COVID-19: Towards a New Notion of Crisis

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Abstract

The momentum and the rapidity characterising the spread of COVID-19 will cause it to be a defining moment in our history, with the global community focus making us aware of its escalation almost simultaneously. We are a world in crisis. This paper explores the notions of crisis in our recent past and proposes a new 21st Century position notion of crisis. It comments on the inherited notion of crisis, which is a point where unprecedented action is called for or required. The notion of crisis was very strong throughout the 19th Century, where it was believed that the foundations of human life and society rest on critical crisis foundations (whether in economics, biology or linguistics). This thinking continued in the 20th Century, but the range of crisis expanded due to social expectations and the informed constituencies which emerged through the knowledge economy. Both these notions of crisis are explored in the first part of the paper. In the second part, we argue that, given the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is room for a new (third) notion of crisis, one that is premised on the generation of expert (sic) constituencies which arise out of concerns or issues. Does this exacerbate the crisis, the notion of crisis and our understanding of it? Thus, while the 19th Century understanding of crisis was based on the fragility of the foundations on which civilization rests, and the 20th Century focus was on constituencies and the politics of rights, the 21st Century is around issues, such as COVID-19. In this scenario, the relationship of the state, media and the public bear reference. New knowledge networks have arisen. Given the explosive

dialectic which emerges when we are forced to acknowledge that perceptions of reality upon which we are reliant and which are established may prove to be fundamentally flawed when exposed to a crisis, the paper concludes that the pandemic has effectively dispelled certainty, and that we can only proceed with caution in crisis.

Keywords: crisis, media, COVID-19, coronavirus

Introduction

The momentum and the rapidity characterising the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) will cause it to be a defining moment in our history. These dramatic events have provoked both shock and dread throughout the global community, which was made aware almost simultaneously through the media, of an imminent threat of pandemic. The state reaction of South Africa to the arrival of the COVID-19, in all its various forms, have been unprecedented. The reaction has speedily exhausted the ways in which the state, the private sectors and civil societies might usually rely upon one another in a response to large-scale events that induce distress. Nevertheless, the escalation of the crisis has generated innovative layers of constituencies as it has progressed, and new conceptualisations of relationship have brought groups, networks and sectors into direct contact with one another, as attempts are made to respond to circumstance. A post-COVID-19 scenario may give us new ways of orientating social and knowledge resources in order to deal with issues of widespread concern that surpass a state-led established system of crisis management, revealing a potential role to be played by non-state actors such as communities, media, experts and other groups of decision-makers. State reaction to the arrival of COVID-19 has been unique in that it has speedily exhausted the ways in which the state, private sectors and civil societies may usually rely upon one another in response to stress. These 'expert groups', social and public networks and sectors, have been placed in direct contact with one another as they attempt to respond to the crisis, forming innovative ways of organising constituencies.

This article explores notions of crisis over the centuries. We argue that while the 19th Century understanding of crisis was based on the fragility of the foundations on which civilization rests, and the 20th Century focus was

on constituencies, the 21st Century is around issues, flagged by COVID-19. It has been written during the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2020), amidst the implementation of the first global responses to the crisis. It extrapolates views from discussions by Bruno Latour (2007) and Graham Harman (2014) on the escalation of crises, to a provisional account of what lasting changes we might expect in the market, the economy, and the broader entity called civil society. When looking at the triad of state, market and nation, and the reaction to crises, one might bear in mind that constituencies must not be thought of as pre-dating issues, for escalating concerns create their own publics and bring new constituencies into being.

As a provisional note on the notions of crisis, the paper discusses the possibility of understanding, and managing more flexibly, the now-prevalent crisis, by viewing it as an escalation across constituencies rather than an obscure and sudden event that somehow rapidly exhausted all the customary, reliable or knowledge-based responses of nation states and markets. The emergence of COVID-19 is a concern that cuts across the systems of society to the point where the systemic solutions no longer provide a management strategy or policy vision for it, thus highlighting a new 'crisis'.

The COVID-19 crisis may be a catalyst for shifting theories on knowledge from a macro-perspective that assumes large abiding entities such as society, capitalism, state and economy, to a detailed focus on networks, projects and ecosystems that shape the constituencies of a crisis as it escalates. These constituencies often form new resources required for the management of a crisis as new skills are required. A new understanding of crisis is needed with the identification of emerging sources of social effectiveness and its implementations. Despite the apparent stability of state and market, the impact of the virus has created a schism amongst traditional decision-makers, as non-state actors play an increasingly significant role; these are, for example, experts in the field of medicine, who, with the implementation of lockdowns, face a myriad of new and unexpected issues which need to be resolved.

What appears as crisis management in the state and market is less the result of 'structural' or institutional frailties within these large entities, than the effect of issues and concerns developing too rapidly for appropriate, concerned constituencies to form in the wake of the escalating circum-stances. Events that threaten to overwhelm states and derail markets can be seen, for purposes of convenience, as exceeding the available knowledge

bases and remedial actions popularly associated with these entities. The COVID-19 escalation and resulting crisis is not simply a challenge to the expertise and the executive capacity of the state and market. It has emerged beyond these, and our understanding of it remains confined to tracing its rapid escalation and identifying the still vaguely demarcated constituencies created by the steps of its emergence. Essentially, then, this paper projects a new understanding of crisis, a different 'model' for this phenomenon. It begins by tracing the historical roots of crisis.

Evolving Notions of Crisis

Throughout the twentieth century, the notion of crisis as an inevitable turning point became the popular way to characterise social and individual changes, by dramatizing them. The roots of this staging of crises were discerned by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote about situations in the lives of individuals, where choices had to be made (Kierkegaard 2004), without good reason, reliable information, or ways of assessing risk. Kierkegaard (2013) defined these inevitable choices and subsequent actions that lack all deliverable foundations, as 'leaps of faith'. Individuals' lives became characterised by an enforced sequence of choices made without available, prior justification and treated as fate or destiny, depending on the outcome. Kierkegaard (2013) summed up this crisis in deliberation, when confronted by certain choices, in his assertion that life is understood only in retrospect, but must be lived forwards, with leaps of faith or permanently sub-rational commitments, where the only justification resides in their consequences once they have already been made. For Kierkegaard (2013), humans attain much of their identity by acting 'in the dark' and then ration-alising the outcome of such actions to seem as if they were fully intended. The Danish philosopher argued that in such a predicament, which he saw as unavoidable and hence universal, the only guiding principle would be a blind faith, relying neither on reason nor on experience. Kierkegaard's model has become the outer limit and intimate bugbear of every attempt to design a robust theory of the rational choices we make, because it plays upon the inherent asymmetry of knowing and doing.

Before Kierkegaard, his nemesis Hegel had spoken about inevitable points in history and culture when one or other kind of practice or institution became incapable of delivering what had come to be expected (Hegel 1998

Preface). To keep abreast of events, their previously anticipated functions and benefits would have to cross over to and inhabit another kind of institution or activity. During this process of migration, there is a danger that both the donor and the recipient institutions might disintegrate without the desired functions emerging in either. Indubitably, it is in these times of crisis that humanity, deliberating within its institutions, may evolve new kinds of self-awareness and develop new insights.

For the purposes of this paper, and given the global sense of crisis, the working definition of crisis adopted in this paper is from Dodd (2004: 44). He notes that while historically crisis was used to describe conditions in medicine or in economic activities expressing danger, 'it is also an experience of necessity: a crisis is a situation where we can go no further, or carry on no longer, without a fundamental change; for better or worse, in a crisis a decision must be made, it is a danger that must be resolved'. AIDS was one such. Given the global calamities surrounding climate change, or the post-colonial uprising currently, crises are thus concerned with humanity.

In the twentieth century, Kierkegaard and Hegel's models of crisis became adapted for the social sciences. Those following Gabriel Tarde (Latour 2002) and ethno-methodologists like Harold Garfinkel (1967), endorsed Kierkegaard's view that social agents are bound to their situation more by their ignorance and uncertainty than by any familiarity, expertise or skill they may possess of it. Crisis was thus the experience of an unchanging social opacity. Followers of Durkheim (like Mauss, Parsons, Halbwachs & Bourdieu), by contrast, saw society as an accomplished reality, which individuals have to decipher through learning its norms and rules, roles and relations, as they are born into it and learn to occupy their prefigured place. Theorists such as Luhmann (1999) rephrased Hegel's model of crisis and asserted that the crisis of outputs becoming paradoxical inputs is resolved by the unexpected and creative emergence of new levels in the system, or its terminal incapacity. Marx had earlier glimpsed and elaborated both the Hegel and Kierkegaard conceptions in his *Grundrisse* (2005), where he saw the profitable reinvestment of profits, an output to input process, as altering the ratio of fixed to variable capital in such a way as to make the extraction of surplus value impossible. Nietzsche (2002) reshaped both arguments to contend that all critical procedures would inevitably become applied to themselves as a result of adhering to their own critical scruples, and

inevitably incubate their own most dangerous critics and sceptics. Marx was responding to acute economic distress of the working classes triggered by the Industrial Revolution in Europe. More recently, deliberations on crises became unleashed by the two world wars: 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. The interim saw the arrival of the media, with the world population 'watching events' and forming opinions from the armchair.

In the first half of 2020, the idea of crisis has made an unexpected comeback. Since the 1960s, it has been expected that disciplines and activities, institutes and programmes would be managed within their limits. By the 1970s, the State Department of the United States of America had declared that it was no longer interested in history because it believed that it could manage the future strategically with enough information and simulation (Huntington 2011; Wells 2005) - no event could surprise and overwhelm any undertaking. Systems would manage themselves by making small, controlled mistakes that would feed back into steady improvements with the system treading more carefully near the limits of the system (Wiener 1989).

Francis Fukuyama (2006: xviii) predicted a simplification of society in which all problems of social order would become re-expressed as rights, and overseen by the state, while every other human requirement would be expressed to the market and met by a cost-effective innovation. With this perspective, which is essentially the core of a revised or new-liberalism, social action would gear together self-directing systems that served the needs of individuals in a simple but reliable way. Crises became more and more difficult to induce. To jump ahead, the Trump era expressed a high confidence in social management during which the leading world powers, China and USA, re-expressed their social systems with smaller roles for democracy and greater roles for social engineering. Into this vision came an unexpected epidemic, the outbreak of the Corona virus disease of 2019 (referred to as COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (2020b)). Through its commitments to systems and efficiency, China reacted by creating public safety measures which through their very efficiency, had the unintended consequence of scattering citizens beyond the boundaries of the quarantine, thus converting a national epidemic into a global pandemic, increased by a rapid self-evacuation and repatriation of tourists from the West. This was an error in the system that did not serve its self-correction but created instead a feedback loop.

After some months of recrimination, western countries recognised that they too had become additional epicentres of a global spread and they adopted the Chinese measure of 'lockdown' (Rawlinson 2020), at first on a tentative basis, but soon, on an indefinitely extendable basis, underpinned by the 'state of emergency' which was obligatory for constitutional democracies to declare. Since so little is known about the nature and patterns of the COVID-19 (Fang, Nie & Penny 2020: 646), the handling of the crisis has become purely empirical, based on *ad hoc* improvements copied from the performance of other nations, with a notion of 'watching and waiting' in the absence of any better understood precedent. During this reactive period, systematic or planned responses by state and market have collapsed (Malala 2020); individual citizens are being called upon to assume risk by policing themselves, and academics to engage in scientific research. The state and the market have turned to themes they believe they can control, namely, the resumption of their role after the anticipated end of the crisis. It is not COVID-19 that is being managed as much as the outer boundary of crisis itself. Today, most focus is upon the recovery and the unexpected levers of change brought about by the crisis itself. Recovery models depend on being able to restore the pre-crisis order of the market and state. The possibility of an extended crisis has evoked visions of an alternative recovery in which the already minimal state and maximally extended market are gradually substituted for by hybrid forms of social enterprise that cover their main functions, but are in turn incubated from within civil society as a direct result of the escalation of the COVID-19 states of emergency.

Unlike previous visions of social change favouring inclusion and extensive equality, these new forms of association are not overtly politicised or underpinned by a rationale of economic principles. They take as their premise the dysfunction of the state and market at present and note with scepticism both entities' attempts to legitimise themselves (despite being overwhelmed and dysfunctional outside of martial law), through references to and the planning of a 'post-COVID-19 future'.

Between the familiar past and the contested future, the entire world population remains suspended in a condition of ignorance that is certainly not attributable to states, economic interests, or other standard popular sources of manipulation and conspiracy. It finds itself thinking and acting ahead of the state and market and having to imagine a future**.** Here, the social and public media have taken on a central role.

The Role of Public and Social Media during Crisis

In the time of COVID-19, 4IR and AI, we need to differentiate between public media and social media. The public is the audience and it engages in a one-way communication. In the case of social audience, the public's roles toggle between that of the audience as well as content creators. Both state-driven and commercial media are bound by certain ethical standards defined by their communications ministries. However, in the case of state-driven media, the editorial and financial controls rest with the government, while the financiers and ownership of private media dictate their editorial policy.

Public media such as newspapers, broadcasters (radio and television), are accepted only on condition that they have undergone an editorial function - this includes their obligation to be concerned with current issues and topical relevance. They define and continually redefine the topics of the reliable present. This is warranted by their obligation to be aware of and to respond to events as they occur. It also includes the obligation to distinguish as rigorously as possible between rumour, opinion and fact, by relying on first-hand sources, cross-checking and direct witness observation wherever possible. Finally, public media are subject to a demand for prudence. They should refrain from speculation and avoid being manipulated. In order to achieve this, they are allowed to ignore, in the short term, certain topics and issues that do serve to build public opinion but that cannot be addressed in a way that serves public good, i.e. without inflaming speculation, suspicion, and scepticism. Users of public media are like users of scientific knowledge: they realise fully that there can be no unmediated truths and facts open to direct scrutiny of the public. They place their reliance instead on a conscientious system of mediations, translations across media, collaborations and consensus-seeking rooted in good faith.

Social media cannot rely upon the costly apparatus and expertise that underpins the editorial product of relevance and objective judgement. To do so would be to exclude their defining characteristic, which is a reciprocity between users. Where social media sacrifices editorial restraints, they compensate by introducing a fundamental equality that is not, however, the result of pact or agreement between users but a feature of the technology itself. Unlike listeners to a radio, social media users can talk back. What is evident is that the autonomy that resides with social media allows it to become a platform for fake news, the spreading of misinformation, hate

speech and civil unrest. Social media platforms are in the spotlight with calls for them to fight issues such as these. Therefore, the fundamental demand placed on social media should never be for objective judgement but instead should aim at inclusive reciprocity. Social media frequently cite the product of public media but cannot add to its objectivity. Instead, such inclusions are used to provoke comment and response, in short, public media serves social media as a stimulus to explore avenues of conversation.

In 2011, looking at political upheaval in the Arab world, Graham Harman, working from the field of speculative realism, explored the functioning of media, civil society and the state during the 'Arab Spring'. Here, the social media reinforced an understanding amongst certain scholars (Rovira 2019) of the ontological relationship of actors and objects, through people and public opinion, as transmitted through their mobile devices. The picture of such an event is incomplete where beings are privileged over inanimate objects which might be regarded as tools for use, but which are never entirely aligned in their dynamic operations with a human intention.

Habermas' thinking, which became familiar as the later Frankfurt School doctrine (Lyytinen & Klein 1985: 208) of the 1970s, has returned with practical force in the post-2016 debate, where public media are regularly accused of behaving like social media through propagating particular interests. Since public media can be instantly challenged in this regard today by social media, there is a pressure for public media to engage and align with social media. This calls for a shift from what seems like an unattainable goal of editorial objectivity, in a global world ruled by private sector power, which is under no obligation to disclose information, and by public sector omnipotence. Since 2016, there has been constant pressure on public media to adopt the ideal of autonomy in place of their increasingly elusive editorially based objectivity. It is in this deadlock that public and social media came upon the unexpected demand to articulate a natural event that has the most far reaching social and individual effects. A mutation in bat diseases (Readfearn 2020; Zilber 2020) has suspended the operations of the market and the state throughout half the world with an inevitable progression towards the remaining half (Velavan & Meyer 2020; Remuzzi & Remuzzi 2020; World Health Organization 2020a). Presidents have suspended the consensus seeking of parliament in favour of the objective judgement of medical experts. States of emergency suspending citizen freedoms are declared (Greene 2020) on the basis of the anticipated progression of patterns

within a natural event that is nevertheless unprecedented and thus undersupplied with factual data.

The response to the crisis by public media has been to continue their reporting on the key institutions of the market and the state as they react to threat while conveying scientific advice that cannot yet rise beyond the level of intensified public hygiene, the latter being long solved and surpassed in the nineteenth century politics of sewer systems (Sochan 2007), water purification (Hazen 1914; Nesfield & Windsor 1905) and the discovery of micro pathogens by researchers like Louis Pasteur (Silverstein 2000: 34). At one stage, it appeared to be that the public media had more or less exhausted their repertory in giving shape to the crisis.

The social media, however, have become the site of an interesting process of escalation. Obviously, this cannot be a unique escalation of new facts and events, since state surveillance and data-mined markets have a strong access to both of these. What we know of the patterns of the disease comes indirectly from policing action and changes in consumer behaviour. Nevertheless, it is a social media quickly rearranged into communities of the crisis, neighbourhoods, professions, businesses, identity-based groups – all orientated towards their experience and response to the crisis, including their experience and response to the state and market response, as reported in the public media. These local points of stakeholder consensus clarify themselves to the degree where organisation and assistance have become necessary, particularly under conditions of lockdown.

Mutual assistance association and various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) entered into the social media conversations of stakeholder communities, thus escalating the issue of the crisis to an organisational level beyond that of communicating individuals. This organisational level, which included non-state and non-market aligned bodies such the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), escalated the issue quickly to the public media due to the relative helplessness and lack of mandate of Non-State Actors (NSA) within states of emergency. Public media thus found themselves with a third source of press releases beyond their customary informing by the market and state. Nevertheless, such issues are the products of consensus and therefore create a number of controversies within the public media, which their obligation to maintain an objective judgement simply requires that they acknowledge and report, but from which they do not draw conclusions. The resulting public

proliferation of debate has attracted the interest of communities of researchers and experts to discussions in the public media in a way that they would not have been attracted to directly by the communities of interest at the base of the social media or by the perspectives of NSA, who are the frontline practical interveners on behalf of such communities.

The Rise of Expert Constituencies

Today, it becomes the role of an expert community to provide models, facts and arguments that decide the key public debates after these are dramatized as controversies by the public media. In short, experts will now be encouraged to attempt to provide new factual stopping points for key public debates. Once the issue has transformed into experts addressing public debates through new avenues of research or novel articulations and applications of past research, the expert community itself becomes attractive to policy makers, who can then proceed as rapidly as possible to align their legislations, budgets and existing policy principles to facilitate the expert solutions into practice by providing them with state legitimacy as the chosen national solution, and with budgets for their implementation.

What is noticeable about this escalation is that its social media foundation gives it a maximum of deliberativeness and inclusiveness that would satisfy Habermas' (2015) classic vision. Nevertheless, it is clear that this popular constituency is not the main constituency of the issue but rather the crisis itself escalating the issue as a major global threat, so that successive new publics come forward in an attempt to manage the escalation of that threat. Initially, NGOs and voluntary associations are over-run by the threat, which in turn becomes a headline issue for media, and cause of the current controversy that will grow in the media sphere. But the threat soon exceeds the powers of the media to settle such controversy, at which point a new form of expertise becomes the constituency of the escalation. A mobilisation takes place to translate explication by controversy into argument stopping facts and models. The threat further escalates beyond science and knowledge of the threat forcing the expert community to enlist policy makers and lobbyists to formulate a course of action derived from the threat that can become the national solution at the level of state, and a stimulus of the economy as the threat becomes successfully managed until it is no longer threatening. The threat is therefore not the catalyst of any given level of its constituencies for

long, but nevertheless causes a rapid collection of constituencies as it exceeds the capability of each constituency to manage and mitigate it. Each will provide growing instruments for the management of the threat until their resources are exceeded by the threat itself (Harman 2014; Latour 2013).

Before the current escalation of COVID-19, it was tacitly understood that the cohesion and day-to-day reproduction of a society proceeded in three parallel ways. The first was through the state, sometimes seen as an institution but in reality, a very complex agglomeration of organisations, agencies, enterprises, with constantly shifting boundaries. Another centre of gravity was the market, which gave cohesion to the endless variety of needs and social interests by placing them in relationships of negotiation and exchange. The third entity was the nation itself that arose originally from the solidarity and cooperation between clans and families. This triad re-expressed itself after the emergence of the national state in the modernised form of voluntary association, known as 'the People' and the voluntary association of civil society within the public sphere.

The Triad and COVID-19

In Karatani's (2008: 591) well-known contention, state, market and nation form an indivisible interlock. Each characterises itself by its need to maintain a distinct form of exchange. These forms of exchange permit the state and the market to produce synergy through their interaction by relying on the form of exchanges at the heart of the nation. Correspondingly, the nation-state proceeds synergistically and does not collapse in antagonisms because the exchanges at the core of the market are enlisted to fortify it. Finally, the relationship between the market and the nation steers productively between alternate capitalist and welfare socialist phases only because the state underpins both of these dispensations with rights and security. However seamless this sharing of stresses may be in ensuring the continuing of a society, cooperation is nevertheless not the social foundation of Karatani's (2008: 591) three entities. They are a consolidated and founded on and maintained by three distinctive forms of exchange. These forms of exchange are the social contracts which aggregate society into zones that eventually become discernible as the state, the market and the nation, as institutions. It is their susceptibility to disaggregation that crisis highlights, and as crises escalate, they provide for novel synergy between the three tiers. This has to

be brought into existence by fresh efforts to augment new aggregation resulting from growing each of the spheres of a particular mode of exchange. Most situations of crisis produce this kind of acceleration of exchanges until a new equilibrium between state, market and nation is attained from 'inside' the crisis. This aims to normalize the crisis and produce a post-COVID-19 society, even if the virus continues to be a major factor in daily life. From this perspective, recovery means the recovery of working synergies between three kinds of exchanges and with this the inclusion and support of the population to a post-crisis equilibrium or 'normality' (e.g. following the reaction to 9/11; Klein 2007).

The current COVID-19 crisis has not yet undergone a full escalation cycle and therefore it remains unclear what capacities the state, market and nation have to build in order to renew their synergy and response to the threat and, if successful, undertake recovery. Therefore, it is safe to say that faced by a risk of such large dimension, the state, market and nation have no clear sense of the extent of the demands they may place on one another. This tentativeness, which influences and extends to relations between states and peer states, and global nodes for markets, has not afflicted civil society where the primary mediatised escalation of the COVID-19 crisis has taken place. The impotence of the market, the state and of the public media for which they are the touchstones of reliability, is echoed by the prominence of NSOs such as the United Nations via WHO. By the logic of social media escalation, the state and the market have become the second last and last constituencies of the inevitable path of COVID-19 escalation. Ahead of them, expert constituencies of the crisis emerge in social media as associations and networks between communities, NGOs, media (now fed bottom up) experts, universities, laboratories, health professionals, lobbyists and policy makers all precede the entry of state and market in managing the crisis.

These newly-formed associations have developed the nation and diminished overnight the roles of the market and state. This is less a shift in balance of power and interests than a growth in networks, projects and ecosystems that remain better aligned to the crisis than the currently free-floating market and state. Hence the expectation has formed that states and markets will have to renegotiate their relationship to civil society as representing all citizens. Like a three-way standoff, whoever manages to draw and deploy an effective management strategy for COVID-19 will emerge as the arbiter of new state, market and nation relationships.

Looking to the global context, during any crisis, be it war, political upheaval or pandemic, if the underlying social order is disaggregated and no longer easily orientated towards maintaining the smooth interdependence of state, market and nation, the constituencies of states, markets and civil society (nations) go their separate ways in petitioning and enlisting the help of all available and viable social agents. The media, both social and public, are the frontline for shoring up the different forms of exchange, of social ordering that the triad (state, market, nation) depend on at their core. Nevertheless, the results of separate enlistment of societies fall short of the synergies that the triad is used to achieving, by pooling their social support based on a common objective. In a crisis, a dominant plausible common objective, strong enough to reunify the triad, has not as yet been identified. Instead, the goals for orientation during and post-crisis steadily emerge in the micro-scale interactions between communities. Their consensus, when it has been reached, will only communicate with the state through the goodwill and skill of mediators, policy makers and lobbyists.

The modification of these forms now seems more of an *ad hoc* response to managing the crisis and no longer something primarily intelligible through policies, constitutions, party manifestos or any aspect of economics. Within this situation, which could be seen as an identity crisis of state, market and nation, the fundamental cooperation between citizens communicating amongst themselves becomes paramount. Cooperation at this scale would have been unthinkable prior to the introduction and diffusion of the interactive media that would mimic the public sphere.

New Knowledge

What the early outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis has revealed is that there are three domains of knowledge that have served us since the 19th Century, to provide western-modernist societies with their reliable interventions: economics, the understanding of communication, codes and languages, and in knowledge of life gained from medicine and biology (Foucault 2005). The knowledge disciplines that form the triad of resources for understanding the threats facing state, nation or market were not upheld by the COVID-19 escalation. The sequence of actual stakeholders became communities, non-state actors, media, experts, policy makers. This sequence exists outside of the social management offered by the triad (state, market and nation) and has

its knowledge base in the management of a variety of threats and concerns that do not easily gear to the bio-political and economic-warfare models that frame knowledge for the state and market.

The knowledge of COVID-19 is largely a management knowledge, up to and including mass vaccinations, if this does become feasible. This know-how remains embedded and also contained in the network of cooperating and communicating constituencies formed directly by an escalation of the virus. This network will remain the major resource for managing the crisis as much as for mapping it. It is from within this network linking communities directly to global ecumenical bodies such as WHO and the World Bank, that all future reliable explanations of COVID-19 as a reality, will come. It is clear that life sciences, communications and concepts, and recovery economics during the crisis, are already oriented fully towards translating the messages within the network and are doing their best to avoid interference and blockages emanating from the old knowledge frames invoked by the proponents of the interests of state, by nationalists and by crisis capitalists.

It is likely that new patterns in pragmatic sciences will fill and replace the perplexity of the state and its experts, who clearly no longer hold the fundamental anchors of knowledge. Even though it may seem that a simple pathogen derived from a natural ecosystem is the cause of the crisis, it is easy to imagine a different history in which a more advanced virology or immunology would have addressed and defeated the threat. Biological threats now present a far greater menace. What constitutes the actual threat is our society's reluctance, or inability to link the emergence of risk with the growth of knowledge. Further, to accept that the growth of knowledge or the management of threat does not occur in any one institution or discipline but requires a flexible and tactical ability to link institutions and disciplines rapidly and in new ways, such that their association allows for the management of an escalation of threat. If successful, this would permit the derivation of a way of managing threat and its effects through different media in order to arrive at a diminution. It is this capability that is sought after, at our cost, and experimentally put in place, in all of today's responses to the COVID-19 threat.

In the era of the Cold War, with its fear of total nuclear annihilation, Friedrich Kittler (1999: xxxix) wrote: '… the media determine our situation' and are where we stand. This may have seemed a strange assertion at the time

when so much else besides the representation of the world was at stake. However today, the practical boundaries of state, market and nation have eroded in such a way as to make it unclear where and how humans may focus their efforts. At the same time our disciplines, which have focused on the practices of managing the economy, the communicational structure and sustainability of life in our society, no longer seems able to contend with the kinds of knowledge that we need to begin to characterise, manage and predict our effective responses, and our anticipated recovery. These two kinds of response give way to a growing sense that another world will emerge if we survive the crisis: a world very different from our own but in ways that we are unable to describe without a sense of guesswork and speculation. Complementary to this is the feeling that our ways of talking about ourselves have lost their foundation and that the simplest acts of everyday life no longer hold the practical reassurance of prudence and good habit. Badiou (*Cinema and Philosophy* 2015) spoke of the cinema as an absolutely empty form, and hence the only medium able to take advantage of incorporating all other media into one and deciding creatively upon the way it can be staged.

Conclusion: The Reign of Uncertainty

What we have shown in this paper is that the crises in modern societies are not any more about crises in the foundations of society. They are not typical 20th Century crises which are about rights recognition and exclusion. These new 21st Century crises are issue-driven. The issue comes out of nowhere, as we seen in the case of COVID-19. When this happens, it builds a succession of constituencies, the first being the people first affected by the crisis; the second (or the first responders), usually NGOs; the third, the media; the fourth, the experts; the fifth, the policymakers; the sixth, parliament; the seventh, the tenderees and the eighth, the original community at the bottom, now capacitated and enabled to manage the crisis, in stages and phases. These eight successive constituencies (and this is a simplified depiction of a very complex scenario), provide two possibilities for a crisis. The one possibility is that the crisis can just randomly escalate. It will still escalate to all these levels, but it will fail to gain from the constituency that it is escalated through. The second possibility is a managed escalation, one that still goes through that same sequence of points towards this resolution, but with some entity or agreement to take it through that sequence conscientiously; to

interrogate what each constituency drawn to the crisis, indeed created by the crisis, brings, and to carry that contribution forward until the resolution of the whole cycle of escalation and de-escalation.

This paper has sought to present notions of crisis, revealing the emergence of a different model. The present situation places us less in the position of a cinema audience, where the content system has failed, the film has broken, and we are only seeing the white light on the screen and hearing white noise though the speakers; instead, we are each invited to adopt the role of a cinema director, in search of better and better images, a clarified relation to reality, by actively arranging the many networks, associations, projects, as would happen in the temporary corporations that make every film. We have become, in spite of ourselves, speculative realists. We can no longer assume that anything we have, know or can do, places us in a more favourable relationship with what is and what we cannot remove ourselves from. What we have relied upon has suddenly become unreliable (Harman 1999). What fills our awareness is no longer clearly conceived or easily grasped. We cannot afford to succumb to doubt, just as we cannot afford to rush into believing in a comfort-zone, comprised of dangerous assumptions that would have us restore the state, market and nation, or the established theories about life, labour and language, despite this present disaggregation. We have to proceed pragmatically and constructively, like a boxer in a boxing ring, trading blow for blow with an unknown and unfathomable adversary. It could well be that the COVID-19 crisis has finally ended the certainties of the past century, and thrown us into a future that had previously been obscured by the mists of nostalgia, repetition and revision, and which we must somehow be able to co-create, if we are going to have the chance to know it, find our place in it and make history under conditions that are more of our own making.

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