Crisis States: Governance, Resistance & Precarious Capitalism

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If we could use but one word to define the current period, that word would have to be crisis. From the economic crisis that has wrecked the lives of millions, to the political crisis wracking liberal democracies, to the crisis of confidence undermining peoples’ hopes, to the ecological crisis threatening life itself on planet Earth, through to the crisis of legitimacy impacting all of these, crisis is the watchword of the day. It is not wrong to suggest that we are living in a state of crisis. Other terms that speak to the tenor of the times include austerity, precarity, neoliberalism, insecurity, and risk. And these are closely linked to, and contribute to, the oppressive climate of crisis. They give flesh to the all-pervasive sense of crisis.

This state of crisis takes on the multiple forms of economic restructuring (layoffs, flexibilization, just-in-time production, workplace closures and withdrawals, insecurity and precarization of labor) and social restructuring (cuts to social services, withdrawal of social welfare, privatization of public resources, social scarcity, and austerity policies) to satisfy corporate owners, bankers, and investors. These are accompanied by and facilitated through political crises—not the least of which are the “no alternative-ism” of the electoral framework (of the two-sided single partyism of Republicrats in the US) and the “too big to fail” squeamishness in the face of corporate arrogance and malfeasance. All while militarizing police (who kill with impunity), legislatively punishing “bad thoughts,” securitizing borders, and pursuing the moral panic-based phobias of war on terror campaigns. And all of which is underwritten by environmental crises associated with extreme energy and extractives.
industries—and the wars and conflicts related to these. (While these are deeply internal in the impacts on human life they are mythically externalized in dominant political and economic worldviews.)

The crises of our time take on the character, as social commentator Alain Badiou suggests, of a “law of the world,” at least for our masters (2012, 4). Yet, despite the sense, manufactured in mainstream economic, political, and media discourses, that crisis is something inexplicable or unstoppable, beyond human control, these crises all have roots in specific social actions, policies, practices, and visions. They are all part of, and contribute to, broader social struggles playing out over the course of decades. They have specific origins and in many ways specific intentions. They emerge from and contribute to—they constitute—shifting terrains of social conflict and control, struggles over resources and over responsibilities. They hold in the balance the future of human care and welfare. Their outcomes will determine the character of human sociality and interaction.

The state has always been the instrument *par excellence* for manufacturing social crisis. This is done at base through the production of death—which is what the history of states is really all about. But the state has other ways of manufacturing crisis. One is through the construction of scarcity (which states have also always been about at base). Others include the inferiorization, and separation, of peoples. These often go hand in hand (scarcity as a constructed condition of the inferiorized who may, in fact, have been involved in the actual production of surplus). A fundamental process (and goal) of states is categorization and division of the population, particularly the attempt to divide the population between normal and deviant (and thus suspect). The state can be defined as an institution for imposing norms on a whole population (Badiou 2012, 92). And in the current period those norms are norms of crisis and precariousness.

The tools at the state’s disposal are well known. Police violence, denial of documents, refusal of services, the infamous cuts to necessary resources, detention and restraints on mobil-
ity, etc. The punishing of “bad thoughts.” Surveillance and moral regulation. Telling women what they can and cannot wear.

As we will see, the sense that we are living in a state of crisis has a dual meaning. On the one hand crisis marks our conditions of life, of interrelation, of collective and individual feeling. At the same time it is also true, if less sensed and certainly less remarked upon, that the multiple crises of our age have very real roots in specific forms of state organization of social life, state policies and practices. And these Crisis States shape human life and interaction in ways that further relate to processes of accumulation and exploitation (which further states of crisis and Crisis States).

The crisis has been effected through, and toward, destruction of the shared, collective resources of working class struggle built up over decades. This includes destruction or diminishment of what I call working class infrastructures of resistance (unions, community centers, political groups, etc.) (Shantz 2010). It also occurs through the discrediting of ideas that oppose fully the ideologies of state capital — most notably anarchism, socialism, communism, but also anti-colonial and anti-racist expressions.

Badiou wryly boils down the social and political crisis of our times to the actions of a tiny oligarchy — a clique of gangsters (2012, 12–13). In his biting terms the crisis amounts to thuggish commands of the mafia of capital, before which governments of all stripes genuflect and tremble. These commands are of this quality:

“Privatize everything. Abolish help for the weak, the solitary, the sick and the unemployed. Abolish all aid for everyone except the banks. Don’t look after the poor; let the elderly die. Reduce the wages of the poor, but reduce the taxes of the rich. Make everyone work until they are ninety. Only teach mathematics to traders, reading to big property-owners and history to on-duty ideologues.” And the execution of these commands will in fact ruin the life of millions of people. (2012, 13)
For some seeking an explanation for the crisis, there has emerged a notion of “postmodern capitalism.” This is a capitalism of global scope and scale that supposedly bypasses or sheds the power of the state. This is supposedly, too, a capitalism of novelty. Yet a proper examination shows that this capitalism replays much of earlier forms of capitalist development and does so, as ever before, through specific (but always, in various forms, engaged and present) deployments of the state. Without the state no capitalism or its market has ever been possible. So too today. As Alain Badiou points out, what is the much ballyhooed “globalization” but the “world market” discussed over 150 years ago by Marx? For Badiou, “Basically, today’s world is exactly the one which, in a brilliant anticipation, a kind of true science fiction, Marx heralded as the full unfolding of the irrational and, in truth, monstrous potentialities of capitalism” (2012, 12). Badiou suggests that we are even now already in a period beyond crisis and well into the period of barbarism against which Marx saw communism as the only hope.

In the manufacture of crisis through social means the state is restored in its role, as Marx called it, of the executive of the bourgeoisie. In saying this it is important to clarify that it is not geared to specific outcomes for specific players (this or that capitalist, Wal-Mart over Target say) in the manner of instrumental conspiracy. Rather it is geared toward conditions most conducive to accumulation and exploitation (profitability) for capital generally.

The generalization, or socialization, of crisis renders labor desperate and dependent. It makes all of the working class susceptible to labor under the least satisfactory conditions. It asserts the coercive character of the labor market in a context of no alternatives. If one wants to survive one will work under whatever conditions are presented. One will not hold out for, or dare ask for, better. This is the social impact of generalized, of socialized, precarity.

Power, according to theorist of bare life Giorgio Agamben, “no longer has today any form of legitimization other than emergency” (2000, 6). Power “everywhere and continuously
refers and appeals to emergency as well as laboring secretly to produce it” (Agamben 2000, 6). As Agamben asks, “How could we not think that a system that can no longer function at all except on the basis of emergency would not also be interested in preserving such an emergency at any price” (2000, 6). This is life reduced to bare life, precarious, threatened. And state practice in its expanding drive for austerity for all but the elites is willing to go to extremes of violence and brutality.

For those most harmed by the crisis and for those who attempt to oppose it (not always the same) the state has reserved particularly violent, indeed brutal, treatment. From blanket policing of poor neighborhoods (under tough-on-crime “broken windows” ideology to mass incarceration to extrajudicial violence, and outright public executions, by police) the recent period has seen an all-out assault on poor and racialized neighborhoods, on communities of the precarious.

The tenor of the times, its open, unapologetic, bald-faced exertion of state violence and the courage of opposition from among the subjugated, is perhaps most forcefully expressed in the Ferguson rebellion following the police killing of Mike Brown and in the rebellions and uprisings that have emerged since, especially after the public and recorded execution by police of Eric Garner in New York, which have converged around the #BlackLivesMatter banner. The numerous killings of unarmed and non-threatening black people (men, women, trans), which have received necessary popular scrutiny and response, show the base character of a Crisis State, one poised and prepared to kill without explanation, to bring crisis to poor, marginalized working class individuals and communities. At the same time, the brave, clear-sighted, unflinching opposition, often bare but always honest in its expression and warm in its care and solidarity, provides one of the most inspiring, promising, and profound examples of a new resistance. The movements have truly transformed understandings and expectations of politics in the face of what can only be described as terrifying violence and the very real, immediate presence of conscienceless state
lethality. In the face of a murderous state they present an emerging constructive commons.

Alain Badiou, in reflecting on the present time of riots, sees the current period as similar to the period following 1848 in Europe. It is a period of resurgent liberatory forces of the subjected. Like 1848, a period of reawakening emerges from a period of “end of history” ruling class triumphalism and reaction.

If we are in a period of state capitalist barbarism, and the crises of our times provide ample evidence that we are, then we might well ask where the way out of crisis opens. What is being posed as the equivalent in the counter to barbarism previously located in socialism?

The mobilizations of this decade have taken the form of uprisings against subjugation and have shown a willingness (at times even a commitment) to operate outside the limiting bounds of legality or lawfulness. From black bloc organizing during alternative globalization demonstrations around various issues to the #BlackLivesMatter movements initiated in response to police executions of community members, there has been a reinvigoration of politics emphasizing autonomy, a self-valorizing impetus that is not restricted within statist confines of the political. The uprisings assert self care and social welfare beyond the demands of the state and legal or peaceful protest, on state terms. They also raise demands and propose organizing practices that go beyond reformist appeals of traditional statist and electoral politics.

The new risings are not only renovating or innovating politics with their tenor and tone, strategies and tactics, and scope of vision. They are also innovating modes of organizing. Today’s movements organize in ways that are decentralized, horizontal, nonhierarchical, participatory, and anti-authoritarian. They are typically autonomous, not tied to specific parties or political structures, and self-directed rather than run by central bodies, boards, or executives. They are agile and expansive.

In Western liberal democracies the new movements against crisis assert the self-identifying, self-determining open post-citizenship belonging of “no one is illegal” and anti-borders
movements, the anti-colonial sovereignty of Idle No More and indigenous uprisings, the unapologetic, self-valorizing actions of new poor people’s movements, the defiance of property regimes in rent strikes and foreclosure resistance, the sabotage of ecojustice and deep green movements, the assertive alternatives of anarchism, and more. All of these offer new proposals for politics. They have each suggested new infrastructures for resistance. While still in early forms of development, these new eruptions have in many startling and exciting ways, within a period of crisis, brought the institutions and organizations of economic and political power, states and capital, to their own crisis. And this suggests an opening in the politics of resistance and social transformation that is shifting the terrain of political struggle in ways that have not been seen in decades within liberal democratic contexts.