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Introduction: Crises and Communication

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When the massive container ship the Ever Given got stuck in the Suez Canal in March of 2021, uncannily prefacing the supply chain crisis that slowly unfolded globally in the following summer and fall, corners of the Internet churned with memetic circulation of the grounded ship superimposed onto the cover of volume 2 of Marx's *Capital*. Although it had already become somewhat commonplace to swap the cover image of the Penguin edition of *Capital* vol 1 with a more contemporary image (for example, a graph depicting the divergence of labor productivity and wages after 1972), the use of *Capital* vol 2 was a special case, as this volume explores the circulation and the communication of capital and of the crises that emerge within that process. While writing and preparing for this volume, the larger supply chain crisis took hold. Currently over a hundred ships idly float outside of the port of Los Angeles and containers pile up while awaiting massively backlogged distribution channels. In this strange transmission backlog, Marx's analyses of the disturbances of circulation in vol 2 seem increasingly prescient: "Since elements of productive capital are constantly being withdrawn from the market and all that is put into the market is an equivalent in money, the effective demand rises, without this in itself providing any element of supply. Hence prices rise, both for the means of subsistence and for the material elements of production."¹ This quote from Marx might as well have been written in today's paper as numerous reports warn of food and goods shortages as well as rising costs (particularly leading into the holiday season in America). In turn this situation leads to increasingly frenzied speculation (despite increased market volatility, the Dow Jones hit an all time record on October 26). Even the current wave of labor strikes and what has been often termed "great resignation" find a place in this larger constellation, as we draw lines of connection to locate the crisis amongst the chaos, as the bottleneck requires a short term absorption of what Marx calls the "surplus army of workers" (which we have long seen in the rise of the precariat class) as a means of digging out of the crisis, and this labor demand empowers workers, if only temporarily. "Wages generally rise, even in the formerly well employed sections of the labour market." At least, that is, until "the inevitable crash" which will undoubtedly be termed yet another crisis.²

This term "crisis" is constantly, almost casually, tossed around in contemporary culture. One cannot open a paper (if that is something that is still done) without confronting the crisis *du jour*. The ubiquitousness of *crises* within the everyday, whether it be about the environment, labor shortage, are also a type of constellation that point to a larger crisis as such. Wendy Chun argues that "crises are

¹ Marx, *Capital* vol 2., 390.

² *ibid.* 391.

not accidental to a culture focused on safety, they are its *raison d'être*,” and that the constant naming of crises not only is continuously codified into systemic practices, but also that “exceptional crises justify states of exception that undo the traditional democratic separation of executive and legislative branches.”³ What Chun offers here is tearing back the veneer of crisis proliferation itself – in essence, when everything is a crisis it begs the question: what remains hidden?

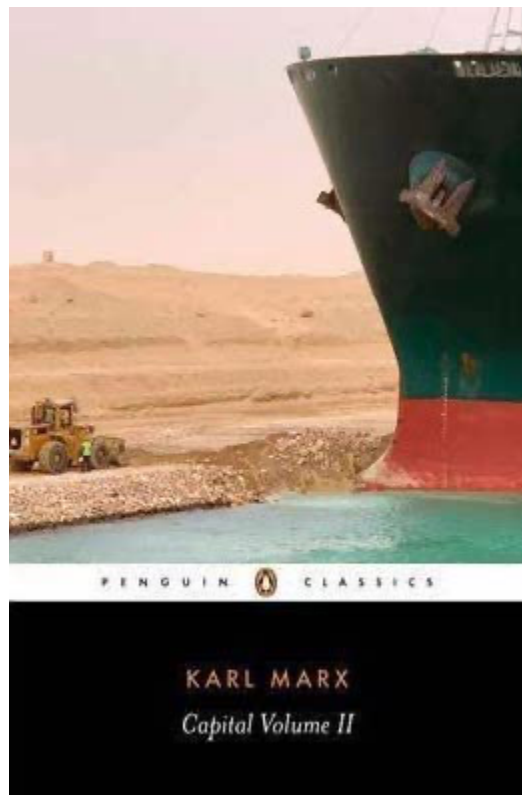


Figure 1 – Circulated meme of The Ever Given as the cover of Capital vol 2

Brian K. Chang argues along with Derrida in a type of agreement here – any “apocalyptic tone” about the things at hand today (as the naming of a crisis is often an apocalyptic act) should be taken with a grain of salt. Instead of crisis as some doomsday event about the *whatever* it is instead the case that crisis is “*always* and *already* at the root of philosophy’s foundation and elsewhere.” He pushes this idea further, noting that “Crisis’ is chronic, for it *happens* all the time” as it is always the “*happening* of the event.” Chang goes so far to note the reversal of the end-times

³ Chun, “Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or Sovereignty and Networks.”

rhetoric, in that “Real events are always crisis-events” and the fabrication of such sophomoric “crises” about everything are actually non-events, merely distractions from reality.⁴ When we begin to connect these dots, we start to locate the crisis amongst the “crises” and reflect on what a volume on “crisis and communication” might help accomplish, other than another textual flood about all of the innumerable crises.

It is often helpful to begin with how we can use this term to separate it from the boundless starfield of “crisis” constellations. Etymologically speaking, *crisis* emerges from the Greek *krisis*, “decision,” which helps to situate how to consider how to approach what we have tried to elicit and collect within this volume. Decisions, as Derrida often notes, are never truly a decision without an undecidability – simply put, if the case is clearly cut, there is no “decision” to be made; it is merely a matter of calculation.⁵ This is helpful when considering the ways in which to situate “crisis,” whether that of the Ever Given, of the Covid-19 pandemic, or of numerous others that are approached in this volume. A crisis is one of undecidability and impossibility – of a rupture within the normally calculated and smoothly running machinations. Stuart Hall, in conversation with Umberto Eco, went so far as to assert that “the role of intellectuals is to produce crisis.”⁶ This undecidability and rupture helps to make sense of this potentially bombastic statement – it is an absolutely important role to point out and create the space for which undecidability can take place, where a rupture might be found, rather than glossing over the thin veneer of calculative reasoning. Hall believed that it was imperative for the intellectual left to help these crises emerge – to point out decisions that must be made, exposing the flaws, gaps, and inequities in systems.

Returning to Marx and the object of inquiry we began with, he does not differentiate between the inchoate telecom technologies of the late nineteenth century and the physical distribution of commodities (in, say, modern container ships). These two iterations of communication are deeply interrelated – long-range distribution of commodities, necessitated by the expansion of markets, require equally long-range telecommunication networks. And while both shipping and telecommunication expanded to a global scale their goal remains the same – to reduce communicational time as much as possible, concealing behind a veneer of immediacy the vast infrastructures that support numerous aspects of the connected and mediated world (from streaming media content to overnight delivery of any of the millions of

⁴ Chang, *Deconstructing Communication*.

⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

⁶ Hall and Eco, “The Role of the Intellectual Is to Produce Crisis: A Conversation.”

products for sale from Amazon). This veneer – in Marx’s parlance, the relations between things (commodities) which *appear* as the relations between people – is of particular importance as it continues to hide the inner workings of these communication systems. And on occasions when the veneer cracks, we often suddenly confront not only the systems and processes it conceals but the constitutive basis for the veneer itself.

It is always of course the case that the *happening* of communication is itself *crisis*. “Miscommunication,” as John Durham Peters tells us, “is the scandal that motivates the very concept of communication in the first place.”⁷ Communication and the crises in which it becomes manifest are doubly represented in the case of the Ever Given. The complex interrelations of global supply chains were suddenly brought before our eyes precisely because they had ground to a halt. But while the products on the Ever Given (and all the ships stuck at either side of the Suez) weren’t moving, the image of the Ever Given freely circulated in coterie social media networks, within which somewhat niche references to Marxist deep cuts made sense. This, then, is a more oblique crisis, one in which semantic recognition is guaranteed by increasingly siloed “imagined communities.”

It may even be that it is only just now, from the vantage point of this double crisis of communication breakdown, that we see the points of connection between these seemingly independent crises start to form. And here, within this constellation marked by the events surrounding the Ever Given we can locate a third crisis, in many ways *the* (singular) crisis to which these areas of alignment point, even if obliquely.

The shift from coal to oil power during WWII and the so-called Great Acceleration in carbon emissions it brought on is the condition of possibility for the Ever Given and more than likely for the bulk of its petrochemical-derived cargo (this, as was widely reported, consisted largely of sex toys). Container ships belong to a regime of commodity production and circulation in which “the production of commodities [has] become derivative – or a by-product – of the production of energy.”⁸ The Ever Given’s blockage, both in the physical space it occupied as well as a literal blockage in the metaphorical “artery” of commerce, came just a few months before the 2021 IPCC report, which reiterated the now rote predictions of catastrophic climate change as the inevitability of our continued failure to draw down carbon emissions. This event highlighted larger systemic issues that gave us some sense of the complexity of our entanglement with an oil-saturated modernity and renders

⁷ Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 6.

⁸ Hanieh, “Petrochemical Empire,” 37.

our efforts at extrication in much the same light as the tiny digger spotted at the container ship's prow, struggling, almost comically, to free it.

Eva Horn argues that “[t]o understand the Anthropocene, we must understand how many of its most daunting challenges result from a clash of scales,”⁹ giving rise to “emergent properties...that cannot be understood as long as one focuses on individual actors, specific localities or particular technologies.”¹⁰ Through its memetic and other media renderings, the plight of the Ever Given serves as a sort of microcosmic representation of a broader metacrisis that normally eludes representation because it spans vastly different scales. The tragicomical contrast between the scale of the Ever Given and its would-be digger rescuer represents in miniature the constant collision of incommensurable scales on which various phenomena occur, often unnoticed or misinterpreted, and intersect with everyday human activity, planting the seeds of crises and catalyzing their growth. We could think, for instance, of the contrast in scale between a single transaction conducted in a retail store and the vast technical and economic apparatus in which it is one tiny node; between the act of discarding a single plastic bottle and the entire mass of plastic in the Earth's oceans; between a single like on Facebook and massive social and political upheaval. Crises that encompass phenomena that occur on incomprehensibly massive and small scales prompt desperate, flailing attempts to make sense of them, which in turn become crises in their own right.

This all begs a number of questions. Are we experiencing many crises or a single crisis with polyvalent appearances? More to the point, is the crisis of communication, which we have tasked our contributors with addressing in the current issue, a crisis in its own right, or is it a kind of subordinate effect of the crisis (terminal this time?) of even later capital? Of course we can't answer such a question here, and merely offer it as a provocation under which the essays collected here might be read.

So while this volume is about crisis and communication, it is not about just communication about crises, but instead about how these “crises” are indicative of both an exposure (the crack in the veneer) as well as an exposition, a theorization and newfound understandings that emerge. It is about communication *as* crisis, or the crisis within the communicative systems that are necessary for movement, creation, the *communis* (common, public), the *communicare* (sharing), the *communicationem* (making common), all active and productive ways of engaging the ways in which

⁹ Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 141

¹⁰ Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 153

communication remains in/as crisis. Pulling on these cracks in the veneer is what Hall's *production* of crises suggests – producing the exposition and theory, extrapolating and exposing the decision making and undecidability.

These essays grasp many topical areas, but together form a larger constellation. They ask: What have crises, both present, perpetual, and past, intimated about flaws, gaps, and inequities in systems of communication that are overlooked or disregarded under “normal” (if “normal” exists) conditions? Questions of meaning making, truth, misinformation, and access come together to bring new context and contextualization (whether philosophical, historical, archeological, rhetorical, ecological, or otherwise) to query and unfold crises both historical and contemporary. In many ways, these essays participate in the production of crises, as per Hall's declaration, or alert us to the real event of crisis, as per Chang, or serve to expose the “crises” as codified and capitalized upon already, as per Chun. All of them tease out and illustrate the tensions, exposing the rips in the veneer, exposing the possibility for better questions.

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We begin this volume with a short piece by Samuel McCormick and John Durham Peters that teases out linguistic and rhetorical concerns between Walter Benjamin and Kenneth Burke, diving into the construction of the formative (and ongoing crisis) of language. This locates a bright star to orient a constellation towards which to investigate crisis and communication.

Infrastructure plays a particularly important part in locating more points to this constellation. Peterson and Gurzawksa's engagement with communication infrastructure for crisis workers illuminates the evolution of the infrastructure along with the operators of these networks. Megan Finn's analysis of communication infrastructure disaster workers, in particular telegraphy workers after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, unpacks the tension between infrastructure, “heroic” labor, and capital. Theo Röhle's examination of DDoS attacks (as they disrupt communication network systems) tracks developments in the landscape of DDoS attacks, arguing that from their initial use as a temporary activist tactic, they have shifted toward more sustained attacks and become part of what structures the hardware of the Internet.

Video games, too, play a part in communicative crises. José Luis Quintero Ramirez argues that the increased user participation on a gaming thread, which was intended to uncover hidden aspects of gameplay, lost critical purchase precisely because the thread's popularity overloaded it with speculation. This, in turn, gestures

toward more general problems of publicity and media misinformation. Linking both with games as well as the ongoing environmental crisis, Stefan Werning examines the phenomenon of “ecomodding,” or “ecocritical modifications of commercial games,” as a potential means of overcoming the crisis of communicating the consequences of climate change.

Several pieces in this volume deal with the simulation of crisis and its effects, from dramatizing the promise and failure of telecommunication networks, to conspiracy theorizing, to attempts by governments and institutions to control crisis narratives and counternarratives. As the pieces in this volume argue, seemingly irrational interpretations of and responses to crises cannot be adequately understood merely as byproducts of psychology or technology. Rather, it is important to recognize and examine the complex interactions among people and media systems to understand the often haphazard and unpredictable process of sense-making in response to crisis. To this end, Majia Nadesan traces a genealogy of crisis in Western thought and argues that governments and institutions increasingly seek to exert authoritarian control over crisis narratives while taming or suppressing attempts to question and problematize official accounts – including conspiracy theorizing – often through technological means, such as algorithmic censorship, rather than fostering the negotiation of crisis via open democratic communication. The complexity and unruliness of communication networks – and people – frustrate authoritarian efforts to assemble and maintain a unified metanarrative of crisis, which in turn provokes populist outrage and the proliferation of counternarratives.

In an analysis of the QAnon mythos and discourse network, Daniel Adleman adopts a media-archaeological approach to conspiracy theories. Responding to scholarship that characterizes conspiracy theorizing as an attempt to render complex and ambiguous phenomena more comprehensible and amenable to direct intervention, Adleman argues that, beyond merely defining conspiracy theory, it is important to attend to the “the entangled rhetorical, ecological, and medial atmospheres that generate conspiracy-imputing attitudes.” He contends that “QAnon and Pizzagate adherents are activated by a media environment that interpellates witnesses into a form of activism that we might term *reactivism*, the misguided quasi-activist reaction to deceptive representations of atrocities.” The appeal of reactivism thus lies, in part, in its (false) promise of purpose, empowerment, and radical social change to people embedded in systems of media and algorithmic control that tend to stifle or pervert these impulses.

Finally, Rose Rowson analyzes the infamous BBC television film *Ghostwatch*, a pseudo-documentary that depicts a haunting and its investigation as if it were an

interactive live television program – complete with a telephone hotline that viewers could call – arguing that a synthesis of narrative and information theory is required to more fully understand complex mediated phenomena/events that blur the boundary between simulation and reality as well as how and why audiences interpret and respond to them.

Together we believe these essays locate a series of points to which readers might locate, connect, create, and think through the larger constellation(s) of crisis, helping to plot out future thinking, engagement, and questioning. To the authors we extend our deep gratitude for their contributions; to the readers we extend our invitation for inputs and suggestions. The following pages begin a conversation we hope will continue. And it is to those whom have spoken we shall turn.

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