident and necessary. Reality in itself is marked by its potential collapse “not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing” (Meillassoux, 2008: 53). God does not exist, but he might do so in the future, the sun might explode tomorrow, gravity might stop working, and the current crisis may finally have no cause. All constants could change for no reason whatsoever (Meillassoux, 2007: 59). The current state of affairs, or, indeed, any state of affairs, involves both what it is and the possibility that it can always be otherwise (Hallward, 2008: 51). The financial crisis as well as the marriage between capital and humanism therefore offers no necessity; they are a mere collection of effects. Furthermore these are not effects of one singular cause or a complex network of causes rather they are effects of a “pure eruption of novelty *ex nihilo*” (Hallward, 2008: 52). There is no natural cause, social law or power that holds the marriage between capital and humanism together and it is only our human experience that is holding us back from disposing of this “superstitious belief in causality” (Hallward, 2008: 52). This makes the marriage and crisis a chance happening, something contingent. But as Meillassoux (2008: 108) points out, “the term contingency refers back to the Latin *continge*, meaning ‘to touch, to befall’, which is to say, what which happens, but which happens enough to happen *to us*”. In so far as something befalls us it does so without a governing law, and this also makes the crisis into a promise: we might become something radically different from what we are now.

This means that the marriage between capital and humanism is essentially not problematic because it is unjust in a moral or political sense but because we believe it to be something governed by given causes and conditions. But Meillassoux may teach us that crisis is not just a chance to change. Crisis shows us that everything is chance.

These are but some of the critical opportunities to scrutinize the crisis we have, theoretically speaking. But *ephemera's* subtitle remains *theory & politics in organization*. So what does this all mean on a practical or political level? We who 'live in' the business school are also part of both the reinforcement of the times and their annulment, not least when meeting students and managers to be. In fact the marriage between capital and humanism is quite explicit in the slogan of a place like the Copenhagen Business School, a place 'Where University Means Business'. Issue 8.3 of *ephemera* (2008) was a special issue on academia: 'University, Failed'. It quoted Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho* (1983): "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Here, diagnosing a world of academic knowledge production which to an extreme extent has been managerialised, it pointed to the way crisis can be seen as nothing less than a training regimen in the art of failing.

At this stage, the United States should know the drill. Barack Obama has recently tried to empower the US to make 'changes we can believe in', believing, presumably, that hope can, quite abruptly, make us become something else. But the question remains: Is Obama's 'Yes We Can' just another way of rekindling the marriage of capitalism and humanism. Is Obama sending the shaky relationship off to a marriage counselor? Will the bond just get tighter when faced with crisis? And are we still not caught in the assumption that in the end the marriage is governed by something true and real? Perhaps it is time for a more radical critique: 'No We Can't'?

As long as the crisis was expressed as a *financial* crisis, through new buzz words like 'subprime' and 'venture capital' the crisis was, for many, an abstract crisis rather than an organizational and societal crisis. Yet, its real effects and horrible consequences can no longer be denied. Perhaps a micro-level war is the practical solution to a situation where a whole people would say 'No We Can't'. And war has, as Mitropoulos asserts above, certainly 'come home'; in practice, it was the transformation of homes from 'places to live in' into 'assets to profit from' in the last decade which now strikes down as 'crisis'. Suitably, the 2008 World Press Photo of the Year was won by the American photographer Anthony Suau for his black and white image of an armed officer moving through a home in Cleveland, Ohio. The inhabitants were evicted as a result of mortgage foreclosure, and the picture literally depicts a home at war, a sober comment to the crisis. Indeed, in the same movement war has come to the workplace, as an undeniable reality right in the praised heart of flexicurity welfare. At a Swedish automobile plant, the management's *crisis management* strategies include armed guards and specially made vehicles that bring the same management safely from their homes to the workplace. The managers will no longer have to run the risk of meeting any of their employees – people they may have known for more than 20 years - outside the office space, because of the risk of getting beating up. All this is their response to the risk of a people that might say, 'No We Can't'. Indeed, employees are continuously reported to have committed suicide as a result of bankruptcies in the industry. It leads us to again ask the question whether we are witnessing the annulment of the norms of our times, or

whether we are witnessing their revelation? Benjamin's *kritik* during the *krisis* of the Second World War ended, in one sense, in his suicide. Suicide is of course war brought directly into the human itself. Says Jesus, "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Matt. 12:25).

The marriage between capital and humanism, then, is already starting to shake and no matter which theoretical and critical starting point that guides our encounter with the crisis, our endpoint may well be 'No We Can't'.

Contributions

Even though this issue of *ephemera* is an open issue we still believe that each of the contributions in their own way critique either the financial times we live in or the same times' marriage of capital and humanism.

Christian De Cock, James Fitchett and Christina Volkman's article 'Myths of a Near Past: Envisioning Finance Capitalism anno 2007' addresses depictions of the world of finance and analyses how these depictions act as key representational elements in the all encompassing fantasy of a harmonious relationship between global capital and the good life. The article follows the same strategy that the authors used in the 2001 piece 'Myths of a Near Future'. This early *ephemera* piece confronted the manifestations of capitalism through a large collection of images about the New Economy. Through a discussion of 81 ads in the *Financial Times* this new piece focuses on how the financial world was represented and entangled into certain fantasies in 2007. In this way the article illustrates a near past filled with myths about the wonders of finance capitalism.

Alexander Styhre's article 'The Production of Informational Objects in Innovation Work: Pharmaceutical Reason and the Individuation of Illnesses' analyses a specific part of the marriage between humanism and capital: that of biotechnology and capital in new drug development. This marriage re-defines life under paroles such as 'pharmaceutical reason' and 'life is information'. Life is "no longer what is given but what is to be managed and monitored" and this is also, argues Styhre with the use of a Derridean concept, threatening to life: "the very concept of life is put... 'under erasure' [*sous rature*]". Based in Gilbert Simondon's concept of transduction, Styhre develops a framework that lays bare the relationship between, in this case, illness and its corresponding therapies. Thus he opens up for an understanding of a co-production of the two rather than their presumed linear causal relationship.

In Carl Cederström's interview with Simon Critchley, *Philosophy in the Boudoir and the Streets*, Cederström leads Critchley into the crisis of thought, since, in the latter's words, philosophy is not about wonder, but "disappointment". Yet, as Critchley argues,

There's something enormously exciting about being disappointed, something enormously exhilarating about being disillusioned. And that is also, as you say in your question, an experience of rebellion.

While we live in times of “military neo-liberalism”, Critchley points with an even spiritual gesture to “the power of the powerless”. As Cederström reports Critchley’s self confessed failure “both as a musician and a poet, but also as a political activist”, Beckett springs to mind again. Living in financial times, the Irish poet may well be one of those voices Critchley calls for: “the counsel of the dead, the hard lessons of history”.

Such a hard lesson is to be found in Christian De Cock’s note ‘What I read About the Global Financial Crisis in 2007 and 2008’. It ruthlessly demonstrates the “the schizophrenia of contemporary history”. Failing, and *failing worse* is what springs to mind after reading this mind blowing *cut up*.

In Jana Costas’ note ‘Mystification and Secrecy in Contemporary Corporate Life: A Reflection on Lars von Trier’s *The Boss of It All*’, von Trier’s comic movie is situated in what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have called ‘the new spirit of capitalism’. In this new spirit, informal and project-based management becomes a multilayered construction where the reality of the organization and the truth about life in the organization enters into a crisis of mystification: management by secrets and smoke screens becomes the ordeal. Just as with the financial crisis (of which the plot in the movie in fact is an offspring), the crisis in the company in question paradoxically comes from believing ‘too much’ in the dominant ideology carried forth by the omnipresent yet invisible ‘boss of it all’. Yet, even more paradoxically, exactly by believing too much the mesmerised employees morally circumvent the narrative, even if they are, as it were, sacked in the end. They failed, but they failed better.

The issue closes of in the heart of the financial times as Andreas Jansson reviews Jakob Vestergaard’s Foucauldian analysis of the (deficient) regulation of the global financial system. *Discipline in the Global Economy? International Finance and the End of Liberalism* is according to Jansson a very interesting and thoughtful book as it argues that the mechanics of the global financial system cannot be reduced to liberalism in the sense of deregulation and a free and unrestrained economy. In Jansson’s reading Vestergaard “advocates the application of what Foucault calls the ‘ethos of liberalism’: the constant questioning of whether we are governing too much (or too little).” Crisis management is here a reflective stance, rather than the default ideological answers that call for ‘firm action’ and the like.

We are, in a sense, brought back to philosophy, or thinking – its wonders, perhaps, but mainly, as Critchley suggests, its disappointment and the paradoxical excitement it offers. And, facing a number of fundamental and possibly fatal global crises, we share the hope that this disappointment may become “an experience of rebellion”.

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