The conceptual interdependence between critique and crisis is such that we cannot think the one independently of the other. Critique is always in some sense a normative response to an experience of crisis. But what happens when both “critique” and “crisis” are themselves in crisis, when it is unclear what we should be doing when we do the former, and what we are responding to when we are responding to the latter? Neo-liberalism has forced us to put our conceptual frameworks in question, as we come to realize that critique as we have understood and practiced it is no longer adequate to the “crises” that neo-liberalism perpetuates. In this seminar, we will explore an alternative model of critique, and an alternative understanding of crisis, that might open up new possibilities for conjoining critique with transformative democratic politics.

Over the last few years, new forms, strategies and subjectivities of dissent and resistance have emerged turning our epoch into the age of resistance. This seminar places the new resistances in the context of the European and world economic and political crisis, and argues that the initiatives of the new dissidents have created an opportunity for developing radical philosophy leading to social change.
Tuesday May 19, Morning Session (9.30am – 12.30pm)
The Demos Electric: Shock Democracy, Quotidian Organizing, and Radical Transformation in Neo-Liberal Times
Romand Coles, Institute for Social Justice, ACU

Neo-liberalism appears to be on autopilot toward the destruction of democracy, unprecedented inequality and planetary ecological catastrophe. To resist and veer from this course would require an upsurge of radical democratic ‘natality’ in Hannah Arendt’s sense - or our capacity to interrupt the tendencies of the world that are (mis)taken to be automatic and begin new modes of political action.

This seminar explores the political conditions that might stimulate and nurture such natality. In particular, it explores ways evanescent forms of shock democracy (e.g., Occupy, anti-austerity protests, climate justice movements) and quotidian grassroots community organising must be creatively interwoven in order to revitalise democracy in ruins. Higher education reformed around public action research might play a crucial catalytic role in this movement of radical transformation.

Tuesday May 19, Afternoon Session (1.30 - 3.30)
Public Lecture: The Paradoxes of Human Rights
Costas Douzinas, Birkbeck College and Institute for Social Justice, ACU

The absence of appeals to human rights in recent resistances around the world give us an opportunity to revisit their theoretical and political premises. Human rights are perhaps the most important liberal institution but liberal philosophy has failed badly in its treatment. Two hundred years of social theory are absent and, as a result, jurisprudence returns to the 18th century and updates the social contract with ‘original positions’ and ‘veils of ignorance’, the categorical imperative with ‘right answers’, ‘ideal speech’ situations and fundamental discourse principles.

The mainstreaming of human rights coincided with the emergence of what sociologists have called globalisation, economists neo-liberalism and political philosophers post-democratic governance. Is there a link between recent moralism, aggressive capitalism and bio-political governmentality? This talk presents an alternative approach to human rights built over a long period of campaigning and scholarship in a number of books. It follows the insight that the term human rights with its symbolic capital has been co-opted to a large number of relatively independent discourses, practices, institutions and campaigns. As a result no global ‘theory’ of rights exists or can be created. Different disciplinary approaches and theoretical perspectives are therefore necessary. The talk will offer a short history of humanity and brief political, legal, philosophical, economic and psychoanalytical parts presenting a radical alternative.