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# Public crises, public futures

By Nick Mahony and John Clarke

**Keywords:** crisis, publics, participation, mediation, politics, articulation

**Abstract:** This article begins to map out a novel approach to analyzing contemporary contexts of public crisis, relationships between them and possibilities that these scenes hold out for politics. The article illustrates and analyses a small selection of examples of these kinds of contemporary scenes and calls for greater attention to be given to the conditions and consequences of different forms and practices of public and political mediation. In offering a three-fold typology to delineate differences between 'abject', 'audience' and 'agentic' publics the article begins to draw out how political and public futures may be seen as being bound up with how the potentialities, capacities and qualities that publics are imagined to have and resourced to perform. Public action and future publics are therefore analysed here in relation to different versions of contemporary crisis and the political concerns and publics these crises work to articulate, foreground and imaginatively and practically support.

The idea that 'we' are currently in the midst of pervasive crisis is currently shaping our everyday lives, in Europe as well as in other regions of the world. The 'we' being addressed in such images of the crisis-ridden present nevertheless varies quite considerably, but many of these 'we's' are represented in the form of publics who share interests, concerns, anxieties and will potentially inhabit a shared future. This paper argues that, if the goal is to collectively create new kinds of public futures out of the conflicts of the current moment, it will be vital to recognize and robustly engage with how different versions of 'crisis' work to imagine, address and position 'the public'.

To explore contemporary articulations of crises and publics, this paper traces some of the diverse ways that crises are used as the occasion to summon publics. We set out a view of publics as entities that are always mediated and always emergent, rather than being pre-existing, readily identifiable and available to be mobilized. We also seek to draw out some of qualities of 'crisis' as a rallying call that can sometimes get missed in rush to either diagnose or respond to the many and diverse material problems that mark the present conjuncture.

To do this we unpack how what are often dramatic visions of crisis form a kind of political spectacle. We examine some of the ways in which such spectacles can work to suspend or interrupt 'normal politics'; invert common-sense ways of doing things; re-animate old debates; bring contradictory ideas into relation; and, in this way mobilize, mesmerize, rouse or disable various groups in both familiar and new ways. We also reflect on the ways in which such spectacles might also contribute to a sense of restoring both 'business as usual' and 'politics as usual'. By taking this route, we

will be able to demonstrate why the analysis of the *articulation* of crises and publics matters: firstly, it offers a way of developing clearer understandings of how contemporary crises are putting a repertoire of political devices, resources and practices into motion in a set of familiar and perhaps not so familiar ways; secondly, it provides a means of developing a more nuanced and contextually informed view of how the current conjuncture is working both to reproduce and reconfigure prevailing divisions of political and public labour.

The present is marked by an apparent proliferation of crises, each of which demands urgent action from various actors and agents, among whom 'the public' features recurrently, even if the particular guise in which the public is imagined and addressed varies considerably. We are engaged by the question of how crises can work to simultaneously constrain and support ideas and formations of publicness. By exploring several examples, we trace some of the complexities of and patterns in the publics being summoned and mediated. Our analysis of these examples leads us to suggest that it is useful to distinguish between at least three types of public, as they each occupy distinctive relationships to the crisis through which they are summoned.

The positions proffered by each of these three forms of articulation are not equally available (as they are structured in relations of dominance), neither are they available at all in any pure or untainted form (they are often blurred or articulated with each other in practice). Instead, we suggest that the evidence of these different positions reminds us that the current moment remains unsettled and involves heterogeneous processes of institutional and wider public formation. This is why we

ask for more analytical and political attention to be given to the kinds of processes and practices of public mediation and formation. These considerations point to the possibility of developing a richer and more contextually grounded understanding of how we can individually and collectively imagine and work to bring about new and more just public futures.

### **An abundance of crises and publics**

It is perhaps unsurprising that the current moment has given birth to an astonishing number of new understandings and political and public actions – coming both from the ‘top-down’ as new governmental or inter-governmental projects and from the ‘bottom-up’ as experiments with new forms of public participation and public creativity. Despite considerable variations in their geographical and social reach, and in the identifications and positions that ‘we’ are invited to adopt in these diverse understandings and actions, this ‘we’ is often (either implicitly or explicitly) imagined and addressed as some kind of public: a collectivity with an interest at stake in the present crisis and its future resolution.

The resolution of many of these current crises seems to demand public as well as governmental action, or at least public opinion to support for (or a sufficient lack of public resistance to) proposed courses of action. However, what we want to underscore in this article is just how diverse and contested ideas and formations of publicness are in the present conjuncture, but also why many of the more well-established ways of conceptualizing these publics may not help us to understand and engage with what is going on.

Established understandings tend to rely on and reproduce the idea that 'the public' is always a pre-existing collectivity: a collectivity that can be identified, addressed and moved to action. The authority of public opinion polling, for example, rests on the claims of being able to represent how, at a given time, 'the public' think or feel about a particular issue of shared concern. Public surveying and the increasingly popular techniques of public segmentation similarly rest on claims to be able to reveal the orientations, motivations or susceptibilities of different sub-sets of 'the public' (Barnett and Mahony 2011). According to some experts (see, for example, Fishkin 2009) processes of public deliberation that involve complicated dynamics of 'opinion-formation' about controversial policy issues can even now be reduced to, and performed via, neutral technological procedures that work through the enrolment, facilitation and participative engagement of representative 'mini-publics'.

For such approaches, the processes of identification, address and solicitation of public action or opinion are largely technical matters, where techniques are primarily distinguished by their greater or lesser degrees of accuracy and efficacy. Estimating public opinion, producing public engagement or participation, or mobilizing public actions typically involve the deployment of well-established technologies and procedures (sampling, organizing 'invited spaces', finding effective grounds, sites and issues to act on etc.). Even critical or constructionist approaches to public opinion have tended to focus on the manipulation, management or framing of opinion, while assuming the pre-existing existence of the public-as-collectivity (see, for example, the approaches taken by Condit et al, 2012, Crepaz and Damron, 2009, Gamson and Modigliani, 1989, Petersen et al., 2011).

We also want to be careful about how established philosophical perspectives and pre-existing normative theories of the public and the public sphere are to be used in this context. Indeed, in the wake of recent critical work on publics, we want to contribute to the breaking open of very long-standing debates about the constitution, role and possible limitations of 'publics' by switching attention to the specifics of particularly constituted publics. The ground was laid for this analysis by a set of contributions to the literature on publics that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, including the nuanced and compelling account of the indeterminacy of public discourse and processes of public mobilisation and its political effects offered in Michael Warner's (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*; Nancy Fraser's work on the inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics of public formation processes; and, the work of Craig Calhoun, who has tirelessly re-worked public sphere theory, not just in throughout the 1990s (see for example 1993), but also to ensure its continued relevance to emerging 21<sup>st</sup> Century events (see for example, his SSRC website commentary on the 2011 eviction of the Wall Street Occupy protestors and his reflections on the work of public social science in the journal *Public Culture*).

Growing out of this work, more recent scholarship has elaborated and re-animated the concept of the public even further. Some of the work undertaken in the last few years has been historical, such as the 'Making Publics' project that has charted, in wonderful detail, a varied cross-section of the processes and struggles through which public and versions of publicness were made-up in early Modern Europe (see website and Wilson 2011). This work is valuable for many reasons, not least because it throws into relief and questions the much more heavily publicized historical narrative of the rise and fall of the public charted by Habermas in *The Structural*

*Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989). Other strands of this work have emerged out of debates between actor-network theorists and have focused on the complex 'materialities' and always already distributed qualities of public-making processes and practices of public participation (Marres and Lezaun 2011)–Most recently, we discern that there has been a 'performative turn' in work on the public. With, for example, anthropologists such as Christopher Kelty (2008) who, through his fieldwork with members of the free software movement, has highlighted the 'recursive' qualities of certain publics that work together through the medium of the internet; and, performance studies scholars and art historians, working to bring to light embodied, relational, affective and infrastructural dimensions to public-making (e.g., Jackson, 2011; special issue of *Performance Research*, 16(2), 2011).

These as well as other contributions to these debates have significantly influenced our own work on publics. Whether this work has involved looking at how public policy is assembled and enacted in the UK (Newman and Clarke 2009); or, how large-scale participative political experiments are constituted and performed in different settings (Mahony 2010a). We have aimed to use this work to tease out and discuss the complicated and often-contradictory normativities inscribed into and acted out through different public summonings and public making initiatives in diverse contexts of contemporary practice. In an introduction to a collection of studies, Mahony, Newman and Barnett argued for an approach that:

starts from assumption that a public is not best thought of as a pre-existing collective subject that straightforwardly expresses itself or offers itself up to be represented. Rather, we are interested in elaborating on how publics, in



the plural (Calhoun 1997), are called into existence, or summoned. On this understanding, '[p]ublics are called into existence, *convened*, which is to say that they are sustained by establishing relations of attention whose geographical configurations are not given in advance' (Barnett, 2008, emphasis in original). This emphasises how publics are formed through processes of *address* (Warner 2002, Iveson, 2007) and implies that the precise spatial dimensions and socio-cultural composition of a public cannot be determined in advance of the actions and activities through which it makes its presence felt. In short, it implies focusing on the processes through which publics *emerge* (see also Angus 2001). We theorise this process of public emergence by distinguishing analytically between the objects, mediums and subjects of publicness (Barnett 2008). Publics emerge around particular objects of concern, that is, around specific issues (Dewey 1927, Marres, 2005). They emerge by articulating these issues through particular mediums, and in distinctively public mediums that combine intimate and anonymous registers of address (Barnett 2003). They gather together and draw on the agency of plural, multiple social subjects variously affected by issues at hand (Warner 2002). Our approach to thinking about the emergence of publics, then, leads us to think about the participants in public action in a particular way. Rather than thinking of these as the already constituted citizens of a territorial nation state, or as the idealised deliberators of rational conversation, we focus in this volume on the actors whose ongoing practices shape and sustain the spaces and sites of publicness. (2010: 2-3)

Important as it is to challenge commonplace views of and approaches to 'the public', there is a further challenge: to reflect critically on the prevalent ways that the idea of 'crisis' is invoked and deployed in current debates. We wish to offer instead an account that takes 'crisis' to be a discursive device being deployed in different ways in specific and varied types of public summoning. We want to take the term itself as a device that is always deployed in search of an audience – here, a public – that can be activated, mobilized or engaged by the threat and promise that the idea of crisis appears to carry with it. As Janet Roitman (2011 online essay for *Political Concepts Lexicon*) reminds us, the etymology of the term 'crisis' speaks to the requirement of judgment and decision in relation to what is identified to be a particular critical event. Crisis, Roitman suggests, can also invoke a call for change between past, present and future states which is dramatized as a kind of 'test' – one that might have unforeseen and unexpected as well as more long-standing hoped for (or feared) outcomes (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). To dwell and reflect on the discursive qualities and distinctions between different versions of crisis appears a risky step in the midst of (apparently) profound and materially consequential crises which make urgent demands on collective attention and energy, whether these are the financial crisis; the Eurozone crisis; the crisis of capitalism; the environmental crisis; the crisis of representative democracy and more. Despite the apparently pressing political urgency (but see Brown 2005) we nevertheless wish to make three separate but related points about the deployment of the idea of crisis.

The first is that crises are always named and claimed differently. It matters, for example, whether the current 'economic' crisis is understood as a financial crisis; a fiscal crisis; a crisis of sovereign debt; a crisis of global capitalism; a crisis of neo-

liberalism; or even not a crisis at all. There is, so to speak, no crisis in general (even if one crisis may be seen to underpin or be the real cause of others). Each specification implies a range of different possible causes and consequences (see, for example, Saad-Filho's – 2011 – distinction between a crisis in neo-liberalism and a crisis of neo-liberalism).

The second point is that this is not just a view of the construction of crises that makes a conventional political distinction between the crisis (the real object) and its contested construction (the ideological struggle). On the contrary, crises are announced in advance as well as contested after the event (Clarke and Newman 2010). The 'real' never comes first, untrammelled by all the ideological/discursive epiphenomena (even if it appears analytically and politically more attractive to imagine the world in this way).

Third, and most important for our purposes here, we want to examine the ways in which crisis is itself a powerful symbolic device, no matter what adjectival qualification is added to it. A crisis, any crisis, is understood as a moment of overbearing urgency, where a particular state of affairs cannot continue, where threats and dangers abound or where things are seen to be somehow 'out of control'. Invocations of crisis can thereby also call up the need for different political futures: including how 'we' might live together and interact with each other as local, national, global or virtual collectivities. The appearance of the word crisis is therefore a particular kind of announcement, one that demands the attention of its audiences (Mahony 2010a).

In what follows, we examine what is at stake in different ways of formulating the relationship between crises and publics. Our aim is to use this exploration to develop a richer understanding of, and to support more debate about, the varieties of public mediation: the sites, forms, devices and modes of address through which publics are summoned. We draw particular attention to distinctions of scale and to the position in which publics are being imagined and incited to engage. We then go on to analyze the current *politics of public mediation* that this situation involves – and which, we believe, is worthy of some critical attention.

### **The publics of contemporary crises**

Our intention here is to do no more than offer a glimpse of some of the diversity of articulation of crises and publics that have been emerging in the current conjuncture. We have picked out just a small indicative sample of the practices that we have found in the announcement of various crises and the summoning of publics to take a role in their resolution. The examples that follow, although eclectic, undoubtedly reflect our geo-political orientations and obsessions (variously England, the UK, Europe and North America) and can therefore do no more than provide one possible set of starting points for further research and debate. We offer this set of examples as a way of opening up a set of analytic reflections on the practices of public making but wish to stress that we are interested in their particularities and differences, rather than seeing them as instances of one generic or even universal process.

Let us begin by attending briefly to how party political leaders, in the UK, have been working to frame recent events. Mainstream political discourse in the UK since the

last General Election in May 2010 has been dominated by two competing, but in many regards similar, interpretations of 'the crisis'. Prime Minister David Cameron, with others who are part of the leadership of the Coalition government, has persistently reiterated that the current moment is one marked by a 'public debt crisis':

We have known for a long time that our debts are huge. Last year, our budget deficit was the largest in our peacetime history. This year - at least according to the previous government's forecasts - it is set to be over 11 per cent of GDP. Today, our national debt stands at £770 billion.

Within just five years it is set to nearly double, to £1.4 trillion.

That is some £22,000 for every man, woman and child in the country. We knew this before.

... Let me explain what it means. Today we spend more on debt interest than we do on running schools in England.

...Interest payments of £70 billion mean that for every single pound you pay in tax, 10 pence would be spent on interest.

Is that what people work so hard for, that their taxes are blown on interest payments on the national debt? What a terrible, terrible waste of money. So, this is how bad things have got. This is how far we have been living beyond our means. This is the legacy our generation threatens to leave the next.

So it really has been a tale of two economies.

A public sector boom - and a private sector bust...

So while the people employed by the taxpayer were insulated from the

harsh realities of the recession...

...everyone else in the economy was paying the price.

And now we're all paying the price because the size of the public sector has got way out of step with the size of the private sector (Cameron: 2010)

This idea of excessive public debt licenses a policy agenda centred around the 'virtuous necessity' of austerity (Clarke 2012) and the urgent need to 'get a grip on public spending' by reducing the cost of public debt, public services and the public sector (public is here always counterposed to the private). However, the apparent need to 'get a grip' has also been translated in another way, by repeatedly stressing that there is also an urgent need for 'strong and decisive' leadership that can deliver more efficient and authoritative government to resolve the crisis.

Given that the 2008 'financial crisis' coalesced while the previous Labour government was in office, the Labour Party's current leader, Ed Milliband, has understandably worked to frame this ongoing crisis slightly differently since the current Coalition government has been in office. Rather than portraying the current moment as one that should primarily be understood as a 'public debt crisis', he has instead repeatedly insisted on framing the current moment as a 'quiet crisis'.

"We are in real danger of a big crisis," warns Mr Miliband. "You can see that around the world. You can feel the fear. It's fear about the current -situation and the sense the Government isn't -offering a way forward." The Labour leader plans to focus his efforts this week on the "quiet crisis" facing British families – battered by soaring food and fuel-prices, their hopes crushed by pay freezes and job cuts. He blasts the

PM's "recipe of hopelessness" for those – families and adds: "David Cameron is out of touch with the struggle people are facing.

"Wages are being frozen or cut back, prices for gas and electricity are soaring. Food prices are rising too." (Daily Mirror: 25.09.2011.

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/meet-ed-miliband-family-guy-155867>)

In this imagery, Miliband invokes and inserts into the political discourse the hard-pressed British families that are currently enduring the present situation rather too stoically. They are imagined as in need of new political leadership as well as more support and assistance from central government.

As the crisis developed through 2011 and 2012, questions intensified over the effectiveness of the government's programme of 'austerity', David Cameron and the UK Coalition Government have shifted their position slightly by increasingly invoking the spectre of the 'Eurozone crisis', thereby echoing some of the more familiar ways that 'the crisis' is being characterized by dominant leaders not just in Eurozone countries but also in the US and other parts of the world.

We suggest that the publics being summoned by these all-too-familiar dominant images of crisis are imagined as passive, anxious and needy collectivities. Invariably atomized (as individuals and/or families) and frequently troubled by their future prospects, these publics tend to be cast as either irresponsible (the excessive consumers, those who run up excessive debts, the overpaid or overpensioned public sector worker) or dully responsible (the overloaded bearers of public debt).

Turning to a second and more diverse cluster of illustrative examples, it is nevertheless possible to see how publics have been and continue to be summoned in a variety of other ways during this period of political instability.

Don't fight it, crowd source it

As protesters in the Occupy movements rail against Wall St., corporate greed and a system they say is stacked against the little guy, some are trying a different tack. Instead of demonstrating or tussling with the police, they are creating alternatives [...].

(Anita Patel, *The New York Times*, December 2011).

In a context in which the reality of the ongoing 'financial crisis' is assumed, the *New York Times* here reports on the emergence of a set of relatively small-scale US-based initiatives that are currently testing-out forms of 'community ownership' and 'crowd-sourced financing'. It highlights, for example, the Saranac Lake Community store initiative that has been opened thanks to the financial involvement of 'hundreds of local people' who took up the offer of \$100 shares as a way to "take control of our future and help our community". It also features Philip Rosedale, 43, who has created 'Coffee and Power', "an online global work exchange where people offer any kind of task like sewing, shopping or writing software". This 'business' apparently has its own "virtual currency for buying, selling or bestowing tasks as gifts": "translation services sell for \$10 a job and a bike messenger for \$15". This article also points to the recent emergence of community-supported financing sites like 'Kiva.org' and 'Kickstarter', that "solicit donations to finance art, technology and business projects" to help businesses acquire finance in 'challenging times'. In these



examples, the publics of crisis are entrepreneurial and consumerist, responding and adapting flexibly by negotiating, designing, offering as well as eagerly navigating and taking up new 'choices'.

Large multinational businesses have shown that they are also adept at offering new 'choices' and 'alternatives' in response to waning levels of confidence in mainstream financial investment protocols. For example, in 2010 Barclays Bank launched its 'One Small Step' initiative in the UK. Widely publicised across different print media channels, this online platform staged a business talent contest by soliciting budding entrepreneurs to submit their business ideas and then inviting people to vote on which of these they considered to most deserve investment from Barclay's bank. This competition has since been repeated in 2011, with the 2011 contest receiving over 10,000 entries and awarding almost £1 million in prize money. The 9 'winners' of the 2011 contest received £50,000 each.

As well as those 'alternatives' offered by small scale and more established, mainstream and larger scale forms of business and investment practice, the last couple of years have also given rise to a proliferation of experiments with novel forms of popular and participatory politics and governance. These initiatives take their legitimacy not only from the idea that the current conjuncture is marked not just by 'financial crisis' but also by 'democratic crisis'.

In terms of the number of people currently 'signed-up', globally, the campaigning organization 'Avaaz' is probably the best known of these (<http://www.avaaz.org/en/index.php>). At the time of writing, Avaaz claims to have

over 14 million members and has been highly active (and it claims highly successful) in its consciousness raising, resource mobilisation and popular resistance campaigning work. Avaaz works by soliciting its members to sign up to and spread the word about its regular petitions. It is also increasingly testing out ways of involving its members in the process of setting the organization's campaigning priorities.

In terms of numbers of people and types of organization involved, there are many other analogous initiatives that could also be discussed here. These range from UK Uncut, which has organized a nation-wide and very high-profile direct action campaign against welfare reform and tax evasion; to small-scale and local one-off forum-style performances, such as the one organised by a London-based group of 'cultural industry' workers – called the 'Carrot Collective' (this name being inspired by the incentivized form of labour that they are questioning). Staged and performed over the course of a single day in a well-known public gallery, this event fostered a lively, highly theatrical and interactive discussion about the increasingly precarious state of the lives of 'creative' workers.

Government, at local, national and European levels, has also been very active of late when it comes to testing-out novel ways of summoning publics into processes of governance. At the vanguard of attempts to reduce local authority spending to meet the challenges of the current 'public debt crisis' has, for example, been Barnet Council in the Conservative peripheries of London. It has pioneered its own 'Pledgebank', an initiative that adapts another experiment also called 'Pledgebank' instigated by an organization called *MySociety* that emerged in a different context.

Barnet's Pledgebank initiative tests out a novel way of outsourcing (to residents) the labour of delivering public services, such as those small-scale tasks of gritting pavements during cold weather, clearing municipal spaces of refuse or organizing local street parties. To do this, Barnet Pledgebank summons residents to "get things done" by teaming up *with* the Council.

"Pledges don't have to be started by the council — organisations, schools, community and volunteer groups can all get involved. [...] The [Pledgebank] website is based on the simple principle that the person making the online pledge will work to make it happen "but only if" a number of other people commit too."

This example reminds us that ideas of crisis and the idea of austerity are now intimately entangled. It also connects to other developments that, while perhaps also underwritten by ideas of 'efficiency', work to imagine, summon and engage with the 'the public' in different ways. Take *OpenIdeo*, which is "an open innovation platform [through which the] global community [is invited to] solve big challenges for the social good". This web platform has been designed and is run by the multinational design company Ideo. At the time of writing the *OpenIdeo* site announces it has 28,745 'users' hooked into in a range of creative challenges, one of which being the problem of how to design 'a more accessible election experience for everyone'.

*WeGov*, which aims to work at the scale of the European Union, is a parallel but entirely distinct initiative. This time, instead of working to innovate a new 'invited space' for public participation in the way that Pledgebank and OpenIdeo do, *WeGov* –

funded by the EU – aims to:

“develop a toolset that allows full advantage to be taken of a wide range of existing and well established social networking sites [...] to engage citizens in two-way dialogues as part of governance and policymaking processes. The tools will make it possible to detect, track and mine options and discussions on policy oriented topics”

The tactic of working to ‘occupy’ putatively public spaces in new ways – here being researched and developed in a rather blue-sky fashion by part of the EU bureaucracy to explore the possibilities of virtual governance – is of course one that has been taken up in rather different ways of late, across Europe and more globally. Indeed, *Occupy* did, at least for some weeks during the last part of 2011, actually appear (as a movement?) in city streets, online and across newspaper headlines around the world.

*Occupy* summoned publics in yet another way, which we want to suggest makes it (as well as some of its antecedents) distinctive from the other two sets of examples we have already highlighted above. For it invited ‘the 99%’ it repeatedly claimed are excluded by the current crisis prone ‘system’ to take a position of active resistance to it by working in solidarity with others to transform politics itself. The goal here was (and continues to be) to attempt to generate more egalitarian, sustainable and democratic alternatives to ‘the status quo’.

*Occupy* itself emerged and gained momentum from the Spanish *Indignados* and the

other parallel 'movements' of the Arab Spring but also draws on activist experiences of the Social Forum, which has been developing over a longer period. Occupy has, however, recently given rise to a myriad of experimental public-making initiatives. For example, in London, *Occupy's* 'tent city university' (which was a key feature of its three month encampment outside St. Paul's Cathedral, on the doorstep of the City of London) was, for example, a space where the '99%' were invited to collectively discuss and help with the process of imagining and creating new ways of acting together in solidarity. The regular assemblies run by the 'residents' of this encampment to make decisions about the every-day maintenance and continued development of this form of public mobilisation, was another example of how this version of *Occupy* sought to pre-figure active and agentic forms of inclusive, participatory and transformative politics in a context of multiplicity and difference.

### **Making a drama out of a crisis?**

There are, of course, many differences between how versions of crisis are announced and publics are summoned across the range of examples we have illustrated here, not least between the scales that are imagined in these different settings. In some of the examples (such as those related to the party political leaders) publics are invited to imagine – and invited to imagine themselves – at *systemic* scales: the terrains of global financial systems or national economic, fiscal and political systems. Whether these systems have been imagined as being in 'breakdown', in 'recession', in a state of near 'collapse' or as 'experiencing a loss of market confidence', the publics being summoned here appear as adjuncts to these systems – necessary adjuncts in many ways, but still not the main actors. Their positions and potentialities for action are understood in relation to these systems, rather than being in any way autonomous

or in interaction with it. Most strikingly perhaps, stepping out of such positions and acting otherwise risks the possibility of being de-legitimated, or becoming non-publics: identified instead as demonstrators, crowds, mobs, agitators, rioters and the like. Indeed, there exists a whole lexicon of such terms that are available to define and denounce 'inappropriate' forms of public action.

In contrast, those settings that seek to constitute possibilities of active publics most often summon publics at more restricted and less systemic scales. To varying extents, examples such as *Pledgebank*, the Forum organised by the *Carrot Collective* or even experiments organised locally via the different and diverse *Occupy* encampments do this by summoning publics into forms of localised but also interactive exchange with a view to developing possibilities for enacting collaborative or collective responses to particular issues or problems. The examples of online platforms that have been touched on here work differently again, instead of limiting themselves to localised processes of interaction and exchange, they work to both support and constrain forms of public action by framing – in very tight ways – the problems or issues they will address.

Across the cases touched on here crisis, in its various guises (financial, democratic, public) appears to work as a device through which publics might be summoned and convened. This may be one specific example of the more general and long established proposition that publics form around issues of shared concern (Dewey 1927/1989), but in the current period in particular, there appears to be something distinctive about the circulation and deployment of the idea of crisis as marking a focus for public summoning. There is some indicative evidence here of a kind of

symbolic inflation: where publics used to form around issues of common concern, do they now need crises before they can be mobilized? The examples assembled also suggest that it is worth thinking about how the device of 'crisis' is both a dramatic and dramatizing image that may work through a register of public address and performance that has the quality of political spectacle.

Some of these examples have spectacular qualities because they rely on the dramatized threat or promise of not being able to go on. Others offer the promise of immersive participative experiences to the publics that they attempt to summon. Still others – in common with a long tradition of carnivalesque, expressive, folkish and anti-establishment practices (Bakhtin 1984) – offer to invert particular forms of pre-existing institutional and representative politics. We want to suggest that it is not helpful to pre-emptively dismiss these spectacles as mere spectacularization: as uniformly insidious obstacles to the realization of novel forms of public relationality (Mahony, 2010b). Spectacles, in other words, may not always simply trivialise, distract or deflect citizens from 'real', or more substantive, forms of practice. We are conscious that we are working against the grain here of a long and worthy line of scholarship on 'the spectacle' (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno 1983; Debord 1992; Postman 1985; Kellner 2010). This is because we want to explore the possibility that some modes of spectacular politics that we have been observing have a more indeterminate and ambivalent identity. As a result, it is possible that some instances of political spectacle could even therefore have a valuable – though certainly not a clear-cut – public role to play in contemporary political conjuncture.

Debate about the potential political value of political spectacles has, we think, too

often been short-circuited by the idea that spectacular modes of practice are always marked by a kind of masking of discrepancies that necessarily exist between their *appearance* and their *reality*. While the way that this approach brings issues of power to the fore can certainly be useful, the orthodox position – propounded most famously by Debord – can work to foreclose the possibility of responses to experiences of spectacle that are anything other than passive and pacified.

A less reductive version of the qualities of spectatorship has begun to emerge from recent work on theatre going (Rancière 2007, 2009) and consumer culture (Hetherington 2008). Hetherington, for example, contends that spaces of spectacle can have a more ambivalent and relational character. This means instead of inevitably being composed so as to support ‘either/or’ forms of action, such spaces can have a ‘both/and’ feel and can be spaces of: “bewilderment, fantasy, manipulation, fragmented experience, mythical displaced meaning and social membership” (2008 pp.184). In this rendering of the spectacle, instead of being inevitably pacified, subjects encounter what Hetherington calls ‘the paradoxical space of possession’ where spectacles *can* take possession of people, but can *also* invite people to take possession of them. We agree with Hetherington that the in-between and indeterminate qualities of spectacle deserve more attention. In particular, his interest in the sense of disturbance that may be generated by spectacles opens up a less rationalist view of how the formation or mobilization of publics may be motivated. Indeed, another swathe of recent work on public affect and public feelings (see, for example, Berlant 2011, Cvetkovich 2007) has demonstrated the need to also revisit – historically, as well as in particular contemporary formations – the always shifting and politically charged dividing lines



between public and personal, and between rational and affective.

We also want to draw on aspects of Rancière's recent work on spectatorship. In particular, we think there is an important advance to be gained from the way that he has problematized another of the binaries that can often go unremarked upon in debates about political subjectivity and public formation. This is the binary between 'authentic' and 'unmediated' and 'staged' and 'mediated' forms of viewing and communication. Rancière argues that forms of mediation and spectatorship, instead of being an obstacle, are instead a pre-condition of productive forms of viewing, interaction and communication. He problematizes not just the efficacy but also the desirability of the ideals of communitarian immediacy, direct communication and self-presence upon which orthodox critiques of spectacle are built. Rancière instead calls for greater individual and collective (public) engagement with the objects that mediate all interactions, stressing the inventive and even potentially transformative possibilities of forms of translation and spectatorship.

We will return to this discussion of the mediated practices of the politics of the current moment below. However, in order to fold these reflections on spectacle into our analysis of the more concrete examples of the connection of crises and publics we begin by distinguishing between three ways in which varieties of crisis and forms of publicness are being articulated. In what follows, we try to tease out the ways in which publics are being addressed, the sorts of positions they are being invited to occupy and the implications for the sorts of public action that might flow from those positions.

### **Revealing crises, positioning publics**

The first of the ways that ideas of crisis and forms of publicness are being articulated is through *immersive narratives* at work in media environments that aim to seize collective attention and call into being what we see as *abject publics*. These are publics who are imagined as immobilized by the crisis; who are seen as being rendered disordered or even dysfunctional in affective terms by the threats, dangers, anxieties and uncertainties that confront them. This formulation works to reproduce the dominant political formation – and the subordinated position of publics within it – at least in terms of the resources the articulation of crisis and public seeks to mobilise in its distribution across multiple spheres of contemporary public life. These publics are spoken of – and for – through the often-spectacular representations of ‘the crisis’ being created by many of the most powerful voices. They are also the publics being resourced by much of the vast and increasingly sophisticated infrastructure that undergirds contemporary mass media. Despite this positioning of publics requiring forms of recognition, acceptance or acquiescence to complete its governing work, forms of agency or public action that go beyond the official specifications of active citizenship are represented as putting national recovery ‘at risk’. Certainly, the responses of publics who have assembled, demonstrated and sometimes rioted in Greece and Spain have been frequently labeled this way during 2011 and 2012. Indeed, these Greek and Spanish publics might even be understood as the exemplary ‘abject’ publics – denounced for their excesses, their failures of self-discipline and their unwillingness to face up to their future responsibilities – even, or perhaps especially, on those occasions when they have refused their abjection.

The second position we discern being articulated and being resourced in the current crisis strewn conjuncture is one in which *audience publics* are offered slightly more active possibilities for forms of *multiple-choice navigation*. In this second position, publics are summoned as ‘choice-bearers’: whether this summoning is practised by activists, politicians or pollsters, or even in the settings of forms of innovative participatory experimentation. Such is the supposed scale and intensity of the crisis, these audience publics are inevitably invited to face up to ‘hard choices’ in the shape of pre-framed ‘options’. They may make choices between paying down the debt quickly or more steadily; between continuing with rampant neo-liberalism or taking action to overthrow this totalising model; between pinning the blame on bankers, politicians or public sector workers; or between spending scarce public resources on A, B or C: do you want schools, roads or libraries? This is a public imagined as only possessing a very limited competence, capacity or sense of individual or collective responsibility for rational, considered decision-making. It is a public that is only very minimally autonomous; and it is a public that is understandably cautious and gripped by worry and therefore in need of rather behaviorist and ‘soft-paternalistic’ (Jones et al 2011, Pykett 2012) forms of governing, ‘nudging’ pressure or even techniques of intense or active facilitation.

Public organisers are still very much driving forms of public formation and participation here, with outcomes, to a large extent, being already pre-determined. However, rather than being authorized by conventional liberal-democratic institutional forms of democracy, these publics are spoken for by ‘self-appointed’ (Montanaro 2010) political representatives and groups. In seeking to summon and organise these audience publics, these self-authorised representatives often call up

the spectre of the mythical 'silent majority' of 'decent', 'right-thinking' and 'sensible' 'ordinary people. It is important to note the contradictory quality of this rather conventional political public: on the one hand, it appears solid, if not stolid; quietly and unassumingly getting on with things; ordinary in its very a-politicalness (Clarke 2010b). On the other hand, it is volatile, flighty and unreliable, needing its political temperature to be polled and evaluated on a daily basis, so that its collective opinion can be assiduously tracked and evaluated by mobile political parties, campaigners and media outlets. These are ready to trim, align and adjust themselves – within certain bounds – via carefully choreographed moments of interaction with the 'choice-bearing' publics they summon.

The third position we can observe through analyzing our examples is a position that imagines, supports and resources forms of *reflexive, creative and agentic publicness*. The public here is taken to be an emergent and not fully known or determined in advance as a fixed collectivity. Nor is it presumed to have an established or shared political identity. In some of the examples above, we can trace forms of publics being summoned to form around only partially substantiated issues. Such a view implies publics that will need, to develop, to substantiate these issues, find an identity, to form a view and to structure and possibly reconfigure the direction of a movement. Some of the sites we have been looking at work to create a space for this kind of public activity, providing a focus, proposing forms of mediation and even holding out possibilities for experiencing 'performative utopias' (Dolan 2011) – but they do not presuppose a precise outcome or suggest that processes of public mediation are entirely immovable. The publics being imagined and resourced in these sites are therefore entities that are capable of co-operation, hope, argument, identification in

difference, organization, negotiation, empathy, care, interdependency, conscious individual and collective decision-making and even creativity and innovation. Here publics are neither spoken of, nor for: rather they have to 'come to voice', become embodied, generate the material and infrastructural conditions of their existence and find ways of expressing and enacting themselves. This process of summoning, performing and making a public response to crisis embraces chance, indeterminacy and imagination. It therefore also opens out – for better or worse – the possibility of new normative pathways (Cooper 2001).

Our development of this threefold-typology here to animate our observations and analysis has been partly inspired by recent work on participatory art by Judith Rodenbeck (2011: 247-9), who herself elaborated on work by Novitz (2001) (we also note here how contemporary artists who work through the medium of participation such as Tania Bruguera have been highly active in the US Occupy movement – see, for example, Artnet 2012). Both Rodenbeck and Novitz are art historians concerned with how historically differentiated versions of 'participatory art' work to position, engage and mobilise viewers and subjects. The significance of their analyses – and their relevance for us – centres on the attention they give to the techniques, practices and performative repertoires through which different positions and sets of relations are constituted. For us, the articulations of crises and publics are important for the ways in which different types of articulation construct different roles and possibilities for the publics they imagine and address. Distinguishing between the largely demobilised, pacified or abject public position; the constrained choice making audience public position and the potentially agentic and collectively self-shaping public position enables us to see how these are

inscribed in both the forms of address and the techniques and practices of mediation. There is not a singular position or role for publics.

In common with others, this typology suffers from the temptation to force boundaries and distinctions where, in practice, many of our illustrative examples blur, enact forms of address and incitements that crisscross between these three positions. Nevertheless, we think it is useful to make these distinctions since they point to some of the contemporary ways in which publics are being imagined and summoned through diverse practices of mediation. We think it is important to combine a concern with the diverse imaginings of publics with attention to the practices of mediation. Practices of mediation involve the mixture of settings, media, material and symbolic resources, and – not least – the forms of support and maintenance that may bring publics into being and create the possibilities for thinking and acting in particular ways. Shannon Jackson has recently tried to recover the idea of ‘support’ as a key element in what she describes as ‘social practice’ (2011: see pp. 30-38 in particular). In doing so, she points to the need for performances to be underpinned, enabled or held up by a range of conditions (and argues, in parallel, that publics are sustained by a variety of material and symbolic supports). We see this as a significant development of views of public mediation (including our own) that have placed too much weight on practices of summoning, or the relationship of ‘call and response’, as though these take place without institutionalised conditions of knowledge, practice and recognition that enable publics to emerge and crystallize (however brief and unstable that crystallization might be).

We think that paying attention to the varieties of mediation matters not only as a

series of analytical questions: what are the techniques, infrastructures, devices, forms of affect and other resources put to work in particular forms of mediation? It is also important as a political question: what are the political conditions and consequences of different forms and practices of mediation? What sorts of publics are summoned and sustained by different mediating practices? What positions are they invited to occupy? What possibilities for thought and action are enabled – and foreclosed – in these different positions? What kinds of prototyping (Rodenbeck 2011) practices are involved and what possibilities to different performances leave to chance?

## **Conclusion**

Our interest in the articulation of crises and publics began from a rather mundane perception that ideas of crisis were often used in the forms of address being used to hail or summon publics, especially, though not only, in the current economic-political crises of the financial system. The evocation of crisis as one of the conditions through which publics might be summoned led us to consider the deployment of crisis imagery as a form of spectacle – mediating and dramatizing collective conditions in ways that might be both mobilizing and demobilizing. Here, we think it may be worth exploring approaches to spectacle that do not treat it as merely pacifying or demobilizing, particularly in a false opposition to an authentic communal mode of public or political communication. Instead, spectating might be understood as a more indeterminate relationship in which different affects, dispositions, potentialities and forms of collective experimentation might be evoked – from awe-struck wonder through troubled uncertainty to the discovery of mobilizing affinities and experimental forms of solidarity and public action.

As we examined different examples of how crises and publics were articulated, we became more conscious of the different ways in which publics were being imagined and addressed which led us towards a crude typology of the different positions that publics were imagined as occupying. Although this typology – and its distinction between abject, audience and agentic publics – certainly over-simplifies the complex practices of mediation that are in play in any of the examples we have used, we think that it nevertheless illuminates something important about the positions or roles that publics are understood to occupy. The differences speak to different capacities, potentialities and qualities that publics are expected to possess or bring into being in relation to questions of social and political concern. The differences also speak to the varied performative and intersubjective repertoires, infrastructures and material and creative conditions of support required in these different modes.

Our analysis leads us towards two sorts of conclusion. The first concerns the politics of mediation. The mediating practices and resources that are involved in summoning different sorts of publics are not themselves neutral or merely technical. They are consequential for the sort of public that is being imagined and summoned – there is, that is to say, a politics of mediation as well as a politics of publicness. Progressive scholarship has tended to emphasise the latter, rather than the former, as a response to an era of privatization, de-collectivization and individualization. Our aim here is not to argue about the weight or the significance of these tendencies, but to ask for some more careful thought about the politics of public mediation. Wishing for, summoning or even speaking in the name of ‘the public’ carries risks – one of which is the possibility of summoning abject or audience publics who are assumed to need



our wisdom. How might our own practices be directed towards summoning, enabling and supporting agentic publics? How might prevailing divisions of political, public, creative and intellectual labour need to be re-worked to mediate, enact and support publics and forms of publicness in new ways?

The second conclusion concerns one particular limitation of the analysis we have presented here. We have focused on the practices through which publics are imagined, addressed, resourced, supported and summoned. At this stage, we have nothing to say about whether publics emerged and formed in response to these summonings; nor whether their practices matched the role and position identified for them. We are conscious that this is a significant gap in our knowledge and the analysis we are presenting. In other contexts we have explored these issues more fully (e.g., Clarke et al. 2007; Mahony 2010a 2010b). However, the questions of success or otherwise in the summoning of publics remains a pressing analytical and political issue.

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