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# The 2007-09 financial crisis: narrating and politicising a calamity

Noel Castree

*University of Wollongong*, [ncastree@uow.edu.au](mailto:ncastree@uow.edu.au)

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# The 2007-09 financial crisis: narrating and politicising a calamity

## **Abstract**

The events triggered by defaults on 'sub-prime' mortgages have been widely described as constituting a 'crisis'. But a crisis of what exactly? Several different explanations of the 20 month drama that unfolded from summer 2007 have been proposed by a wide range of commentators. These include journalists, academics, politicians, business-people, pundits and public administrators, among others. This essay parses this superfluity of crisis talk into five principal accounts. It focuses on the Anglo-American scene. The interpretations presented range from the simplistic and populist to the complex and specialised. They are compared and contrasted, and in each case their diverse normative implications are sketched. As a Marxist, I argue that the fifth interpretation - which speaks to macro-economic imbalances and asymmetries of class power - is the most compelling. But I also argue that each of the other interpretations can be narrated and politicised in such a way as to advance Left arguments for far-reaching socio-economic reform. Yet, this fact notwithstanding, the Left - by which I mean those positioned left of both New Labour and the Democrats - has so far failed to use the recent crisis to its political advantage. This, I suggest, is a sign of its long-standing marginality in Britain and the US - a marginality so entrenched that even an acute economic crisis has been unable to alter it. This crisis thus reveals a seeming paradox: the continued strength of neoliberal capitalism despite itself.

## **Keywords**

09, 2007, financial, calamity, crisis, narrating, politicising

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# The 2007-09 financial crisis: narrating and politicising a calamity

Noel Castree, School of Environment & Development, Manchester University, M13 9PL [noel.castree@man.ac.uk](mailto:noel.castree@man.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** The events triggered by defaults on ‘sub-prime’ mortgages have been widely described as constituting a ‘crisis’. But a crisis of *what* exactly? Several different explanations of the 20 month drama that unfolded from summer 2007 have been proposed by a wide range of commentators. These include journalists, academics, politicians, business-people, pundits and public administrators, among others. This essay parses this superfluity of crisis talk into five principal accounts. It focuses on the Anglo-American scene. The interpretations presented range from the simplistic and populist to the complex and specialised. They are compared and contrasted, and in each case their diverse normative implications are sketched. As a Marxist, I argue that the fifth interpretation – which speaks to macro-economic imbalances and asymmetries of class power – is the most compelling. But I also argue that each of the other interpretations can be narrated and politicised in such a way as to advance Left arguments for far-reaching socio-economic reform. Yet, this fact notwithstanding, the Left – by which I mean those positioned left of both New Labour and the Democrats – has so far failed to use the recent crisis to its political advantage. This, I suggest, is a sign of its long-standing marginality in Britain and the US – a marginality so entrenched that even an acute economic crisis has been unable to alter it. This crisis thus reveals a seeming paradox: the continued strength of neoliberal capitalism despite itself.

**Key words:** finance capital; crisis; banking; economic discourse; regulation; uneven geographical development

## Introduction

By spring 2008, the political economic turmoil unleashed by defaults on ‘sub-prime’ loans in the US was being widely described as a ‘crisis’. Metaphors like ‘financial firestorm’, ‘credit tsunami’ and ‘economic meltdown’ became commonplace in media, political and business circles. Their use was in no way hyperbolic: the sudden and unexpected collapse of Lehman Brothers in the autumn only served to confirm their appropriateness. Comparisons were being made to the Wall Street Crash and the subsequent Great Depression of the 1930s. These comparisons have proven inaccurate, for the time being – though a synchronised global recession of geographically varied seriousness has now set-in.

How are the crisis and its aftermath to be explained, and what are the appropriate remedies? Commentators of all stripes have fallen over themselves

to answer this cardinal question. Newspaper editors, journalists, pundits, economists, politicians and many others besides have had their say in books, essays, broadcasts, blogs, conferences, workshops and editorials. There's been a superfluity of analysis. Who is one to believe? Most people know little about the machinations of investment bankers or ratings agencies, and they rely on various 'experts' and 'authorities' to instruct them in the economic fundamentals, such as the drivers of interest rate changes, stock market volatility and current account deficits. This epistemic dependence is not confined to the billions of people who live-out their lives on Main Street rather than Wall Street. Even professionals in the financial sector and wider business community look to others – usually members of their peer group – for answers. After all, most of them did not see the recent calamity coming (as if previous economic crises were somehow unrepeatabe precedents of interest only to historians). And while academics are trained and employed to understand complexity, only a minority of this sizeable community have the expertise to understand – in more than a superficial way – why the 2007-09 crisis occurred. We, too, are reliant on the wisdom of those with the credibility to persuade us that their version of events is true. The same might be said of most of the activists who have kept that loose international known as the 'anti-capitalist' (or anti-globalisation) movement alive since the late 90s.

Happy is the world in which alternative accounts of the recent crisis might receive equal exposure. They could then be compared and contrasted on their merits by those seeking enlightenment. Since value-free analysis is a myth, these merits would include open acknowledgement of the various values and goals written into the different diagnoses, prognoses and remedies suggested to us over the last two years or so. In the real world, however, the argumentative playfield is never even. Certain interpretations command widespread attention, while others remain marginal. Or, to phrase it somewhat differently, those

interpretations that command a hearing are, normatively speaking, framed in some ways but not others. It was ever thus.

These observations, it seems to me, provide a fitting context in which to make sense of the numerous attempts to explain the 2007-09 crisis, as well as their relative efficacy. In this essay I want to parse these attempts, and pick-out some of the major interpretations of cause, effect and cure. In each case I consider the diverse normative framings possible, and the audiences most likely to recognise these interpretations under one or other frame. I focus on the Anglo-American scene. This is not a traditional academic review piece. I do not confine my attention to analyses of the crisis authored by professional researchers, as if other interpretations somehow matter less in shaping collective understandings; and I do not pepper the essay with citations. Mine is a synopsis of a large and sprawling debate that has unfolded in a range of fora and arenas, from the popular to the esoteric. My interest is in how different interpretations of the recent crisis have (or have not) been mobilised, and to what effect. If the essay seems very didactic, this is intentional – I aim to clarify what at times has seemed like a babble of crisis talk.

As we will see, all the available interpretations of the recent crisis – from the most simplistic to the most complex – can in theory be used in the service of Left arguments against the current order. Put differently, the crisis can be narrated in such a way that both the person on the street and sections of the professional classes can be persuaded that a swerve to the Left is necessary and desirable. Yet in both Britain and the US, the Left – by which I mean those who regard both New Labour and the Democrats as insufficiently radical – have been unable to make the political weather (let alone alter the climate). A crisis, as Pierre Bourdieu once noted, breaks “the immediate fit between subjective structures and objective structures, [and so] destroys self-evidence practically” (1977: 168). Towards the end of the essay, I consider in brief why – *contra* Bourdieu’s synonymisation of crisis and opportunity – a gap between

potentiality and actuality has arisen. The Anglo-American Left must learn the lessons contained therein. Otherwise, it is likely to remain wholly marginal for another period of years.

### **Interpretation 1: ‘corrupt and greedy bankers are to blame’**

The speed with which spring 2007 defaults on ‘sub-prime’ American mortgages triggered a late year global ‘credit crunch’ left the heads of financiers, regulators and politicians spinning. For the average citizen it was even more bewildering, or simply bemusing. Talk of leveraged borrowing, derivatives and securitised loans made little sense to the person on the street – such as the thousands of Northern Rock account holders who, in September 2007, queued to remove their savings from what they thought was a dependable high street lender. But by the new year, those with little appetite for the intricacies of high finance were thrown a gift: something recognisable to blame. Jerome Kerviel, a junior futures trader with Société Générale, was arrested in January 2008 for (apparently) unauthorised dealing leading to losses of 4.9 billion Euro. But his malfeasance was as nothing compared with that of the new poster-boy for financial corruption. Bernard Madoff, a highly respected Wall Street investor, was sentenced to 150 years in prison for operating the largest Ponzi scheme in world history. His prosecutors claimed losses of \$65 billion on behalf of their now mostly bankrupt clients. Madoff is to the noughties what Nick Leeson was to the nineties and Michael Milken was to the eighties. (And let us not forget another now infamous American financier, Allen Stanford, who currently stands accused of defrauding myriad investors)

Unsurprisingly, the tabloid press and the other vox pop parts of the news media had a field-day with these cases. They served a pedagogic purpose that bookended 2008, after frenetic months when political economic leaders and the media had found it easier to describe unfolding events than explain them. Kerviel and Madoff’s corruption usefully personalised the causes of a crisis that most people simply did not understand. Little matter that both men’s

actions were largely irrelevant to the liquidity drought that had pitched the world's 'real economy' into recession by early 2009. But the search for villains did not begin-and-end with a few 'rogue traders'. Even the most demagogic elements of the news media could not pretend that this was the nub of the problem. Instead, the spotlight was shone on a broader set of actors and a rather different cause: namely, high financiers in general ('fat cats') and their collective greed in particular.

This story-line became a common-place of the low- and middle-brow news media throughout 2008 and 2009. For instance, Britain's most popular tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, repeatedly invoked the image of City bankers as pigs gorging themselves in troughs of money. The attribution of collective blame typically focussed on two things. First, it was suggested that pretty much the entire financial class was guilty of reckless self-aggrandizement. In Britain, the way Northern Rock's former chief executive Adam Applegarth was pilloried in the gutter press from late 2007 was emblematic of this. Once it became clear – by early 2008 – that virtually every high street and investment bank had engaged in high-risk lending practices, blaming a few individuals like Applegarth became rather pointless (even as it satisfied public bloodlust). The collective guilt thesis was dramatised in February 2008, when the leaders of HBOS and Royal Bank of Scotland were cross-examined by the Treasury Select Committee of the House of Commons. The four chief bankers under the spotlight all issued a public apology for the harm their lack of proper oversight had caused. In the US, the likes of Merrill's Stan O'Neal and Citigroup's Chuck Price either felt compelled to resign or were ousted. At the time of writing, Lloyd Blankfein, James Dimon, John Mack and Brian Moynihan publicly admitted their banks' strategic errors, under cross-examination by the Congressional Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission. This was, evidently, a problem caused not by a few reckless financiers but by almost all of those found in banking's upper echelons.

If such apologies served to locate blame at the level of chief executives and their boards, the notion that greed was a key driver was seemingly evidenced time and again through 2008 and the early part of 2009. This brings us to the second focus of the selfish bankers storyline: the huge severance packages given to the senior financiers who had led their companies – and the wider world economy – over the cliff. The sense of public outrage about this was intensified by the extraordinary fiscal and monetary measures that public authorities worldwide put in place to rescue the financial system: this meant, in effect, that tax-payers were richly rewarding already uber-wealthy executives for their catastrophic failures. In Britain, former RBS chief Fred Goodwin became a cause celebre, with his Edinburgh home requiring a police guard once details of his exorbitant pension payment were reported in the media. In the US, the newly installed President sensed the public mood when (in spring 2009) he strongly criticised those running insurer AIG for awarding lavish employee bonuses – this when the firm still required federal government funds to survive. These bonuses continue to be awarded by the big banks, most recently Barclays (at the time of writing). This led several journalists to coin a sardonic new acronym for 2009: BAB ('bonuses are back').

For all its popular appeal, it is not difficult to point out the analytical deficiencies of the 'corrupt and greedy bankers' narrative. While high finance's 'masters of the universe' must certainly take responsibility for their reckless actions, to abstract them as a group from the wider political economy serves to obscure a number of important factors (to be discussed later). 'Greed' is not much of an explanatory category either, implying as it does some transhistorical human impulse that threatens to manifest itself in the absence of proper checks. Even so, the idea that individual corruption and collective greed together explain the recent economic crisis is undeniably powerful. Its relative simplicity makes it easy for mass audiences to understand; its focus on individuals and their wider clique taps-in to a venerable public need to identify villains; and, at

the end of the day, the idea is easy for those promoting it to evidence. On top of this, it has widespread political appeal: it resonates with conservatives, liberals and social democrats alike. In Britain, for instance, New Labour has had cause to use it on occasion (no doubt to deflect attention from its own role in deregulating City finance from 1997 onwards), while the Conservatives have found it very helpful in attempts to win over potential voters in the run-up to a general election. Outside the political mainstream, Interpretation 1 can also prove strategically useful to radicals on both the Left and the Right. In normative terms, it licenses punitive action against bankers (of the sort meted out to Madoff) who must be ‘reigned in’ and ‘held to account’. That regulators and legislators have thus far done little to punish financial high-flyers only serves to further dismay large sections of the general public. At the time of writing (December 2009), critics are still pressing the Obama and Brown administrations to put Wall Street and City fat cats on a stringent diet overseen by more rigorous regulators. New Labour has thus far travelled further down this road – at least rhetorically – than has the White House. This said, Obama is presently making noises about imposing new taxes on US financiers.

### **Interpretation 2: ‘light touch’ regulation is to blame**

Soon after the ‘credit crunch’ set-in, many in the worlds of business, politics, academia and the serious news media began to talk about financial ‘regulation’ – the *lack* of it, to be precise – as the principal problem. Such talk sounds dry and overly technical to the average person. But it is meat-and-drink to that significant minority of people who play very close attention to how business practice is governed by public authorities. These people include economics correspondents who ply their trade outside the populist sections of the media; business professionals in the financial sector and beyond; elected and appointed public servants tasked with the job of oversight; and social scientists based in think tanks, foundations, economics departments and business schools. If publications like *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and *Business Week*

are anything to go by, 'regulatory failure' has become a favoured explanation among large sections of the world's political economic elite and the business commentariat. In simple terms, the argument is that too much commercial freedom was afforded to financiers large, medium and small. Former House speaker Newt Gingrich phrased it thus: the current crisis, he opined, "is a government problem, not a market problem" (cited in Freeland, 2009: 22). The liberal-left *Guardian* newspaper economics editor – no friend of Gingrich – agrees: "The reason for the crisis was not that the state was too active, but that it was too passive" (Elliott, 2009: 28).

This interpretation has considerable empirical warrant. The so-called 'high risk, high reward' approach to finance was indulged by regulators and law makers worldwide for over 20 years. Indeed, it was in one sense *created* by them – Clinton's repeal of the Depression-era Glass-Steagall Act in 1999 being a signal example. In the US and Britain, where global banking assumes huge national importance, the good times yielded colossal tax returns for central government, thousands of largely well-paid financial services jobs, and an associated 'wealth effect' as Wall Street and City employees spent their considerable earnings. But the price of success was a misplaced belief that the interests of finance capital were coincident with the public interest. Regulatory under-sight became normalised. Examples abound and have been easy for proponents of the 'under-regulation' interpretation to cite. For instance, in recent years law makers and regulators in the Anglo-American world have: removed the firewall separating high street and investment banks; allowed excessive leverage, with some banks having debt-to-equity ratios as high as 30:1; permitted the proliferation of complex financial instruments such as collateralised debt obligations and credit default swaps; sanctioned a reward structure in which finance professionals are richly remunerated for making continuous, short-term gain for their investors and shareholders; allowed 'too large to fail' banks to form through mergers and acquisitions; raised no

objections to financial institutions that seek – as a core business objective – returns on very high risk investments; not objected to hand-in-glove relationships between credit ratings agencies, companies insuring against non-performing investments and the international banks; and sanctioned the emergence of a so-called ‘shadow banking system’ in which ‘special investment vehicles’ operated with almost no public accountability.

In the detail, the charge-sheet is very long, but it reduces to two principal claims. First, that politicians and public administrators were far too trusting in finance capital’s powers of ‘self-regulation’, based on the so-called ‘efficient markets hypothesis’ (which says that financial markets produce sufficient information to continuously self-correct). The first chairman of Britain’s Financial Services Authority (FSA), Sir Howard Davies, summarised this faith in the invisible hand with striking candour. “The philosophy from when I set it up”, he admitted in 2008, “has been to say ‘Consenting adults in private? That’s their problem really’” (cited in Wade, 2008: 13). The second major charge is that gaps in regulatory oversight were allowed to develop. For instance, reflecting on the post-1997 division of labour between the Bank of England and the FSA, the Bank’s deputy governor Paul Tucker said that “we left an underlap between us” (cited in Moya, 2009: 23). He was referring to the Authority’s micro-regulatory focus on individual banks and the Bank’s macro-regulatory focus on keeping inflation low: this meant that neither organisation was tasked with monitoring or addressing a build-up of systemic risk across the banking sector as a whole. Of course, one could simply argue that regulatory *negligence* was the real cause – an example being Alan Greenspan’s decision to ignore credit- and asset-bubbles during his Fed tenure, as if they didn’t really matter.

As with Interpretation 1 of the recent crisis, the ‘light touch’ regulation narrative is polyvalent in the political sense. Those who signed-up to ‘self-regulating’ finance from the get-go have been able offer-up *mea culpas* in its

name, just as much as their critics have used it to say ‘We told you so’. The difference lies in their preferred solutions. Students of J.K. Galbraith, Keynes and the American economist Hyman Minsky – such as *The Guardian*’s Larry Elliott – have called for a ‘new financial architecture’ whose principles and institutions would protect the public interest against the private agendas of risk-taking banks. Even some of those directly responsible for regulatory failure were, in the dark days of late 2008, given to such talk (Gordon Brown being a prime example, and who has returned to the theme in the run-up to the general election). In addition, realists and pragmatists in the Marxian camp and on the socialist Left see the tactical sense in beefing-up financial regulation. Among the measures suggested have been a new Glass-Steagall Act, far tougher capital adequacy requirements and accounting standards, the outlawing of ‘off-balance-sheet’ banking, the de-universalisation of the short-term ‘shareholder value’ investment model, greater consumer protection from ‘predatory lending’, the break-up of overly large banks, and the creation of a ‘Tobin tax’ on certain cross-border financial transactions. There have been many other suggestions besides. In virtually every case, the policies would have to be implemented and enforced internationally. One of the remarkable oddities of recent history is that while finance capital has been borderless, its regulation has remained largely in the hands of national bodies like the US Securities and Exchange Commission.

These muscular proposals for change have so far fallen on deaf ears. As I noted above, the normative lessons of the ‘under-regulation’ narrative can easily be made consistent with the aspirations of those who do not want the visible hand of the state ‘interfering’ too much with finance capital’s operations. The new FSA banking code is a case in point. Issued in August 2009, it sets out eight principles that should govern the operation of City banks and sets new standards of information sharing and transparency. But it falls far short of the sort of meaty measures called for by proponents of a new financial architecture.

Journalist John Kampfner dismissed it as “a gentle entreaty to Britain’s financial services industry to behave better” (2009: 26). The reason, it has been widely suggested, is politicians’ fear of City and Wall Street jobs disappearing overseas to financial centres with less stringent regulatory requirements. This, presumably, drove Alistair Darling and Tim Geithner to face-down the call of premiers Sarkozy and Merkel to mandatorily control bankers’ bonuses at the September 2009 G20 meeting. Both men favour voluntary measures, even though Darling hardened his own rhetoric through the autumn and winter leading to the imposition of a one-off ‘windfall tax’ on City earnings. The policy debate that divides those otherwise persuaded by the ‘regulatory failure’ interpretation is thus focussed on the following technical question: how much financial regulation, of what sort, and at what geographical scale?

### **Interpretation 3: ‘casino finance’ is to blame**

Regulation requires two parties: regulators and the regulated. The third interpretation is really the flip-side of the second, and has been advanced by those who prefer, for whatever reason, to emphasise structural problems within the financial sector. This interpretation focuses on the ‘rational irrationality’ of banks and related private sector actors. The spotlight is here trained on how financial operators chose to exercise the freedom afforded to them by permissive regulators. Unlike the rather populist Interpretation 1, this one backgrounds greed and foregrounds a tragedy of the financial commons in which a frantic race for profit ultimately brought ruin to all. In October 2008 Congressional testimony, former Federal Reserve Bank chairman Alan Greenspan suggested these operators had ‘underpriced’ the systemic risk their own actions created – perhaps trying to deflect attention from his own lapses as Fed chairman during the Clinton era. Those less intimate with the world of high finance have preferred to use gambling analogies. For instance, the widely respected MP Vince Cable – Treasury spokesman for the British LibDem Party

– has frequently compared modern financiers to those who frequent casinos (echoing Susan Strange, author of the prescient *Casino capitalism* [1997]).

Once again, the evidence to support this interpretation of events is not hard to seek. Given a lax regulatory environment, it's no surprise that individual financial institutions entered into a competitive battle in which 'financial innovation' was seen as a key to success. The 'originate and distribute' approach to asset-backed securities is one of many cases in point. This approach became commonplace from the early 1990s, with City and Wall Street financiers in the vanguard. Traditional banks used to offer loans from depositors' savings, and received their returns direct from clients over a period of months or years. The post-traditional banks of the last 20 years preferred to repackage loans and divide them into tranches to be sold-on immediately to institutional investors, pension fund managers or other financial institutions. These tranches were hedged against defaults by taking out insurance, and their cost to investors varied depending on the levels of risk and reward involved. By distributing the risks of potentially non-performing loans far and wide, the originators of tranches enjoyed instant returns on their lending while minimising their own vulnerability to defaults. They also off-loaded debt, enabling them to lend more money and do more business in a seemingly virtuous spiral. The problem, however, is that they were emboldened to seek-out ever riskier lending opportunities – such as sub-prime mortgages – in the belief that any resulting problems would be diffused across the entire financial system. As it turned out, the problems *infected* the system rather than being – as per the expectation – absorbed by it.

The dysfunctionality of the originate and distribute practices pursued by banks is but one example of what, in retrospect, looks like a form of widespread madness within the financial sector. But to call it madness is too easy. According to the third interpretation of crisis, it's better seen as a case of collective irrationality wherein individual banks continued to push the envelope

so long as the profits came rolling in. In Robin Blackburn's words, "if [finance capital] is unaccountable and unregulated it becomes sovereign in the capital re-allocation process, and ... grab[s] the lion's share of the gains it makes possible, including anticipated gains before they have been realised" (2008: 84). An awful lot of brain power and ingenuity went into creating the family of complex financial products and practices whose names are now tainted ('over the counter trades', hedge funds etc.). And an awful lot of money was made, for financial institutions, their shareholders and their many clients. In a sense, the numerous innovations conjured-up by traders, dealers, brokers and all the rest 'worked'. And because they worked no one bank or bond insurer or ratings agency was prepared to call time on them, even though the party had to end sometime – just as the 'roaring 20s' came to an abrupt halt by that decade's end, presaging the grim and ultimately incendiary 1930s.

As with Interpretation 2, the precise normative and policy implications of Interpretation 3 are rather varied. It licenses more-or-less intrusive regulation by public authorities, but at a minimum suggests that certain financial products and practices are far too risky to continue unabated. As Adair Turner, head of the FSA, said in August this year (much to the City's consternation and perhaps betraying his frustration at the toothlessness of the new FSA Code he'd just signed off on): far too many financial services are 'socially useless'. As such, this interpretation resonates with those who favour rather mild or very strong reform alike. Chastened free marketers and those (Left or Right) in favour of less business-friendly regulation can relate to the casino finance narrative equally. The need for some form of 'macro-prudential regulation' of the banks has been their mantra. These banks, the argument goes, must be made more 'moral' and obliged to rediscover a sense of their proper role in sustaining both real economic activity and social stability. Like the 'light touch' regulation narrative, Interpretation 3 focuses squarely on the financial sector *per se* and its governance. This is a strength – after all, regulators and

financiers must take considerable responsibility for their reckless (in)actions. But it is also a weakness – at least from the perspective of the next interpretation. For it brackets-out a whole set of absolutely critical considerations, leading Jean Pisani-Ferry and Indhira Santos to opine that “... many analysts have failed to grasp fully the character of the [recent] crisis” (2009: 9).

#### **Interpretation 4: macro-economic imbalances are to blame**

The fourth interpretation of the recent crisis aims to set finance capital in a wider economic context. As such, it folds interpretations two and three together and shows them to be but elements of a much larger story. This interpretation has been voiced by a number of individuals within the worlds of business journalism, politics and financial regulation; and it has been articulated by a number of analysts located in think tanks and universities. It is a rather technical, big picture interpretation that most members of the general public are only dimly aware of. It speaks to grand questions of economic history and geography rather than questions of micro-finance, regulatory procedure or bankers' presumed motives. One of its more famous proponents summarises it well: “Today's credit crisis”, writes Martin Wolf in *Fixing global finance*, “is a symptom of an unbalanced world economy” (2008: 5).

This interpretation's starting point is the excess liquidity sloshing around the global economy this last twenty years or so. Without this liquidity, the financial sector would not have had the raw material needed to put its various complex instruments to work. From where did this liquidity originate? Two main sources: namely, the Middle East – reaping the continued rewards of oil exports – and several Far Eastern countries, whose growth has been based to a large extent on manufacturing exports. The latter include China, still the world's fastest growing economy, and Japan, still one of the world's largest economies even after its 'lost decade' triggered by a bursting property bubble 15 years ago. Why did countries in these two regions elect to run trade

surpluses? In the Middle East there was little choice: the benefits of controlling oil needed by the rest of the world guaranteed colossal revenue streams relative to levels of domestic investment and consumption. In the Far East, one must look to the economic crisis of 1997-8 and the earlier Japanese crisis. These persuaded policy makers of the need to save for a rainy day and, specifically, of the need to convert surpluses into the world's 'universal' (or 'reserve') currency, the US dollar. These measures would help stabilise the value of domestic money and insure against speculative attacks on home currencies. Though not badly affected by the 1997-8 meltdown, these lessons were learned by the Chinese too.

How was this achieved? To earn dollars several Far Eastern countries fixed the exchange rate of their domestic currencies to the dollar at a favourable level. This ensured that their exports to the US – still the world's largest economy, even in the current recession – remained affordable for American consumers. So too did their relatively cheap labour costs (Japan excepted), giving them a competitive advantage over many other overseas producers. The resulting dollar surpluses were either used to pay-off outstanding debts, hoarded, invested or lent to others. The most significant of these 'others' was the United States. After the dot.com bubble burst in the early noughties, direct foreign investment in the American economy became much less attractive. So East Asian countries (and some Middle Eastern ones) began to buy US Treasury bonds – traditionally, a reliable source of long-term income. This was (and remains) especially true of China. These bonds were issued readily by successive US administrations in need of liquidity to fund tax cuts and the high costs of government, including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because this liquidity originated overseas, it did not raise the costs of domestic borrowing (which would've occurred had the government sourced money from US savers). Interest rates thus remained low, enabling financial institutions within and connected to Wall Street to expand their deposits and loans greatly.

So it was that surpluses accumulated on one side of the world became transferred en masse to fund the US fiscal deficit, which led to cheap money for the domestic banks to spend. A good deal of this money went into US consumer borrowing and housing, so maintaining American demand for imports from Far and Middle Eastern countries.

This interpretation of the ‘deep causes’ of the recent crisis can be looked at from two angles. The ‘savings glut’ perspective blames those economies who accumulated large dollar surpluses. They are charged with obliging the US to be ‘consumer of the last resort’, a role it took-on to avoid global deflation. They should, the argument goes, have spent more and lent less. Successive chairmen of the Federal Reserve Bank have been notable authors of this perspective. The ‘money glut’ perspective looks at the coin from the other side. It points a finger at Washington DC. By running unprecedented trade deficits, the federal government is charged with living beyond its means. Maintaining the dollar’s strength against a number of currencies also made it more difficult for its export industries to earn overseas revenue, while benefiting dollar-rich Wall Street banks in their foreign ventures. In addition, the weak industrial policy of all White House administrations since Carter’s meant a lack of strategic investment in new industries located in the ‘real economy’. However, Wall Street is not let off the hook. Benefitting from the low interest rates set by Alan Greenspan, the financial sector could arguably have invested in new productive activities with high export potential. Instead, a consumer credit and housing bubble was produced – sub-prime mortgages being one part of this. In Britain, New Labour, the Bank of England and the City were responsible for similar policies being pursued. Indeed, the ‘money glut’ perspective is consistent with the idea of a ‘First World debt crisis’, centred on the Anglo-American zone and fuelled by Japan and numerous developing world lenders (see Sideri, 2009).

Clearly, the normative implications of Interpretation 4 are far-reaching and appeal to those given – by inclination or profession – to strategising about

geopolitics and geoeconomics. Critics of the US, but also many within the American establishment, have argued that it can no longer live beyond its means. It must rebalance its books, devalue its currency, invest more in value-creating business ventures, and even relinquish the right of 'seigniorage'. This is consistent with the 'money glut' perspective. On the other side, advocates of the 'savings glut' perspective argue that large trade surplus economies must (among other things) inflate their currencies, tolerate a dollar deflation, invest more at home, increase domestic wages and fund major public works in order to stimulate demand. What unites the two perspectives on Interpretation 4 is a recognition that global institutional reform is required that extends way beyond rethinking how finance per se is governed. Tinkering with the remit of the G20's newly minted Financial Stability Board (formerly the G7's Financial Stability Forum) or the EU's proposed Systemic Risk Board is thus not nearly enough. Nor will Gordon Brown's recent agitation for a global Tobin tax do the trick. A modern-day Bretton Woods regime has been called for – only this time, a 'global new deal' would not be organised around US hegemony, and global governance institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and a new World Financial Authority would reflect this change of circumstance. They would be democratic and pluralistic organisations dedicated to managing global affairs in the interests of numerous countries and power blocs.

Relative to all the previous interpretations of the recent financial crisis, the fourth adds a much-needed macro-economic, geopolitical and historical dimension. Its advocates consider it superior on these grounds, and there is copious evidence to support either the savings or money glut versions of the thesis. Economic nationalists can derive strategic lessons from this interpretation germane to their own country's future, while internationalists can argue for a managed transition away from US dominance. However, its complexity ensures that this interpretation lacks the popular resonance of Interpretation 1. It is an interpretation operative only among those versed in

the technicalities of global political economy – the sort of people who read *The Economist*, UNCTAD reports or academic journal essays about world affairs (like this one). This also applies to the fifth and final interpretation of the 2007-09 meltdown. The difference, as we will now see, is that it is strongly favoured by commentators on both the reformist and revolutionary wings of the Left. This is because it supplements Interpretation 4 with concepts and evidence that further radicalise its already considerable normative implications.

### **Interpretation 5: Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism is to blame**

The fifth take on the recent crisis has been put forward by several academics influenced by Marxism,<sup>1</sup> but also by some outside universities who criticise neoliberalism in the name of a more socially just model of capitalism – such as financial analyst Graham Turner, author of *The Credit Crunch* (2008). This interpretation has not been loudly voiced in business circles or mainstream politics, let alone the mass media. But one or two notables within the political economic establishment have been prepared to lend it credence – such as the distinguished British ex-civil servant Sir Tim Lankester (2009).

The key to this interpretation is the 1970s, which is the last time the Western economies experienced a coordinated recession akin to today's. Forty years ago, the post-war Keynesian compact began to crumble. The leading capitalist economies experienced varying degrees of stagflation: weak economic growth accompanied by rising prices. The crisis proved an opportunity for 'neoliberal' thinking to enter the fray, notably in the US and UK from 1979 onwards. In the name of personal and corporate 'freedom', the neoliberal programme emphasised the need to remove 'barriers' to free trade. It replaced the Keynesian focus on demand management with a concern to keep inflation

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<sup>1</sup>I'm thinking, for example, of Bellamy Foster and Magdoff's (2009) *The great financial crisis* and Richard Wolff's (2009) *Capitalism hits the fan: The global economic meltdown and what to do about it*. There is also Neil Smith's classically Marxist interpretation of the switch of capital into 'unproductive' finance, advanced in the pages of this journal (Smith, 2008). Kevin Cox has also advanced related arguments in this journal, detailing the changing geography of investment and profitability as it relates to declining US hegemony (Cox, 2009).

low at all costs, by controlling the money supply. As the Reagan and Thatcher administrations showed, domestically this meant destroying most of the norms and institution of post-war managed (or 'embedded') capitalism. Trade union power was assailed, many 'unproductive' industries allowed to perish, labour markets 'deregulated', wage controls removed, tax breaks given to the corporate sector, and many state activities privatised or contracted out. This domestic agenda was scaled-up to the international level in the form of what later became known as 'globalization'. From the early 1980s, Washington pressed its allies to remove restrictions on international trade, lending and investment – with Britain an influential comrade-in-arms. The hope was that Anglo-Saxon capitalism could create new lucrative pockets of comparative economic advantage by trading in an expanded world system.

But there were other reasons too. High labour costs in both countries combined with decreasing unit transportation costs and new telecommunications meant that domestic producers began to see geographic relocation and FDI as feasible strategies. In addition, even as their economies were in recession through the late 70s and early 80s, America and Britain retained their historic strength in banking and financial services. They used this to international advantage by progressively deregulating Wall Street and the City, and making them the centre of global liquidity flows. From the early 70s, both places became switching points in the world economy, re-channeling rivers of money from newly enriched oil states and 'tiger economies' to other parts of the world. The collapse of the former communist bloc and the end of Chinese isolation simply reinforced their centrality from the late 1980s onwards. The greater New York region and the south east of England duly felt the benefits, as did the national treasuries receiving tax revenues.

What were the long-term effects of the neoliberal turn in the US and Britain? Less than salutary, according to proponents of Interpretation 5. First, both economies became far too reliant on finance, construction and retail, and

failed to invest sufficiently in new ventures that could set domestic accumulation on a profitable, post-industrial path. Second, both countries' manufacturing base was eviscerated, with many home-grown producers electing to invest overseas – in Britain, Dyson (maker of vacuum cleaners) became a well known example, repeating what iconic manufacturer General Motors had been doing for years by decamping to Mexico and elsewhere. Thirdly, the share of national wealth accruing to working people declined relative to that of those owning or running capitalist enterprises. This has been documented by Robert Pollin (2003), Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy (2004) – among many others. According to David Harvey, in *A brief history of neoliberalism* (2005), this amounts to a restoration of class power in the neoliberal heartlands, but elsewhere besides. This new wealth inequality in the US and Britain – so Interpretation 5 goes – was achieved courtesy of four things: (i) China's arrival on the world stage along with other low cost exporters kept consumer prices down and weakened demands for wage hikes; (ii) the credible threat of capital flight from the US and UK gave employers considerable power over their workforces; (iii) easy credit provided by City and Wall Street lenders, in a low interest environment, helped to conceal the fact of low wages for working class and lower middle class people (and created a false sense of personal wealth); and (iv) the defeat of the trades unions during the 1980s and the move to 'flexible' labour markets played havoc with the organisational capacities of the (increasingly indebted) average working person.

In sum, proponents of Interpretation 5 argue that, post the 1970s crisis, neoliberal policies succeeded in delivering economic growth in a range of countries worldwide – including the two major proponents of *laissez faire* capitalism. However, because the benefits of growth were skewed grotesquely in favour of the rich, the resulting 'demand gap' found in the American and British populations was filled by saddling households with debt. Meanwhile, new working populations in China, the Far East and the former communist

bloc have been made to accept low wages as the price for export-led growth. To be sure, many of these workers have been lifted out of poverty by selling their labour power. But relative to the wealth created by their collective workplace efforts, they have enjoyed meagre rewards. Unlike 40 years ago, this crisis stems in large part from the weakness of wage labour. The fact that defaults on sub-prime mortgages made to ‘ninjas’ lit the financial tinder indicates as much (‘ninjas’ is a US mortgage brokers’ term for people with no income, no job and no assets).

As I said above, proponents of Interpretation 5 add some missing ingredients to an otherwise persuasive Interpretation 4. They also, as I additionally indicated, tend not be those working in or around the worlds of politics, finance and commodity production. For reformist proponents of Interpretation 5, a managed sharing of economic and political power between the US and other major players – like Russia, Japan, the EU and China – should be accompanied by robust measures to stimulate domestic demand worldwide. A precondition of this would be a redistribution of wealth towards ordinary workers, increased public control of key economic sectors, and a new ethic that values greater social equality over the responsibilities and freedoms of individuals. These arguments do not chime with the thinking of business, media and political elites in the major capitalist states – notwithstanding the pseudo-Keynesian rescue packages thrown at high finance. Revolutionary proponents of Interpretation 5 go even further, unsurprisingly. For them, the current crisis is simply one of several ways in which the ineluctable contradictions of capitalism can play-out. Here is Geoff Mann, writing in *New Left Review*: “... regulation cannot be enough ... The overthrow of capital’s rule is literally the only way out” (2009: 126). Such an overthrow, clearly, would require coordinated radical action globally, led by a resurgent labour movement and/or a more tightly organised ‘anti-globalization’ movement. The prospects of this are, needless to say, vanishingly small. As Slavoj Žižek once said, it

remains far easier to image the end of the world than it does the end of capitalism.

### **The dynamics of explanation and evaluation**

“The present-day plunge into the economic abyss”, writes R Taggart Murphy in *New Left Review*, “has ... brought forth a smorgasbord of assertions about ‘the’ cause” (2009: 149). In the previous pages, I’ve presented what I take to be the principal extant interpretations of the recent financial crisis. They are not mutually exclusive, but they seem to me to be relatively distinct. These interpretations have been variously promoted (and sometimes combined) by a range of commentators who, depending on their social location, speak to more-or-less sizeable, more-or-less knowledgeable audiences ranged across the spectrum of political belief. Within its own terms of intellectual reference, each interpretation has a certain plausibility. They can all be copiously evidenced and almost all are normatively underdetermined, meaning that (especially in the first three cases) they can speak to the moral-political sentiments of very different sections of the populations affected by the financial meltdown of 2007-09. Their normative framing is thus up for grabs.

They can even be combined into an omnibus explanation, should one have the stomach for such an indigestible thing. Here, for example, is Czech Prime Minister Jan Fischer speaking at London’s Chatman House in March 2009: “the financial crisis”, he said, resulted from an exceedingly complex interaction of market failures, global financial and monetary imbalances, inappropriate regulation, weak supervision and poor macro-prudential oversight.” However, it seems to me that this catch-all account detracts from efforts to identify proximate and deep causes and to enumerate real policy alternatives moving forward. There is a big difference between privileging one of the five interpretations I’ve identified, blending some of them for intellectual or strategic reasons, and marrying them all together for the sake of apparent comprehensiveness.

Having remained studiously neutral in the previous five sections, let me now come clean and reiterate my own analytical and political allegiances – which I flagged briefly in the introduction to this essay. It seems to me that while the second and third interpretations speak to the proximate causes of the recent crisis, and while the first has obvious popular appeal, the fifth is the most telling of all when seen as a necessary extension of the fourth. I offer this judgement not on purely cognitive grounds, as if evidence and logic alone can distinguish ‘stronger’ from ‘weaker’ interpretations. The fourth and fifth interpretations offer us a wide-angle lens on the recent crisis, but this breadth is not enough to justify their superiority or persuasiveness. It is also a question of politics and values. The economic growth achieved prior to the current recession was accompanied by a systematic redistribution of wealth that greatly favoured the rich, within and without the financial sector – this was no accident and it was morally unacceptable. At base, the 2007-09 crisis was one of a class-based neoliberalism led by the US (and secondarily Britain) – a project that ultimately failed to manage the venerable overaccumulation tendencies of capitalism on a world-scale. To my mind, only in this context do otherwise valid criticisms of ‘fat cats’, light touch regulation and casino banking (Interpretations 1-3) make real sense and generate the ‘right’ normative implications.

This said, only a minority of people are ever likely to find Interpretation 5 compelling (including, I would hope, readers of this journal). In the Anglo-American context, it is too far reaching and radical in its analysis and implications to be palatable for those atop New Labour or the Democrats – the two established Left parties in Britain and the US. It speaks more to intellectuals and activists who are well to the Left of either party, or who exist uneasily within them. And it is, of course, far too esoteric to be readily communicable to the average person – even a simplified version would likely lack sufficient clarity to speak to the head or heart of a typical voter, worker or

citizen. This is why advocates of Interpretation 5 would – on strategic grounds – need to support any and all attempts to frame Interpretations 1, 2 and 3 in broadly Left-wing ways. It would be quite wrong to dismiss this trio because of their simplicity or narrowness. As I said earlier, each of these interpretations can be made consistent with a political agenda focussed on curbing excess personal wealth, reviving a strong conception of the public good, and fostering far greater social equality.

The question then arises: why has the recent crisis *not* proven to be a moment of opportunity for those who, like this author, favour a sharp turn to the political Left in the Anglo-American world (and indeed beyond)? Why, in other words, has the Left outside the political mainstream proven unable, so far, to narrate the recent crisis in ways that repopularise classic arguments against ‘free market capitalism’? The answers to these questions are complex and they vary considerably in the detail depending on whether one is discussing the US or Britain. Getting the answers right clearly matters a great deal. Thinkers and activists on the Left (and other radicals too, like US neoliberalism’s Godfather Milton Friedman) have long regarded crises as moments of real opportunity. But some, like Antonio Gramsci, long ago realised that the existing order will not dissolve quickly or readily – even in the face of acute problems like those recently evident in the global financial system. As I have tried to show, it is perfectly possible to narrate the 2007-09 in politically radical ways – it’s not for want of evidence, arguments or ideas that the financial crisis has not yet proven opportune for the Left.

This means that we must look to other factors in order to answer the questions just posed. These factors await exploration in another essay, and are already preoccupying a fair number of commentators. But they surely include organisational and financial weaknesses within what remains a very fragmented Left; the fact that New Labour’s and Bush/Obama’s rescue packages have taken the edge off the crisis, thus defusing some of the public’s anger; the fact

that simply coping with the fall-out of what's happened (e.g. a sharp rise in unemployment levels) is preoccupying many individuals, families and communities; the deep sedimentation of liberal values on both sides of the Atlantic, such that Left ideals of equality and mutuality seem relatively unappealing – even at a time when those ideals would challenge the assumption that we should deal with the fall-out of the crisis as individuals rather than as members of a genuine public; the comparative visibility and strength of conservative and even nationalist parties and groups in both countries; the fact that a whole generation of younger workers, consumers and citizens enjoyed the fruits of the long boom and have no historic memory of poverty, mass unemployment, collectivist action or political militancy; the fact that New Labour and the post-Carter Democrats stole the Left's rhetoric and deprived many otherwise progressive voters of a more robust sense of a 'proper' Left programme; and the fact that politics now seems remote from many peoples' lives, reflecting in part a new grassroots cynicism that citizens' wishes no longer count for much in either Westminster or Washington.

Looking ahead, we are now entering a period where public spending will have to contract sharply on both sides of the Atlantic. If the Conservatives assume power in Britain, this will no doubt be justified using elements of the discursive repertoire of neoliberalism – such as reducing 'big government' and 'freeing' firms and workers to employ their capital and ingenuity without undue 'interference'. There will also likely be a serious further discrediting of New Labour (whose image is already in tatters), based on the argument that it was a Left government that sustained high public spending only by turning a blind eye to finance capital's excesses. Indeed, after a failed second attempt to unseat Gordon Brown (in January 2010), New Labour's election team took a Blairite turn and eschewed the neo-Keynesian rhetoric of 2009 in the hope of wooing voters. Regardless, and in both Britain and the US, it will be the state apparatus itself that becomes increasingly politicised – perhaps to the point where it

suffers an acute legitimacy crisis. Yet it is precisely this institution that requires a high level of both resources and public trust to deliver any meaningful Left political programme.

## **Conclusion**

This essay had one major objective. Different explanations of the recent financial crisis were summarised, along with their various policy implications. I suggested that, on both cognitive and normative grounds, Interpretation 5 is the most powerful when seen as an extension of the fourth. But I also suggested that those of us on the Left should welcome any and all attempts to use the other interpretations in ways that advance progressive arguments. Fidelity to the most penetrating interpretation would otherwise prevent Leftists speaking to a range of constituencies in a language they understand. In the previous section, I claimed that the 2007-09 crisis seems not to have given Leftists greater room for intellectual or practical manoeuvre: there has been no popularisation of a robust Left programme. The implication of this is as follows: the Left's problems are sufficiently wide and deep that, even during a period of severe economic turbulence, it has lacked the means to seize the moment in even a minimal sense. Other actors, institutions and forces are making a history and a geography to which the Left must perforce adapt and respond.

In *Social justice and the city*, his first book as a Marxist, David Harvey wisely insisted that "It's irrelevant to ask whether concepts ... are 'true' or 'false'. We have to ask, rather, what it is that produces them and what they serve to produce" (1973: 298). This injunction – written on the eve of the last generalised economic crisis – should be taken to heart now as much as then. Ultimately, the power of rival interpretations of the recent crisis depends both on who is advancing them (and how) and the wider appeal of their declared or implicit political philosophy. But it also depends on the wider dynamics of social formation since these comprise the necessary context in which both the

‘objective’ and discursive dimensions of the recent crisis play-out. The 2010 British election will almost certainly return a Conservative government, and if not there will be a cross-party coalition. Notwithstanding the election of a black, Democratic President in the US, there is little sign of a genuinely Left-turn in America, meaning that it resembles Britain in this respect – even though there are *prima facie* reasons for such a turn to occur in both countries. The Left’s current (and long-standing) marginality in American politics has its own causes; its situation is to be explained in ways different to the British Left’s plight, even though both constituencies have a common experience hegemonic neoliberalism leading up to 2007. For Leftists on both sides of the Atlantic, the lessons of the recent crisis are serious and should be very sobering. The political and moral economy of putatively *laissez faire* capitalism will remain entrenched in the Anglo-American world until and unless the Left raises its game considerably. That latter is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the eclipse of the former. The challenge, I fear, will be insurmountable in even the medium-term future.

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