



# Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis

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Things sometimes go wrong, of course; I hope that nothing goes wrong today, but we  
have to allow for the possibility.  
– Franz Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’

‘Anguish language’ is best kept as an indeterminate, barbed and spiky object to be inserted as and when necessary. Or more accurately glimpsed in the varied speech acts and texts generated by and through the slow, ongoing socio-economic crisis we all exist within. It is far too early to express this loose notion of ‘anguish language’ as a tightly defined concept to be deployed in the playgrounds of contemporary radical theory. Keeping this in mind, the following should be viewed as a non-prescriptive attempt to sketch the rudiments of a theory of ‘anguish language’ that is as provisional as the forms of enunciation socio-economic crisis evokes. If ‘anguish language’ is anything it is the tics and tremors of literary, poetic, (anti) political and vernacular responses to the crises of capitalism, and these responses inevitably shift, turn and change form. These anguished modalities of (non)communication, rage, despair and investigative angst trace out the varied cartographies of how the social crises of capitalism might form and deform the bodies and activities of those subjects forced to survive within them. While ‘anguish language’ might equally well be chalked on a wall or tweeted out into the digital ethersphere, work such as poet Sean Bonney’s recent series of ‘letters’ to an unnamed antagonist are exemplary: ‘I really wish I could think of something to say that was hopeful, that was useful, that was not simply a net of rats blocking the force of the sun...’<sup>1</sup>

As such, ‘anguish language’ is itself a performative act of enunciation that says something of the antagonism within and against personal and socio-economic crises otherwise elided by more conventional political responses. Even the truth of a slogan such as ‘Capitalism is Crisis’ risks becoming a cliché when repeated too often and affixed to relatively impotent collective forms of radical politics. The increasingly baroque theorisation of communism might inform certain anguished languages but political antagonism and/or subjective travails are expressed in very different forms from most communist theory, both more and less rigorous. ‘Anguish language’ is perhaps intent on, or more accurately distracted by, other concerns and is not in itself afraid of forming a ‘net of rats’ that might be more subtle or asymmetrical than the righteous forcefulness of political discourse.

## **It’s a remarkable piece of apparatus<sup>2</sup>**

‘Anguish language’ does not exist in a vacuum. It is irreducibly (anti)social in that it serves as both a response and tangential threat to other forms of crisis laden discourse. The sloganeering of radical anti-capitalism and communist theoretical praxis are not the most central of these other discourses – that position being held by what might as well be termed ‘crisis language’. By this I mean a varied array of discourses, the plethora of crisis missives that emerge from work/welfare bureaucracy, the media, ‘democratic’ managerial politics and the way that these echo around day-to-day life, informing and (re)producing subjects.

1 Sean Bonney, ‘Letter Against the Firmament (3)’, <http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.co.uk/>

2 Franz Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, *The Complete Short Stories*, (Trans: Willa and Edwin Muir), UK: Minerva, 1992, p.141.



The modes of 'crisis language' are varied, ranging from the most instrumentally bureaucratic through to the hysteria of the media bubble, to the combination of banal assurance, 'everyman' rhetoric and determined designation of the enemy 'other' that marks out managerial politics. Often the three forms of 'crisis language' work in tandem with one another – feeding into institutions, other discourses, workplaces, etc. producing a whole series of apparatuses intent on managing crisis. For instance, the recent introduction into UK political 'debate' of the 'strivers' versus 'skivers' dichotomy, with the former being the almost untouchable caste of 'hard working families' and the latter a miscellany of welfare cheats and those unable to rise before 11am. This worked on a binary division, including through their very exclusion those 'skivers' that are to be disciplined, thus making it an ideal, ongoing media meme that also fed back into the very policies it was designed to make possible. Such feedback loops make 'crisis language' in itself an apparatus but does not quite explain the relation to 'anguish language'. With a nod and a wink to Marx, this might best be expressed in the form of an equation: experience multiplied by crisis language = X pounds of flesh.

'Crisis language' takes a toll upon the bodies of those it is directed at and this is one of its essential functions. Prosaically the very material effects of this language might be viewed in terms of extra work extracted, benefits cut, increase in food bank visits, or the cigarettes smoked at the arrival of yet another officious looking letter. Less quantifiably the 'crisis language' apparatus exacts its toll in flesh by helping to ensure that a fervid temporality of anxiety afflicts the subject, an anxious tempo that co-exists with the weird stasis of crisis ridden but seemingly immobile capitalism. What we still might think of as experience is broken into even more fragments as it becomes devalued in the face of both anxiety and stasis. This is in no way to argue for the precedence of the linguistic over relations of power and economy. It is to point to the way language is also constitutive of these social relations in which crisis takes form and that this is the conflictual field for 'anguish language' to act within.

### **There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body<sup>3</sup>**

The material effects of language were recognised by Franz Kafka, one of the early progenitors of what we have termed 'anguish language'. His story, 'In the Penal Colony', tells of a horrific machine that inscribes the sentence and token of guilt upon the body of the accused by means of a steel harrow over the course of 12 hours. This seems an allegory for how language, when affixed to the laws of state and economy, becomes an instrument of how guilt is decided and punishment administered. Similarly, 'crisis language' is a constitutive element of a natural history of the body and subject. It is inscribed upon our bodies as slowly and inexorably as the harrow begins its trajectory during 'In the Penal Colony'. If the harrow records guilt and 'crisis language' helps to inscribe the social relations of crisis capitalism then what might 'anguish language' offer in response? If nothing else an anguished language is the sound of most things going wrong and someone, somewhere registering and recording it. This remains inexorably tied to a category of experience that in 1933 Walter Benjamin believed to have become impoverished through the combined forces of technological war, economic crisis and new forms of communication and ideology. He wrote that: 'our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on a personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.140.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', Selected Writings Vol.2 1927-1934, (Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith), US: Harvard University Press, 1999, p.732.



No longer would there be the earlier forms of experience where a life connected with a form of life, whether bourgeois, peasant or worker. The cycles and patterns that connected generations, families and individuals were irrevocably broken by greater forces. Benjamin's espousal of this 'new kind of barbarism', an erasure of past forms of experience in favour of the revolutionary transparency of a destructive experiential poverty does not carry the same impetus today. This might be because while Benjamin could still imagine a clean break through such 'barbarism' that would open into a revolutionary now-time, the barbarism we inherit is now second nature. The contemporary socio-economic and experiential crisis seems slow and inexorable, immanent to everything and atomised, anxious yet uncaring. Given this, 'anguish language' might be capable, in its own fashion, of registering crisis in a way conventional political discourses cannot, tracking it from the cracks in the subject and the wear upon the body. In doing so it might in a minor way reinvent contemporary 'barbarism' in order to trace the ghost of the destructive rupture Benjamin envisaged.

