

## Afterword: After Austerity?

The essays in this volume were originally published as a special issue of the journal *Cultural Studies* in 2010, having been written over the course of the preceding year. At that time, talk about the end of the economic crisis was starting to circulate, suggesting that it would only be a matter of months before things got back to “normal.” However, it was already clear that the post-crisis “normal” was only going to make more visible and widespread the contradictions and cruelties that had defined the economic transformations of the previous decades. While a few suggested that the end of neoliberalism (or at least its humbling) was still a possibility, it soon became clear that it would be public services and the infrastructures that help to shape and maintain communities that would be the hardest hit as the effects of the collapse financial credit markets that had been a central factor in the initial crisis was shifted from banks onto the states that had bailed them out less than two years earlier.

As noted in the introduction, the essays in this volume emerged at a moment when it was necessary to contextualize the crisis in such a way that it would be possible to recognize and develop the potential for radical and egalitarian social change, potentials that were often explained out of discussions about how to best respond to the situation at hand. The narratives of crisis, bringing together explanations of how it was caused and what would be necessary for it to end, posited the economic downturn as a discrete series of events in the process denying the degree to which these occurrences were part of broader systemic crises within capitalism. The mainstream media and elected officials repeated the mantra that there was no need to acknowledge or address the long-term erosion of the rights, services and protections that was the true legacy of the crisis.

In many countries, the language of austerity emerged as a way of justifying these rounds of reductions in healthcare, education and other social services. The need for austerity measures, however, was not merely a way of expressing the perceived necessity of the cuts, but also as a way of asking individuals to contribute to the ongoing restructuring of social services by doing (and giving) a little more of their own time and labour as well as expecting less from institutions and each other. Hard times and hard choices, the logic

went, required everyone to tighten their belts a little. In this way, the beginning of a period of austerity was part of a broader shift in language and practices of representation that took shape as the crisis ended and the grey morning after started to take shape. In the northern hemisphere, a wave of elections bringing conservative and reactionary parties to power highlighted how fears and anxieties about the future coupled with a sense that there was no other way forward except for cutbacks and massive job losses to fuel a powerful wave of post-crisis populism. Popular xenophobia and state-endorsed racism moved to the center of political platforms as a politics of exclusion came to be seen as the only way to protect jobs, property values and the community from the dangers of the global financial crisis, externalizing a threat that was very much home grown. Even as banks profited and corporations profited from attempts to stimulate the economy, appeals to 'ordinary' people continued to ask for more sacrifice.

While the attempt to redefine a leftist politics has continued in South America and the popular uprisings across North Africa in 2011 should give hope that there remains the possibility for radical and revolutionary change, the forms of populism that have taken hold in many of the world's most developed economies should serve as a reminder of how collective energies for social change can be marshalled in regressive and self-destructive ways. However, the fact that these forms of populism have stifled and exhausted many egalitarian programs and initiatives ranging from the reconstruction of infrastructure in the United States to a global and co-ordinated attack on organized labour, is more than simply the naked exercise of power by the planet's political and financial elites. Rather, as Stuart Hall wrote more than thirty years in his attempt to document and analyze the rise of authoritarian populism under Margaret Thatcher, the success of the discursive and material formation that constituted this populism, "is no rhetorical device or trick, for this populism is operating on genuine contradictions, and it has a rational and material core. Its success and effectivity does not lie in its capacity to dupe unsuspecting folk but in the way it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions—and yet is able to represent them within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the Right." (Hall 1979, 20).

Thus along with justifying the immediate actions of governments as they slash their budgets, the language of austerity is also the most explicit and concrete way of structuring the popular imagination for social change. In this way, drawing on Hall's insights into the rise of Thatcherism, it is important to analyze how many forms of expression and participation have been reorganized in the contemporary moment to produce this experience of austerity. This is a reorganization of the material and representational spaces in which millions of people live, shaping not only attitudes towards financial capitalism (and its unshakeable importance to the production and organization of wealth) but the texture of everyday life in a number of different areas.

There have been a number of attempts to make sense of this particular conjuncture, recognizing that it is not sufficient to simply map the economic determinants of the crisis and its aftermath, but to also examine the management of representations and affect that have played such a key role in defining how this crisis has 'felt' on the ground. In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Mark Fisher describes this expansive notion of capitalism as "a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009, p.16) At the end of his paper in this volume, John Clark refers to the idea of "disaffected consent," introduced by Jeremy Gilbert to explain the affective and material organization of the atmosphere which defines life after the crisis. This is a particularly appropriate way of characterizing our contemporary moment. It is not that most people do not know what is happening (and are therefore duped into following manipulative leaders.) Rather, even as we come to understand better the extent of collusion and corruption that structures the relationship between the financial elites and elected officials, the rationalities which underwrite the turn to austerity effectively block the translation of knowledge into sustained and strategic action.

For this reason, the post-crisis moment is a particularly difficult moment for many engaged in the struggle against exploitation and for scholars interested in analyzing practices of dissent and resistance. The struggle for social change, taking place in a number of arenas ranging from the re-organization of the global political economy to the nature of labour to the popular representation of economic knowledge, seems to have been successfully colonized by the ideologically and economically regressive project that has gone by the name neo-liberalism for the past four decades. Therefore, while the issues raised by the essays collected in this volume remain of vital and urgent importance, it must be acknowledged that we have entered a different moment in which the tensions sketched out in the preceding pages have been normalized and, perhaps more worrisome, expected.

Randy Martin, in his contribution to this volume, concluded by arguing that it would benefit work in cultural studies to seek out narratives which would "keep an eye cocked for the potential partnerships that lay within reach." Such an attitude, which seeks out solidarity yet its not naively optimistic about programs for social change, is an important one for researchers in Cultural Studies to cultivate in the contemporary moment. The fog of austerity is not absolutely stifling and it is worth working to developing relationships with those movements and practices that have proven successful in challenging hegemonic ideas about the economy and the structure of society. Looking to these movements would be to recognize some of the possibilities open to Cultural Studies as a hybrid intellectual project that straddles the institutional boundaries that demarcate the university, the state and everyday life.

At the level of how research might develop this relationship, there are two directions in particular that seem necessary and important to develop further which draw upon the long history of work that has been identified with that name Cultural Studies. The first relates to those practices of representation which characterize the post-crisis landscape, representations ranging from popular, mainstream media to activist organizations who make use of spectacle to draw attention to the contradictions at the heart of the contemporary moment. The second relates to the radical transformation in the structure and organization of information and communication networks; this transformation and its consequences for individual and collective action has been characterized as 'convergence culture' by Jenkins and others. While much has been made of the democratic potential, there is much more than could be said about the radically de-stablizing effects that these technologies might have for political practice and the institutionalization of power.

The analysis of representations of the economy is a field which has been argued for most extensively by David Ruccio as part of a call to investigate what he calls "economic representations" (Ruccio 2008). In many ways, this is a program that is consistent with the long history of research in Cultural Studies that has shown the significance of representations in framing and organizing political and social struggles. However, as Lawrence Grossberg has argued, it is no longer sufficient to believe that the critique of representation is sufficient to constitute a political program (Grossberg 2010). The power relations which define the contemporary moment, particularly the concentration of media power in the hands of an increasingly small number of global corporations, means that strategies for dissenting through the production of symbols need to pay greater attention to the material context from which they emerge. It is along these lines that we should pay greater attention to the practices developed by groups such as UK Uncut or the Not An Alternative group based in New York City. Through a series of highly inventive and representationally sophisticated protest actions, groups such as these have brought into the light the ways in which the material contradictions which constitute the post-crisis moment are lived, yet remain undiscussed.

Playing an important role in providing a language and a space to speak out about the popular discontent with our current predicament, these seek to show that "there is anger at these cuts, that the idea of mass apathy is a myth and that people are willing to do more than just join a Facebook group to stand up and defend what they believe in" ([www.ukuncut.org.uk](http://www.ukuncut.org.uk)). The strength of these coalitions is their interest in reconnecting representation and action. As much as the above quotation suggests a skepticism with the usefulness of contemporary media for social protest (i.e. Facebook), they explicitly court and encourage the production and circulation of media texts as part of protest actions. As mainstream media coverage of protests against austerity cuts in Greece in 2011 make clear, the curation of representations of protest is essential as cameras are drawn to the most spectacular (and often most violent)

images, flattening the complex networks and practices which define resistance to neo-liberal orthodoxy into street riots.

The work of Cultural Studies in association with such movements is not merely to show support nor is it to do the work of these movements itself. Rather, it would be to think in a more extended way about the relationship between the circulation of representations of the economy (and representations which themselves perform the act of protests) and the sensibilization and mobilization of communities. While there is a long tradition in Cultural Studies of studying the way that media intersects with everyday life, this has often remained at the level of interpretation. The rise of mobile media as well as the exigencies of the present moment ask us to think more explicitly about the relationship between text and action or, in equal measure, the complex ways in which particular configurations of media networks and practices of representation inhibit or block engagement and response. This would be to draw upon the historical strengths of Cultural Studies adoption and hybridization of both hermeneutic and ethnographic methods.

Mapping the circulation of the representation and its relationship to various modalities of economic empowerment and disaffection must also entail an engagement with the changing organization of information and communication networks often referred to, using the language of Henry Jenkins, as 'media convergence.' Jenkins argument posits that the structural changes in the organization of media network as well as the changing opportunities for participation in vernacular media production translate directly into a democratic political project. Jenkins argument is strongest in dealing with the way in which the changes have affected mainstream media culture, it is less explicit in its discussion of how these changes might affect other areas of society. In much the same way that contemporary practices of protest look to bridge the connection between representation and engagement, an analysis of these transformations in how information circulates would also need to consider in a more general way how such institutional formations such as the state or the actors that make up the financial sector are themselves being transformed as media convergence is spreads across society. How, for example, have mobile media technologies and the increasingly rapid circulation of media texts and other information across various platforms changed the ways in which the economy is regulated?

We need to know more about the way in which government agencies as well as those who work in the financial sectors are being transformed through their use of new information and communication technology. This might seem like a straightforward question about the diffusion and adoption of new technologies, but it is a question for Cultural Studies as it will point directly to the intersection between practices of representation, consumption and the particular configuration of material resources that structure power in the age of financial capitalism. Take, for example, the periodic scandals around the consumption of pornography by financial workers and regulators while on the job. This is an example that draws out attention both to popular attitudes

about the financial sector and those who work there, but it also says something about the permeability of these institutions to the circulation of media content and their continuity with other cultural dynamics at large.

These are only two tentative suggestions about possible directions cultural studies research might take as it develops its engagement with the world after the economic crisis. It is a project that moves beyond straight forward analysis and is guided by a desire to improve the dire situation in which many find themselves. Drawing attention to the movements and practices that have proven successful in mobilizing coalitions and making visible the structures of power which work to take away rights and concentrate wealth must continue to be the main goals of critically oriented intellectual work. The essays gathered in this volume offer many insights into how such work might develop and the ways in which scholarly research might contribute to broader social struggles.

## References

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