

# The Immense Accumulation of Spectacles: Crisis Capitalism or Crisis Exceptionalism

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## Abstract

*Drawing on Debord's Society of Spectacle, this paper explores the relationship between the broad neoliberal capitalism spectacle and the specific representations of the economic crisis mediated by an Italian newspaper, Il Sole 24 Ore. In the context of informational capitalism and based on a theme analysis of the newspaper front-page articles in the period of 2010-11, the paper maintains that the crisis should be understood as a contradictory enactment: being in between a necessary and functional aspect of neoliberal capitalism as well as a genuine, potentially subversive, exception from it.*

**Keywords:** Crisis, Debord, Il Sole 24 Ore, Italy, Gramsci, Schmitt, Agamben

It is difficult to not think at the recent global financial crisis as a marching parade of mediated images depicting people on the streets protesting austerity policies, home evictions, the semiotic impact of rating agencies on the markets and altisonant statements of politicians. As Alain Badiou (Le Monde, 17/10/08, p.A1) very eloquently illustrates:

As it is presented to us, the planetary financial crisis resembles one of those bad films concocted by that factory for the production of pre-packaged blockbusters that today we call the "cinema". Nothing is missing, the spectacle of mounting disaster, the feeling of being suspended from enormous puppet-strings, the exoticism of the identical – the Bourse of Jakarta placed under the same spectacular rubric as New York, the diagonal from Moscow to Sao Paulo, everywhere the same fire ravaging the same banks – not to mention terrifying

plotlines: it is impossible to avert Black Friday, everything is collapsing, everything will collapse.

However, before Badiou, almost fifty years ago, Debord (1967) in *The Society of the Spectacle* claimed that under the conditions of late capitalism “all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles: everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (thesis 5). The spectacle, described as a formidable mediation standing in between people’s “actual” life and how they perceived it, represented a radical attack to modern Western life, which informed most of the radical cultural theory produced later on. In this respect, the main question this paper tries to address is whether the notion of the Spectacle still provides valid interpretive categories to understand current times and, more specifically, the recent economic crisis. The answer offered here maintains that a contextualized and qualified version of that spectacle can indeed deliver a useful perspective through which understand

the rich production of meanings and cultural practices generated by the recent economic predicament.

Accordingly, in this paper I explore the relationship between the broad neoliberal capitalist spectacle and the specific representations of the economic crisis mediated by the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*. In the contest of informational capitalism and based on a theme analysis of the newspaper front-page articles in the period of 2010-11, I claim that the crisis should be understood as a contradictory enactment of the spectacle: being in between a necessary and functional “state of exception” of neoliberal capitalism, as well as a genuine, potentially subversive, rupture.

First of all, the study aims at illuminating how the idea of economic crisis operates at the same time as a global grand narrative of capitalism and as a historic specific expression manifested in the Italian case. In fact, the crisis acquires culturally specific meanings, which resonated with particular anxieties and sense of urgency of the country, which is represented by themes such as “Italy’s Meta Crisis: Dialectical Modernity and the South,” “Crisis as Social Drama” Telos and Antagonism,” “Market as Historic Agents,” and finally “Technocracy as Redemptive Politics.”

Second, drawing on Schmitt (2006) and Agamben’s (2005) concept of the “state of exception,” the analysis shows how the crisis falls at the same time inside and outside the general spectacle. *De facto*, the “exceptional” condition of the crisis presents ambivalent outcomes. On the one hand, it creates a contest of social panic and state of emergency that allows taking exceptional measures that reproduce the general spectacle. In this regard, I will use Gramsci’s understanding of crisis (1971) to underline the aspects of continuity of the crisis in relation capitalism.

On the other, the crisis is also potentially working as a de-alienating dynamic, especially in the contest of social media and the way crisis-related social movements have taken advantage of them. In fact, the identified themes also suggest a potential breach in the spectacle caused by cultural and material implications of the economic downturn, which show the contradiction between the natural condition of the spectacle—its predisposition to ever change—and its natural inclination, i.e. to appear as eternal. Thus, the crisis is ultimately understood as dialectical phenomenon caught in between social reproduction of the spectacle as well as opening up opportunities for social change (Dutta, 2011).

In order to advance my argument, after a brief contextualization of the crisis in Italy, I provide a thematization of the media coverage of the crisis by *Il Sole 24 Ore*. Then, in the second part of the paper, I use Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*’s investigation as a framework through which expounding how those themes play out together in the context of informational capitalism and how the “exceptional” status of the crisis may produce contradictory phenomena.

### **Italy’s Crisis Within the Crisis**

The financial crisis of 2007-2008 hit Italy considerably hard. Whereas, the country was not directly affected by the bursting of US housing bubble, it suffered the effects of the general neoliberal environment that generated such a bubble in the first place. In fact, neoliberal-banking products such as the Credit Default Swaps (CDS), a JP Morgan creation that works as insurance for capital investors, propelled a predatory politics of financial speculations. In time of prospective economic issues, CDS became a powerful speculation tool because by increasing the risk of insolvency of the loaner, investors could raise

the price of CDS, which then could be sold as higher value commodities. This was precisely the dynamic of how the global crisis affected the Italian public debt in 2010-11: the speculation operated like as a self-fulfilling prophecy, which, by simply betting on the increasing unsustainability of the Italian public debt, indeed made the debt unattainable by increasing the costs of financialization.

However, Italy entered in recession even before the financial crisis. In fact, the increasing impoverishment of the middle class in the last decades had heavily contracted the domestic consumption, which, until mid 1990s, was compensated by a worthy rate of export. When the exports fell the economy started contracting and the public debt expanding. As a result, in the period between 2008 and 2014 Italy lost 9% of its GDP, with an unemployment rate that is currently approaching 13% (voxeu.org, 2014).

Thus, to sum up, Italy has been experiencing a twofold crisis, which comprises noticeable historical shortcomings of its economy combined with experiencing the effects of a global financial crisis that dramatically aggravated the financialization of its public debt. In the next section, through the lens of the newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*'s articles, I will show how dominant neoliberal language of the market hybridizes when intersecting historic specific narratives of Italy.

### **Mediated Crisis: *Il Sole 24 Ore*'s Multiple Narratives**

In this section, I explore how the crisis contributes to create new meanings and re-signify pre-existing ones in the Italian public discourse, which in this case was mediated by the most prestigious economic-oriented daily press *Il Sole 24 Ore*. The examination of the text will be carried out through an analysis of the consistent and systematic use of figurative language condensed in themes. My

assumption is that allegories display how various meanings are linked, integrated, and/or reconstituted apart from their literal sense and in reference to profoundly established culturally material imaginary of a given community.

In order to proceed with my examination, I draw on Barthes's (1979) practical strategies to identify themes in a given text that I briefly summarize here: first, themes must be consistently present; second, they are repeated in a number of different objects; finally, themes are frequently linked to an ideological network. Based on such criteria, I have examined 1000 articles (both columns and leading opinion) retrieved from the first pages of *Il Sole 24 Ore* during the period between January 2010 and December 2011, the climatic phase of Italian financial crisis. Those are the themes that I identified: "Markets as Historic Agents," "Italy's Meta Crisis: Dialectical Modernity and the South," "Crisis as Social Drama: Telos and Antagonism," and finally "Technocracy as Redemptive Politics."

While those themes can be analytically recognized as narratives in their own right, in the general discourse produced by this newspaper, they constantly overlap each other. Thus, their examination as separated subjects should be understood as a purely analytical moment that facilitates their discussion. Let us examine them in detail.

The first theme I identified is "Markets As Historic Agents," which was especially present when Italy felt under the speculation pressure of the financial markets and the spread between German Bunds and Italian debt treasure bonds dramatically increased. This theme reveals how the particular rhetoric of the newspaper personified the markets as deliberative actors in their own right instead of being treated as the resultant of complex interactions of human practices. Those "personas," evaluate, judge

with the power of impersonal, seemingly objective arbitration (2010, May, 7, p.A1; Gaiani, 2010, March 2, p.A1; Mingardi, 2010 April, 16, p.A1).

Concretely, their distance from humanity depicts them as capricious and never really predictable (Riolfi, 2010 May, 7, p.A1) classic Greek gods who are capable to shake global economies with the speed and stroke of a “lightning” (Roubini; 2011, June 18, p.A1). Accordingly, the markets are often seen as “attacking,” “sieging” a given country (2011, August 9, p.A1). Moreover, because of their power, the markets demand to be “flattered,” “courted” and “praised,” (2011, December, 10, p.A1).

A second theme that I identified is “Italy’s Meta Crisis: Dialectical Modernity and the South,” which describes how the global crisis was translated into Italy’s specific narratives and concerns. In this case, two main aspects seem to be constantly linked together: the idea of Italy as a dysfunctional model capitalism and its most pronounced exemplification: Southern Italy. As a result, Italy is depicted as a psychotic country that presents two antithetic faces: the industrious, modern and rational North and the socially parasite, anti-modern and mafioso South (Campiglio, 2010, March 20, p.A1).

The dichotomy between “North” and “South,” considered to be most important source of dysfunctionality, is frequently expressed by articles that describe how northern cities business “fight,” “defeat” the crisis by willingness and entrepreneurship (Rossi, 2010, May 5, p.A1; Basile, 2010, April 18, p.A1; Casadei, 2010, March 02, p.A1). Some other times, political authorities such as President of the Italian Republic reproaches *il Sud* (Southern Italy) for not adequately responding to the crisis (Pesole, 2010 March 4, p.A1).

Such a deep running contradiction according to *Il Sole 24 Ore* creates one major problem for Italy

in respect to global capital: “credibility,” and the fact that Italy is represented as an unreliable economic system that requires “special attention” for its enormous public debt (2011, November 5, p.A1) and the lack of budget rigor (2011, June, 02, p.A1). The climax of such a dysfunctionality theme concerns the possible resurgence of political violence (as it already happened in 1970s) due to the exacerbation of internal issues (Pesole, 2010, May, 9, p.A1). The general implication of such a theme is that capitalism acts as a containment factor of an otherwise overflowing chaos reigning in Italy (Sorrentino, 2010, April 30, p.A1). As matter of fact, such chaos can only be controlled by neoliberal “structural reforms” (Cerretelli, 2010, April, 17, p.A1).

A third theme consistently present in *Il Sole 24 Ore* is “Crisis as Social Drama: Telos and Antagonism.” This is a theme that closely resonates with the idea of crisis as an unfolding, dramatic spectacle in which people maybe become victims, villains and heroes. The general narrative conveyed by this theme depicts the crisis as a traumatic interruption of the teleology of capitalist progress (i.e. capital accumulation), which creates chaos and antagonisms. In the die-hard modernist driven imaginary of progress, capitalism is consistently being associated to “dynamism,” “action,” “energy,” and “(labor) force,” powerful machineries and entrepreneurship is understood as the effort to constructively transform those resources into wealth. In this sense, the crisis is perceived to be congealing and wastefully consuming those vital energies (Scozzari, 2010, May 18, p.A1).

The crisis constitutes an inertia resisting any motions ahead or any steering towards a meaningful direction. Thus, the variable macro political economic indexes such as GDP, the rate of employment and unemployment, the markets, the stock exchange, all measure the presence or absence of the teleological

force of progress. Accordingly, when the economy “slows down,” “history stops” (2010, July 23, p.A1) and falls backwards in the same way countries are being “downgraded” by rating agencies (Longo, 2010, April 04, p.A1).

In such a moment of disorientation, i.e. lack of direction-telos, opposing forces antagonize each other. Thus, economic sectors, cities, or captains of industry “must stand up” and “beat the crisis” (2011, February 04, p.A1), “dribbling it” (2010, September 29, p.A1), and “resisting it” (2011, December 10, p.A1). The crisis is understood as a drama, as a catastrophic event (2010, March, 20, p.A1) that produces a state of emergency (Beda, 2010, March 5, p.A1), which needs to be faced with the determination of a conflict against a mortal enemy or a biological hazard (Berta, 2010, March 21, p.A1). In its exceptionality, the crisis may also require unorthodox alliances such as the one between the state and market (Profumo, 2010, May 04, p.A1).

The metaphor of war is remarkably present in images of trenches, ( Bufacchi, 2010, May 7, p.A1; Sorrentino, 2010, July 11, p.A1; Sorrentino, 2010, May 23, p.A1) and duel-like confrontations between institutions or as specific economic sectors (2010, June 18, p.A1), EU banks (2010, June 12, p.A1), the rating agencies (Lomba, 2011, February 1, p.A1). Moreover, the spectacularization sometimes was expressed by explicit comparisons with fiction dramas (2011, December, 01, p.A1; 2010, March 19, p.A1; Danna, 2010, May 30, p.A1) or by references to conspiracy theories (Naim, 2010, March 20, p.A1; Chiellino, 2010, March, 02, p.A1).

While in the theme just reviewed the dramatic crisis tends to privilege individualistic kind of responses, in the last theme I examine, “Technocracy as Redemptive Politics,” responses and concerns about the crisis are considered at the social,

collective and systemic level. Certainly there is a strong link between the two because as the previous, this theme regards the crisis as an exceptional event, a kind of moral, political and economic “judgment day” that punishes all inefficiencies, waste, unethical speculations. It is a pseudo-religion based on social Darwinism, protestant ethic and a punitive kind of meritocracy (Dardanello, 2010, July 8, p.A1).

The crisis then highlights moral guilt, as the already mentioned Italian dysfunctionality can only be redeemed by a technocratic (as opposed to political) kind of politics, which aims at a general and allegedly dis-interested rationalization of the system. In the specific case of Italy, *Il sole 24 Ore* celebrates policies such as Marzano Law aimed at structural reforms of the economy (Scarci, 2010 April, 12, p.A1), proposals for the reform of the job market (Guidi, 2010, October 26, p.A1), and plans to rationalize the system (Da Rold, 2010 March 20, p.A1)

Hence, the crisis needs to be defeated by monetary and fiscal policies in order to provide “liquidity” to the economy (Onado, 2010, May 7, p.A1) but also by a Weberian Protestant ethic characterized by values such as “rigor” and “austerity” (Ricci, 2010 March 30, p.A1). In this scenario, the technocratic moral example is considered to be Germany, which sends around Europe its political economic experts to evaluate banks, important business and entire countries (Longo, 2010, June, 02, 2010, p.A1; 2011, Dec 02, p.A1; 2011, September 19, p.A1).

To sum up, through the above theme analysis, I tried to point at how the global financial crisis enters in the specific Italian context through a language and particular meanings that intersect global neoliberal values and Italian specific concerns. A common general feature of all these themes is the tendency to transpose the crisis at the dramatic level: the crisis turns into a theatrical stage for markets becoming

quasi-gods and subjects confronting each other in epic struggles. In the next section, drawing of Debord's ideas, I provide a framework to make sense of the spectacle of capitalism and the specific phenomenon of the crisis.

### **The Spectacles: Capitalism and Crisis**

Based on the discussion just provided, clearly the themes and narratives produced by the Italian newspaper reveal a process that cuts across social, cultural, political economic and ideological fields that goes beyond Italy, in which media function as formidable means of social reproduction/transformation. In this sense, Guy Debord's idea of *Society of Spectacle* (1967) may provide a valuable synthetic perspective to make sense of such a scenario. Accordingly, in the second part of this study, I first describe how Debord originally understood the spectacle and how it can be upraised to the current mode of production. Then, drawing on Schmitt and Agamben and Gramsci I discuss how the crisis can be treated as an ambivalent spectacular phenomenon: re-generating the capitalist spectacle but also offering occasions for de-alienation.

Debord spells his original formulation in 221 theses describing a particular stage of capitalism "when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life." (thesis 42). The ruling of the commodity form is linked to the fundamental shift in the twentieth century from a production-oriented economy to a later configuration organized around consumption, media and information:

In all of its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, and entertainment — the spectacle is the *model* of the prevailing way of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have *already been made* in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production (Thesis

7).

Such a mediation covers a still fairly straightforward capitalist logic of accumulation and domination of labor, in other words behind the spectacle operates an "undisturbed development of modern capitalism" (thesis 65).

Debord draws on theorist such as Lukacs (1971), Weber (1978) and Marx (1978) who examine modernity as a process of bureaucratization, rationalization and commodification of social life. One central concept in his Spectacle is the Marxian notion of alienation.

Drawing on Marx's commodity fetishism and alienation (1867), Debord claims that "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (thesis 4). The spectacle constitutes a sort of pre-constituted gaze into the world that is mainly propelled by mediated visual communication: "when the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior" (thesis 18). However, whereas Marx relied on the notion of the fetish as "a solid object obfuscating social mediation" (Žižek, 2002, p.36), Debord asserts a fetishism that is immaterial, ethereal and therefore omnipresent and this why the spectacle is difficult to detect.

However, the Spectacle does not dominate through "hypnosis" or "subliminal" propaganda, but through a totalizing social organization in which social control is built upon a flexible mix of force and consent. Hence, the Spectacle is a tool of social pacification more than social oppression, a kind of "ubiquitous opium for the masses" (thesis 44). Consequently, similar to the Gramscian notion of hegemony, institutions such as schools, media, sport, the parliament, urban environment, the literature, are considered as organic components of the spectacle. In

its ubiquity, the spectacle also constitutes people's subjectivity by generating and regulating both needs and desires. Thus by "mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in *controlling use*" (thesis 46).

To sum up, the spectacle is not a deliberate distortion but rather "a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into a material force" (thesis 5). Its power consists in its pervasiveness and in being able to mediate any aspect of social life. Indeed, as will be showed in a moment, such a particular understanding appear to be substantiated by the themes found in *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

First of all, through the lens of the spectacle, the themes "Technocracy as Redemptive Politics" and "Market as Historic Agents" appear as reifications of human economic activity, which lose their original meaning and take a life on their own, so proving that

"[t]he spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers (thesis 16).

In the case of "Technocracy as Redemptive Politics" one can detect how the spectacle of neoliberal ideology aims at becoming hegemonic through a naturalization of its policy. In other words, what is redemptive about "technocracy" is its reliance on the Enlightenment myth of technical knowledge, which, in its allegedly objective and impartial wisdom, sublimates into a moralized and almost religious worldview not dissimilar to the moral philosophy of Adam Smith.

However, in this spectacle, the supposed to be rationality of the neoliberal *Weltanschauung* conveyed by "technocracy" is contrasted with the

chaotic (but still religious) vision of the markets erratically behaving like gods from Mount Olympus. Thus, from this perspective, the spectacle of the markets, consists of human praxis converted into abstract re-personifications, metaphoric agents just like gods because "the fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes (thesis 24).

Therefore, the quasi-religious imaginary of the themes (e.g. divine agency, crisis as judgment day, the inscrutability of the crisis) reflect alienation, or the separation between the historical process and the human capability to see those phenomena as the result of people's action. Moreover, the clear tension between the two themes of the Markets and Technocracy reveals the neoliberal contradiction between its actual practice and its ideology. For Debord, drawing on Feuerbach's understanding of human alienation, the highest exemplification of the spectacle is to understand it as the material reconstruction of a religious illusion.

Another theme that resonates with the spectacle is "Social drama: Telos and Antagonism," which celebrates the division and antagonism of a society that is pulled apart when the ideological mediation created by the teleology of capitalism and progress seems to collapse. The drama *Il Sole 24 Ore* describes operates as a moral panic linked to the fear of losing a social organization that provides meaning to reality. Indeed, the Spectacle is a "the mythical order with which every power has always camouflaged itself" (thesis 25), which like a myth for Bathes (1979) depoliticizes speech, naturalizes historical categories and provides a linear worldview. When such an order seems to be destabilized then people may react dramatically but also realize a fundamental truth: the perishability of the spectacle.

In relation of this last point, the analyzed themes reveal the tension between the global crisis and the Italian specific translation of it, which may in turn reflect the contradiction between unity and division of the spectacle. Debord states “although the struggles between different powers for control of the same socio-economic system are officially presented as fundamental antagonisms, they actually reflect that system’s fundamental unity, both internationally and within each nation (thesis 5). However, an economic crisis can emphasize the gap between the overall spectacle and its national representations. For instance the exacerbation of Italian dysfunctionality by the crisis may generate a dis-functionalism in the way the spectacle is supposed to work.

It is clear that *Il Sole 24 Ore* stresses the anomalies of the Italian case because of its will to conform to neoliberal capitalism. However, the contradictions in the Italian version of the spectacle are hardly negligible and makes of Italy a liminal space representing the global unevenness of the spectacle during these times of crisis: in fact, the lack of rigor in accounting finance that threatens to lead Italy to bankruptcy; a South that proves refractory to the so called modernity project; and the even more frightening risk for the country to fall back into chaos and political violence may crumble the idea of historical necessity of the spectacle. In this context, the material and concrete implications of “Crisis as Social Drama: Telos and Antagonism” breaches into the Telos of endless accumulation of capital and commodities. In fact, due to the general impoverishment of larger section of the population of many societies, the concrete ability to buy and to consume at previous conspicuous levels has been crippled.

Thus to synthesize, the themes provide an ambivalent historicization of the spectacle that both

seem to confirm and to problematize it. This leads us to the need to qualify the adherence of the current situation to the presumably operating spectacle. I here consider two important qualifications: first of all, the fact that the current spectacle may differ from the one described by Debord when it comes to the introduction and usages of the so called new media; second, that the crisis, in its condition of exception, may alternatively be considered as a continuum or as a rupture of the spectacle.

On the one hand, there is a continuum between the 1960s spectacle and the current one. A general reflection of the globalized capitalist scenario of the recent financial crisis may provide evidences of that. For instance, based on current political economic analysis of media, the notion of informational capitalism (Castells, 2009) confirms Debord’s original intuition of the increasingly central role of media. In fact, “the process of capitalist restructuring undertaken since the 1980s that describes the increasing prominence of information and communication within capitalism under conditions of globalization and rapid technological development” (p.18) seems to be in line with Debord’s description.

Furthermore, thanks to cable and satellite, mobile technology and the recent transition from web 1.0 to 2.0 media, the spectacle seems to have occupied even more spheres of social life. In this sense, several scholars have suggested that social media practices should be critically understood in terms of commodification of the private sphere and exploitation of audience labor (Cohen, 2008; Dyer-Witheford 1999, Fuchs, 2010). Such a literature also notices that entertainment, a key dimension of the society of Debord’s spectacle, has currently become even more prominent by fusing together with other realms of life such as education, research, the production of news, politics and religion.



However, on the other hand, it is also important to point out a fundamental difference between the spectacle as understood by Debord and how web 2.0 media have impacted the agency of the audience. The “one-way relationship” (thesis 29) that characterized Debord’s spectators has significantly evolved. In other words, the introduction of inexpensive digital production tools, high Internet connection, powerful computers, transformed “spectators” into “prod-users” (Bruns, 2008). Prod-users are agents that come into this new collaborative space provided by web 2.0 as users but then become producers, thus occupying a liminal position between production and consumption. The kind of production prod-users engage with is not centralized or coordinated but extemporaneous, ongoing, open-ended process. Bruns points out how in the prod-usage boundaries between passive consumption and active production characterized by open collaborative participation, fluid hierarchic structure of production, unfinished artifacts and common property and individual rewards.

Thus, as Fisher (2012) notices, social media and prod-usage practices may also provide opportunity for de-alienation of media users: if alienation is about the lose “authorship” of the product of labor, the lose of contact with fellow workers, then social media grant users much more control over the production of content and the way they interact with other users. From this perspective, social media could be considered for their capability to enhance self-expression and identity building aspect, which may actually reduce alienation rather than increasing it. Moreover, the “many to many logic” of web 2.0 media possess democratic potential that enable, challenge, and question established practices and social hierarchies (Castells 2009).

In many ways alienation and de-alienation

constitute each other (Fisher, 2012). In this sense, social media exemplify two ways in which the mediation of the spectacle could run shallower, as I have just mentioned, but also run deeper. First of all, the just mentioned de-alienation effects can also be evaluated for their service to accumulate capital, thus working as a spectacle of “agency and independent creative production.” In fact, in such a media landscape, surely there is room for both alienation and exploitation (Fuchs, 2010), because in such porous boundaries the “active” user of social media, freely generate content and value, which is then appropriated by media corporations such as Facebook and YouTube.

Hence, social media with their rhetoric of active construction of individual “situations” being monetized and exploited, paradoxically enough, could be read as the spectacle of a defeated “Situationism,” which is being subsumed by capital. Secondly, as Hardt and Negri (2004) notice, the new spectacle has gone beyond the one described by Debord as it is founded on the exploitation of bio-politics, which consume human being vital energies and affective relations.

So far, I show how the most recent stage of capitalism provide and ambivalent context in which one can find evidences of an even more pervading spectacle and at the same time circumstances in which the “spectator” may use the same media saturated environment to implement democracy and enhance de-alienating “situations.” However, the examination of *Il Sole 24 Ore*’s themes also provides another potential qualification of the spectacle when it comes to the relationship between the general spectacle and the specific one of the crisis, as it was highlighted in the themes such “Social Drama: Telos and Antagonism” and “Italy’s Meta Crisis: Dialectical Modernity and the South.” Accordingly, in the last section of the

paper, I claim that the crisis, as the materialization of (neo-)liberal democratic “state of exception,” can be simultaneously regarded as a continuity and rupture of the spectacle.

### **Spectacle of Crisis Capitalism or The State of Exception**

Based on the previously examined themes, the crisis exemplifies a state of exception that can be regarded at the same time as reproductive as well transformative of the general neoliberal, post-industrial and informational spectacle. Schmitt (2006), looking how the Nazi political movement was breaching into the constitutional frame of the Weimar Republic in Germany, considered how modern liberal democratic societies are caught between the tension of a state of right and the exceptionality of a state of emergency that allowed a given regime to take unorthodox or even illegal measures. Inferring from that specific historic case, Schmitt suggested that sovereignty in a liberal democracy simultaneously falls inside and outside the rule of law by incorporating such an immanent logic of crisis and emergency which justifies outside-law extraordinary measures such as martial law, or the violation of human rights as counter terrorism.

More recently, Agamben (2005) has advanced Schmitt’s argument by contextualizing it in the current political scenario: according to Agamben exceptionalism appears as the consistent political strategy of the modern leader as “an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law” (p.39). Just like Debord’s spectacle, Agamben argues that the state of exception is a norm without any reference to reality, which is linguistically reproduced through a process of “de-semantization and suspension of concrete praxis in its immediate reference to the real” (p.37). From this point of view, crisis capitalism

appears to be as an aspect of the spectacle that allows the consolidation of political projects such as the process neoliberalization, the liquidation of workers ‘right as well as of the social democratic welfare state.

Gramsci (1971) confirms the “instrumental” exceptionalism of crises by noticing how the development of capitalism has constantly been about a “continuous crisis, i.e. a very rapid movement of elements which balance and check each other out” (1971, p. 428). Thus, crises should be understood as systemic, recurrent and fluid phenomena rather than catastrophic collapses of the capitalist system because “civil society has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic ‘incursions’ of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)” (p. 235). Their exceptionality becomes a rhetorical tool to justify what antidemocratic processes.

Furthermore, the capability of a given society to resist the incursions of crises has to do with both state and civil society acting like a (historic) bloc: “the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between state or political society and ‘civil society’,” in which “economic-social content [civil society] and ethico-political form [the state] are concretely identified” (1971, p. 367). This is for Debord a fundamental aspect of the spectacle, the alliance between state and civil society. In fact, Debord considers the liberal separation of the two as just another fiction of the spectacle. Gramsci then would agree with Marx’s statement “the violent destruction of capital” took place “not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation” (1867, p. 750)

However, aside the reproductive function of the crisis, its state of exception can also be understood in its more literal sense. That is a genuine exemption from the conventional rules of the spectacle that can

disrupt its appearance of “eternity” (thesis 71). Therefore, the crisis reflects the contradiction between natural condition and natural inclination of the spectacle.

In its disruptive concrete phenomenology such as lay offs, ending businesses, house foreclosures, people’s protests, by dissolving much of the established social relations sustaining the spectacle, a crisis could provide an occasion for estrangement from it. By undermining the continuity and “end of history” character of the spectacle, the crisis reveals its historical nature, its tendency to permanently revolutionize its material means of reproduction. Consequently, if the spectacle negates history, the crisis, by negating that negation, provides an opportunity to historicize it.

In the recent years, the disruptive role of the crisis can be observed in various instances of social mobilization against the spectacle. For instance, groups such as Occupy Wall Street in US, Indignados in Spain overtly use Debord’s Situationist philosophy (Black 2012; Gitlin 2012) and social media to demand radical changes. As Della Porta (2012) notices, it is not the first time that economic crises create a cycle of social mobilization: it happened in 2002 with the Global Justice Movement and has happened now. In both occasions, the movements were claiming global rights and blaming global financial capital.

Both Occupy and Indignados are characterized by a significant (counter-) performative feature in their struggle, which through the creation of alternative collective imaginaries and meaningful practices suggested the possibility of a substitute way of life. Relying on Situationist re-signification strategies such as *detournment* and *derive*, both movements support the idea of the construction of a situation that at the same time emancipates its inhabitants and resists the pressure of the system.

Again, similarly to Situationism, they are also inspired by the idea of a structure-less and leaderless organization that refuses the calcifying implications of traditional ideologies and spectacular mediated politics.

Even in Italy, the crisis produced disruptions in the Spectacle exemplified by Cinque Stelle Movement, which since late 2009 constituted itself as a political party. Compared the other two mentioned movements, Cinque Stelle Movement appears as a much more relative disturbance as the movement chose the road of conventional politics and his leader Beppe Grillo manifested more than once populist and reactionary tendencies. Never the less, if it is true that for Debord the spectacle represented whatever was escaping people’s activity, the ruptures in the telos of the spectacle created by the crisis have provided for those movements a ground on which practical and dialogical engagement and re-appropriation of reality could be conceived and partially realized.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have used Debord’s notion of the spectacle to understand how neoliberal capitalism and the recent global financial crisis have impacted societies and more specifically, Italy’s public discourse. As Kaplan claims (2012, p.458) “Debord serves up a severe indictment of contemporary capitalist culture. Isolation, fantasy, ideological blindness, manipulation have come to absolutely define our shared social world.” In relation to that, I argue that such a condemnation can still provide an illuminating perspective on current circumstances by suggesting how capitalism finds in the notion of crisis a powerful exemplification of one its fundamental paradoxes: creating by destroying and destroying by creating.

However, the spectacle as it appears at the beginning of the twenty first century is not identical to the one portrayed by Debord. The Fordist phase described by Debord has since 1970s turned into post-Fordism (Harvey, 2005). In such a scenario, the so called “new media” are at the center of a debate that tries to establish whether tools such as Facebook have contributed to further level of commodification or to provide an opportunity for a less alienating experience.

Even more ambivalent than informational capitalism, the idea of the crisis has been treated in this paper as a contradictory phenomenon that can undermine or re-organize the spectacle. To conclude, in a paper that has navigated through numerous ambivalences, I would like to disambiguate my full hopes for a radical cathartic moments out of this so called Great Recession.

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