Crisis, Rupture and Anxiety

Crisis, Rupture and Anxiety: An Interdisciplinary Examination of Contemporary and Historical Human Challenges

Edited by

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The editors would like to thank all of the contributors to the 2010 University of Salford Arts Media and Social Sciences Postgraduate Conference (entitled: *Crisis, Rupture and Anxiety: An Interdisciplinary Examination of Contemporary and Historical Human Challenges*) and especially those who took the time to submit papers to this collection. As this work is testament to, the conference drew an extraordinary response from early career researchers both based in the United Kingdom and around Europe, coming from many different disciplines and offering a diversity of approaches to an understanding of what the concept of crisis means for scholars today, as well as what lessons may be drawn from its historical usage. It has been our pleasure to assemble and edit such a collection of papers.

We would also like to thank the University of Salford and its Faculty of Arts, Media and Social Sciences (subsequently, the College of Arts and Social Sciences) for funding the conference and providing support at every juncture. In particular, we would like to thank Professor John Keiger, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Social Sciences, and Professor Jocelyn Evans for their support in organising and facilitating the conference and to academic staff across the University of Salford who kindly agreed to chair conference panels. A great deal of thanks is owed to Debbie Hughes, of the College of Arts and Social Sciences' Research Support Unit, without whose administrative support this conference would never have got off the ground.

W. Jackson, B. Jeffery, M. Marino and T. Sykes
Salford, August 2011

INTRODUCTION

CRISIS, RUPTURE AND ANXIETY: RE-APPROPRIATING THE CONCEPT OF CRISIS AS A TOOL FOR CRITIQUE

WILL JACKSON AND BOB JEFFERY

The concept of crisis is in the contemporary epoch almost omnipresent. We are seemingly faced with crises in every aspect of our lives and as academics working across the arts, media and the social sciences a confrontation with events and phenomena labelled as 'crises' is inescapable. It is with this experience in mind that this book, and the original conference from which it developed, was set under the title of crisis accompanied by the potential accompanying effects of rupture and anxiety. However, the original conference was not intended to be concerned with the concept of crisis purely in the academic realm; it was also grounded in the geographical context in which the host university is situated. Salford has been at the sharp end of countless 'crises' since the emergence of the area as the original industrial heartland and continues to suffer some of the worst effects of numerous 'crises' in the current era (see Engels, 1973[1845]; Roberts 1990[1971]; Manchester Evening News, 2009). So in the context of the current academic concern with the concept and experience of 'crisis', and a concern with the effects of such events on the immediate surroundings, it was fitting and arguably essential that the theme of the 2010 Arts, Media and Social Sciences Post-Graduate conference at the University of Salford was focussed as such. It was the contention here from the outset that fusing these two incentives for an interrogation of the concept of crisis had a potential utility, as this volume hopefully reveals.

From the outset the engagement with the concept of crisis in this conference was intended to have a critical edge. The necessity of critical analysis of the specific crises we are confronted with is intertwined with the need for a critical interrogation of the application of this concept itself.

In *Policing the Crisis* Stuart Hall et al noted that the word crisis was then – 'almost too conveniently – in fashion' and that it had become "de rigueur to refer to *the British crisis* often without specifying in what respects such a 'crisis' exists" (1978: 317). Hall et al started their analysis with the concept of crisis applied as a critique but it had, by the time of the book's conclusion, become a dominant term applied without any substantive critical edge. Their necessary response was to "define how we understand the 'crisis'" (Ibid) and expose its true nature. Over thirty years on from *Policing The Crisis* the notion is still very much in vogue and while we are undoubtedly presented with innumerable intolerable situations within and outside of our research, the process of specifying the exact characteristics of these 'crises' remains notably absent in many cases. The idea for this conference took impetus from Hall et al's response to the neutralisation of the concept of crisis that is now arguably the defining feature of the dominant use of the term.

At present as academics we are seemingly surrounded by an even more heightened frenzy of labelling events and phenomena as 'crises'. Some of these undoubtedly necessitate the label but some arguably require a more substantive critical exposition of both the characteristics of these 'crises' and the role this definition in itself plays. If the concept of crisis infers not just a period of instability but a decisive stage and a potential turning point we must ask ourselves if this is truly what is implied in its contemporary usage. The juxtaposition of the concept of crisis with rupture and anxiety in the title of the conference was intended to foster the further development of a critical analysis of the concept of crisis as it is currently employed. In the first instance, the notion of rupture suggests a questioning of whether the term crisis implies a true breach of continuity and a break with the current order. In the current era do we speak of a sense of crisis as opening up the possibility of transformation in the multitude of situations in which it is deployed or do we instead use it merely to indicate a surmountable episode of difficulty in an otherwise smooth continuation of the status quo?

Furthermore, in suggesting a need to think in terms of the relationship between crisis and anxiety we intended to provoke a consideration of the effects of crisis situations. Our current era could arguably be defined as much by anxiety as crisis – here we are mindful of both recent European survey data (Glover, 2011) and local data of the use of antidepressants (Salford Star, 2011) – and from this premise we sought to highlight the importance of thinking about the interrelationship between these two issues. Moreover, the notion of anxiety as the potential dominant effect of crisis points toward the potential paralysis of those effected and raises

serious questions about the possibilities for responses to crisis events and phenomena. The idea that a crisis has the effect of paralysing the subject suggests a potential utility of such crises for those with an interest in maintaining the current order. In essence we sought to widen the discussion across the arts, media and social sciences about the conservative or transformative nature of those events and phenomena that are deemed to be defined by crises. Do the various 'crises' with which we concern ourselves today present the possibility of transformative outcomes? Do the strategies for crisis management with which many of us are in some way concerned suggest a break with the current order? Is there a potential for those situations with which we are concerned to be 'managed' in such a way that a repetition of the crisis can be averted?

It was in this context that the original conference set about its task and that this volume seeks to offer a collective intervention. By concerning ourselves with the plethora of contexts in which this concept is applied or inferred we can begin to consider the potential links between crises as well as the effects of designating events as such. The role of the academic is brought into question in relation to the process of designating or refuting the label of crisis (or at least the specific phenomena it is attached to). As a central critical tool we have the potential to sharpen our analyses through the reappropriation of the concept as well as rearticulating the exact character of a particular crisis. We must be aware that the naming of a crisis has the ability to define more precisely – outside of the dominant discourse – the true nature of the event and its causes.

The critical analysis of the process of defining a situation as a crisis may not be a conscious driving force between every paper here but by structuring an interdisciplinary conference around this theme we hoped to conduct something approaching a 'meta-analysis' that would enable us to begin to plot any links between these crises and their potential root cause(s). This volume is the result of that rather grand aim and we invite the reader to consider the common themes and points of convergence between the diverse contributions. We begin from numerous starting points concerned with different crises in a wide range of disciplines whose effects are felt at the local and global levels, some confined to the academic realm but others affecting people's everyday lives. Yet it is arguably within this interdisciplinary framework that an effective critical analysis of the concept of crisis as it is currently employed can be established.

From this perspective there is a need for a truly critical analysis of each specific crisis as well as a conscious project of 'joining the dots' in terms of the causes and the apparently necessary responses. This dual concern

with causes and 'solutions' is borne out of the numerous crisis management strategies that have been established in various contexts that have the potential to create more problems and even exacerbate the situation – here we can at least start with responses to the financial crisis, the so-called security crisis and the ecological crisis to name but three of the most pressing. With this in mind it is crucial that we try to make links between the wealth of seemingly inescapable crisis responses that we are told will improve the various situations. The similar pretence attached to these responses of them being 'the only available option' suggests a further need to plot the potential links between these strategies most pressingly to identify if a coherent politics of crisis management exists.

Starting at the financial 'crisis'

The primary incentive for the contemporary concern with 'crisis' is largely borne out of the ongoing financial crisis in the UK and beyond that continues to blight academia touching the subjects of our research in many cases and compromising the stability of the research and teaching in many of our institutions – to say nothing of the more direct and pressing effects on life outside the academy. But it is against the backdrop of this crisis that the academic concern with the very application of the concept is brought out most clearly to be in need of critical analysis. Indeed, an analysis of the processes of defining a crisis and subsequently responding to it is potentially of use for those of us concerned with crises ostensibly beyond this sphere. Crucially, the limited amount of truly critical work on this crisis so far points to its role as a cornerstone for many of the other crises that we concerned ourselves with in the conference and the present collection of papers. There is therefore a need to see how far this connection is identifiable.

The concepts of 'credit crunch' or 'financial crisis' offer us only so much in terms of our understandings of the events, their effects and the required solutions. That these concepts have been coined and employed by political and economic elites – those with a vested interest in the pre-crisis status quo – suggests that the concept is used here only to suggest a period of instability in the markets as opposed to a more substantive turning point in the economic and political order defined as it is by free-market capitalism. The inescapable effects of this current crisis correspond with the dominant discourse that suggests that we must do all that we can to save the current economic system as it underpins our whole way of life – in this sense not just in the affluent 'north' but throughout the global economy – but this dominant analysis is arguably employed to marginalise

any discussion around the necessity of the 'solutions'. This 'no alternative' approach to the response to this crisis – "save the banks at any cost" – is predicated by the mainstream analysis of its effects that refuses to admit that there is any alternative framework within which we can operate.

Marx understood the concept of crisis to have a dual purpose in reference to capitalism. He utilised the term in the ordinary way to refer to the crises of his time but he also used the term to suggest an inherent evolutionary disease within the capitalist system. As Schumpeter noted, Marx displayed "a tendency to link those recurrent crises with this unique crisis of the capitalist order….to even suggest that the former may in a sense be looked upon as previews of the ultimate breakdown" (1976[1943]: 41). The work of David Harvey and others in this context have made clear that we are not experiencing an isolated period of instability but moreover this is crisis is symptomatic of capitalism's 'normal' operation: 'financial crises serve to rationalise the irrationalities of capitalism – they lead to reconfigurations, new models of development, new spheres of investment and new forms of class power' (2010: 11). Yet within the displacement and transcendence of existing limits capital sows the seeds of future crises

Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) exposed the basic utility of the crisis situation in securing the hegemony of the global free-market. A crisis is in this sense is not an obstacle to be overcome but instead an opportunity to be exploited. The paralysis of disaster-shocked people and countries allows instead for the corporate reengineering of societies along neo-liberal lines to go largely unopposed. In exposing the historic development of 'disaster capitalism' Klein illustrated the opportunities afforded by the effects of crisis situations – regardless of the cause of such crises – that in turn allow for the fundamental features of the current order to be more deeply entrenched. Capitalism and the capitalist state are well practiced in preventing crisis situations from opening up a space for transformation. Instead crisis situations and their management are an intrinsic part of the current economic and political order and in turn provide a continual back drop to everyday life in the contemporary era.

If then we are able to reappropriate the concept in this context and emphasise that this is a crisis of capitalism understood in Marx's more malignant sense of crisis we can begin to offer a truly critical analysis of the responses to this situation and move toward an understanding of the root cause(s). We must be also remain aware that the responses have the ability in this sense to create further crises within and beyond the specific context that they emerge and as academics we can therefore begin to consider how these projects of crisis management potentially provide the

link between the seemingly disparate contexts in which we are engrossed. As a starting point for this we can begin to see now the pervasive effects of the 'management' of the financial crisis as we are plunged into a supposedly unavoidable age of austerity. Writing in the arts, media and social sciences set against the backdrop of seemingly eternal crisis 'opportunities' we must be mindful of what the notion of crisis has come to mean for those with a vested interest in the current status quo and how the ultimately conservative responses are presented to us as our only alternative. It has been noted that the responses to the financial crisis and the responses to 9/11 bore great similarity in the way in which George Bush "evoked the threat to the American way of life and the necessity of quick and decisive action to cope with the danger" (Zizek 2008). This seemingly ubiquitous framing of crisis management strategies – there is no alternative – should sound alarm bells for the critically engaged scholar. The closure of the very possibility of alternatives further suggests that the labelling of crises and their management has a decisive political function that requires further critical analysis.

The conference started from the idea that the process of taking ownership of the concept of crisis may be of utility to other contexts to allow for an effective critical analysis that refuses to be constrained in its ability to think of responses that allow for real transformation. With reference to the current economic crisis we need to acknowledge what the crisis is of and who it truly affects. As Obama desperately sought to find "whose ass to kick" in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (Gabbatt 2010), the academic analysis of crises must in a less rhetorical and more political sense ascertain the cause and effect and if needed reclaim the concept rearticulating the form it takes outside the dominant discourse before any truly transformative responses can be conceptualised. If, for example, we placed the emphasis on the fact that the so-called financial crisis was instead a *housing* crisis, clearly not for the speculators but for those millions of people who lost their homes, then we can shift the focus and point toward the true crisis situation. It is from this basic shift in emphasis that the cause and potentially transformative solutions can be uncovered; it is not to deny a crisis situation exists but to give it an appropriate name. The crisis in this case is not in doubt but a critical analysis must seek to identify its real affects, indeed we must demand a "return to the real" (Badiou 2008).

As we work in increasingly more specialised areas both by the nature of PhD research and due to the increasing fragmentation and specialisation of academic life (Lefebvre, 2000[1971]) there is potentially great utility in this approach to the study of crises. If, in the current context we are able to

think beyond the specific crisis and apply the concept of crisis in its true etymological sense as to imply 'a turning point in a disease' we can reclaim the concept to illustrate the need – if not the immediate possibility – of a break with the hegemonic order. This mode of thinking arguably needs to infect critical academic engagement with the plethora of crises we confront in the contemporary era.

Crisis in Politics and Society

As this volume originates from what was a truly interdisciplinary conference the book is structured for reasons of logical coherence into two sections. The first section considers the notion of crises in political and social phenomena and the papers deal with a range of issues including: crises in the urban environment and the political function of attributing the idea of crisis to space and place; crises in national identity; the affinity between cultural and political crisis in a particular historical moment; and the idea of capitalism as crisis.

We begin this collection with a paper from Sabine Horlitz, re-examining the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex (St. Louis, Missouri) in 1972. The image associated with that blast quickly took on the attributes of a media event, being co-opted into discourses of 'defensible space', the 'death' of modernism, and the 'urban crisis'. Delving into this latter dimension of the instrumentalisation of Pruitt-Igoe's demise, Horlitz questions whose interests this story of apparent public-housing failure actually serves. Challenging the myths that surround the complex, Horlitz depicts an active community involved in the city-wide rent strikes of 1969, exposes the *realpolitik* of urban governance that led to economisation in the design and implementation of the supposedly utopian (even socialist) enterprise, and explores the ambiguous route that led to the project's final destruction. Ultimately, Horlitz argues that the construction of Pruitt-Igoe's failure has to be seen as part of a process of manufacturing consent and mobilising conservative forces against urban policies dominated by Keynesian redistributionism, a discourse that was mobilised repeatedly by both Nixon and Reagan, and which depends on a misrecognition of public housing as a gift of 'the benevolent state'.

Lawrence Cassidy continues in the same vein, exploring potential strategies of engaging those displaced by the official response to perceived urban crises in Salford (Greater Manchester) through the use of 'material remnants'. Cassidy begins by exploring the historical context of the city of Engels and the English (and Irish) working classes. He argues that the

historical social segregation that characterised the Victorian period has its echoes in more recent rounds of slum clearance, as well as the 'creative demolition' of contemporary 'regeneration policies'. While for Cassidy, as for Holtiz's, the idea of crisis becomes the justification for various forms of (non-)interventionism by capital and the capitalist state, he is also interested in understanding how the rupture of demolition and dislocation can be both explored and perhaps mitigated through processes of social networking, regrouping and cultural empowerment. Drawing his inspiration from the analogous case of urban clearance and segregation embodied by Cape Town's District Six, cleared under the Group Areas Act of the early Apartheid period and a critical engagement with other contemporary spaces of remembrance, Cassidy explores the use of family photographs, installations, maps, street signs and oral histories as ways of catalysing memory and commemorating communities lost under the slum clearances of the 1960s and 70s. The paper concludes by returning to the question of the contemporary manifestations of urban 'restructuring' and drawing out the continuities that mark a century or more of urban change.

Stephen Crofts' paper is also concerned with the idea of identities in crisis, teasing out the implications of globalisation on the social in terms of a crisis of nationalisms. Considering the cases of Australia, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom and the USA, Crofts (drawing on the analyses of Manuel Castells) traces the evolution of the state from 'container' to 'node', the withdrawal of the state from the realm of economic policy, the loss of bargaining power by labour and the interminable widening of inequalities. In such a context, social fragmentation arises from the discrepancies between logic of global flows and those of everyday community. Amidst such anxiety there is recourse by the state to a regressive 'cultural nationalism', expressed through spectacular public pageants and national branding. Crofts argues that these tendencies mesh with protectionist sentiments that are the corollary to a 'politics of fear', itself a paranoid reaction to the enfeebling of the state under the period of neoliberalism.

Knut Langewand takes the politics of uncertainty in a very different direction, exploring narratives of crisis and metaphors of sickness in Weimar Germany. Exploring the etymology of the term, Langewand focuses in on the attribute of crisis as a 'moment of decision' or, in the Greek and Latin traditions, the 'decisive phase' in the course of an illness. He then notes the deployment of the term, along with that of sickness, being applied to society and the state following the surrender of Germany in the First World War; for the first time, the language of degeneration, previously used only to stigmatise 'others', became a catch-all for the

social malaise Germany found herself in during the 1920s and early 30s. Langewand further explores these themes through three examples from different spheres of Weimar culture. The first relates to the 'body of the people' being weakened through the moral contamination of modernity and the big city, of individualism and of rationalism. The second depicts the 'crisis letters' of a Weimar psychologist who attempted an explicit connection of the psychic and the political. While finally, Langewand interrogates the incapacitation of the last man to hold the office of chancellor prior to the ascent of the Nazi party through tooth ache and rhetorically questions whether the sicknesses of the republic infected its highest representatives.

The final paper in this first section looks inward to the source of the contemporary crises. Christian Garland seeks to consider the possibility of understanding the economic crisis not as a malfunction or break in the economic order but as an indication that capitalism itself is a crisis for humanity. In this sense Garland seeks to consider the possible responses to this in terms of the function class struggle plays in the attempted negation of the crisis ridden conditions within which the working class finds itself in the capitalist system. In line with the idea of a reinterpretation and potential reappropriation of the notion of crisis, Garland seeks to illustrate how in resisting the crisis of capitalism the resistance becomes a crisis *for* capitalism. Crisis becomes a response, an attempt to negate that that continuously negates us, and the notion of being in the world but against it is a central theme of Garland's paper. In this frame Garland considers how through this reappropriation of the concept of crisis the relationship to rupture and anxiety can be changed, with those who seek to resist refusing to be pacified by anxiety and seeking to challenge and indeed break with the status quo. In essence Garland seeks to consider the possibilities for resistance to the capitalist order and how this may come through, and indeed require, a reconsideration of the concept of crisis and the potential it holds for both conservative and revolutionary forces.

Crisis in the Arts, media and humanities

The notion of crisis as manifest in the arts and humanities, and more recently in the media, has existed in one way or another for some time. An early indication of this is to be found in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (written in 1867-9). As Storey points out, "it becomes clear when reading through Arnold's work that the term 'anarchy' operates in part as a synonym for popular culture" (2006:14), and that one of the functions of culture is to bring the principle of authority to the working class to

counteract this threat (Storey, 2006:15). The idea of cultural crisis and decline continued in the twentieth century with the Leavisites, who, even in 1930, recognized that "[i]t is a commonplace today that culture is at a crisis" (Leavis 1998 [1930]: 14), and predicted that "[t]he revolution against taste, once begun, will land us into irreparable chaos" (Q. D. Leavis 1978: 190). The advent of postmodernism has perhaps changed our perception of cultural crisis, the distinction between 'high' and 'low' (or 'mass') culture having become less meaningful. So, it comes as no surprise that more contemporary debates about identity crisis, crisis in visual arts institutions and representation, and crisis in the cultural industries and educational institutions are at the core of the following chapters, in which the authors draw upon postmodernist as well as poststructuralist theory.

Mattia Marino discusses the crisis of collective identity and cultural memory, in a global-local context. Globalization and the availability of different textual forms have contributed to causing postmodern Europeans to re-evaluate and reconstruct their identity, which is bound up with the concept of hybridity – not just in an ethnic sense but also in terms of gender, age, health, sexuality, and class. Cultural memory can also be renegotiated, and to illustrate these issues and concerns Marino compares two novels, a film and a music video, which have in common crises of female identity and cultural memory that defines one's identity against the oppositional Other.

The next two chapters concern visual art and its relationship to institutions and contemporary life. Vlad Morariu writes about the symbolic struggle of artists against authoritarian art institutions, which take on the canonizing role of deciding which artists and works to display and, crucially, which to refuse. These institutions also use 'disciplining technologies' to conduct a type of ideological control and surveillance of their audiences. These two factors have led to a crisis of art institutions, from which institutional critique by artists has emerged, and Morariu considers (from a French poststructuralist perspective) an example of such critique by performance artist Andrea Fraser. This case illustrates the possibility of embracing crisis in a micropolitics of desire. Marcelo Mari's chapter concerns the crisis of representation in visual art, such as the Immobile Art of Edgar Franco, in which a working mobile phone is placed in an obviously locked display case. In discussing art and our relationship with information technology Mari covers a lot of ground, including the invasion of privacy and the body, the anxiety caused by the availability of technology, and a warning against technological determinism: "We must be aware that science is an instrument and depends on how and by whom

it is used." The chapter deals with the crucial question of the relationship between embodiment and authority.

The theme of technology is continued by Tom Sykes (who is also cautious about technological determinism), whose subject is the crisis the cultural industries are currently facing due to digital media and the ways in which cultural texts can so easily be copied and disseminated over the internet. The case study here is the recording industry, which was probably not anxious *enough* about the significance of file sharing technology, realizing too late that it was entering a crisis. Sykes discusses the reaction of the major record labels to this crisis, and their desperate attempts to regain control over the distribution of recorded music, while not forgetting the artists, who may ultimately benefit from the rupturing of the old business model brought about by this particular crisis. A theme that runs through all the chapters in this section seems to be the ambivalent relationship of the individual to contemporary society, whether in terms of identity, institutions, privacy in the age of information technology, or intellectual property. Rather than simply causing (or being symptoms of) crises, perhaps this is (in the industrialized world) just part of the human condition.

The sense of institutional practices being in crisis is further developed by Hamish Gillies in the very different context of English language teaching in the Japanese educational system. Adopting a complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) perspective, Gillies is keen to emphasise that as social systems are both complex and dynamic, so they are always already on the verge of crisis (or in the terminology of CDST, 'phase change'). Elaborating on the specifies of English language delivery in Japan, Gillies draws attention to the high and increasing levels of apathy towards the subject evidenced by Japanese school children since the middle of the twentieth century. Sketching the key facets of a CDST approach, the author discusses the framing of language delivery through reference to attractor states, self-organisation, co-adaptation and control parameters. By drawing on data from an ongoing empirical research project, Gillies constructs a typology of language learners and hypothesises the processes by which differing types become motivated or demotivated.

The final chapter in the collection by Chiara Certomà considers environmental politics through a semiotic approach to the political and scientific debates on environmental challenges. The crisis of theoretical representations of the environment is discussed alongside the crisis of representing environmentalist concerns in the political arena. Political and scientific conceptions of the environment are exposed as grounded in language and metaphors, rather than neccessarily relying on any objective

facts. This chapter serves to illustrate the links between the two sections of the book by considering the ways in which the representation of a particluar crisis can have a pivotal effect on the political strategies available in response. Representation, and in this case the discursive construction, of a crisis is shown to have major implications for the ability to (re)imagine the politics of crisis managament. We return thus to our starting point in which we are compelled to reconsider the notion of crisis in a given context, how it has been employed and how through the dominant framing truly transformative responses are potentially denied.

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PART I:

POLITICS AND SOCIETY

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A BLAST: THE 1970S URBAN CRISIS AND THE DEMOLITION OF THE PRUITT-IGOE PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX

SABINE HORLITZ

In 1972, several of the thirty-three buildings that made up the Pruitt-Igoe high-rise public housing project in St. Louis, Missouri, USA were dynamited. Planned for low-income families and built in one of the poorest, largely African-American neighborhoods of the city, the complex had been praised as a model of visionary architecture and urban planning when it was opened in 1954. Less than 20 years later, however, it became demonized as a place of vandalism and crime, and demolition came to be depicted as the only possible solution. The Pruitt-Igoe blast rapidly attracted widespread attention[1] and was immediately referred to as both the result and expression of an architectural as well as a social disaster, whereby the former was often held responsible for the latter. The media as well as professional and scholarly publications identified it with "the death of the city of the future", "the housing failure of the century", or, with all due modesty, as "graphic evidence of the inability of modern architecture to save the world". Pruitt-Igoe was labeled a "monster", a "ghost town" or "dumping ground", a "planned slum" where one can "observe the evils brought forth by the do-gooder mentality" or a "crime-infested jungle" that "had to be abandoned" – virulent judgments that were directed as much at modernist design as at government-led urban planning (von Eckardt, 1972; Architectural Forum, 1972; Kamin, 1984; The Washington Post, 1971 as well as LIFE Magazine, 1972; Zoeckler, 1974; Architecture Plus, 1973; Richardson, 1974; Peirce, 1980).

Fig. 1-1 Demolition of Pruitt-Igoe March 16th 1972 [Source: Wikimedia Commons]

Since then, the image of this high-rise housing structure collapsing in a cloud of dust has been reproduced extensively. Detached from both time and space, and from its initial context, it became an all-purpose symbol of the failure not only of modern architecture, but also of public housing and welfare policies in general. Paying particular attention to the context of the instrumentalization of Pruitt-Igoe's demolition in the debates around the 1970s urban crisis and respective restructuring of urban policies will be the main topic of this article. Before I come to this however, I would first like to give a short summary of Pruitt-Igoe's interpretation in the architectural discourse – the field in which it is today most well known. Within the realm of architecture and planning, in *Defensible Space* (1972), Oscar Newman was the first to draw on the case of Pruitt-Igoe to demonstrate the relationship between architecture, crime and decay. Although his study was made before the Pruitt-Igoe blast, the latter featured on the book's cover, heightening its profile and urgency. Though often accused of being oversimplified and deterministic, Newman's catchy equation that sets public housing crime in relation to the height of its buildings, arguing that the higher the buildings, the higher the crime rate

(ibid. p.28) proved to have an extraordinary influence on future planning paradigms, not only in the US.[2] It was, however, the architectural historian Charles Jencks (1977) who, in his professedly polemical book *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* greatly popularized Pruitt-Igoe or rather, the image of its demolition, by pinpointing the moment of the buildings' blast as that of the death of modern architecture and the beginning of postmodernism – an interpretation that legions of advocates of postmodernism would come to adopt. Among the best-known are Rowe and Koetter, who referred in *Collage City* (1978) to the alleged failure of Pruitt-Igoe as a starting point for the redefinition of architectural and planning paradigms and Tom Wolfe, for whom it was a perfect foil to his polemics against modernity in *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981).

In her insightful essay "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth" (1991), Katharine Bristol analyzes the "logic" underlying postmodernists' explanations of why Pruitt-Igoe failed. Her main point is that to hold design alone responsible for its failure – which is the core of what she calls the Pruitt-Igoe myth – diverts attention from the multiple social, economic, institutional and structural causes of public housing problems. Postmodernism, she concludes, thereby simply further legitimizes the architectural profession by implying that deeply embedded social problems are caused by architectural design and can thus be solved in turn by it alone. Contrary to its claim of fundamentally challenging modernism, the architectural postmodern movement hence in essence follows and even reinforces the principal modernist assertion, namely its belief in the power of design to effect social change.

Another 20 years later – when architectural postmodernism has lost all semblance of social critique and turned into either just another consumerist thread or (in its historicist strand) into an invocation of a pre-modern authoritarian cultural order – I would like to shift attention back to the other strand of Pruitt-Igoe's instrumentalization: the way the project has been used in political debates pertaining both to the urban crisis of its day and to the role of government intervention. Pruitt-Igoe has often been cited in this regard as clear evidence of the fundamental failure of federally funded public housing and welfare policies in general – and hence also to underline the necessity of government withdrawal from these areas that, according to the new doctrine, would function all the better if left to the free play of market forces. In this context, politicians, bureaucrats, and their scientific aides alluded to Pruitt-Igoe in order to legitimize cutbacks in public housing programs and promote the benefits of private development and home ownership. They thus propelled forward a shift in urban policy that paralleled ultimately national and even global political-

economic developments, namely the end of the Fordist-Keynesian welfare state and the emergence of a new "flexible regime of accumulation" – to use David Harvey's term (1987) – now more widely referred to as neoliberalism.

I would therefore suggest a shift in focus, from the demystification of Pruitt-Igoe to the question of whose interests these very particular discourses of failure actually serve. It is no accident that the dominant narrative highlights Pruitt-Igoe as an outright if not even a model failure and precludes any socio-historic factors that might cast a shadow on this unambiguous claim. It fails to mention, for instance, its tenants' participation in the St. Louis city-wide public housing rent strike of 1969, the first such strike in the US and one that ultimately changed federal legislation; nor do we hear about the various attempts to remodel the project, undertaken by major architectural firms such as SOM as well as by local grassroots organizations – events that do indeed render Pruitt-Igoe's history more ambivalent and conflictual and would, if fully acknowledged, make it impossible to see Pruitt-Igoe as an outright failure. The frequent references to the blast as evidence of public housing's or the welfare state's failure thus cannot be seen only as a somewhat superficial illustration of a political point, but should be regarded rather, as an ideological tool to reframe the discourse on the 1970s urban crisis, whereby the crisis was naturalized and the regulatory measures – namely urban restructuring and ultimately, the political shift towards neoliberalism – were presented not as the outcome of political decisions but of "objective" necessity.

First, I will briefly survey how Pruitt-Igoe was a paradigmatic case of the different phases of that which, from the 1950s to the 1970s, was regarded as the primary urban problems; second, I will analyze how Pruitt-Igoe, and especially its demolition, served to discursively reframe the notion of the urban crisis, and thereby expound on the discrepancies between actual conflicts and struggles over Pruitt-Igoe's future and the dominant narration of its failure; and, finally, I will show how the dominant discourse has been and continues to be used not only to legitimize physical, fiscal and institutional urban restructuring but also helped to disguise its class-based nature.

Shifting Notions of Urban Problems

From the 1950s through the 1970s in the USA, one can identify three major shifts in the dominant understanding of urban problems – regarding their causes, major themes and appropriate cures, as well as the role of

governmental action therein – which, especially in the run-up to Pruitt-Igoe's demise, coincided with the restructuring of global capitalism. In Pruitt-Igoe, all of these stages became paradigmatically materialized: in the project's built form and territorial arrangement, in the numerous governmental programs that were implemented there, in the tenants' collective actions and, not least, in the project's ultimate fate. It would, however, be a mistake to regard Pruitt-Igoe merely as a local case or as the passive vessel of greater social forces. From the very beginning it embodied, reflected and influenced all levels of public policy. Pruitt-Igoe must therefore be regarded rather as part of a dynamic, relational configuration of what geographers refer to as the "politics of scale", in which "transformations in the pattern of power relations invariably result in shifts in scale relationships, often involving powerful actors, agents, and interests 'jumping scale', in order to acquire a tactical or strategic advantage" (Peck, 2002, p.337).

Public housing leads the way

During the post-war years planning experts and politicians alike tended to see urban problems as physical in nature – or, at the least, concurred with the prevailing notion of modern planning, i.e. that the alteration and modernization of the urban landscape was their appropriate cure. The negative impact of (heavily subsidized) suburbanization, the so-called "white flight", confronted inner-city districts with a shrinking tax base and the fear of further urban economic decline. Under these conditions, the 1949 Housing Act, the goal of which was to provide "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family" (Meehan, 1975, p.15), was perceived with ambivalence from the outset. It subordinated the production of low-income housing to the processes of urban upgrading through urban renewal and slum clearance. To achieve the latter, inner-city slum areas were acquired with public funds, their built structures torn down and the land earmarked either for commercial use or the construction of middle-class housing and put on the market at subsidized prices whilst the first, large-scale public housing projects such as Pruitt-Igoe were produced to compensate those displaced by slum clearance. Underlying these processes was an institutional arrangement that would later heavily influence Pruitt-Igoe's fate: the federal government, represented as of 1965 by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), backed the bonds issued to fund the construction of public housing projects; in return the local Housing Authorities were