

Emergency, Imagination and Management

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Crisis Work

Crisis occurs intermittently and unexpectedly. Yet what if the condition of crisis were not a catastrophic or redemptive eruption, but were becoming a permanent possibility and even a permanent necessity? What if, given the powerful and paradoxical coherence provided by dangerous or menacing events, it may have become necessary to manufacture, monitor and maintain crisis? I will draw on Peter Sloterdijk's arguments about the capitalisation of rage to suggest that the production, processing and diversification of themes of stress and crisis – the crisis imaginary – has become as important to mediated society as goods, services or money.

What are we to make of crisis, what can crisis make happen, and hold at bay?

Crisis is related to Greek *krinein*, to judge, determine, or decide. In Greek, *krisis* could mean both the act of judging and the actual judgement – the event or issue of the judgement – to which it leads. As such, it is first cousin to words like *criticism* and *critique*. This makes phrases like 'the crisis of criticism', which used to abound in literary and cultural publishing, immaculately tautological – all criticism is both the effect and effecting of a kind of crisis. Medicine preserves the link between crisis and the idea of a decisive turning point: to be in a 'critical condition' is not to disapprove of your treatment plan or consultant's bedside manner, but to be at the point at which something will be decided. The earliest citation given by the OED for crisis used in this sense, from a medical text book of 1543, tells us baldly that 'Crisis sygnifieth iudgement' (Vigo 1543, sig Z4v). The judgement in question is a judgement that we are not necessarily going to be able or called upon to make, or may be as Larkin calls it, 'what something hidden from us chose' (Larkin 1988, 153). In a medical crisis it is often the body that will make its own judgement on itself. The word crisis has also been used to mean a sign, symptom or determining feature, even a *criterion*, which shares its Greek root. A seventeenth-century entomologist uses the word in this way in commenting that the beauty and vigour of certain flies is 'a Crysis of their youth, not their idleness' (Purchas 1657, 12).

The time of crisis is an exceptional time, a time of change, renewal, revolution or even revelation – the time not of *chronos*, the hickory-dickory-dock of one thing coming after another, but of *kairos*, that which breaks into or breaks out in ordinary clock or calendar time. Michel Serres proposes in his book *Temps des crises* that crisis must accordingly always imply a breakthrough into the absolutely new and irrevocable: 'If we are really going through a crisis, in the strong medical sense of the term, then a return backwards is no good. The terms "stimulus" or "reform" are irrelevant. If we are really dealing with a crisis then no "recovery" is possible' (Serres 2015, xii). So a crisis always in a sense is a matter of life and death, a choice between the life of the new and the death of the old. As

such, it may seem exhausting, painful, stressful, and so in almost all cases to be averted or avoided.

And yet much of modern art, if not also of modern life, seems to suffer under a kind of deficit or deferral of crisis. ‘Should I, after tea and cakes and ices’ havers Eliot’s Prufrock, ‘Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?’ (Eliot 1969, 15). This might suggest that another view of crisis might be in hand. What if the condition of crisis were not a catastrophic or redemptive eruption, but could become a permanent possibility and even a permanent necessity? What if *kairos* could become chronic, and the event of crisis become frequentative? What if the necessity might arise to manufacture, monitor and maintain crisis? Such a view might be assisted by Heiner Mühlmann’s proposal about Maximal Stress Cooperation (Mühlmann 1996, 28-42). Put at its simplest, this means that dangerous and menacing events or periods are powerfully and paradoxically cohering. Or, as Peter Sloterdijk puts it, human beings ‘are always “worked up” or agitated about something or other – be it catastrophes, enemy states, crimes, or scandals – they constantly keep revolving the thematic material that they use to communicate internally about their situation, or rather, about their immune status or stress-status’ (Sloterdijk 2006, 6). This is a good thing, as long as the cooperation produced by the stimulus of crisis does not itself result in the intensification of crisis – as the response to 9-11 might seem to suggest it can. By constantly renewing and revolving these stress themes ‘a group takes its own fever temperature; and through its fever, it generates its own operative unity as an endogenously closed context of agitation’ (Sloterdijk 2006, 6).

Art, which, like academic communication in general, may have become more or less completely absorbed into the contemporary ecology of media, is one of the most important and versatile subsystems on which we rely to produce and prolong crisis at a manageable level. If there is a theory of such a practice, or a practice of such a theory, one would surely be able to point to a version of it in the state of permanent excitation of art, the state of permanent excitation which art actually and definitionally is, which has taught us, more powerfully than any other activity, that only unrelenting crisis can validate its operations or our interest. So, if crisis is a kind of judgement, we may well suspect that the work of judgement reciprocally requires, profits from, and perhaps itself precipitates and prolongs conditions of crisis, for example in the project of radicalisation, that is the radiation of new forms and possibilities of radicality at every moment.

One obvious objection to this view might be that, if art is just playing at crisis, then it’s not crisis, but just play. But crisis-play is perhaps precisely what immunity is – and perhaps crisis-control what, in the animal world at least, play is and is for. Playing is rehearsing, anticipating crisis in order to head it off. The slogan employed by the Commercial Union insurance company used to be ‘We won’t make a drama out of a crisis’. But a drama is precisely the way in which crisis is kept in an inflamed but subcritical condition. The kind of dramatisation produced by the artist and other media operatives is surely an important way in which crisis is managed and self-monitored, that is to say, maintained at optimal levels of stressory coherence-induction.

In his book *Rage and Time*, Peter Sloterdijk has drawn on Mühlmann’s sociobiological arguments regarding the fundamental role in culture formation of Maximal Stress Cooperation to analyse the ways in which states, religions and political movements

capitalise anger. The originality of his argument is in the link he makes between rage and temporality. For the strength of rage, which may be defined as the passionate inability to tolerate delay, is also its weakness, since rage is so apt to squander itself, in incandescent but ultimately ineffective effusion. In order to maximise its powers, rage must be concentrated, agglomerated, saved up and eked out. In the process, rage engenders narrative, by becoming revenge, and the ever-lengthening interval between offence and vengeance produces history. Subjected in this way to time, rage gives to time its very temper and tonality. As 'a vector that creates a tension between then, now, and later' (Sloterdijk 2010, 60), the desire for revenge is the most perfected form of the human sense of historical project.

But there is an economic as well as a temporal dimension to rage. And, given that the name we customarily give to the complex system of exchanges between time and economics is capitalism, Sloterdijk would have us think, not just in terms of a rage against the machine of capitalism, but also of a veritable capitalist machinery of rage. He makes out a religious prehistory for this in the Judaic notion of the wrathful God, seeing the capacity of Judaism to defer yet nurture revenge for its wrongs as confirming Israel as 'the most important export nation for rage-manufacturing systems' (Sloterdijk 2010, 91). Its most important trading partner is Christianity, the eschatology of which Sloterdijk reads as a system for maintaining through history 'a transcendent archive of rage' (Sloterdijk 2010, 97) which will be made good only on the Day of Judgement. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought about a secular diversification of this system, which had previously never advanced far beyond the primitive accumulations of the treasure-house or savings bank, into an ever more complex and intricately administered market of rage accounting and transaction.

Surely we can see crisis as forming a related or partly subsidiary system. We fear crisis, but need crisis to maintain fear at vitalising levels. We should recognise that the production, processing and diversification of themes of stress and crisis has become as important to mediated society as goods, services or money. Sloterdijk argues that

A constant, varyingly intense flow of stress topics must ensure the synchronisation of consciousnesses in order to integrate the respective population into a community of concern and excitation that regenerates from day to day. That is why modern information media are simply indispensable for the creation of coherence in national and continental stress communes. They alone are capable of binding together the diverging collectives with counter-tensions using a constant flow of irritant topics...The maintenance of the feeling of social cohesion among the shareholders...can only follow through chronic, symbolically produced stress. The larger the collective, the stronger the stress forces need to be that counteract the disintegration of the uncollectable collective into a patchwork of introverted clans and enclaves. As long as a collective can work itself up into a rage over the notion of doing away with itself, it has passed its vitality test. It does what healthy collectives do best, namely getting worked up; and in doing so, it proves what it wants to prove: that it reaches its optimum under stress. (Sloterdijk 2016, 7-8)

The history of modern financial institutions is a history of entanglement and accommodation between money and symbolic media. This entanglement is itself routinely and reliably productive of tension and crisis, since the crisis of the sign induced by the fitful fevering of share-prices can so easily and predictably become a matter of life and death. But the complex arrangements of contemporary finance mean that stress and crisis themselves are capitalised, that they have prices, stocks, outlays, risks, returns, losses, debts, discounts and dividends.

The work of art and the world of art, along with their accessory structures of explication and distribution, are part of a huge and ever-more densely interconnected and reticulated work of affect-symbolic engineering and administration, designed in large part to keep crisis-awareness and response at workable levels, thereby helping to stave off the crisis of crisis-recession. Along with politicians, academics, archbishops and other media functionaries, artists are the managers of crisis services and instruments in this symbolic economy of excitements, investments, opportunities and anxieties. I do not mean to snicker or, for reasons that should be painfully obvious, 'critique' this crisis-work, that we might do well to think of on the analogy of the Freudian dream-work, or joke-work. Crisis really does require managers and management, not just to guard against the possibility that this time the crisis might really sweep us away, but also to maintain crisis-liquidity, making sure the crisis account on which our collectivity depends is never overdrawn. No more reliable carrier or vehicle of this capitalisation of crisis can be imagined than the work of underwriting and capitalising the commanding fantasy of capital-C Capitalism itself. Nobody should imagine that to speak of fantasy makes the crisis it deals with and deals out merely imaginary; the work of fantasy, like the Freudian dream-work, is exacting and exhausting and in its strange way honorable labour. We all have our part to play, not so much in imagining crisis, or producing imaginary crisis, or (least plausible of all), enlisting imagination as our salvation from crisis, as in keeping the crisis imaginary working at full capacity.

Imagination Emergency

Emergency must be imagined. Unimaginability is itself an emergency for the work of imagination.

The response to the Brexit vote and the election of Trump has been to proclaim their unimaginability. This permits the lurch away from politics and into fantasy. But, in fact, the unimaginability of Trump and Brexit has actually become one means of rescuing emergency for imaginability, through the topos of the inconceivable. Lindy West provided one example of this inconceivability topos in her column for the *Guardian* on 15th February 2017.

Today, during my morning routine of opening my laptop, clicking on literally anything, and just screaming and screaming, I made the astonishing discovery that Donald Trump has only been president of the United States for about three weeks. Which is weird, because I could have sworn we had fallen through a tesseract into the airless crush of a two-dimensional void at least seven eternities ago, or what would have constituted seven eternities if such a place had a linear concept of time.

Turns out, though, it has only been 25 days, we are still on earth, and every cell in my body has not been excruciatingly flattened into pure math. It just feels like it.

It's an understandable mistake, I think. Trump has really been eat-pray-loving his way through his first month as the most dangerous man on earth, seeding so many potential atrocities – including, perhaps, the breakdown of the republic itself – that human consciousness has been reduced to a panicked blur, a zoetrope of galloping despair. (West 2017)

As usual, nobody knows how anybody actually feels about this, despite the fact that, or, really, just because of the fact that everybody is so busy inspecting and articulating their feelings and because the field of communications is so saturated with the expression of and exhortation to feelings of various kinds. Liberals have become millennials, convinced that a convulsion as inconceivable and unspeakable as this can only signal a coming apocalypse, and that we must be living in the end times. Mass Observation once undertook a survey of dreams that people had on the morning of the 1937 coronation. One could imagine a similar analysis of the Christmas and New Year greetings exchanged by academics in late 2016 – I have a little archive of them – full of the most apocalyptically lurid intimations about the drak times we are living in.

We assume that fantasy is the opposite of emergency - that fantasy keeps us safely and wish-fulfillingly cocooned, until our dream of a continuous world is ruptured by the trauma of the urgently and unrepresentably real. This is systems-theoretical illiteracy. Fantasy feeds upon the real, which it also keeps in being; and the more shockingly unrepresentable it is, the better. The real correspondingly requires the certification of fantasy, without which it will seem thin and nauseously insipid.

It might seem as though this were something like Slavoj Žižek's 'Passion for the Real', characterised by the paradox that:

it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a theatrical spectacle – from the Stalinist show trials to spectacular terrorist acts. If, then, the passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*, then, in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real (Žižek 2002, 9-10)

But this does not seem quite right to me. Because, so far, there have been no violent events, indeed, one might almost whisper that there seem so far to have been fewer than usual. Instead, the thing that seems most terrifying about Trump's media-management regime is that he eschews the possibility of any kind of disruptive event, adopting a Žižekian view that extremity is a media put-up job. Everything is fine, we are assured, his administration is an adept and fine-tuned affair. For the last few years, Agamben's work has allowed the theory to flourish that democratic countries artificially create states of emergency in order to justify the suspension of rights that they find inconvenient. What characterises Trump's administration is its serene determination to suspend the state of emergency, and thereby to create an existential emergency at the level of appearance and communication, which cannot itself be communicated. It is Trump's very imposture of statesmanlike composure in the face of universal astonishment, dread and the

expectation of calamity that seems so terrifyingly delirious. Some commentators optimistically opined that Trump was showing signs of a nervous breakdown during his crazy press conference of 17th February – 2/17 – but in fact what seems most crazy is the fact that he is apparently so imperturbably immune from any such possibility. I think, like many others, that there are in Trump some pretty clear signs of a delusional personality but this may not be very much more of a liability than it has ever been before.

There is an interesting antinomy here. On the one hand, since there is as yet no real news – no economic developments, military deployments, riots or scandals – there is nothing really to react to. At the same time, and because of this very deficit of crisis, there is *only* reaction, a swirling, throbbing skystorm of it, and that precisely is the news. Sloterdijk's proposal of a capitalisation of rage tips us a wink as to how to think of this. The capitalisation of rage is intended to smooth it out and lengthen it into purpose – to bring time under tension. There must be a certain amount of rage in play at the moment, though perhaps it is likely to be expressed more in outrage: but really what is humming and burring is something like mass anxiety. The opponents of Trump find it deeply creepy that he seems to feel no anxiety about their anxiety. We seem to be getting a foretaste of the syrupy reassurance we will be offered following the announcement of the first missile strikes.

To point to the compacting of fantasy and the real is not intended to prompt Platonic reflections on the ontology of political reality – the possibility of truth in politics, or the possibility of a truth of politics. Instead, I think it gives us an opportunity to see the crisis-work in action. Developing this requires us to try to get a fix on the nature and configuration of the affective investments in the unfolding situation. I have few qualifications to speak about the state of emergency or likely military or political developments: but I realise that, without quite realising it, I have been thinking for some time about the interactions of communication and fantasy, interactions which look at the moment as though they may be inundating the whole field of political communications.

Anxiety Markets

May we perhaps speak of an economics of anxiety, as Sloterdijk allows us to speak of an economics of rage? I think we may, and probably should. Indeed, one of the characteristics of anxiety is that it is itself characterised by a more complex economy of outlay and inhibition than rage, which latter tends unilaterally towards discharge. Where rage strives for spectacular and wasteful self-squandering, anxiety ekes itself out, for fear that, if we stop being anxious, the only thing that stands between us and the thing we dread will have gone. Anxiety therefore prolongs itself in self-investment. It is hard to persuade the angry person to invest their rage in long-term projects, since the whole point of rage is to overcome temporising ifs and buts and force things to a determinate crisis, but it is just as hard to persuade the anxious person to disinvest from their yes-buts and what-ifs.

But, of course, we are not talking about actually anxious persons, or aggregates of anxiety. We are talking about signs, signals and attestations: share prices and stock movements.

Let us remember that, in a so-called financial panic, no single agent needs to feel anything more than mild, prudent concern, just as, in the transmission of a tidal wave, none of the water is actually moving forwards, even though its circular movements may be transmitting enormous energy. The affective system is powered, not by the aggregation of individual states of feeling, but by the aggregation of exchanges of expressions of feeling. We would do well to put in brackets the question of what any individual might be feeling about this. If the expression 'collective feeling' has any meaning, it is as a way of discussing the abstract movements of market rates with regard to attributed feelings. Feelings are not collective, for they cannot be had in common: the signs of feeling are, because the signs of feeling are held in common. We are talking here about a peculiarly heightened entanglement of representation and feeling. The worry is not that Trump will do what he says, it is that he says the things he does.

It does seem that we are seeing, and in the process participating in, a huge elevation of anxiety-work. There are those, like Slavoj Žižek, who come into their own in such circumstances. The ascendancy of Trump, he wants to believe, will precipitate a radical regrouping in the Democratic party – nothing short, in fact, than the rise, no doubt, of a purgative revolutionary socialism. Žižek is a mirror-image of Trump: where Trump instances insane serenity, Žižek dances his jig of insane confidence in the healing powers of vehemence, a strange mixture of blood-in-the-streets death-drive and cradle-to-grave collectivism. Žižek here aims to turn anxiety into action: to give the essentially timeless, objectless and unorientated state of anxiety a sort of aim, outcome and resolution, in purposive anger. His aim is, precisely to put anxiety, which works away at itself without any object properly speaking, to work. It is to push anxiety into the condition of crisis.

In among this, we do have to recognise that Trump is right about one thing: he is indeed the subject of a kind of media obsession, and there are very few who would want to claim that the bulk of media representation of Trump is anything but deeply antagonistic. But Trump does seem to have one intuition, which might even be on the way to rising to an insight, and one huge advantage, namely that he has so far never come out badly from raising the temperature.

The existence of crisis-work does not in the least imply immunity to crisis, and the damage that may result. The very fact that crisis-work is the usual state of affairs in mediated life, the artificial production of extremity in order to maintain immunity to it, allowing us, as Walter Benjamin remarked, to take pleasure from the thought of our own annihilation, means that we are ill-equipped to tell the difference between real and simulated crisis. Indeed, there may be no difference to tell. If the stress production-management cycle is, as Sloterdijk puts it, immunological in function, then we might do well to imagine the possibility of something like an auto-immune response: the production of genuinely chaotic and life-threatening conditions of stress from the very structures designed to keep it at manageable and vitalising levels.

Rage is identified by Sloterdijk with the thymotic drive to assert the self, to discover and constitute the self in assertiveness. Anxiety is athymotic. Where rage asserts the self through surrendering it, anxiety erodes the self through attempting neurotically to conserve it. Rage constitutes the subject through defining an object for it to come up

against; anxiety takes itself gnawingly for an object. That is why the attribution of anxiety is so gratifying and so profitable, for it undermines the capacity for subjecthood of the target. Rage knows why, it is the reason it gives itself. Anxiety is never sure what it is anxious about, or whether its anxiety is proportionate. Rage is always sure, because it is the means of ensuring certainty: as its own reason, it has no need to reason about itself (don't ask me why I am angry - I am angry, so I must have a reason). Anxiety, by contrast is all rumination and ratiocination, scenario-planning and plea-bargaining. Anxiety is feeling feeding back into itself as a pseudo-calculative rationality.

At the same time, anxiety has the power of self-conservation in which rage and lust are deficient. For that reason, anxiety provides a socially-cohering kind of stress. This is in part because anxiety is never sure of its scale or scope. Like shame, with which it shares the quality of self-prolonging endurance, anxiety oscillates unpredictably between large and small, and is constantly taking its own measure. This makes it easier to adapt to the production and reproduction of affective economy, for anxiety is in fact economic, a matter of emotive calculation, from the beginning. It is ceaselessly laying bets on and with itself.

Secession

Something of a quiet revolution is sweeping through some areas of immunology, in the growing suspicion that inflammation, no matter how minor it may seem, whether in the sore throat or the bunion, may in fact always constitute a risk for the organism, and may precipitate many much more intractable conditions. Hence perhaps the mysterious efficacy of long-term low-dose ingestion of aspirin, for those able to tolerate its gastric side-effects. What if the correct response were, not to manufacture and maintain fitful fevering, but to damp it down? Might it be adaptive for us to calm down, or decathect, to find a way to care less, to catch from surcease, not success, but secession? Margaret Thatcher prevented the voices of IRA leaders from being broadcast in order, famously, to deprive them of the oxygen of publicity. I think we might indeed benefit from cutting the supply of lighter-fuel to the Presidential vanity-bonfire. Trump threatens to turn away from confrontation, which he knows he cannot win. Instead, he proposes to communicate with those he fantasises as 'his people' through social media. Perhaps the media might consider a similar disinvestment. This need not imply leaving the President to get on with things untroubled. But it might imply a renewed focus on facts and events, it might imply learning to be less interested in our and others' feelings about the news, or ceasing to mistake it for news.

The chances of this happening are remote indeed. For we have grown accustomed to the seeming fact that solution to every difficulty is more connection, and more communication. But there are inflammatory disorders of communication, to which the only healthy response is quarantine. Michel Serres speculates that all communications among what he describes as homiothermal organisms (ones who need to keep their internal temperatures constant) may be regarded as variants on the injunction 'keep me warm' (Serres 1982, 76). The rise of Trump may perhaps be seen as a symptom of the

global warming in whose existence he claims to disbelieve. In communications as in climate change, more incandescence does not seem likely to help.

I have repeatedly fallen into a trap in evoking this form of stress-management. This is the trap of representing the situation at hand, as Sloterdijk himself does, as a ‘psychopolitics’, as though we were dealing with the orchestration of large aggregations of things that people in fact feel, as though it were a question of subjecting unpredictable and elemental forces to some kind of directive rule. But we cannot remind ourselves often enough that affective economies do not depend upon any actual persons having any particular feelings about anything whatever. Indeed it depends on the conductivity that is the result of nobody really feeling what they believe they must and insist they do – though it does require persons to impersonate those states of feeling, as convincingly as they can, in order to ‘exist’ them, in the Sartrean sense of giving them a form of local form of instance and existence. Indeed, the great advantage of anxiety as a putative or projected collective feeling state, is that nobody need feel it. In fact, more than this, nobody can be sure that they are feeling it, to the right degree. One of the most important features of anxiety is that it is always under transaction, always provoking a kind of meta-anxiety about whether one’s anxiety is proportionate to its object. Many forms of so-called collective feeling are really feelings that we agree to feel that we ought to have: sympathy, at certain times, the feeling of love, the feeling of righteous indignation. All collective emotion is like taking offence, in that it is something you cannot feel in and for yourself, but must feel vicariously, on some injured party’s behalf. Taking offence is an action, not a state, an action that nearly always in fact involves going on the offensive, by wielding the offence done to you (Connor 2008). Anxiety is the inner lining of all these imputed and exhorted emotions, these optative affects that exist only in the commerce between their putative bearers, but in fact never really come permanently to rest in any of them. Anxiety is the feeling of not being sure what, or how much, to feel.

The means that anxiety is never quite my own, and never quite in my present. So, characteristically, I may feel anxious about being able to control my anxiety, should I find it rising into panic. But I may also feel anxious that I am not nearly anxious enough, about Trump, Brexit, climate change, the low pound, antibiotic resistance, pensions policy. There is a constant bidding war in anxiety, as commentators raise the stakes, make us uneasy with their reassurances. Many emotions are indeed transmitted easily between human beings, since we seem strongly adapted to tune our feelings into what we assume others are feeling. But the fact that emotions are nowadays mediated, not through the corporeal immediacy of pheromones or alarm-calls but through complex forms of social rhetoric, mean that there is always a more-or-less complex market in stress-inducements and calmatives, that must, like inflation, be kept at manageable levels, neither overheating, nor declining into stagnant torpor.

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