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Crisis, Rupture and Legitimacy: Final Reflections

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At this writing, the anniversary of the January 6th, 2021 riot at the US Capitol approaches. On that day an angry mob of armed extremists (or 'mobsters') stormed the Capitol building in a desperate bid to prevent Joe Biden from becoming President and to return Donald Trump to the White House. In so doing, the rioters intended to Stop the Steal, and thus to correct what they regarded as a grave miscarriage of justice. In re-instating Trump, however, the mobsters sought to do more than right a single wrong. They also had broader, more all-encompassing goals. In their view, the election was a sham, the results having been wildly distorted by systematic, widespread fraud. The idea that dark forces would attempt to perpetrate such a fraud upon the American people was deeply troubling. More disturbing still, however, was that they had succeeded. The debacle of the election, the mobsters believed, revealed the presence of dangers so ominous that they threatened the country at its very core. Returning Trump to the presidency, they hoped, would stem the tide of those dark forces.

These views are extreme but not at all unusual. Although once restricted to the margins of political life they have come to occupy its very centre. Indeed, such views are now shared by millions upon millions of like-minded individuals, all across the country. Despite their open and explicit xenophobia and intolerance, these individuals regard themselves as making up a 'moral community'. Symptomatic of the fear and fervour that drives this community is the following: although the January 6th mobsters killed and maimed, and although they sought to do far more (they intended to hang the Vice President of the US in a public execution), neither the mobsters nor the moral community view the events at the Capitol as in any way problematic. To the contrary: they view the mobsters as patriots and the January 6th Riot as part of a revolution.

America's new mobster/patriots believe that the violence of January 6th is legitimized and sacralised by a calling higher than the law. They regard themselves as the last line of defence in a battle with profoundly malevolent forces that have already infected the country with impurities, and now threaten it with imminent demise. What is at stake in this struggle is not just the deaths of a few individuals (at the Capitol) but the death of an entire nation, an entire people. Indeed, America's community of mobster/patriots believes that the US has fallen from a great height. Tragically, a way of life that was once the envy of the world is now crumbling. That way of life *must* be protected, at any and all cost.

The mobster/patriots were certain that the fate of Donald Trump would determine the fate of their country and, as January 6th approached, they became increasingly fearful. Convinced that America nation was in dire need of assistance, and having exhausted all legal channels, the mobster/patriots took up arms to answer that need. January 6th, however, was just the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, the moral community that has formed around Trump — a community based on suspicion and xenophobia — seeks to spearhead a sweeping movement of purification and

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re-birth that is akin to a Holy War, and is being waged against an entire host of enemies. This war is intended to restore the health and wellbeing of a society that is ridden with disease and poisoned by contaminants. Among the most striking features of this war is the following: those fighting it regard as their sworn enemies not just the usual suspects (minorities, feminists, foreigners, liberals) but virtually the entire state apparatus. Indeed, the patriots who have come together to preserve their endangered way of life believe that the state has completely discredited itself. At a result, only patriots (mobsters) can be trusted to exercise armed force in defence of the country's legitimate citizens.

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The events of January 6th are a useful point of entry into the issues that are explored with such skill, insight and originality in the contributions to this Special Issue. The authors document in rich detail the emergence of new communities of suspicion (and trust!) all around the world. They document as well the fierce struggles that rage over the meaning of the public, and how to safeguard the health of the public. The essays bring to light equally contentious debates over the parameters of the citizenry, over who may act in its name, and what it means to do so. The articles document case after case in which the state is seen as having failed the general populace. Indeed, the authors show that in a great many contexts, legitimacy is no longer regarded as residing in the institutions of government. Rather, it is seen has having migrated elsewhere, to diverse non-state locations. In these locales, alternative forms of legitimacy and community are unfolding.

In broaching these topics, the studies in this Special Issue break important new ground. Building on Pardo and Prato's foundational scholarship on the anthropology of legitimacy (Pardo ed. 2000, 2004; Pardo and Prato eds 2010, 2019), the articles are perhaps most distinctive in foregrounding the *temporal* dimensions to processes of legitimation — a topic that has been neglected in much of the literature. The contributions do so by focusing on controversies about legitimacy and health during an era of widespread turmoil and crisis. As anthropologists have long recognized, there is much to be learned by examining seemingly familiar and staid processes during periods of crisis, when the forces that render these processes ordinary cease to operate. For it is during these moments that the conditions of possibility of the normal and the everyday become visible. These essays provide us with the opportunity to seize upon crisis in order to *see* legitimacy in a new light — to do so by examining contexts in which it falters or fails.

As the contributors show, however, crisis is not all of one piece. Two different modalities of crisis are currently shaping struggles over legitimacy, community, health and the public. The first modality reflects the slow violence (Nixon 2011) unleashed on populations across the globe by processes of privatization and related efforts to redefine legitimate social life in neoliberal terms. Many of the articles foreground this problem. Collectively, they show the impact of privatization on an entire range of vulnerable groups, as well as the feelings of betrayal that ensue

when governments prove unwilling to protect the vulnerable from assaults on their wellbeing. As the contributions show, new understandings of legitimacy, citizenship, health and the public are emerging all around the world as groups threatened by privatization draw upon the diverse cultural resources at their disposal to reconfigure communities of trust.

The contributions also shed important new light on the principles by which these emergent communities are configured. The Special Issue highlights two such principles. Some groups seek to protect themselves from privatization by seeking out 'openings'. They reach across socio-cultural divides to incorporate new allies into a broader, more inclusive community of trust, a more inclusive public. Other groups, however, do the opposite. They commit themselves to 'closure' rather than openings and adopt practices that exclude rather than include. Like the January 6th mobsters, they reinforce rather than relax community boundaries, eschew difference, purge themselves of impurities, and establish a restrictive public.

The articles also draw our attention to a second modality of crisis, one that has had equally important effects on legitimacy, citizenship, health and the public. This second modality is one of sudden rupture rather than slow, steady assault. Rupture may be distinguished from assault in that it arrives without reason, out of nowhere. Furthermore, unlike assault, rupture threatens the entire population rather than a vulnerable segment of it. Indeed, rupture serves no one's interests, and is difficult for everyone to comprehend (COVID-19, for example).[1] Unlike the slow violence of privatization, the sudden violence of rupture makes no effort to prescribe. It is not intent upon replacing an old form of order with a new one. Nor does it point in any new direction. It is directionless and pointless. Rupture undermines *all* forms of order. It is destructive rather than constructive.

One of the least remarked upon aspects of rupture is its impact on legitimacy. By its very nature, rupture tends to shatter existing understandings, expectations and relations. As a result, rupture involves the violent separation of what is from what was. Indeed, faced with rupture, people find that their accustomed ways of doing and believing no longer make any sense. Rupture thus leaves people without a meaningful history. It does so by destroying patterns of authority, delegitimizing the past, and leaving people stranded in a rootless present. But rupture does more than separate people from their past. It also denies them a future. Having lost any sense of where they have come from, people find it difficult to have any idea where they might be going. Indeed, they are caught in a condition of impasse (Caduff et al. n.d.), in which time seems to have come to a standstill.

Rupture thus renders nonsensical what had formerly passed as common sense. If people are to find a way out of impasse, they must develop a new common sense, a new framework of meaning, that can explain what has suddenly been rendered inexplicable. As the articles show, however, because past ways of doing and believing have been invalidated, generating such an account is difficult. Indeed, it involves an important element of ethnogenesis. It involves the

[1] There are of course other examples of crisis. One thinks immediately of the economic crisis that descended upon the countries of southern Europe, with Greece being a particularly clear example (Panourgia 2011).

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creation of new cultural worlds. In creating the world anew, people often have recourse to elements of belief that the old order dismissed as marginal or irrational. It is precisely because these notions were once ridiculed that they can now move to centre stage and can become the basis of a new common sense, a narrative that provides a new rationale for connecting the present to the past and the future.

By exploring how legitimation processes unfold in times of crisis, and by distinguishing between different modalities of crisis (slow assault versus sudden rupture), the contributions to this Special Issue shed important light on the forces that are generating new geographies of suspicion and trust across the globe. They do so by showing that each modality of crisis undermines existing patterns of legitimacy in distinctive ways, and confronts the populations thus affected with different dilemmas as they seek to resolve the crisis of legitimacy. They also identify the contrasting principles (openings, closures, ethnogenesis) that these groups employ as they seek to reconfigure legitimacy. But the Special Issue does more. In addition to helping us see the object of ethnographic enquiry in a new light, the contributions also have implications for the subjects who undertake such enquiries. They show how conditions of crisis compel us to re-think the conceptual categories that we employ to interpret ethnography.

Among the most important of these categories is 'health'. The articles greatly enrich our understanding of this term by showing that, in the context of crisis, health has no clear or unambiguous referent. Indeed, groups across the globe associate health with a wide range of seemingly unrelated issues, from gang violence to intervention by spirit mediums, from road repair to waste disposal, from freedom of choice to the integrity of elections. In addition to documenting these wide variations in the meaning of health, the Special Issue does something more. It also draws our attention to a major shift in the landscape of legitimacy, a shift that is unfolding across the planet. Indeed, the articles document a growing suspicion of the rational-secular-bureaucratic as a way of engaging with the world, and the ever-more-widespread embrace of the non-rational, the spiritual and the emotive.

The conditions of crisis that are focus of the articles also help us see legitimacy in a new light. The contributions do so by analysing legitimacy in its absence — by exploring where people believe legitimacy *should* be located, who should be (but is not) exercising it on their behalf, and the sense of alarm and dismay that ensues when those expectations are not met. In the most diverse of circumstances, people believe that legitimate authority should be located in 'the state'. By exploring contexts in which the state has lost legitimacy, by identifying the myriad locations where legitimacy is relocating, and by tracing the steps people take to re-establish legitimacy in these non-state locations, the contributions draw attention to the emergence of entire new topographies of order and conflict.

The articles further contribute to academic discussion and debate by suggesting the emergence of a distinctive form of legitimacy, one that is born of crisis. As suggested in the discussion of the January 6th Capitol Riot, populations facing conditions of rupture commonly often come together on the basis of 'necessity'. What is distinctive about necessity is that it is seen as justifying virtually any kind of action, any challenge to what is, any effort at

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transformation. In other words, necessity is regarded as superseding all existing forms of legitimate order. The specific necessity that drives community formation varies according to context, as do the principles upon which the communities that seek to address it are configured. To take but two contemporary examples, in some settings communities coalesce around the necessity of protecting the nation — a concern that generates a community of suspicion, which is based on closure (that is, America's 'moral community' of mobster/patriots).[2] In other circumstances, however, communities come together around the necessity of saving the planet — a preoccupation that produces a community of sacrifice, which is based on openings (Nugent and Suhail 2021).

The articles also raise important questions about the meaning of the public, a term that is often associated with the citizenry. Because the contributions concern situations in which the public is being reconceived and citizenship is being redefined, they are very effective in bringing out the inherently political nature of these terms — which generally present themselves as apolitical. Karl Marx (1843) raised a related point almost two centuries ago in his reflections about the state. He argued that the state is an illusory sovereignty made up of imaginary citizens. In other words, the assertions of equality that underlie the idea of an undifferentiated citizenry conceal the enormous inequalities in wealth, power and possibility that characterize the real lives of the people that make up any political community. Neither the state nor the law addresses this problem. Indeed, as Marx argues, they conceal it. As Anatole France put it, 'The law, in all its majestic equality, forbids the rich and the poor alike from sleeping under bridges, begging in the streets and stealing bread' (1914: 94).

As the foregoing implies, the articles in the Special Issue also compel us to re-think the state. By focusing on contexts in which communities of suspicion, trust and sacrifice challenge the highly interested and arbitrary nature of government action, the articles illustrate Marx's point about the illusory nature of state sovereignty, and its inability to protect the rights of its citizens. But the contributions do something more. They also resonate with the writings of Max Weber. Weber (1946: 78) famously defined the state as 'a human community that (successfully) claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force'. It is worth emphasizing that Weber did *not* define the state as an institution or a bureaucracy (Brown 1995), although he easily could have had he wished to. Instead, Weber was at pains to define the state as a human community.

This is a point that is unlikely to be without significance in that Weber wrote so extensively about the state and bureaucracy. It is also a point that is directly relevant to the contributions presented here. Indeed, the articles enrich Weber's emphasis on the state-as-community by asking the following question. In what circumstances do human communities come to see legitimate order as separate from the institutions that govern it? Put differently, in what circumstances do (some) citizens come to believe that they have been failed by the state? Furthermore, how might our understanding of the state change if we were to follow Weber's lead — if we approached the state as a human community that claims a monopoly on the right

[2] Here, the articles echo the work of Agamben (2005), especially his analysis of Nazi Germany.

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to use legitimate force (America's mobster/patriots, for example) rather than as an institution that exercises such a monopoly?

These considerations raise a second question that is related to the first. If, as Weber would have it, the state is reconceptualized as a human community rather than an institution, what are the forces that define the boundaries of such communities? Put differently, what are the forces that shape the parameters of the new communities of trust, suspicion and sacrifice that are emerging all around the world, in conditions of crisis? Which contexts promote tendencies toward closure — toward the formation of rigid, narrowly-defined communities of suspicion (whether in terms of race, class, gender, nation, and so on)? Alternatively, what circumstances encourage people to seek out openings — to explore the possibility of expanding communities of trust and sacrifice, so that they incorporate groups that were formerly regarded as suspect?

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The contributions to this Special Issue break important new ground in the study of legitimacy and health. They do so by exploring these issues during a time of great turmoil. By analysing seemingly familiar problems in a highly unfamiliar setting, the contributions reveal hitherto unexplored aspects of the processes by which particular forms of legitimacy come to be seen as legitimate. The articles do so in several ways. First, encourage us to re-examine the object of ethnographic enquiry; that is, they shed new light on the principles that underlie the formation of the emergent communities of suspicion, trust and sacrifice that are taking shape around the globe. Second, they have important implications for the subjects who undertake ethnographic enquiry. Indeed, they encourage us to look closely and critically at the conceptual categories that we employ in carrying out ethnographic analysis. It is difficult to imagine a more interesting or important set of essays.

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