

PROBLÉMATIQUE

Journal of Political Studies / Revue D'Études Politiques

Volume #12, 2009

“Our Present Conjuncture”

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A Special Thank You to:

The Graduate Program in
Political Science, York University

Introduction:

Our Present Conjuncture

It would perhaps be fitting to spend a moment reflecting on the title of this, the first print publication of *Problématique* in nearly two years. What does it mean to reflect on ‘our conjuncture’ *now*?

Speaking in the early 1990’s, shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jacques Derrida addressed the problematic of ‘juncture’ *vis-à-vis* Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In Act I scene V, Derrida reminds us, Hamlet speaks the famous lines: ‘The time is out of joint: oh cursed spight/ that I was ever borne to set it right’.¹ This ‘out of joint-ness’ of time seems particularly relevant to the thematic of this issue: ‘Our Present Conjuncture’. ‘Juncture’ can be both place and a point in the time of events. Thus, the ‘out of joint-ness’ speaks both to the locality of York University, coming out of a year marked by a long and bitter labour dispute, and to a moment in history which is witness to a prolonged economic crisis, crucial shifts in, and destabilizations of, neoliberal power and ideology, and turning points in social struggles to

¹ William Shakespeare, cited in Jacques Derrida, ‘Injunctions of Marx,’ in *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

uphold and extend human freedom. These contemporary problematics are taken up in various ways by the authors presented in this issue.

And yet there is a great optimism here in these pages. While at first glance it may seem that our present is one of *disjuncture*, we have chosen, rather, to speak to the ‘out of joint-ness’ of our present, as a moment of *conjuncture*: a word which evokes a sense of connectedness, of joining together, of new beginnings and new directions. The members of the editorial collective feel, and we hope that you will agree, that all of the pieces here presented, speak in some way to this notion of conjoining, of finding and creating new directions.

The ‘out of joint-ness’ of time is also a good place to begin a brief reflection of the production of this issue. In the fall of 2008 an initial call for papers for issue # 12 was sent out. Shortly thereafter the members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) 3903 went on strike. Upon return, a second call for papers was issued. The content of the present issue reflects the diversity of responses we received to both calls, as well as the challenges associated with producing a single issue from two separate calls – which is to say, a moment of conjuncture, from what seemed to present itself as one of profound disjuncture. The resulting issue is a mix of academic analysis and argumentation, memory narrative and, fittingly, a splash of theatre.

John Saunders kicks off the issue with an essay entitled ‘Of Strikes, Subways and the Big Box University: Reconsidering the Spatial Fixations of Infrastructure’. This short, provocative piece connects the strike at York to broader features of our political and economic moment of deindustrialization and economic crisis. Saunders reflects on the ’08/09 strike at York in light of a nearly simultaneous labour dispute at Progressive Moulded Products in Vaughan. Saunders reads these two moments together to show how ‘beneath the rhetoric of change and crisis – that new skills and new ways of thinking and working are required to survive the downturn and to prosper in the future – lie other connections’ (6). Indeed, as Saunders convincingly asserts, transformations in the area surrounding York University, an area which he refers to as the ‘in-between city’ and which includes parts of both Toronto and Vaughn municipalities, can be understood as strategies that attempt to ‘fix’ capital during times of crisis. Such transformations include ‘plans to establish York University as part of a new urban center...and as a means of managing urban growth through economic

development.’ As such, ‘the strike at York University can be understood as not just a sector based response to neo-liberal restructuring of post-secondary education, but also as a potential threat to the economic and regional stability currently proposed by municipal, regional, provincial and federal governments’ (6).

In another timely intervention, ‘The End of Transformation? Culture as the Final Fictitious Commodity’ by Timothy Macneill rereads Polanyi’s seminal 1944 text *The Great Transformation* as an optic through which to view contemporary shifts associated with the commodification of culture. As the fourth ‘fictitious commodity’ – after land, labor and money – culture, for Macneill, represents a final frontier for the liberal project of constructing an entirely self regulating market. The overcoming of this final barrier to the complete ‘disembedding’ of the economy from society, while ‘virtually impossible’ in practice would therefore complete a process – a transformation – begun in the 18th century. Through this optic, Macneill suggests that the commodification of culture through attempts at its universal regulation, notably by instruments such as the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) is the 21st century manifestation – with all the attendant dangers – of the logic that produced and sustained the Gold Standard. ‘If there is a core claim in Polanyi’s argument’ concludes Macneill, ‘it is that rigid institutions that are conceived from fundamentalist claims to universality are unworkable when applied to a context of the pluralistic and shifting realities of human social creativity’ (36). The article culminates in a poignant call to imagine ways to fight for, and protect, human freedom and creativity as freedoms ‘to communicatively act in ways that create shifting, unbounded and ephemeral cultural forms’ (37).

Simon Granovsky-Larsen also reflects on the possibility that our present conjuncture is a kind of ‘end’ – and hence also a beginning – in ‘Upsetting Neoliberalism: The End of an Era in Latin America.’ This thought-provoking piece contests the understanding that ‘the primary concern of neoliberal policies or their advocates’ are the Washington Consensus pillars of privatization, liberalization and deregulation (42-3). Rather, Granovsky-Larsen argues, ‘neoliberalism is largely an ideological doctrine that has been selectively applied in order to achieve goals that are flexible to immediate conditions but always composed with class interests in mind’ (43). Indeed, for Granovsky-Larsen the ‘goal of

restoring income and class position' of the wealthiest strata of capitalist in the United States in the post-1970 era is central to the neoliberal policy program (45). He argues, contra a certain 'giddy brand of anti-imperialism', (46 fn. 3) that 'the collapse of neoliberalism would only mean a change within capitalism; it would mean that the accumulation of wealth is conducted according to new lines of ideological and political justification and that resources are distributed among society in new ways' (46). The paper thus moves ultimately towards a discussion of contemporary Bolivia as a case of what Granovsky-Larsen refers to as 'post-neoliberalism in action'. Challenging the view that the Morales administration is merely reformist, Granovsky-Larsen argues that 'in their lament for a familiar revolutionary agenda...critics of the MAS [Movement Towards Socialism] fail to take note of the programs which not only move the country on a clear path away from neoliberalism but which incorporate explicitly anti-capitalist economic organization into national planning' (55-6).

Prepared by Andrew Hryhorowych, Kevin McCain and Aaron Papehausen of the Graduate Program in Philosophy, 'Actually, You're Out of Order!' is a humorous dramatization of the dynamics of CUPE 3903 General Membership Meetings during the 08/09 strike at York. Performed on the Glendon picket lines during the December week of action, this skit offers up a delightful lineup of familiar characters. Whistle; Gate; Pylon; Fire Barrel and others debate an agenda whilst recalling bygone days of meetings where there were cookies...

Finally, Victoria Kramkowski ('A Gift') and Jesse Ovadia ('A Day at the Table') each provide us with personal narratives of strike experiences. From the picket lines to the bargaining table respectively, these pieces invite further reflection on the ways in which the strike at York – as a specific moment of 'Our Present Conjuncture' – is connected to broader phenomena such as the casualization of labour, and a resurgence of student and worker militancies.

We hope you find our selections, and the resultant juxtapositions, both provocative and challenging.

Sincerely,

The *Problématique* Editorial Collective