
Of Crises and Conjunctures: The Problem of the Present

Journal of Communication Inquiry
34(4) 337–354
© The Author(s) 2010
Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>
DOI: 10.1177/0196859910382451
<http://jci.sagepub.com>



John Clarke¹

Abstract

In this article I reflect on the ‘present crisis’, using it as an entry to questions about how we understand crisis, and how we understand the present. In trying to avoid the speedy movement from crisis to political economy, I return to an older source—*Policing the Crisis* (1978)—to ask what it might have to say to us in this new moment. I also consider what it might not tell us in relation to the present crisis and the present conjuncture. In the process, I raise some questions: how many crises are there? Are there crises of legitimation, social authority or hegemony? What are the sites and forms of politics in an era of ‘anti-politics’?

Keywords

conjuncture, contradiction, crisis, hegemony, politics, anti-politics

Introduction

The implosion of the financial services sector in 2008–2009 has been generally announced as a crisis, with extensive historical cross referencing to other crises that we have known—depressions, recessions and bursting bubbles. In this article, I want to slow down a little and—in particular—resist the temptation to produce one more definitive critical account of this crisis and think instead about what might be involved in the terms of reference for this special issue: “the present crisis.” I will take some time to worry about what it means to think about the present-ness of the present—or to think about the current moment as a conjuncture. I will then move on to worry about what it means to think about the present as a crisis and what work the word crisis does, particularly in its compelling singularity.

¹The Open University, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author:

John Clarke, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom.

Email: john.clarke@open.ac.uk

This process of worrying about the words is a way of trying to open up some conceptual space in the midst of what feels like a strange short-circuiting brought on by the appearance of the very word crisis itself. How does the word crisis manage to suspend many of the ways of thinking and analysing social formations? What compelling reciprocal relationship exists between the word crisis and forms of economic thinking, such that we are all (apparently) political economists now? So much of the writing about the crisis assumes, presumes and reproduces the “economic-ness” of the thing. As a result, it seems that other issues, approaches, or ways of thinking can be put into suspension until we have grasped the economic character of the crisis. I am not sure this is helpful in thinking about either the present as conjuncture or the present as crisis.

To loosen this conceptual stranglehold—in which the weight of the fundamental, the real, the material, the economic presses ever more firmly upon us—I have returned to a 30-year-old book: Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts 1978 *Policing the Crisis* (in which I was one of the et al.). This may seem like a strange move: it is not an obvious starting point for thinking about sub-prime mortgages, the proliferation of debt or the contradictions of finance capital. But I have a number of reasons for wanting to make this move: first, to celebrate the practice of working collaboratively on questions of conjuncture and crisis; second, to avoid some of the short-circuiting associated with crisis thinking and third to explore how it might—and might not—help us to think about the present. *Policing the Crisis* insisted (among many other things) on the complex links through which crisis was articulated in a social formation. In a recent conversation Doreen Massey and Stuart Hall restated the problem of thinking about crisis in a way that serves as a point of entry for my discussion here:

Massey: The other thing that’s really striking is the importance of thinking of things as complex moments, where different parts of the overall social formation may themselves, independently, be in crisis in various ways. So although we see this moment as a big economic crisis, it is also a philosophical crisis in some kinds of ways—or it could be, if we got hold of the narrative. So it’s really important that we don’t only “do the economy,” as it were.

Hall: Absolutely not. It is not a moment to fall back on economic determinism, though it may be tempting to do so, since the current crisis seems to start in the economy. But any serious analysis of the crisis must take into account its other “conditions of existence.” For example, the ideological—the way market fundamentalism has become the economic common sense, not only of the west but globally; politically—the way New Labour has been disconnected from its political roots and evolved as the second party of capital, transforming the political terrain; socially—the way class and other social relations have been so reconfigured under consumer capitalism that they fragment, undermining the potential social constituencies or agencies for change. We can’t ignore the way the financial sector has asserted its dominance over the economy as a whole, or indeed its centrality to the new forms of global capitalism. But we must address the complexity of the crisis as a whole. Different

levels of society, the economy, politics, ideology, common sense, etc, come together or “fuse.” The definition of a conjunctural crisis is when these “relatively autonomous” sites—which have different origins, are driven by different contradictions, and develop according to their own temporalities—are nevertheless “convened” or condensed in the same moment. Then there is crisis, a break, a “ruptural fusion.” (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 38)

So I want to go a long way round to explore ways of thinking about the present crisis that do not assume or start from its self-evident “economic-ness.” This is not the same as arguing that it does not have an economic character—but perhaps that should not be the starting point (nor the finishing point). The paper proceeds by using *Policing* to establish ways of thinking about conjunctures and crises, asking how they might shape our view of the present and ends by drawing out some questions about the problems of hegemony, consent and coercion.

Give Us a break? Unwrapping the Present

How then are we supposed to view the present? Starting from the idea of crisis involves a temptation to identify a much-needed break. Under the weight of a long period of capitalist domination and global expansion, the crisis of 2008-2009 offered a moment of disruption, dislocation or disjuncture in its inexorable logic. Crisis marks discontinuity: the possibility of the end of neo-liberal thinking, market populism, or the hubris of the masters of the Universe (see, inter alia, Frank, 2001; Gamble, 2009; Ho, 2009). There is no doubt that the break was much-needed in many respects: analytically, politically and affectively. It was a reminder that the logic of capital did not unfold smoothly; that the fantasies of finance capital were not the same as reality; that the magic of markets may have lost its hold on the popular imagination; and that normalization is hard work. But the view of crisis as a break risks reinstalling a singular and linear view of historical development: things go along smoothly and then . . . they don't. But the process made visible here remains one sort of process: the logic and dynamics of capital accumulation and their political embedding as rule/domination/hegemony. Here I want to unlock this singular view of history—of the history of the unrolling of global capital and then its necessary dislocation. I want to unlock it because it seems to me to be an impoverished form of historical analysis and because, in all its singularity, it both overestimates and underestimates the significance of crisis.

Let me start from a book published 1 year before *Policing the Crisis*: Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature* (1977) in which he argued about the need to distinguish between two types of historical analysis: epochal and conjunctural (what he calls here authentic historical analysis):

In what I have called epochal analysis, a cultural process is seized as a cultural system, with determinate dominant features: feudal culture or bourgeois culture or a transition from one to the other. This emphasis on dominant and definitive

lineaments is important and often, in practice, effective. But it then happens that its methodology is preserved for the very different function of historical analysis, in which a sense of movement within what is ordinarily abstracted as a system is crucially necessary, especially if it is connected with the future as well as the past. In authentic historical analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelationships between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific effective dominance. It is necessary to examine how these relate to the whole cultural process rather than only to the selected and abstracted dominant system. (1977, p. 121)

Williams suggests that the temptations of “epochal analysis” include treating the abstracted epochal dominant as a “static type.” Concepts such as globalization, reflexive modernity, neo-liberalism and advanced liberal governmentality might be contenders for a list of recent epochal abstractions. And one might argue that the commodification and competitive-evaluative rankings of scholarship have incited a tendency to write—or at least name things—epochally: “the end of” is both a marker of intellectual excitement and a potent sales pitch). In contrast, Williams argues for the importance of “authentic historical analysis” that is attentive to the internal dynamic relations of specific moments:

We have certainly to speak of the “dominant” and the “effective,” and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we have also to speak, and indeed with further differentiation of each, of the “residual” and the “emergent,” which in any real historical process, and at any moment in the process, are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the “dominant.” (1977, p. 121-122)

What I take from Williams is his insistence that specific historical moments are the site of entanglements between multiple formations and tendencies. His view of doing such analysis demands two things: the first is to escape the fixation on the dominant, by attending to the residual and emergent. The second is to consider their dynamic interactions as the dominant struggles to contain, displace, neutralize or incorporate elements of the others (particularly, he argues, the emergent). This is a difficult specification for analytical work—and it has been largely avoided by much critical work on neo-liberalism, for example, which has been overly fascinated by tracing the dominant and as a result confirms its dominance (Clarke, 2008).

With this view of the demands of conjunctural analysis in mind, let me now turn to *Policing the Crisis*. I think that one reason for its longevity is to do with what questions of method, rather than just the analysis of the specific crisis of hegemony that it presents. The book enters its conjuncture (the early 1970s in the United Kingdom) through an odd, apparently idiosyncratic, starting point: the extraordinary sentences passed on three young men, accused (though not of course in legal terms) of a “mugging” in Birmingham. The book traces the multiple contexts that made that moment imaginable, possible and contingently necessary. It was the moment—and mugging was the

word—through which the shift to a Law'n'Order society was articulated. In this analysis, the “exhaustion of consent” is made visible, and the use of coercion is identified as the basis for an attempt to reconstruct hegemony in a more authoritarian mode. But the analysis is not one that traces the expression of a basic crisis and its subsequent ideological mystification: on the contrary, the articulated questions of race, nation and social order are understood as necessary elements of both the crisis and its (attempted) resolution. Wrestling with the problem of how to analyze a conjuncture, *Policing* argued against the linear view of an unfolding crisis. Instead, it claimed that:

The problem of the periodisation of a conjuncture is posed, but not resolved theoretically within the form of analytic reconstruction chosen. In the arrangement of themes, we hope the reader will be able to discern what are, in fact, the overlapping of different periodisations, of structurally different forces developing at different tempos and rhythms of, in fact, different “histories.” The depth of the crisis, in this sense, is to be seen in the accumulation of contradictions and breaks, rather than in their net sequential or chronological identity. (Hall et al., 1978, p. 219)

“Multiple temporalities” are central to this view of a conjuncture as a site in which they become condensed, entangled and coconstitutive of crisis. The idea of conjuncture marks this moment of condensation: an *accumulation* of tendencies, forces, antagonisms and contradictions. Among other things, this accumulation and condensation produces a point of uncertainty and possibility. To borrow a different language a conjuncture is both overdetermined and underdetermined. Overdetermined in the sense of the multiple forces and pressures, as Althusser famously argued:

The “contradiction” is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence, and even from the *instances* it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates; it might be called *over-determined in its principle*. (2005, p. 101; emphasis in original)

But the conjuncture is simultaneously underdetermined—in terms of its resolution or its outcomes. The heterogeneity of forces, antagonisms and contradictions needs to be navigated, needs to be directed and needs to be connected into a project for the future: it is the site of political-cultural work.

For *Policing* the conjuncture of the early 1970s centered on a problem of hegemony, social authority, political leadership—and the attempted resolution of that political aspect of crisis by the greater use of (state) force against “enemies within.” It traced the mobilization of the police and prisons, the judicial apparatus and an anxious citizenry to defend, install and maintain “order,” producing the birth of a “Laura Norder” society. *Policing* teased out the heterogeneous forces involved in the conjuncture; the emergence of a strategy for resolving the crisis and the intense political-cultural

work that went into making its definition of the crisis and its proposed solutions seem necessary, appropriate and desirable.

Turning to the current conjuncture might require us to think about the different temporalities (the histories, trajectories and rhythms) that come to combine in the present—not to define the “prime mover” (is it a Kondratieff long wave? Or an effect of the virtualization of capital?) but to see what has been accumulating and becoming entangled and condensed. For example, how was the elaboration of new practices of financialization entangled with the popular political project (of the transatlantic New Right at least) of making a “property owning democracy” and “classless society”? Debt marks one of the points of entanglement to be sure (Williams, 2004), but there are other dynamics interwoven here: the psychic or affective investments in home-owning and the associated economy and fantasy of “home improvement”; the denigration of public housing; rising levels of homelessness and the management of the homeless. But this is just one—and fairly visible—set of interwoven dynamics and barely scratches the surface of the heterogeneity of the conjuncture.

In ending this section, let me re-assert its core argument: we need to think of the conjuncture is a point where different temporalities—and more specifically, *the tensions, antagonisms and contradictions which they carry*—begin to come together. Here we begin to see how this present crisis might be named in so many different ways: a crisis of the mortgage system, of private and public debt, of the financial system, of global capitalism, of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, the state of politics, the state of the nation, etc. In part these multiple namings suggest the entanglements of many of these institutions. But we might also think that this present crisis can be named in so many ways because we can trace within it the signs of accumulated failures of diverse economic, political-cultural and governing projects. In response to the tendency to write “success stories” about global capital, neo-liberal rule or capitalist hegemony (on both the right and the left), what difference might it make to think about the present as the accumulation of failure?

How Many Crises?

The word crisis has been everywhere. No-one can have been left in any doubt about being in the presence of a crisis, even if the specification of what sort of crisis it is has been extremely varied. But most accounts of this crisis—popular and academic—have insisted on its singularity. The crisis has to be known in its essential—economic—character before its political or social effects or implications can be traced out. *Policing*—in keeping with its conjunctural approach—offered a different view, teasing out the multiple crises that made up its conjuncture:

First it is a crisis of and for British capitalism. . .

Second, then, it is a crisis of the “relations of social forces” engendered by this deep rupture at the economic level—a crisis in the political class struggle and in the political apparatuses . . . at the point where the political struggle

issues into the “theatre of politics,” it has been experienced as a crisis of “Party” . . .

It has been of profound importance that the major strategies for dealing with the crisis and its political effects have been drawn in large measure from the social democratic repertoire, not from that of the traditional party of the ruling class. The dislocations which this has produced in the development of the crisis, as well as resistances to it and thus to the possible forms of its dissolution, have hardly begun to be calculated . . .

Third, it has been a crisis of the State. The entry into late capitalism demands a thorough reconstruction of the capitalist state, an enlargement of its sphere, its apparatuses, its relation to civil society . . .

Fourth it is a crisis in political legitimacy, in social authority, in hegemony and in the forms of class struggle. This crucially touches on questions of consent and coercion. (Hall et al., 1978, p. 317-319)

For me, this is an instructive way of thinking about crises and conjunctures. Rather than assuming the singularity of crisis, it enables us to ask: how many crises are there? And secondly: how are they connected/articulated? It is, of course, the fourth of the crises listed above—the crisis in political legitimacy, in social authority, in hegemony—on which *Policing* concentrated and around which its analysis revolved. But the analysis rests on a view of different crises as both distinct and articulated. It also poses the question of how key issues or aspects are translated from one to another: the move from the crisis in the social relationship of capitalism to the relationship of social forces, experienced as a “crisis of Party”; the connection between political strategies and their failures and the crisis of the state; and the experience of these in relationship to political legitimacy, social authority and hegemony. This reflects the earlier argument about the conjuncture being made up of an “accumulation of contradiction and breaks.”

So, does this idea of multiple crises have any contemporary value or relevance? I think it does, by virtue of forcing us to move beyond the obvious and largely taken for granted model of the economic crisis-plus-its-ramifications. There is no reason why the present conjuncture and its accumulation of contradictions and breaks should have the same character as the one studied in *Policing*. Nevertheless it may be worth exploring some potential similarities and differences.

First, then, a crisis of and for British capitalism? Although there is a crisis of British capitalism it is one that is not uniquely or peculiarly British, not least because “British capitalism” is barely British. I will return to the national question later, but for the moment I want to suggest that, while the present looks like a crisis of global capitalism, it is spatially differentiated in its shape and distribution. In particular, the crisis was most clearly articulated with the financial institutions of transatlantic “Anglo-Saxon” or “Anglo American” capitalism: symbolically represented in Wall Street and the City of London (Ho, 2009; Massey, 2008). The shifting spatial representations of the crisis—as global, as Anglo, as British—speak to something about the distinctive contemporary interconnectedness of capitalism, and of finance capital in particular, in

comparison with when we spoke more confidently (if not necessarily correctly) about national capitalisms.

Second, a crisis of the relationships of social forces and their relationship to the “theatre of politics”? Here the questions get even more difficult, since the financial crash was—at least in some accounts—a self-generating process, driven by the contradictions internal to its own processes of capital accumulation. But if we understand the social forces more widely (rather than as the social relationships of production), we might get a different take on this crisis. The recent debt-fuelled expansion of economic growth has been associated with some reconfiguring of social relationships: the recomposition of classes (their places, their memberships, their social composition etc); the displacement of industrial or machinofacture to new settings; the apparent autonomization of finance capital and its embodiment in global market-makers; the rearticulation of production, consumption and credit in the attempt to stabilize a postfordist social and political settlement; the shifting segmentation of populations and new strategies for governing them.

Here we encounter troubling questions of who counts as a social force and how they make the transition to being political forces. *Policing* was marked by a genuine sense of strain between a relatively classical Marxist view of social forces—classes, their fractions, their alliances, their representation in politics—and a more diverse view of the groups whose presence and action might also entitle them to be viewed as social forces. For example, the women’s movement, anticolonial and antiracist movements, and the student movement were located somewhere in the uneasy relationship between social and political forces.

This issue has, of course, been a constant source of contention since then—leading to accusations that Cultural Studies ignores class and/or has been distracted by other forms of cultural or identity politics. I do not expect to resolve this dispute here, except to say that *Policing* operated in this ambiguous space precisely because of the importance of addressing both “politics” and “culture” as the sites of hegemonic work. Culture was the means by which we/they insisted that there was more to politics than politics. This involved re-opening the relationship between politics and culture in at least three ways. First, it involved recognizing the limited array of what counted as, or was recognized as, politics in the institutional apparatuses of capitalist democracy. Other politics went on alongside, and in complex relationships with, the formal institutions of political representation and government. Second, the question of culture was itself made political: culture as the site in which (through which?) the struggle for hegemony was conducted. This marked the Gramscian moment in cultural studies: if hegemony meant the exercise of “social leadership,” then the sites and settings in which such leadership might be grounded and exercised potentially stretched far beyond the confines of the state (the democratic-bureaucratic complex). Common sense, culture, and popular understandings were themselves political: entwined with practices of power and its consolidation. Third, politics needed to be culturalized: the phrase “theatre of politics” gives a clue to this third move. Even officially institutionalized politics—the politics of electoral combat, party alignments, manifestos and maneuvering—were

themselves forms of cultural practice. Representative politics were also representational. This is different from two other interpretations: one that Parties are the expressions of classes (the Party of Capital versus the Party of Labour); the other that representative or institutional politics are merely the smokescreen, the rhetorical appearance that conceals the “real.”

I feel somewhat embarrassed writing these three points down. They are uncomfortably banal and I find it hard to believe that anyone does not know them. Nevertheless, the speed with which the return of crisis has renewed the short-circuiting tendencies of political economy thinking suggests that, even if they are well known, they are also quickly forgotten. So I want to re-pose some of these questions about politics and culture—and the significance of the “theatre of politics.” What social forces have been visible in this “crisis”? How were they represented?

Reposing the questions is, of course, not the same as answering them. But let me sketch three quick points. First, in the United Kingdom (and in my more limited knowledge of the United States in this period), the social forces *represented* in the politics of the crisis were almost all “classless” forces: outraged investors, desperate homeowners, victims of bad debt or, worse, repossession/eviction. These actors appeared in their identities as part of a “property-owning democracy,” while the non-home-owning (renters, for example) and the homeless were signally absent (even as their numbers were growing). They lacked the sort of stake that would make them recognizable stake-holders in this propertied world. At best/worst, they appeared as the embodiment of “bad debt”: the subprime citizen whose inherent subprimeness triggered the crisis. In contrast, “ordinary people” (aka “hard working families” in United Kingdom parlance) were those whose hopes and dreams had been “betrayed” by a mixed cast of bankers, market makers, regulators, financial advisors and so on.

This was surely a “white-collar crime”: so questions of class did creep into the accounts: the rich, the “fat cats,” the “masters of the universe” marked by how their power and wealth had separated them from everyday realities. But as with most white-collar crime, these acts of villainy recounted through some well-established narrative schemas: the “first time offender”; the “led astray”/“fell into bad company”; the “reasonable mistake” and—inevitably—the “few bad apples.” As Thomas Frank (2009) has wryly observed, the recent crop can only make us marvel at the “spectacular run of lousy luck” (p. 3). Tough times for metaphorical apple growers, indeed.

Second, these representations are folded into other—and longer running—issues of representation, not least the troubled relationship between class and the property owning democracy (itself inextricably tied to images of the “classless society”). This combined emphasis on property, work and family is central to the recent political repertoire of the United States and the United Kingdom—whether celebrating the accomplishments of the independent middle classes, urging aspirational goals to those on the edges, or disciplining those who have failed to make themselves independent. This has been a potent combination that links aspects of economic policy, social policy and the imagery of ordinary people as “hard working families.”

But classes do not stop existing because they are not voiced or represented as class subjects. Indeed, I would want to argue more generally that they rarely make their entry as “classes” in any simple way, separate from other social dynamics and social relationships. So, sometimes they appear as “communities”—most notably, and successfully, in recent years as “the business community” (those natural and knowledgeable partners in the “business of government”). Business friendly government has further squeezed the space for working class representations. Even in older social democratic forms, the working class was likely to be addressed through more neutral devices: working people, ordinary people, etc rather than in direct class terms. The exhaustion of British social democracy (traced in *Policing*) both provided one of the conditions for the move to authoritarian populism but also eventually led to the rebuilding of Labourism in the form of New Labour: involving a discursive and policy dominance modeling life around presumed middle class norms (e.g., Ball (2006); Gewirtz (2001) on education policy; Gillies (2006) on family policy and Skeggs (2004) on politics and policy more generally).

Finally, we might note that one effect of this reworking of the fields of class representation has been the discovery of the “white working class” in academic, popular cultural and political discourse (e.g., Collins, 2004; Dench, Gavron, & Young, 2007; Sveinsson, 2009). Apparently abandoned by the Labour Party, unloved by a cosmopolitan middle class, and displaced from its indigenous rights by migrants, the representation of the white working class revives troubling dynamics about the relationships between race, place and culture—and politics. At stake in this representation is the silencing of any other form of class: migrants, settled minority groups, and ethnic minority others are never, it seems, part of classes. As a result, antagonisms are elaborated between class and its others, usually in the guise of “communities” (Clarke, 2009). This is not the place to explore these issues further, but they do suggest a fertile and contradictory terrain of class recomposition and representation, rather than simply the disappearance of class.

Still Policing the Crisis?

In this respect, Gramsci argued, the state had another, and crucial aspect or role besides the legal or coercive one: the role of leadership, of direction, of education and tutelage—the sphere, not of “domination” by force, but of the “production of consent.” “In reality, the State must be conceived of as an “educator.”” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 201).

Here I want to turn to the third and fourth crises identified in *Policing*: the crisis of the State and the crisis of social authority or hegemony. Do these orient us to significant aspects of the present crisis? I think they do—not least because they point us to different conditions and trajectories of state formation and hegemony (and the relationships between consent and coercion). Turning first to the state, the crisis that we discussed in *Policing* was one of the preconditions for the “reinvention” of the state

by the transatlantic New Right in the 1980s and 1990s—a messy assemblage of strategies for reforming the apparatuses of the state, “re-tooling” its capacities, diverting its resources, enlarging its entanglements with civil society and the corporate sector, and inventing new ways of managing populations (all under the umbrella of “rolling back the state”). In particular, the state was the necessary means of enlarging the conditions and possibilities of capital accumulation: “freeing” capital from the constraints of government, taxation, organized labor, excessive regulation and many other “interferences.” It would be good to remember that states are usually contradictory and have to manage contradictions: the dominance attributed to “neo-liberalism” in the last three decades (especially in Anglo-American scholarship) has rather lost sight of contradictions and turned toward a more instrumentalist view of the state as the manager of the neo-liberal plan.

The contradictoriness of the state results from the effects of contending political forces that make their marks on states; and inhabiting the problematic relationship between capitalism and democracy; while states have to accommodate and manage specific economic, social and political contradictions. Keeping contradictoriness in view might enable us to see the condition of permanent revolution that has been involved in the project of state reform. For me, this suggests something different from the triumph of neo-liberalism—or at least suggests that the translation of the Grand Plan from the commanding heights of politics into the policies, practices and places of the state is a much more grudging, antagonistic and uneven process. While I am not sure I want to claim this marks a permanent crisis of the state, there is something about the wave after wave of “reform” that speaks to how hard it has been to conform states to the plans, desires and fantasies of capital, not least because states have other business to attend to: managing politics, maintaining order of different kinds, dealing with segmented populations, identify and pursuing national interests in a world imagined as globalised, etc. But I am willing to argue that states—in different ways in different places—have staggered from crisis to crisis, facing crises of popular legitimacy, funding, incapacity, contradictory demands and expectations, popular disorder, and the decline of political and governmental authority. At the same time, they have been laboratories of innovation—finding new ways of “running the country,” being competitive, creating security, building partnerships, deciding what to do with different parts of their populations.

A critical part of this ferment has been the place of coercion, force and the legal/policing apparatuses. *Policing* pointed to the expanded role that coercion might play in the restoration of authority. Subsequently, in the United States and United Kingdom—though more unevenly elsewhere—the expansion of the public safety/security nexus has been massively important. Whether this is the proliferation of criminalizing laws (and therefore police powers), the extension and revival of old powers (especially around public order), the huge expansion of incarceration, or the “securitization” of populations and mobilities—the state has been rolled out, rather than rolled back. I will come back to the relationship between coercion and consent in a moment, but I want to underscore the ways in which the state in the United States and United Kingdom has

extended its powers by laying claim to the threats of an almost permanent social crisis: the anxiety-inducing cocktail of crime, terrorism, dislocation, disorder, incivility, and people out of place (the homeless, the undocumented, racially marked migrants in general). This looks like the *normalization* of the “exceptional state” or the Law and Order state (see also Coleman, Sim, Tombs, & Whyte, 2009).

This, of course, leads me to *Policing’s* final—and most significant—crisis: the crisis of leadership, social authority, and hegemony. We argued that the balance, the relationship, between consent and coercion was being changed—as consent to the postwar settlement (variously known as social democratic/Keynesian/Atlantic Fordist) became exhausted. But this was not an argument about a move from consent to coercion, rather that coercion was being expanded as the ground on which new forms of consent might be reconstructed:

Here the pendulum within the exercise of hegemony tilts, decisively, , from that where consent over-rides coercion, to that condition where coercion becomes, as it were, the natural and routine form in which consent is secured. (Hall et al., 1978, p. 320)

There are two different ways in which we might develop this view of the changing relationship between consent and coercion. The first would see it as an accomplishment: the Law and Order state became a precondition for a new hegemony of neo-liberal entrepreneurial “freedoms.” Public safety/security distinguished people inside and outside of this imaginary divide: the law-abiding citizens who got to exercise their freedoms to work and consume—and their Others who required more and more interventions to control and contain. This boundary both needed to be policed and performed: otherwise how would the law-abiding know their freedoms were being protected? I think this is the argument that undergirds and links a number of views of the growth of coercion: the culture of control, the punitive turn, the surveillance state, the carceral state and so on (see e.g., Garland, 2001; Harris, 2010; Simon, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). As before, I think such analyses may tend too much toward the epochal and miss the sense of permanent revolution or innovation that has been at stake in these processes. That is, I want to read them not as a new hegemony but as responses to the *continuing failure of hegemonic projects* to secure a new settlement that stabilizes a political-cultural formation.

There has been a continuing search for the conditions that would enable a new hegemony—one which would rest on increasingly segmenting populations through dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (nationally and internationally). But the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (and the attempts to construct policy links between them) have proved unstable in several ways. The proliferation of economic insecurity has made inclusion more contingent than in the stabilized structures of Fordism—the obverse of the individualized, entrepreneurial, consuming cosmopolitan self is the nexus of downsizing, debt and demoralization that threatens “middle class” prospects. Expansive cosmopolitan globalism encounters the anxious revival of nationalism.

Market-centric reasoning (or market populism, Frank, 2001) meets the problems of unpredictability and unfairness. And, as more parts of the population become the objects of suspicion, surveillance and scrutiny, so suspicion multiples (not least about the intrusiveness of the state).

None of this marks the appearance of coherent counterhegemonic projects, but it does suggest the political-cultural terrain of hegemony is uneven and fractured, such that “consent” is partial, particular and conditional rather than a stabilized engagement with a new “way of life.” What these antagonisms also indicate are the heterogeneous elements that come together in the present conjuncture—there is no single still centre of hegemony around which the rest is epiphenomenal froth. On the contrary, “leadership” has to be exercised across many domains—connectively, rather than merely in economic corporate terms. In the final section, I want to explore three issues about consent that are made more visible in the moment of crisis:

1. Is there a difference between institutional and popular forms of dominance?
2. Is there anything between consent and dissent?
3. What is the significance of antipolitics?

Politics and Anti-Politics

There is a fundamental difficulty in studying hegemony that concerns the sites and scales in which we should look for it. If we take public political discourse as the focal point, then claims about a neo-liberal hegemony look plausible. In the United Kingdom and United States particularly, the main political parties have attached themselves to globalizing, de-regulated, free market solutions for many things. The crisis has provoked some arguments over positioning: what sort of fiscal regulation; what type of New Deal; what means of paying for the public debt? The official and mediated discourses of politics represent one form of hegemonic accomplishment—the closure of circulating discourse around “neo-liberal assumptions” (though this may be less true outside the Anglo-American core). Indeed, elsewhere national political projects use terms such as “neo-liberalism” or the “Anglo-Saxon model” to distinguish themselves from at least some aspects of this “common sense.”

Second, there are the forms of hegemonic domination that have seized or been established as the directive logics of national and international institutions—from fiscal to social policy; from welfare reform to the World Trade Organization. Such institutionalizations are significant because they frame the policy and practice landscapes that different sorts of actors inhabit. As Gamble (2009: chapter 3) has argued about neo-liberalism, it combined political power in some countries (what he calls the “Anglosphere”) with domination of the international policy landscape, even though in many other nations different variants of market economies were in place. “Global,” then, may be better understood as an effect produced by globalising institutions and practices rather than a universal condition (see e.g., Cameron & Palan, 2004; Ho, 2009; Larner & Walters, 2004).

But such institutionalizations are significant at the national level, too. They both affect the conditions under which people live and act (framing their actions in more or less constraining ways) but also contribute to the proliferating feeling of a new common sense. For example, “welfare reform” in the United States sought to promote “independence; by getting poor people off welfare and into work. Conservative and neo-liberal discourses combine in these processes—but they both discipline poor people and have a sort of demonstration effect for others within and beyond the United States (e.g., Morgan, Acker, & Weigt, 2009; Peck, 2002). Institutionalization does not mean that other logics (residual or emergent) necessarily disappear but they are certainly subject to processes of attempted incorporation, subordination or silencing.

We should add to this series of sites of hegemonic work the dominant media institutions and forms. The circulation of dominant political discourses in news-making; the chosen modalities of “entertainment”; and the proliferation of reality TV formats that variously advocate self-discipline and self-transformation, shame and ridicule the socially/culturally incompetent and stimulate a hyper-competitive individualism—all of these promote hegemonic orientations to a postwelfarist, market-centric and self-disciplining set of orientations (e.g., Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Skeggs, 2005). Such tendencies are neither uniform nor coherent but they are tendencies.

Read through the institutions of politics, policy and mass media (particularly those of the “Anglosphere”—a dangerous temptation for Anglophone scholars), this “neo-liberal” hegemonic project looks well established. But I want to note two caveats. First, such a reading tends to repress questions of contradictions, tensions and antagonisms within the “dominant” that produce both contestation and innovation—as well as ignoring attempted “accommodations” of subordinate residual and emergent orientations. Second, this is a mapping of the dominant—its strategies, and tactics, its discourses and modes of address. It is not the same as mapping the whole—the landscape of common sense and the other nondominant or nonincorporated elements, traces, fragments that make up the field of the popular. For some time, I have been arguing against reading off the outcomes of dominant strategies from their intentions or objectives. The same point applies here too—it is dangerous (in many senses) to assume that hegemonic projects are successful.

Policing pointed to not reading this field of hegemonic work as structured around a simple binary (between consent and coercion) but as a field that is constantly traversed by shifting strategies seeking to produce consent, contain dissent and, last but not least, use force to produce consent. So are we still *policing* the crisis but on a grander and more routinized scale? In the United Kingdom, Thatcherite authoritarian populism gave way to the Blairite authoritarian populism and its obsession with the “anti-social” among us (overlaid by the “muslimization” of terror). The inability to restabilize hegemony has produced difficult configurations of authoritarianism, conditional consent (especially around the unstable field of consumption), more or less passive dissent, deep popular anxieties and scepticism . . . and force.

That points to my final question that flows from *Policing the Crisis*: how do we think about consent? I have struggled for some time with the notion of consent as the key element of hegemony because it seems too simple and singular to capture the relationships

of subordinated groups to hegemonic projects. Even in *Policing* there is a discussion of how the consent of subordinated groups is conditional—involving a “corporate” commonsense that is subject to dominant framings, logics and meanings. This suggests it is possible to think of consent as conditional, grudging, or passive—what we might describe as consent without enthusiasm? Here we are in the landscape of TINA Margaret Thatcher’s “There Is No Alternative”): the absence of articulated and articulating alternative framings of the world and our place in it. For me, this TINA is somewhat narrower and less all-embracing than Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism (2009). In part, this flows from issues of the contradictory, paradoxical and tension-ridden character of the dominant/would-be hegemonic sets of meanings. But in part, it also flows from the Gramscian puzzle about common sense.

The first set of issues point me toward how people inhabit and relate to the dominant/would-be hegemonic—and its internal tensions. What is the relationship between consent and dissent here? Is it possible to be in a relationship of strain or tension between the two? It also raises questions about the relationship between active and passive modes of both consent and dissent, in which we might have to be attentive to dissent-in-waiting. At a conference last year, Jeremy Gilbert coined the compelling phrase “disaffected consent” to name this perverse and paradoxical condition. This seems particularly significant given the current (United Kingdom?) combinations of political disaffection, distrust in major economic and political institutions and disbelief and outrage about the causes and consequences of the financial crisis. It leaves a problem about how such passive/disaffected/sceptical consent might become a political force?

The Gramscian answer is, of course, that such disaffected consent can become a political force if there is an alternative hegemonic project. Without political articulation it remains merely a social force, or cultural grit in the manufacturing of hegemony. That is, it is part of the cultural landscape on which hegemonic work has to be conducted where the balance of disaffection and consent has to be managed (rather than a presumption of consent). But the Gramscian answer also points to the heterogeneity of common-sense: it is always multiple, plural, made up of inconsistent and contradictory fragments and traces. Commonsense is not simply a form of bad or backward thinking. Rather it might be seen as a field of possibility—about which we know surprisingly little. We are much better at tracing and analyzing dominant thinking rather than the popular forms through which people live and represent their many subordinations.

At the same time, these dynamics unfold alongside a conjunctural deepening of *de-politicization*—in terms of popular engagement with, enthusiasm for, or trust in “politics.” This is also an unstable formation: skepticism and cynicisms about “politics” is itself a well-established position on the left: let us not forget the catalogue of bourgeois reformist, illusions, ideologies, and mystifications. But it is also the terrain in which alternative political parties can announce their populist credentials by their “anti-politics” (from nationalist revivalism to anti-tax movements in the United States). There is also a tension within critical scholarship evident in the concept of *de-politicization*—identifying those processes which neutralize the political character of conditions, relationships and forms of power. We presume that being political is the

natural condition of things even as people suspect that politics is the name for venal, self-interested, corrupt or ideological people and practices. Perhaps hegemony might be best secured through such a formulation, delivering a cynical, distanced, privatized and de-politicized populace. In contrast, crises threaten such hegemonic projects by bringing collective anxieties, needs, desires and imaginaries into view (however briefly). The hegemonic work of reattaching those popular sentiments to “business as usual” has been under way since the financial crisis became visible in 2008. However, the “success” of this project looks more contradictory, contingent and conditional than before and may produce new relationships of disaffection and distancing.

However, it was not my aim in this paper to deliver one more diagnosis of the present crisis. Rather I wanted to use the return to *Policing the Crisis* to explore ways of thinking again about how to approach the analysis of crises and conjunctures. I have tried to argue the importance of thinking conjuncturally, examining the heterogeneity of the present rather than treating it in epochal terms (of either continuity or rupture). I have also tried to show that the question of how many crises, in what sorts of articulation, might be more productive than a concern with the single and singular view of crisis. Finally, I have attempted to indicate some of the complications of the relationships between coercion, consent and hegemony. In the face of political economic reductionism, these seem to me to be potentially productive lines of thinking although the model of *Policing* does leave the question about where and how the sorts of collaborative intellectual labour that underpinned it might be conducted in the present. Heroic individualism may not be the right answer.

Author Note

Thanks to James Hay for the invitation/incitement to write this paper. It draws on two others: ‘Looking for the Here and Now’, presented at Birkbeck College in March 2010 and ‘Still Policing the Crisis’ that formed part of a panel at the SANA/ABA conference on *Reconsidering Hegemony* in Denver, April 2010. I am grateful to the many people who responded to these papers, but especially to Sasha Roseneil for the invitation and continuing discussions, and my copanelists Julian Brash, Hilary Cunningham and Jeff Maskovsky in Denver.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

- Ball, S. J. (2006). *Education policy and social class: Selected works*. London: Routledge.
- Cameron, A., & Palan, R. (2004). *Imagined geographies of globalization*. London: SAGE.
- Clarke, J. (2008). Living with/in and without neo-liberalism. *Focaal*, 51, 135-147.

- Clarke, J. (2009). People and Places: The search for community. In G. Mooney & S. Neal (Eds.), *Community: Welfare, crime and society*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Coleman, R., Sim, J., Tombs, S., & Whyte, D. (Eds.). (2009). *State, power, crime*. London: SAGE.
- Collins, M. (2004). *The likes of us: A biography of the white working class*. Cambridge, UK: Granta.
- Dench, G., Gavron, K., & Young, M. (2006). *The new East End—kinship, race and conflict*. London: Profile Books.
- Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books.
- Frank, T. (2001). *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy*. New York, Anchor Books.
- Frank, T. (2009). *The Wrecking Crew*. New York: Holt.
- Gamble, A. (2009). *Spectre at the feast: Capitalist crisis and the politics of recession*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garland, D. (2001). *The culture of control: Crime and social order in contemporary society*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gewirtz, S. (2001). Cloning the Blairs: New Labour's programme for the re-socialisation of working-class parents. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16, 365-378.
- Gillies, V. (2006). *Marginalised mothers: Exploring working-class experiences of parenting*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S., & Massey, D. (2010). Interpreting the crisis. In R. Grayson & J. Rutherford (Eds.), *After the crash: Re-inventing the left in Britain*. Soundings in collaboration with the Social Liberal Forum and Compass. London: Lawrence and Wishart e-book pp. 37-46.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, J. (1978). *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law 'n' Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Harris, A. (2010). *The Watchers: The rise of America's Surveillance State*. New York: Penguin.
- Ho, K. (2009) *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Larner, W. and Walters, W. (Eds.). (2004). *Global governmentality: New perspectives on international rule*. London: Routledge
- Massey, D. (2008) *World City*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Morgan, S., Acker, J., & Weigt, J. (2009) *Stretched thin: Poor families, welfare work and welfare reform*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ouellette, L., & Hay, J. (2008). *Better living through reality TV: Television and post-welfare citizenship*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell.
- Peck, J. (2002). *Workfare states*. New York: Guilford.
- Simon, J. (2009) *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skeggs, B. (2004). *Class, self and culture*. London: Routledge.
- Skeggs, B. (2005) The Making of Class through Visualising Moral Subject Formation. "Class, Culture and Identity" of *Sociology*, 39(Special ed.), 965-982.
- Sveinsson, K. P. (Ed.) (2009). *Who cares about the white working class?* London: Runnymede Trust.
- Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor: The neo-liberal government of social insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Williams, B. (2004). *Debt for sale: A social history of the credit trap*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Bio

John Clarke is professor of social policy at the Open University, where he has worked for more than 25 years on the political and cultural struggles involved in remaking welfare states. He has a particular interest in the ways in which managerialism and consumerism have reshaped the relationship between welfare, states, and nations. He is currently working with an international group on a project called *Disputing Citizenship*. His books include *Changing Welfare, Changing States* (SAGE, 2004); *Creating Citizen-Consumers* (with Janet Newman and others, SAGE, 2007) and *Publics, Politics and Power: remaking the public in public services* (with Janet Newman, SAGE 2009).