

Introduction: Locations of Politics

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In this symposium, we present and think about crises as locations from which to interrogate commonplace approaches to the political. Our goal is to offer case studies in cultivating what Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo calls “political literacy and responsibility,” to uncover the Real which capitalist realism suppresses.¹ The planet, the border, the safe space, the university—these are just a few of the locations of crisis today that can dislocate entrenched methodological and ideological reflexes in contemporary theory, and open onto a productive radical critique of the present. The papers collected here present crises as locations where lines of inclusion and exclusion are (re)drawn, and meanings and identities are construed, contested, and renewed. Conventionally, geographers think of locations as the recognizable nodal points referring to a measured “where” of places.² In our case, however, a location refers to the “where” of crises and, thus, potentiality.

No matter where we are located, a deep sense of insecurity and disorientation engulfs our daily lives. Many of us feel lost, desperately “in search of politics,” to borrow the words of Zygmunt Bauman.³ Looking back over just the last half decade, it is difficult not to feel outraged by the omnipresent failures of politics, from the divisions fueled by the Trump Presidency to Brexit, from climate change inaction to a growing sense of indifference in the face of ongoing border catastrophes. Despite the cautious hope for radical change that was brought on by the initial waves of COVID-19, the pandemic crisis has done little to revitalize the common, instead illustrating the extraordinary ruthlessness and resilience of liberal capitalism. COVID’s management, characterized by strategically disempowered global institutions like the World Health Organization, the privileging of private pharmacological interests over public health, the deriding and scorning of expertise and science, among many other consequences of liberal self-destructivism, offer us a grim and bleak foresight into how we might tackle the no less immediate, but certainly more complex and ever greater threat of climate change.

Many of us feel lost, powerless. While politics is everywhere, it has been increasingly depoliticized, whether through an ethical turn or through a fragmentation into decontextualized, allegedly separate crises, each with a limited set of associated policies and binary positions. Indeed, “crisis” has been one of the keywords to define our contemporary era. “Crises” seem to surround us to such an extent and with such force that Nancy ponders if the very term may itself be in crisis,⁴ while Žižek et al. warn that the term “is at risk of slipping into a provocative cliché devoid of substance.”⁵ On the other hand, Stijn De Cauwer reinvests this term with radical potentiality, arguing that “‘crisis’ and ‘critique’ have always been complementary” and that a crisis is “an invitation to sharpen our capacity for judging a situation, to propose different concepts, theories, and narratives, and to invent alternative solutions to the attempts to manipulate the anxieties, uncertainty, and suffering of the people by different political factions.”⁶

To be sure, the term “crisis” is conventionally used to refer to a system’s failure to respond to a moment of urgency. Colin Hay reminds us, however, that crisis and failure are distinctly and politically different. A crisis, he explains, occurs when there is enough political will to translate failure into crisis. In other words, failure exists as a pre-condition of crisis until it is “politically and ideationally mediated.”⁷ This is not to deny that a crisis has a material base, but rather that its interpretation, perception, narration, and construction makes failure recognizable as a crisis. Crises can be acted upon, (re)produced, and performed as breaking points in hegemonic discourse. A crisis, therefore, speaks to a dislocating geography of discursive identities and meanings, which are otherwise generally presented as if originating externally to politics. Examples of externalized failure abound: “corruption is not endemic but an externality of capitalism”; “climate change is a mere byproduct of or cost to pay for industrialization”; “Trumpism is antithetical to democracy,” etc. Crises, in other words, can reveal the ruses of a failing system prone to deflecting attention towards “something” existing “outside” of it. The proliferation of so-called “refugee crises” is a striking example. A discursive misnomer,⁸ the very expression places responsibility on refugees and frames their migration as a result of a binary opposition of localized “push” and “pull” factors: wars, poverty, and famine versus safety, jobs, education and freedom. In fact, “refugee crises” reflect a crisis of the border,⁹ and as such of globalized capitalism with its constitutive “imperial formations.”¹⁰

The location most commonly associated with politics is the territorial border, whose inside/outside logic has been diffused from its original location at the supposed ends of state territory to disciplining and securing all places and bodies within a given territory.¹¹ Existing diffusely as “a permanent state of exception,”¹² forcing everyone to

remember, take on and perform their identities, the border most often enters the public view as the spectacle of the “ritualized display of violence and expulsion.”¹³ Vázquez-Arroyo’s reflections on the logics of boundaries, borders, and walls in his multi-layered and richly contextualized contribution to this symposium examine the border as an “enabling condition for the location of politics.” In the context of numerous ongoing border crises,¹⁴ can the border be reclaimed for a progressive politics “in the name of the self-determination of collectivities against imperialist interventions”? While rejecting the necropolitical racialization and classing of borders, Vázquez-Arroyo’s “Left realpolitik” addresses not only defenders of a global capitalism which “batters down all Chinese walls,” but also poses a challenge to liberal left imaginations of a “humanity without borders.” Against “cosmopolitanism and its imperial sedimentation” can the crisis of the border, framed as “an enabling condition for a modicum of equality and resistance,” function as the location for a reinvestment in a shared political (rather than individual ethical) responsibility?

Such an admittedly bold move requires “political literacy” and a “sober realism,”¹⁵ values for political theory and citizenship that are also advanced by Larry Busk and Jaan Reynolds, in their paper on the planetary crisis of climate change. Anthropogenic climate change is, of course, *the* crisis of our contemporary political moment. Appropriately naming the onslaught on “nature,” however, proves contentious and can easily conceal the roots of the system’s failure. A climate’s changing is part of the definitional attribute of the term “climate.” Referring to “anthropos” is, for different reasons, similarly suspect, both because it fails to differentiate between groups of “humans” with vastly different emissions profiles, and because it naturalizes self-destruction, displacing the origins of rapidly increasing global warming onto the human being as a species rather than acknowledging its inseparability from the trajectory of capitalism.¹⁶ Climate change is arguably capital’s largest crisis, and it may very well be its final one. As the dictum re-articulated by Mark Fisher goes, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.”¹⁷ Global economic entanglements are undoubtedly complex, but Busk and Reynolds reject a facile intellectual capitulation into skepticism and call for re-activating responsibility: “If oil is drilled and processed in Norway but consumed in the United Kingdom, or if an American-owned cattle company razes parts of the rain forest with help from the Brazilian government, or if the IMF pressures various states to relax their environmental regulations, which country is to blame?” Where, in other words, do we locate the crisis of environmental destruction that is global in its dimensions? The answer Busk and Reynolds compellingly propose is one of “totality.” A crisis grounded in the global reach of capitalist society’s irrational pursuit of profit and growth at all costs demands a similarly totalizing approach through what Adorno described as “‘the rational establishment of the whole society’ by ‘a self-conscious global subject.’” For political theory, this uncomfortable confrontation with “totality,” “universal” and “rationality” immediately unsettles a ubiquitous and deeply held “critical-theoretic disposition.” Not only does Busk and Reynold’s impassioned essay force us to question our “incredulity towards metanarratives,” but it also implies a hypocritical complicity of many of our most cherished methods with the status quo. We simply cannot afford, for instance, to abandon “realization”¹⁸ or expect rare and local moments of interruption¹⁹ to suffice when immediate and coordinated, radical systemic change is the only hope for confronting a system of globally networked “vested interests.” Where do our own interests as theorists lie in this configuration and what dislocations in thought are necessary to confront this planetary crisis?

Underpinning political literacy, responsibility and the foundations of a rational society is, of course, the education of the *demos*. The final two contributions in this symposium move the political topology of thought to the location “where people know how to learn and learn how to know.”²⁰ Universities are grounded in and shaped by reason, but what is less clear is whose reason it speaks and for what purpose. Today, a pronounced cultural shift has declared their failure, and the university as a whole—not just the humanities, or the tenure system, or specific curricula—is under attack. This crisis has, in part, been exacerbated by “neoliberal rationality” with its emphasis on competitive “excellence”, trends, productivity, and management, and by the emergency measures and displacements required during the pandemic. It prompts us to question the roles of the university in the contemporary landscape of production and transmission of knowledge as well as in the realization of ideals such as freedom, equality, inclusivity, and democracy.²¹

Western societies have largely become rather sociopathic, depoliticized collections of individuals and small groups, desperately and haphazardly seeking safety and happiness while attempting to increase their value as “human capital.”²² As individuals struggle to find meaning and recognition beyond the lowest common denominator role of “consumer-spectator,” the attractiveness of micro-communities and “safe spaces” becomes ever greater. These have proliferated with growing urgency recently as a response to overt rhetoric of hate and violence fostered by thriving global extreme right movements, of which the Trump administration was the exemplary caricatural incarnation. Anne

Berger's contribution makes the case for thinking of "safe spaces" as locations in crisis. These groups, be they therapeutic or militant, confer a very real validation upon individuals searching for safety and security, but are they intrinsically and unequivocally emancipatory? While protecting minorities from injury, Berger argues, they may simultaneously activate a contradictory logic of autoimmunity. She invites readers to meditate on the genealogy of protected and protective "safe spaces" and their privileged relationship with universities today. Berger also considers the expansion of "trigger warnings" as a further case study for thinking through the deep ties between the exceptional, though endangered, place of the university and the conditions of democracy itself.

Marijn Nieuwenhuis and Erzsébet Strausz's autoethnographic contribution shares Berger's faith in the possibilities of the university as a "counter-institution,"²³ a place with-against, a location where thought is made for the outside, but whose own thinking is also shaped by it. Nieuwenhuis and Strausz question the outside/inside of the university, often imagined as a contained location of knowledge, or the *where* of thought. Using the concept of atmospheres introduced by New Phenomenological thought,²⁴ Nieuwenhuis and Strausz "think atmospherically" about the (post)Covid spaces of higher education. The move to digitalization of knowledge production and sharing, driven by quick fixes, undermines traditional pedagogic practices, but—maybe equally importantly—also opens possibilities for rethinking what teaching is, or rather could be. Through a close and intimate account of the felt and embodied changes in pedagogical experiences during and after the Covid crisis, Nieuwenhuis and Strausz ask how we may think differently about, remake and experience education as "a practice of freedom."²⁵ Thinking through where and how transgressions can be found and enabled helps us to challenge the political horizons of possibility, which, given the centrality of the classroom and its participating bodies in the doing and undoing of knowledge, have an importance stretching beyond Capital's expectation of education as career preparation and investment in the self.

If producing informed citizenship in the age of an increasingly algorithmic management of "selves" is an urgent task, so too is maintaining political literacy, responsibility, and relevance for theory. The essays gathered in this symposium all claim, in different and sometimes opposed ways, a fundamental concern with (re)building a sense of shared fate, as well as with shifting the scope and pace of the scholarly conversation. They seek to renew our commitment to critical thought rather than impulse and trend, to reason and nuance rather than enclosing and naturalizing ideology, to historical, linguistic, and cross-cultural contextualization rather than a myopic focus on the present, the literal or the local. The invisible landscapes and atmospheres they examine, the distinctions and genealogies they trace, the contradictory logics they deconstruct all testify to an exhilarating openness to thinking across disciplines and multiple levels of analysis. Through the dislocations of thought they perform, they extend a provocation to readers: where and how can a new anti-capitalism emerge differently today?²⁶

Notes

¹ "For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us." Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester [state?]) [I am not sure? These are British cities.], Zero Books, 2019), 18.

² Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Chichester, [State?]: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁴ Jean-Luc Nany, "Chapter 10: The Idea of Crisis," in *Critical Theory at a Crossroads: Conversations on Resistance in Times of Crisis*, ed. Stijn De Cauwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, "Introduction," *States of Crisis and Post-Capitalist Scenarios* (Farnham, MA: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014).

⁶ Stijn De Cauwer, *Critical Theory at a Crossroads: Conversations on Resistance in Times of Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xvii.

⁷ Colin Hay, "Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: interrogating the process of change," *The British journal of politics & international relations* 1.3 (1999): 317–344, 324.

⁸ See Nicholas De Genova, Martina Tazzioli and Soledad Álvarez-Velasco, "Europe/crisis: New keywords of 'the crisis' in and of 'Europe,'" *Near Futures Online* (2016): 1–16.

⁹ This is one of the starting points of the critical border studies literature. See, for instance, Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Europe's border crisis: Biopolitical security and beyond* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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- ¹⁰ Ann L. Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Out Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- ¹¹ The work that immediately comes to mind is Étienne Balibar, “The Borders of Europe,” translated by James Swenson, in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 216–229.
- ¹² Mark B. Salter, “When the exception becomes the rule: Borders, sovereignty, and citizenship,” *Citizenship Studies* 12.4 (2008): 365–380.
- ¹³ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, Or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), viii.
- ¹⁴ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone, 2010).
- ¹⁵ Described by Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo in *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power* (Chichester, [state?]: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁶ See especially Jason W. Moore, ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: Pm Press, 2016).
- ¹⁷ Fisher, *Capitalist realism*, chapter 1.
- ¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “Destituent Potentiality and the Critique of Realization,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 122:1 (2023), 9–17.
- ¹⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- ²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 131.
- ²¹ Remaining relevant here is Bill Readings’s *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- ²² Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. (New York: Zone Books, 2016).
- ²³ Simon Wortham, *Counter-institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2006).
- ²⁴ For an introduction in English, see Hermann Schmitz, *New phenomenology: A brief introduction* (Milan: Mimesis, 2019).
- ²⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).
- ²⁶ See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 78: “We are now in a political landscape littered with what Alex Williams called ‘ideological rubble’ - it is year zero again, and a space has been cleared for a new anti-capitalism to emerge which is not necessarily tied to the old language or traditions.”



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