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# In Times of Crisis: Act!

By Steffen Bärlm

It has been 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. We are 'celebrating' this anniversary at a time when global capitalism and liberal democracy, the so-called winners of the Cold War struggle between East and West, find themselves in one of the deepest economic and political crises since the Wall Street crash in 1929 and the global turmoil that followed. Perhaps more significantly, however, this is the first crisis that Eastern Europeans are experiencing since their so-called 'transition' from a state socialist to a capitalist ideology. What should we make of this transition since 1989? Rather than engaging in a traditional analysis of the winners and losers of this transition, I am interested in what today's capitalist crisis has perhaps in common with the crisis of state socialism in 1989. I will explore this question by engaging with the German film *Good Bye Lenin!*.

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## Crisis, What Crisis?

The press is currently reporting - on an almost daily basis - that we are in the midst of one of the deepest and most serious economic crises since the 1929 Wall Street crash. While it is clear that most of the media has not quite given up on capitalism - for example, the Financial Times' motto seems to be 'Capitalism is dead; long live capitalism' (Wolf, 2009) - it is nevertheless significant that even the most outspoken apologists for capitalist free markets see a real danger in the capitalist system itself being under threat.

As someone who grew up in East Germany and went through a life-defining crisis in 1989 - the fall of the Berlin Wall - I find the current capitalist crisis strangely satisfying. Not that I do not have a heart for all those who are currently suffering because of this crisis. There are those millions who have lost their jobs, those who live in constant fear of job insecurity, and the millions who are affected by the massive cut-backs in social spending. The current crisis has unprecedented implications throughout the world. Latvia, for example - one of the 'Baltic Tigers' that until recently were celebrated for their 'transition' successes - has had to be bailed out by the IMF. This forced the government to cut the wages of public service workers, such as teachers, by up to a half(!), reduce state pensions by 10 per cent and the unemployment rate has risen from around 5 to over 14-15 per cent within two years (for more details, see Kuper, 2009). This is thus clearly a crisis that is affecting millions of people around the world in very real terms. What I find somewhat satisfying is not at all that people are suffering but that a system that just a few months ago nobody thought could ever come to an end is now in a deep economic, political and legitimization crisis. That is, what is good to see is that the over-confidence of capitalism - symbolized by astronomical increases in executive salaries, stock market booms and the construction of ever higher skyscrapers - has now experienced a real crack. For me, there are real parallels between today's crisis and that of 1989. Back then, too, nobody - even those strategists of the West whose full time job it was to destroy the East - expected the state socialist system to crack and eventually fall in the spectacular fashion it did. Perhaps, then, we have not seen the end of today's crisis!

The crisis of 1989 and the eventual disappearance of 'real existing socialism', as it was called by the East German politburo, was a radical social change that defined my life, as it changed millions of other lives in Eastern Europe and around the world. Of course, life plans, careers, aspirations, and a whole way of life came to an end. But what perhaps provides an invisible and even unspoken bond between those who have lived through this process of radical social change is precisely this shared experience of having gone through this crisis. It is as if 'we' - the people who have gone through this transition - have watched an historical movie. 'We' now know that history moves: it is in transit: it *can* change. Sometimes it seems as if many Westerners, those who watched the fall of the Berlin Wall from afar, have never been to the cinema of history; many have never experienced a 'real' transition, one in which everything changes from one day to the next. I think it is for this reason that Ake - who is also someone who has gone through this transition - loves to ridicule certain Western scholars - those who talk a lot about and even celebrate change and movement, but who then continue to live their comfortable, established, middle-class lives, in which not much really changes at all.

All this seems to have now come to an end. First there was 9/11 with which 'history' re-entered the Western discourse. Suddenly the full violence of history was very physically apparent in the midst of the comfortable lives of the people of the 'First World' - precisely the violence that has often been exported to countries far away from New York, London or Berlin. Yet 9/11 resulted more in a crisis of security and to some extent in a political crisis. In order not to let the 9/11 attacks also have a significant economic impact, the policy makers of the US and the West as a whole made it even easier for banks, companies and people to obtain cheap credit. After some falls on the stock markets after 9/11, which were accompanied by the burst of the '.com' bubble, the markets were soon bullish again and all major indices subsequently rose to unprecedented heights. Easy credit and financialization were the secrets of the game. This game has now collapsed like a house of cards.

But perhaps the recent collapse of the financial markets and the deep economic crisis of 2009 are not that extraordinary at all. As Marx - particularly in Volume 3 of *Capital* - points out in some detail, capitalism should be understood as a long series of crises. According to Marx (2006), these crises occur because of the general tendency in capitalism for the rate of profit to fall. So, following Marx, one can say that crisis is at the heart of capitalism (see also Foster and Magdoff, 2009). In fact, one can go further and say that capitalism needs crises in order to renew, reproduce and re-legitimise itself (see also Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). And indeed history seems to prove the point that capitalism means crisis: Mexico (1994), Asia (1997), Argentina (2001) - to name just the most recent major accumulation crises that preceded the current global crisis that originated in the US in 2007/2008. This is to say that there is nothing extraordinary about the current capitalist crisis, precisely because crisis should be seen as something continuous in capitalism.

Such continuity has also been felt by many of 'us' who lived through the crisis of 1989. That is, many people who have lived through 'transition' are quite cynical about the change that is supposed to have delivered today's democracy and freedom. The so-called 'Wende' - the turn, the transition from state socialism to capitalism - although a big change at one level, was for many not much of a change at all. Many say without having anything theoretical or academic in mind: yesterday we had to hail our communist leaders - Lenin, Stalin, Honecker, Tito - today our 'leaders' are Ronald McDonald and Coca Cola (or whatever global brands we can think of). When people say that nothing has really

changed that much for them, it is of course easy to come up with numerous empirical counter-examples of what really *has* changed since the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' and state socialism. Yet, this cannot do away with the personal experiences of many. Many people simply feel that not much has changed for them: one set of ideological banners was simply replaced with another. Out went the red banners of communist slogans; in came the red advertising banners selling us Coke. So, with their cynicism, many Eastern Europeans instinctively bridge the presupposed gap between the then ideological system and the assumed post-ideological now with a new narrative that sees continuity between past and present. That is, there was no ideological break that would assume that we have stepped from a dark age to today's dreamworld. Instead, what we have is a continuous series of catastrophes, as Benjamin (1999a) would call it.

This is also the argument put forward in Susan Buck-Morss' book, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, which taps into the cultural, economic and political dreamworlds of East and West in order to read them together, and against each other. For Buck-Morss, the movie of the recent historical transition is one that goes through the concrete material histories of objects and texts. For her, socio-organizational systems are not vague philosophical constructs, but concrete materialities, such as statues, exhibitions, movies, buildings, art. What she shows in her book is how the materialities of East and West are, in fact, connected by similar ideological workings. For example, although the 'Cold War' was all about an ideological warfare between supposedly opposed systems, the ideologies of East and West were deeply embedded in the logic of economic progress, industrialization and military might. That is, the logics of life in East and West were connected by what Benjamin and Buck-Morss call a common series of dreamworlds and catastrophes.

### **Good Bye Lenin!**

So, what exactly happened in 1989 when from one moment to the next the veil of the state socialist fantasy was blown away and history started to move? How should we make sense of the 'Wende' - the turn, the crisis of state socialism and the start of the transition to capitalism in 1989?

The German film, *Good Bye Lenin!*, is situated at exactly that time. It is about a mother who had a heart attack just before the big changes took place in East Germany in 1989. Doctors say that she needs to rest, and under no circumstances she should get excited about anything - otherwise she would have another heart attack, which she would probably not survive. And then, of course, the 'Wende' takes place with all the excitement that goes with such an immense social change. Her children have a cunning idea. In order not to threaten the life of their mum, they pretend - when the mother wakes up out of her coma - that the GDR still exists, that the wall has never come down, that everything is still working 'orderly'. So, as the mother is tied to her bed, her children try everything to create the illusion that nothing has changed.

What we have here is a perfect event of ideological un/masking. In Žižek's (1989) Lacanian words, the Other - the ideological system of 'real existing socialism' - has stopped functioning. The symbolic system that has held East German social relations together - the marches, the banners, the empty speeches by the old leaders, the Cold War rhetoric - breaks down. The old language suddenly does not make sense anymore. What East Germans lived through back then was a complete break-down of social relations, a collapse of the ideological gloss - a general state of emergency. By showing us how the children try to maintain the ideological relations within the space of a little room or flat, *Good Bye Lenin!* shows how ideology functions at large. For example, the children produce their own version of the *Aktuelle Kamera*, the daily news bulletin of the state East German TV - and the media played, of course, an essential part in the mass hypnosis of society and the maintenance of the Eastern dreamworld.

The children have to work hard to keep the illusion alive; just like society at large is continuously at work in order to keep its dreamworld, or phantasmagoria, as Benjamin (1999a) calls it, alive. There is a continuous 'worlding' going on that produces, what Heidegger (1977) calls, the 'world-image'. That is, there is a continuous technical hustling going on that produces the world we live in - and this world is an image, a fantastic dreamworld. It is hard work to keep this dreamworld alive; it is work that needs to be repeated on a continuous basis. In other words, ideology does not just happen. It needs to be continuously worked on and repeated. There is a technical agency in the way ideology is maintained. The children in *Good Bye Lenin!* instinctively know this; so, they try everything to keep the illusion alive for their mother, because an interruption of this illusion would literally kill her.

Yet, is it the children who are acting here? Undoubtedly, they are doing something. But, according to Althusser (1971), their doing is primarily a responding - they respond to the changed ideological world around them, which literally calls on them: 'Hey, you there!'. This is what Althusser calls 'interpellation', which is the process of ideological construction of subjects (see also Jones and Spicer, 2005). That is, subjects do not construct their own world. Yet, it is also not constructed *for* them. Rather, the process of, what one could call, 'interpellated worlding' suggests that ideology is constructed through a technical process *with* subjects. Subjects respond to the Other who calls: 'Hey, you there; Ronald McDonald has now taken over; you must say good bye to Lenin!'. The children are able to respond to this call; their subjectivity can still be moulded. But their fragile mother would literally not survive if confronted by the demanding call of the new Other, the new symbolic system of the West.

However, the children do not simply believe in the new ideology. This is not a one-way street of a new Big Brother telling them what to do. As the Western brands take over Eastern European banners and the thousands of new billboards praise a brave new world of consumerism, the believing is done for them (Žižek, 1989; see also Fleming and Spicer, 2005). Believe resides with the new objects of capitalism around them, and the children respond to their call by buying them, talking about them, and accepting them - sometimes cynically - as their new 'leaders'. Žižek (1997: 112) thus talks about an 'interpassivity', which can also be translated as 'active passivity' (see also Johnsen et al., 2009). That is, for him, subjects do not actively construct their world; it is passively constructed for and with them.

For Å½iÅ¾ek, this process also involves suffering. In *Good Bye Lenin!* it is clearly the mother who suffers the most, but the film's real heroes are the children, the next generation, whose suffering is more subtle and hence more significant for the analysis of ideological transition. With Å½iÅ¾ek, one can say that the children do their suffering through the Other - through their mother and the objects of the past carefully arranged around her, which serve as reminder of a recent time and its different symbolic system. By constructing a 'false' world of the past for the mother, the children do their suffering through these objects of their history: the *Aktuelle Kamera*, the 'funny' but beloved GDR brands that have vanished from the supermarket shelves, the communist songs, etc. Again, a certain 'interpassivity' takes place here: this time it is not an embracing of the new ideology, but a longing for the belief of the past. The 'interpassive suffering' (Å½iÅ¾ek, 1997: 112) can be seen as a resistance against the new, incoming belief system. But it is not an active resistance, assuming subjects that are in full control of themselves. Instead, the children resist through the old objects of ideological belief, which are carefully arranged for the mother to enable her survival. Perhaps it is this resistance-as-suffering which enable the children to cope with the shock doctrine (Klein, 2008) of the new ideological system.

But then Lenin flies through the screen of the film theatre. One day the mother feels strong enough to get out of bed. She wanders onto the streets outside her apartment block. And suddenly, just in front of her, the ideological kernel that - arranged by the children - keeps the mother's subjectivity in place has been lifted - into the sky; it is not grounded anymore. A monument - a large size Lenin statue - is taken away by helicopter. Lenin just hangs there; he is moved away. For a moment, the mother's reality does not function anymore. This is the moment of what Å½iÅ¾ek calls, after Lacan (1977, 1998), the Real; the moment when the unbearable truth of social organization becomes visible. The Real - that which cannot be symbolized - that which is the dirty underbelly of social reality - suddenly becomes visible. Lenin in the air - not standing anywhere of importance; not imposing his historical truth onto our reality, our subjectivity.

Today, movement has become fashionable. Movements, multiplicities, repetitions, nomads and rhizomatic connections and lives are often celebrated. What is often not acknowledged is that this moment of change - if it is a real moment of transition and change - can be absolutely terrifying. This is why the children in the movie want to protect their mother from experiencing this moment of truth; because it would literally kill her. It would give her another heart attack, which she would not survive. Why? Because when the world starts to move - not just in a superficial way, such as, going on a train, or changing jobs, or joining a demonstration - no, when the world really starts to move, i.e. when the dominant ideological system breaks down, then we are talking about a traumatic experience the outcome of which is not predictable. Anything can happen.

## **Good Bye Ronald?**

It is easy to talk about such an unmasking and breakdown of ideology if it concerns the past; not just any past, but the past of the East, the old 'axis of evil' of the Cold War. That is, now that the world has moved on, it is easy to be critical of the Eastern state socialist regime, critical of that way of life. *Good Bye Lenin!* works precisely because everyone can have a good laugh about the old system, knowing very well that it is now in the past. 'How ridiculous it all was, wasn't it?' Perhaps it was. It is easy to ridicule a system of social organization that has gone. It is easy to be 'critical' if one is on the winner's side.

But what if this unmasking of ideology is to be applied to today's hegemony? This is the true moment of critique; a proper radical move. That is, it is not enough to analyze the crisis of state socialism and the possibility for radical social change in 1989 - as so many liberal commentators have been eager to do (e.g. Fukuyama, 1992). Most of these accounts of the 'Wende' assume that it was inevitable that capitalism and the system of liberal democracy that legitimises capital would win. It was all just a question of timing and finding the most opportune moment. But this is just a winner's tale of an already tired 'truth'. It is pure ideology. The proper move of critical analysis is to repeat the very moment of crisis of the 'Wende' and apply it to oneself in the here and now.

This is very much Walter Benjamin's (1999a,b) method. His aphoristic text collections *One-Way Street* and the *Arcades Project* are readings of, and engagements with, the past, with history. He hopes that his particular way of putting words together will illuminate the reader and enable certain re-cognitions in what he perceived to be the moment of danger of capitalist development. He refers to these illuminations as 'flashes of knowledge' (1999: 462). Such a flash must be understood as an event, an *Augenblick*, which hopes to discontinue and destruct the continuity of the 'eternal image' of history, which today is presented to us as 'capitalism' and 'liberal democracy' which are seemingly untouchable truths.

So, what I am suggesting here is that to truly engage with the crisis of 1989, with that particular *Augenblick*, is to repeat it. Repetition is thus wrested away from the liberal commentators that use the concept to celebrate the ephemerality of life and the capitalist nausea of the commodity world. The radical possibility of repetition - also seen by Žižek (2009) in Kierkegaard and Deleuze - is thus to see the possibility of a repetition of crisis. The question we can therefore put is this: what if the crisis of 1989 is just another node of capitalist crises? That is, if Buck-Morss (2002) and others are correct to see the contingencies between 'real existing' state socialism and 'real existing' capitalism, then perhaps 1989 needs to be analyzed as a crisis that repeats itself on a continuous basis, as capitalist crises do. If this is the case, then the crisis of 2009 is related to the crisis of 1989. Again, the proper move of radical critique is not only to realize the connection between these two dates, but to see the possibilities of radical social change that is implanted in today's moment of crisis. If we can say good bye to Lenin, we can also say good bye to Ronald McDonald!

And perhaps the 'waving good bye' to Ronald has already started. What just yesterday seemed unthinkable - the nationalisation of the biggest banks of the Western world, the end of neo-liberalism a la Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, and the re-emergence of 'big government' - is reality today. Of course, such shifts in capitalist systems of reproduction and legitimacy have occurred many times before. So, we might not necessarily say good bye to Ronald McDonald and the entire

system of reproduction and symbolisation known as capitalism. But each crisis engenders a moment of possibility. In 1989 there was no guarantee that state socialism would collapse. But it did. So, why can 2009 not be the year when we see the start of the end of capitalism itself? The Financial Times, the spokes organ of Western, liberal capitalism, seems to think it is possible. Otherwise, why would it run a high profile discussion round called 'The Future of Capitalism'. Something is in the air. If the FT is prepared to be directly associated with the 'word' (see [www.ft.com/capitalism](http://www.ft.com/capitalism)), then perhaps the moment of possibility, the moment of a suspension of ideology has come.

## Suspension

In a moment of crisis, we see glimpses of, what Lacan (1998: 184) calls, *jouissance* - the obscene enjoyment felt in the realms of the Real. For Lacan, the Real, is that which cannot be symbolized; that which cannot be predicted in a change process. And I think there was a kind of collective *jouissance* felt at the end of 1989 when the symbolic order of East Germany - with all its institutions, such as the Stasi - simply collapsed almost from one day to the next. There was a real sense that anything could happen. It was in this gap year - between October 1989 and German reunification in October 1990 - when it was not quite clear which way things would be going - it was then that enjoyment - or rather *jouissance* in the Lacanian sense, was felt. Why? Because a real opening of society took place. The symbolic order had stopped functioning, and the new order was not yet in place. Anything could happen, and indeed many openings were possible then.

Here I am not talking about Popper's (1945) open society, which in a 'proper' liberal democratic fashion tries to cater for a society's citizenship in a pluralistic way (see also De Cock and BÃ¶hm, 2007). This is not the kind of opening of a society that took place in 1989, as with Popper 'openness' is always already closed in a Lacanian sense. In Popper's open society, the ideological kernel is never displaced, because the state bureaucracy always hustles to keep the dreamworld of liberal democracy in place. Social relations are never truly opened with Popper. At the end of 1989 social relations broke down completely; and what presented itself in this break was not a pluralist 'open society', which is properly administered by the state - or by philanthropists such as Soros (2000), who is also a fan of Popper's well-ordered 'open society'. No, what took place was a breakdown of everything ordered; the state ceased to function. It was in that moment when a real openness emerged. Anything could have taken place. It is this openness which enables real change to take place. A different world was possible then.

But, of course, the social closed again - relatively quickly - when in December 1989 the big man - Helmut Kohl, the then West German chancellor - moved in to present a ten-point plan that would lead to reunification of the two Germanies. This was the start of the end - the start of the new ideological veil that would soon be put over the head of the social, and the end of the real opening of society. The 'open society' moved into East Germany, in order to displace and even destruct the real opening of society that presented itself in the autumn of 1989. The new statues were finally erected on 3 October 1990 when the two Germanies reunited. What we have seen since then is the process of 'Ossis' - as East Germans are often called by West Germans - getting used to their new ideology. What they had

lived through is remarkable. Living through the time when an ideological veil comes off, when mass utopia suddenly collapses, when the mass psychological control of the people suddenly shows cracks and eventually breaks down completely, is an experience of *jouissance*.

This *jouissance* was soon replaced by the pleasures of the new consumer culture, the commodity dreamworld of the West. Lacan (1998: 184) makes a difference between pleasure and enjoyment, or *jouissance*. In contrast to *jouissance*, which is articulated in the realms of the Real, that which cannot be symbolized, pleasure is sanctioned by the Other, by the ideological and symbolic system that sustains and produces the subject. That is, pleasure is a product of the Other. It is like watching Big Brother and consuming TV images selling us profane joys of the commodity world we live in. This is Marx's (1976) main purpose of introducing his concept of 'commodity fetishism', which, for him, is the cornerstone of the ideological functioning of social relations under capitalism. For Marx, the commodity has to perform all sorts of wild dances to sell itself on the market. In other words, it has to continuously change its appearance - new fashions, new colours, new news stories, new everything - without actually changing its content at all. The appearance of form is everything, while the content remains the same (see also BÅllm, 2006b).

Yet, as Marx (2006) points out, as capital reproduces itself, there also have to be continuous crises. The ideological mechanism, which he describes as commodity fetishism, has to break down at some point - there are continuously cracks opening up in the house of capital. Just like the cracks finally showed up in East German ideology. Equally, the ideological illusion maintained by the children in *Good Bye Lenin!* could not last forever. At some point, the temporary dreamworld produced for the mother had to break down. This is something Å½ek highlights again and again in his work: although the symbolic and ideological order continuously tries to sell us the fact that it is complete and completely in charge - that is, there cannot be an outside to the Other - what, in fact, continuously take place is the breakdown of the symbolic order, which, of course, is tried to be denied and glossed over. Yet, the cracks in the Other are always visible. For example, when Lenin flies through the sky in front of the mother, the crack in the mother's symbolic world breaks down. Her children try to fix the illusion again, but it is too late. The event of Lenin flying through the sky is too much to handle; it is the start of the end.

## **Act!**

Today the capitalist crisis is all too visible. Until very recently the system tried to lure us into the belief that glass offices, glass walls and glass towers are architectural symbols of a real transparency and openness. Today we know that this was simply a lie. Today we know that the whole discourse of transparency was simply an ideological attempt to make the system even more opaque: less democratic, less accessible, less accountable, less open. The ideological dreamworld of consumer and finance capitalism has now collapsed in the most spectacular fashion. The existing neo-liberal logic has been suspended. A real dislocation has taken place, as Laclau (1990) would call it.

According to Laclau (1990), it is precisely this dislocation which enables hegemonic politics. That is, once an existing symbolic structure shows cracks, and once people stop believing in that hegemonic system - for example, capitalism and liberal democracy - then there is an opportunity for real change. Note that this model of discontinuous change - or rather radical social change through discontinuity - is quite different to the one proposed by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) for whom change is rhizomatic and continuous. The future community, they argue, is already embedded in the current relations of the multitude. Change is thus immanent to the system, which is an argument that is well known from Marx (1976) who shows how capitalism has to continuously change in order to open up new opportunities for accumulation (BÃ¶hm, 2006b; Å½iÅ¼ek, 2004). While Hardt and Negri are not apologists for capitalist relations, they argue that there is always an overflow of creativity in the multitude that will eventually change capitalism beyond recognition. In other words, they are hoping for a change from within the system.

But, for Laclau (2004), such immanence can deliver no politics or real counter-hegemonic challenge to the system. This is because a real dislocation and a real break of the symbolic order needs to take place. And this 'taking place' is the right choice of words, as this break simply takes place. That is, it cannot be predicted, planned or organized. Å½iÅ¼ek talks about a rupture coming out of nowhere, a "rupture after which 'nothing remains the same'" (Å½iÅ¼ek, 1992: 45). And it is this rupture that we cannot find in Hardt and Negri who believe that the future society will somehow organically emerge out of the current one. According to Å½iÅ¼ek, Hardt and Negri fail to conceptualize such an act in which nothing remains the same as before. This is an event of *jouissance*, the obscene enjoyment when social relations completely break down and a new society and symbolic order becomes possible. This is what Å½iÅ¼ek calls 'the act' (Å½iÅ¼ek, 2002a; see also De Cock and BÃ¶hm, 2007).

Å½iÅ¼ek's 'act' is a strange creature. On one hand, it is something that presents itself to us by way of a crack in the symbolic system that simply happens, i.e. it cannot be predicted or planned. On the other hand, though, it is also something that we can engage in; there is an agency here for the subject: 'one acts, makes a leap, and then one hopes that things will turn out all right' (Å½iÅ¼ek, 2002b: 81). With the 'act' we, the social body - as this is clearly a communal and common event - try to make a leap into the future that is inherently unknown to us. There is no guarantee that things will work out OK; we cannot even predict whether the act will lead to something 'positive' or 'negative', because this judgement is dependent on a symbolic order that is to be changed itself. That is, it is easy to judge what happened in the past, for example, the 'terrible dictatorships' that emerged in the East, because this judgement is passed and legitimated by a symbolic system of the historical 'winner'. But when we make a leap into the future, then all judgement of history may change.

My concern here has been to show that such an event, such an act, is not simply some sort of theoretical state. Instead, I have tried to reflect about the rupture, the real state of emergency, many have lived through at the end of the 1980s when the system of state socialism collapsed almost overnight. We said 'Good bye' to Lenin and 'Hello' to Ronald McDonald. We said 'Good bye' to one empire and its symbolic order, and 'Hello' to another one. Having this experience of life under two different Others, and having gone through this radical change process already once, has made many people aware that even today's hegemonic system of capitalism and liberal democracy is not going to be there forever. It is a vulnerable system, like all hegemonic systems are. It can disappear overnight,

if the conditions are right.

The mistake we made in 1989 and 1990 - that crucial moment of dislocation - was to not 'deepen' the crisis. That is, we were not able to connect the crisis of real existing socialism to that of real existing capitalism. We failed to see that both systems *were* and *are* connected to each other and that getting rid of one of them will not solve the problems of the other. In 1989 and 1990 the discourse that won the day was one that saw capitalism as the saviour, the liberator, the Messiah. But it was an illusion, as many East Europeans now realize, as they are stuck in bankrupt countries, having lost their jobs, dignity and hope. What is perhaps not realized enough in the West is that 2009 might mark one of the deepest economic crises since the 1929 crash, but it also marks the end of the 'transition' project, 20 years after its inception.

The discourse of 'transition' hoped to align the lands of the East - and it is clear that this does not simply include the countries of Eastern Europe - to the discourse of capitalism, liberal democracy and 'freedom' of the West. This project has now come to an end because of the deep cracks that have emerged in the symbolic system of the West. Now, the task, in my view, is not to overcome this crisis, as most left leaning commentators, think tanks, politicians and organizations advocate. Overcoming the crisis is the very hope and task of bourgeois capitalism, that system which presents us with these crises on a continuous basis. In order to discontinue this continuity of crisis we have to, instead, deepen the crisis of capitalism and liberal democracy.

What could such a project of deepening the crisis entail? First of all, it is important to not see the current crisis of capitalism as an extraordinary event. Instead, we need to see the continuity of crisis in capitalism. By aligning all the crises that capitalism has presented us with, we need to make visible the catastrophe of capitalism as such. Second - and this is what I have also tried to do in this paper - we need to align today's crisis of capitalism with the crisis of 'real existing' socialism in 1989. That is, it is important to deepen the current crisis by linking it to the crisis of the 'transition' project, hence showing that the crisis and collapse of state socialism can be linked to the imaginary dreamworld of capitalism. One obvious thing that connects 'real existing' socialism and 'real existing' capitalism, for example, is the ecological crisis, or rather the series of ecological catastrophes, that have characterized both politico-economic systems. In state socialism the social imaginary of socio-technical progress of humanity was only possible through the subordination and even destruction of nature. This is not much different in capitalism. Hence, third, a deepening of today's crisis needs to link the economic, political and cultural destructiveness of capitalism to the destruction of nature on which capital feeds.

This list can easily be continued. What I hope is clear is that what I mean by 'deepening the crisis' is that it is not enough to resist the massive loss of jobs and the outrageous policies of rescuing banks and finance corporations that have become too big to fail. It is not enough to engage in traditional union politics, which is primarily aimed at saving jobs. What, instead, is needed is a movement to deepen the current crisis by showing how completely unsustainable the capitalist system is. What we need to work toward is not the rescue of a failed and sick system that has brought a series of crises and catastrophes over humanity. Instead, we need to work toward an act, an act of difference, an act of change, an act of dislocation and discontinuity. Most people I speak to can clearly see a need for a radical social change, but they then immediately ask: 'But what is the alternative?', 'Capitalism is the only game in town'.

This is what we said about 'real existing' socialism in 1989 as well. And then it collapsed; like a house of cards. It is possible. It has happened before, and it will happen again. *Carpe diem*.

### About the author

Steffen BÅllhm is Reader in Management at the University of Essex. He was born in Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic, in 1973. He was 16 years old when, in 1989, he was plunged into a deep crisis, from which he may never recover. To deal with this crisis, he became a Certified Banker in 1993 and worked in investment banking and management consulting in Germany and the UK for several years, but this turned out to be a blind alley. Since becoming an academic in 2003 he has been trying to engage in crisis management by being involved in publishing *Repositioning Organization Theory* (Palgrave, 2006), *Against Automobility* (Blackwell, 2006), *Upsetting the Offset: The Political Economy of Carbon Markets* (MayFly, 2009) as well as *ephemera* (ephemeraweb.org) and MayFlyBooks (mayflybooks.org). He can be contacted at steffen@essex.ac.uk.

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I use the signifier 'we' not to address an essential, homogenous social body but, rather, an imagined community of East Europeans who have gone through dramatic changes since the end of state socialism. Of course, this is a very problematic 'we' in many ways, since it assumes the homogeneity of a mass body, particularly if we remind ourselves of the differences between types of state socialism at work in, for example, East Germany and Yugoslavia. However, for me the 'we' is a rhetorical move that must be seen in connection to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theoretical apparatus that indeed enables a hegemonic discourse of 'us' versus 'them'. For them, state socialism can be seen as a specific arrangement of discourses that enable the emergence and maintenance of a hegemony. This hegemony is never a pure homogeneity of a singular 'we' as this 'we' is riddled with antagonisms and heterogeneities. However, for Laclau and Mouffe, we can still talk about a 'we' that is produced through specific hegemonic power relations. In other words, the language of mass ideology and historical formations should not be abandoned. For more on this point, see Bakhtin (2006a).