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SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE: INTERROGATING THE “GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS”

Crisis, what crisis?

Why talk about the global economic crisis today? The topic no longer seems as relevant or fresh as it did two years ago when we issued the call for papers. At that time, the events following the implosion of Lehman Brothers in 2008 seemed to be at the centre of everyday and media discourse: we heard it on the radio, saw it on television, read it in the printed media and thought about it in public and private places. Our imaginaries and experiences seemed to be saturated by the global economic crisis. The global economic crisis informed or structured discussions about political interventions, bailouts, quantitative easing, the nationalisation of financial institutions, and austerity programmes. The emergence of the *Indignados* in Spain, the public sector workers' protests in Greece, the London Riots, the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring and the mass demonstrations in Russia and Turkey were often read through the prism of, or shared a common destiny with, the unfolding crisis.

Does the decentring of the global economic crisis from public and media attention imply that the crisis is over or should we understand both the existence and the effects of subsequent events and developments as ongoing expressions of the crisis? These events and developments have included a shift in the dominant discourse from 'crisis' to 'recovery and growth', heightened concerns around migration, the fiscal and legitimation problems of political institutions, the rise of right wing parties and movements and the return of geopolitics and violent conflicts. Is it now appropriate to reassign these events and developments to the discrete domains of economics, demography, politics and geography or do we need to rethink the concept and understanding of crisis in deeper sociological terms?

It is important to recall that at the time when the crisis was unfolding sociologists were widely seen as having failed to make adequate sense of the crisis. There was a perception that sociology had failed to translate the quotidian reality of the crisis into adequate forms of sociological knowledge. With some justification, media critics like Aditya Chakraborty argued that while 'sociologists are reliably good at analysing the fallout from crisis' they are practically silent on the causes of this crisis¹. The British Sociological Association (BSA) responded to the criticism by issuing an extended list of sociological books, journal articles and reports that purported to examine the relationship between finance, the economy and society. However, this failed to placate media critics and produced an acknowledgement among many sociologists of the need to explore the problem of the economic crisis further. This special issue was in part motivated by a desire to pick up the gauntlet thrown down to sociology by media critics.

A more important motivation, however, was a concern to move beyond criticism of how sociology and other social sciences have failed to adequately understand the crisis towards a critique of the very concept of crisis. This is based on the presupposition that the development of a sociological imagination that engaged more incisively with economic phenomena, and thereby produced a 'sociological perspective' on the economy, would only go part of the way to interrogating the formulation of 'global economic crisis.' Indeed, sociologists have already

demonstrated how economic crises are precipitated through the social construction of markets, and the problem of socially produced nature of knowledge that defines and performs 'the economy' (MacKenzie 2006; 2011). There have also been criticisms of the institutional and cultural configurations of late capitalism (Engelen 2011; Engelen et al. 2010; Fligstein, 2001), as well as accounts of the embeddedness and political constitution of markets (Helleiner et al. 2011; Krippner, 2012; Prasad, 2006) and the need to think of alternatives beyond the politics-economics matrix (Fraser, 2012; Polanyi, 2001). Indeed, the need to take this critical view conceptually beyond empiricism and hermeneutics (Savage and Burrows 2007), methodologically beyond the confines of disciplinary insularity (Van Antwerpen 2006), and practically towards public engagement (Burawoy 2005; Holmwood and Scott 2007) has been widespread since before the crisis.

The contributions alluded to above have not, however, challenged the coordinates of the debate on what constitutes a crisis and thus offered a critique of the 'metanarrative' of crisis. This metanarrative has externalised and objectified the economy as separate domain from society. It has (re)produced a fundamental disjunction between economy and society as different domains of life. As editors of this special issue, we view the challenge of picking up the gauntlet thrown down by the critics of sociology as part of a broader project of questioning the category of crisis itself and the ostensibly 'economic' nature of the crisis and its manifestations. We would argue that the apparent limitations of sociology demonstrates how sociology, being neither above nor outside the crisis, articulates a mode of thinking the 'economy' that is itself an expression of the crisis. On the other hand, by producing an understanding of the crisis that internalises this contradiction, sociology can begin to produce knowledge that better appreciates its own limits and barriers. As articles in this special issue will demonstrate, such a move is possible by adopting a move away from sociological criticism towards a critique of society and its fetishized separation from the economy.

As public attention and debate shifts from the crisis towards 'recovery and growth', we raise the question as to whether the relative quietness of sociology on the crisis can really be rectified in the absence of a more fundamental rethinking of the theoretical, epistemological and methodological assumptions on which the discipline is founded. We suggest that there is a need for sociology to undergo an introspective examination and an open itself up to the kind of criticism that will broaden our outlook and deepen our understanding based on a critique of society itself. The special issue must be read as an invitation to come out of our intellectual comfort zones in order to confront limitations and explore possibilities. It combines a series of articles that contribute to a project that aims to bridge disciplines and broaden the scope of knowledge beyond disciplinary boundaries or theoretical frameworks. Ultimately, the aim is to develop a more profound sociological understanding of what is meant by 'global', 'economic' and 'crises'.

The contributions

In the call for papers, we urged contributors to unsettle conventions and to challenge the established frameworks within which sociological debates on the global economic crisis had been conducted. We looked for contributions that would facilitate a rethinking of basic epistemological assumptions in the social sciences in order to challenge the categories attributed to the global economic crisis. We were interested in contributions capable of renewing sociological critique by learning with the social practices and movements emerging alongside the crisis in order to facilitate the

regeneration of sociology as a major critique of society. The latter was seen as vital to addressing the vexing issue as to how sociologists engage effectively as public intellectuals. We have organized the contributions around five themes which capture the ways in which contributors have responded to the agenda set out in the original call for papers.

The first theme touches on the construction and deconstruction of the narrative of crisis and the ways in which the discourse of the crisis has been employed to refashion social relations along neoliberal lines. Harvie and Dowling focus on how the economic crisis and the resulting austerity policies in the UK are underpinned by a new approach to political economy based on Prime Minister David Cameron's notion of the 'Big Society'. The financial meltdown has involved state authorities bailing out banks and other financial institutions and, as a consequence, the economic crisis has also become manifest as a crisis of social reproduction and a fiscal crisis of the state. The logic of the 'Big Society' is to transfer or devolve responsibility for social reproduction to the private and voluntary sectors in a way that is legitimized by a discourse of community empowerment. The authors highlight the ways in which public services and social welfare have become increasingly 'financialized' through the development of social investment markets in which social entrepreneurs can invest in community initiatives in a way that shifts the financial risks of social reproduction from the public to the private sector and leads to the financialization in everyday life.

The financialization of everyday life is also explored by Bryan and Rafferty, who explore the phenomenon of financial derivatives and the way in which their calculative logic has been applied to social and political relations both before and after the financial crash of 2008. The authors highlight the intensification of the derivative form which is defined as a form of ownership associated not with the ownership of the means of production but with the performance of the means of production. The logic of derivatives has expanded into banal areas of social life including the securitization of domestic utility payments and the reconfiguration of employment contracts on the basis of self-employment and zero hours contracts. The logic of derivatives can also be witnessed in the operation of the state and the logic of the 'Big Society' in which the provision of public services is funded by 'social investment' in the form of social investment bonds which shifts the risks of public investment programmes from the state to private investors and which subordinate the provision of public services and social welfare to the calculus of financial derivatives.

The dominant discourse on the crisis has included a narrative which simultaneously scapegoats fabricated vulnerable groups as agents and victims of the crisis, whilst reinforcing the impossibility of alternatives and ultimately the power of capital. Monaghan, O'Flynn and Power demonstrate how responsibility for the crisis in Ireland has been individualized and projected onto a range of 'scapegoats' in Irish society including unionized public sector workers, benefit claimants, bankers and the entire Irish population who behaved irresponsibly in a frenzied property boom. Consequently, powerful financial elites have been able to not only obscure their own responsibility for the crisis, but to apply the power of the state and media to a powerful process of scapegoating that has legitimized a series of reforms of the public sector, welfare system and financial system that have polarized further disparities of wealth and power in post-crisis Ireland. The authors argue that the enduring importance of sociology is to highlight how these scapegoating processes work and defend civil society from the destructive logic of neo-liberal capitalism.

Granter and Tischer examine the discourse of crisis as a specific form of learned knowledge. Through the example of their experience of teaching the crisis to final year undergraduate students in economics, business and finance, they suggest an approach to pedagogy that simultaneously provides a sociological learning of economics, business and finance and a warning about forms of economic knowledge that generate discursive power through pedagogy without sociological imagination. Rather than viewing a pedagogy of the crisis as the transmission of knowledge, the authors outline an approach which is focussed on the 'totality of social relations', where the task of the sociologist is to uncover the social processes underpinning the historical development of capitalism and the ways in which these appear in a fetishized form as the quantitative determination of economic magnitudes.

The second theme is focussed on how the crisis has involved the shaping and reshaping of subjectivity. Sociology has tended to focus on the objective conditions precipitated by the crisis such as poverty, unemployment and indebtedness. However, several contributions to this special issue highlight the importance of uncovering the hidden subjective dimensions of the crisis and the ways in which the crisis can generate existential issues and problems. This highlights the significance of money in the shaping minds and bodies, and the ways in which this asserts itself in objective characteristics such as overconsumption, obesity, anxiety and depression.

Charbonneau and Hansen engage in a fruitful and insightful conversation with Maurizio Lazzarato, author of *The making of the indebted man*, where Lazzarato elaborates on his 'theory of debt'. In this text, debt is not explored in economic or financial terms as if they were discrete spheres of social relations, but with reference to subjectivity. Lazzarato's notion of 'indebted man' is inspired by Nietzsche's belief that the credit-debtor relationship requires a change in subjectivity in order to progress and highlights a condition suffered by subjects in capitalist societies: indebtedness. His argument is that the traditional antagonism between capital and labour has been replaced by the relationship between creditor and debtor. Although this relation between creditor and debtor is historical, Lazzarato argues that the development of neoliberalism and the consequent power of money credit has resulted in the emergence of '*homo debitor*'. Money-credit has touched subjectivity and the expansion of money in the form of credit and its crisis is dependent on the creation of the indebted subject.

Lilley and Papadopoulos argues that since the 1980s capitalism has been underpinned by a process of 'biofinancialisation' or a culture of valuation that subordinates social life to the financial realm. This is a culture in which value expands and accrues across the existential conditions of living labour. According to the author, the instability of capitalism does not emanate from financial systems, but from the culture of valuation and the way this culture controls and shapes social conflict. The refusal to work, for example, is no longer an option because value production is embodied in human existence. The author argues that 'social science fiction' is the best way to achieve social and ecological justice in biofinancial societies. This involves changing our experience of politics through 'commoning' or the creation of different forms of life.

The third theme explores how the crisis is lived and challenged through the emergence of new social practices and social struggles. Spitzer and Piper explore the lived experience of the global economic crisis in terms of its gendered and racialized dynamics through the experience of Filipino female domestic workers; many of whom have been losing their employment in Europe and North America as a result of the crisis. The authors argue that while the current conditions of migration and return

are significant, these represent the ongoing effects of neoliberal globalization and the multiple crises already impacting residents of the global South. This contribution invites us to apply the sociological imagination in order to recognize the uneven and combined nature of capitalism and to question the Eurocentric assumptions and methodological nationalism that have underpinned social scientific analyses of the global economic crisis.

Ozarow and Croucher also investigate a significant phenomenon produced by the crisis in the global South in the form of factory occupations and worker recovered companies (WRCs). The authors explore whether companies recovered by their workers in Argentina during the 2001 crisis have survived, and how this experience might influence the sociology of work. They provide an assessment of the sustainability of the WRCs and contend that the WRCs constitute an alternative vision and a promising sustainable model that has influenced state policy. In addition to this, the article suggests that the resistance to crisis, and the alternatives elaborated by the workers in vulnerable positions, has the potential to redefine the boundaries of sociology of work and allow it to reconnect with broader societal issues and theories and industrial relations debates.

Laurence Cox explores the relationship between the global economic crisis and a perceived crisis of sociology. The crisis has highlighted the limits of sociology as an effective critical discourse and, according to the author, sociology can only regain its intellectual significance if it engages with extant forms of social knowledge generated by social movements. Cox argues that an effective performance of public sociology requires both an engagement with the theorizing of social movements and an engagement with knowledge that is being created through practice. In the struggles against neoliberalism since the 1990s, social movements have linked spaces of theoretical analysis and generated more effective critical insights compared to sociological analysis. For example the World Social Forum and the occupy movements have drawn our attention of the process of democratisation through learning, thinking, listening and organising. This knowledge is not property of an institution (e.g. universities), but is freely produced and disseminated. Many movements are engaged in pedagogical experiences that are also a source of knowledge for sociology and are leading to the emergence of what Gramsci calls 'good sense'.

The 'economy' has been an important focus for social movements and popular organisations involved in alternative forms of social and solidary economy. The book symposium considered the argument put forward in *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our communities* by J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy. This book poses questions such as what is the 'economy'? Can we change it? Can we think of the economy differently? The book proposes that we can and should take back the economy. Although this volume draws on previous theoretical work by Gibson-Graham, it is mainly a 'guide' to create alternatives to capitalism. Peter North embraces the authors 'optimistic approach to social change' and suggests that a focus on 'what can be done' and 'how we can develop our own power' can facilitate an understanding of how we can change the world. Steffen Böhm is less optimistic and while appreciating the significance of the message of this 'radical' book, Böhm is concerned with the question of whether projects such as local food can survive or will be necessarily appropriated by the powerful, in this case, supermarkets. While hope exists, we must to be cautious for our resistance could become an 'incubator' for capital to renew itself. Massimo de Angelis argues that as a manual that helps to continue creating and monitoring

complex and interconnected activities entailed in the task of taking back the economy, the book offers the tools to create a community economy that is made of many interconnected activities. Healy, Cameron and Gibson-Graham embrace the insightful comments on their book by emphasising their intention to write an accessible work that continues in the tradition of challenging ‘capitalcentric’ conceptions of the economy. The authors reflect that being critical involves the application of the three forms of politics outlined by Gibson-Graham (2006): a politics of language, a politics of the subject and a politics of collective action. This involves a commitment to play a part in the ‘world-making process’ by helping to decodify and understand the new possibilities arising from current patterns of development and restructuring.

The fourth theme is focussed on how the crisis requires the rethinking of sociology and its relationship to the ‘economy’. Brown and Spencer lay out a useful historical and analytical overview of the existing faultlines between neoclassical economics and traditional sociology. These faultlines allow an insight into the reasons behind the failure of both disciplines in their mainstream forms to predict or understand the current ‘economic crisis’. The authors refer usefully to Clarke’s (1991) analysis of this historical separation in terms of economics abstracting the ‘formal’ rationality of individual exchange from the ‘substantive’ irrationality of class exploitation and power. The separation resulted in the extreme instrumentalism and increasingly obscure mathematical formalism of economics and defined sociology as a discipline concerned with the study of society, but excluding those areas that had been deemed ‘economic’ which became the exclusive terrain for professional economists. This allowed mainstream economics to detach itself from concerns with social phenomena such as poverty, inequality, class, power, gendering, racialization and other forms of social segmentation. This disciplinary divide, including the professionalization of economics as a master social science, has contributed to the dominance of *laissez faire* ideology and served the interests of the finance lobby.

In the review essay, Curran asks whether it is possible for sociology to continue ‘business as usual’ in the current climate or whether it should become truly *transdisciplinary*. Through an insightful discussion of three important books on the financial crisis and reform (Engelen et al., 2011), the crisis in the Eurozone (van Apeldoorn et al., 2013) and the capital-State nexus and the crisis (Lapavitsas 2012), Curran suggests that sociology can make a significant contribution to the investigation of the capitalist crisis and its aftermath through a sociological interrogation of the knowledge and frameworks developed by other disciplines. The deep examination of the knowledge produced by economists, for example can highlight how what *appear* as ‘economic’ or ‘financial’ crises are in fact expression of a deep disruption of social relations in capitalist societies.

In a related vein, Toscano seeks to interrogate the persistence and limits of a particular kind of imaginary within contemporary sociological responses to the crisis. What he calls ‘reformist imaginary’ relies on a specific perception of crisis which has its roots in classical debates about reformism and revolution and the diametrically opposed conceptions of progress, urgency and gradual or catastrophic social transformation. The perception and analysis of crisis is the more political of the responses to the crisis, but the vast majority of sociological scholarship has failed to address its temporal uniqueness. This is because academic understanding of crises is still rooted in Marx’s crisis theory and the strategic question of how workers’ parties were to intervene faced with the cyclical and intensifying bouts of destruction characterising the capitalist economy. In order to escape this revolutionary imaginary, sociology has tended to focus on the technical criticism of the economic and the

sociology of knowledge, and this has undermined the capacity of the discipline to move beyond apolitical and reformist imaginaries. The author invites us to explore both the possibility that crisis is not just a periodic occurrence, but a constant, defining moment of capitalism and ways to transcend the typical analytical categories used to deal intellectually and politically with crises such as the state, regulation, social protection, etc. which have tended to recreate the reformist *cul de sac* that fails to end the possibility of crises.

Where now for Sociology? An invitation

While crisis appears to be receding, it is also clear that ‘we’ are living in its aftermath. The more profound questions posed by the altered, transitional reality we are facing is whether there is a possibility, amidst the debris that are current global conflicts and political and social upheavals, that a light of alternative futures may emerge at the end of this dark tunnel? While contributions to this special issue have highlighted the ways in which the crisis is implicated in the colonization of subjectivity, the development of new form of domination through financial categories, the scapegoating of vulnerable social groups, as well as the continuing redistribution of power and wealth towards a shrinking global elite, there have also been glimpses into social practices that have attempted to subvert the narrative of crisis with new ideas and practises, put forward by movements and groups, associated with resistance, liberation and emancipation.

The shared perspective of this special issue has, in no small measure, been to contribute to the task of subverting the idea of the crisis by pointing at the limits of sociology in its positivistic and programmatic manifestations, and focussing on critique and the creation of utopias—not as chimeras but as part of a process of transforming society (see Jacobsen’s book review in this Special Issue, see also Levitas, 2013). A renewed sociology is a *sociology of hope* against the hopelessness that underlines the notion of ‘economic crisis’ (Dinerstein 2014); an adequate response to the ‘crisis’ has to be based on a process of *relearning hope*. We end the special issue, therefore, with a note on hope and crisis by John Holloway. Our resistances, argues Holloway, are ‘cracks’ that weaken the ‘capitalist synthesis’ and the net of domination (Holloway, 2010). Inspired by Ernst Bloch, Holloway reflects on the significance of hope as a tool for seeing both the weaknesses of the system of domination (which is fragile despite appearances to the contrary) and the possibilities that do not yet exist. In his brief but passionate note, Holloway inspires us to reflect on the possibility of transcending the barriers that separate ‘us’—the sociologists, from ‘them’—the subjects of study. It is possible, we argue with Holloway, to (re)constitute a ‘we’ by rethinking objectivity and subjectivity in such a way that creates a form of sociological *critique* that is submerged and integrated into the struggle for a dignified social existence and that provides the possibility for a different world.

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ⁱ Chakraborty, A. "Economics has failed us: but where are the fresh voices?" *The Guardian*, 16 April 2012 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/16/economics-has-failed-us-alternative-voices>); Letters, "Alternative economics – as if people mattered", *The Guardian*, 18 April 2012 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/apr/18/alternative-economics-people-mattered>); Chakraborty, A. "Angry academics can't answer my criticism that there's too little analysis of our current crisis", *The Guardian*, 7 May 2012; Brewer, J. "Sociologists don't debate quibbles. We are tackling the financial crisis head-on" *The Guardian*, 5 June 2012 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/05/response-sociologists-financial-crisis>).