

REVIEWS IN CRISIS THEORY

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CRISIS IN THE INDUSTRIAL WORLD?

This review section seeks to bring some rigour to the growing discussion about some quandaries currently besetting the whole of the industrial world. These difficulties of social reproduction are without precedent in the history of modernity, if only because the concept of "crisis", through which they are signified, has become internalized within the self-understanding of society itself. A chorus of commentators swears by it, all the evidence is seen to add up to it: this *is* a decade of crisis. Not without confusion, "crisis" comes to connote a thousand events. There is a crisis of overpopulation in the peripheries, energy crises in the metropolises; the crisis of western sociology is debated within scholarly seminars as others issue stern warnings of imminent crisis in the whole of western civilization; Bette Midler sings tunes for the New Depression and many on the left take heart, convinced that the collapse of capitalism is just around the corner; while the culture industry engages audiences with apocalyptic visions of cosmic crises, it is said that adolescent, mid-life and old age crises haunt our earthly lives. "Crisis" is definitely front-page material; it is as if our thoughts and senses are mesmerized by its dramatic connotations, over-powering our potential for self-reflection on its richer and more classical meaning.

This befuddling of the image of crisis cannot be dismissed as mere bureaucratic trickery. It is not simply another aspect of plastic, "artificial negativity" generated through the cunning designs of an omniscient and omnipotent ruling group, whose world-conquering intentions cease to be constrained by the objective structures it inhabits. Certainly, this popular talk of "crisis" can easily become valuable material in the hands of the political technicians — but this is no different from almost any other mass *Phantasie*. Far from being deceptive, manipulable images, whose function is the anaesthetization of the masses and the consequent postponement of revolution forever, the widespread talk of crisis also has its utopian dimension. It is ideological, to invoke the classical metaphor: this "crisis-ridden" discourse both obfuscates a critical, explanatory account of objective social processes and is *suggestive* of

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“deeper” contradictions and breakdowns of the reproduction patterns of those processes and the subjective possibilities they present. The proliferation of images of tension, conflict and catastrophe may even serve to subvert the myth of “Happy Consciousness”, the simple-minded belief that the system which delivers the goods really is rational. Thus, images of “crisis” are intermeshed inextricably with a daily life which tends to produce apathy, fear, meaninglessness *and* hopes and desires for a better world.

This insight becomes the justification for recollecting the more classical meaning of the concept of crisis which, transferred to the level of society, presupposed two interrelated notions. First, a crisis-ridden process connotes a fateful phase in its reproduction, a turning point during which its self-reproductive capacities are severely reduced. The point is reached where even the subjectivity of the “agents” of this social formation in crisis is imperilled. Seemingly taking on its own life, the objective crisis process unfolds ruthlessly behind the backs of its constituents; their “natural attitudes” tend to be subverted, their normal powers of judgement and action paralyzed, at least temporarily. This syndrome is spelled out clearly in the medical genealogy of the concept. Goethe’s famous, “All transitions are crises; and is a crisis not a sickness?”, merely retrieved an old theme among the Greek physicians. Hippocrates’ insight that a crisis occurs in diseases whenever they increase in intensity, change into another disease, or end altogether exerted wide influence. This can be seen in Thucydides. His analysis of the Corcyraean revolution and, above all, his well-known characterization of the crisis of the fateful plague of Athens during its seventh or ninth days connoted an objective, seemingly contagious process which generates symptoms within the afflicted, whose identities are disturbed and normal active powers robbed.

Yet moments of crisis are not entirely fateful. Kuhn’s recent historiographical appropriation of the concept “crisis” rightly stresses its signification of a process of destruction *and* construction, challenge *and* response, of unsettling anomaly *and* nascent attempts to proliferate interpretive responses which subvert the old normality. The classical concept connotes a second meaning which is implicit in its medical usage: disruptions of the hitherto existing familiar continuity of a process, crises are *Dämmerung* (dusk, dawn), signals of the end of a phase of reproduction and the possibility of its renewal, or of breakthrough to the unfamiliar. With reference to social processes, this means, above all, that the disintegration of the natural attitudes of those who have become objects of system paralysis promises a self-consciousness of this objective paralysis and perhaps active attempts to overcome it. The dialectical, discontinuous quality of a crisis produces its own “otherness” and hence, the condition of its resolution — potential subjects. The tradition of tragic theatre, in which the perilous moment of crisis is central,

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exemplifies this sense of crises as moments which present rich possibilities for the regaining of free subjectivity against the pseudo-power of Fate. A crisis (*krisis*, from *kriain*, to decide, to sort through) is therefore a moment during which it becomes possible, even necessary to decide upon possible courses of action. In the modern world, this sense is regathered powerfully by Rousseau. His conviction that the rulers of Europe were blindly working in concert to hasten the fateful coming of revolution was the ground of his hope that society could be re-made through political intervention. "You reckon on the present order of society, without considering that this order is itself subject to inscrutable changes Does fate strike so seldom that you can count on immunity from her blows? The crisis is approaching, and we are on the edge of a revolution. Who can answer for your fate? What man has made, man may destroy. Nature's characters alone are ineffaceable, and nature makes neither the prince, the rich man, nor the nobleman." The universal triumph of exchange relations which mould men into commodities, things, "tools to be used", has reached its systematic limit, according to Rousseau. The coming crisis threatens the self-confident objectification of the subjects of civil society and, with that, raises the possibility that men can be re-made in the image of their true selves. Insofar as crises are moments of discontinuity wherein trapped subjects can foresee their emancipation, the overcoming of crisis is inescapably a normative process. Rousseau's insistence that reason is partisan in this process still stands: there can be no "value-neutral" crisis interpretation in the cruder (non-Weberian) sense. To analyze crisis tendencies is to adopt the role of advocate, to analyze the likelihood of their successful overcoming or avoidance. Techno-bureaucratic versions of crisis analysis are in accord with this formula. The repressive intentions of Wiener and Kahn's *Crisis and Arms Control* is exemplary: crises are said to be turning points in an unfolding sequence of events and actions, whose "uncertainties" precipitate a reduction of "control" over "events" and their "effects". An emancipatory theory of crisis tendencies is diametrically opposed to this technocratic formulation — it seeks to foster the construction of new historical possibilities through an interpretation of the structural limits to social integration, and of the need to overcome those objective, structural antagonisms which block the chances of the emancipation of speaking, labouring and acting subjects.

It is in these two interrelated senses that we speak of the Marxian theory of crises (of tendential decline of the average rate of profit, underconsumption, disproportionality) in the middle of the nineteenth century. Korsch's approximate periodization of the writings of Marx in accordance with the rise and fall of the prospects for European revolution is insightful in this respect. Prior to the defeat of the 1848 revolutions the Marxian formulations expressed the real possibility that the proletariat-in-formation would subjectively intervene to revolutionize European capitalism beyond recognition. The theoretical apogee

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of this phase is the well-known *Manifesto* adage: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." History is subjectivity, a process of the transformation of humanity and nature through labouring struggle. Beyond this phase, and commencing with *Wage Labour and Capital*, the theoretical emphases shift to the logic of objective historical processes. The critique of political economy protests the dominion of things over the weakened proletariat, by probing the objective pre-conditions of self-conscious intervention. Revolution is now seen as only possible through crises of the objective institutional framework of capitalist society — crises whose certainty is no less than the coming revolution itself. The warning of *The Critique of Political Economy* becomes the ensign of this phase and its objectivist retrospect on the past. "The history of society is the history of material production and the contradiction between the material forces of production and the productive relations." It is as if the present is a natural process whereby the "sum-total of social relations" develops in accordance with definite laws. Under the conditions of liberal capitalist production, the producers become personifications of reified economic categories, created objects of those laws of motion which operate under the sign of "iron necessity" and the imminence of communist revolution. According to the last of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* the subjectivist formulations of the *Manifesto* must be re-worked and supplemented. "In view of the general prosperity which now prevails ... there can be no question of any real revolution. A new revolution will be made possible only as the result of a new crisis, but it is just as certain as the coming crisis itself."

Whether this Marxian crisis theorem, consequent upon the theoretical conviction that the greatest hindrance to production in capitalist society is capital itself, remains operative today, is very much an open question. Indeed, the attempt to recover these theorems in an abstract-formal manner (cf. Poulantzas' 'A propos du concept de crise' in his *La crise de l'Etat*) or even more literally (as in the German 'Staatsableitung' debate) is outwitted by three novel, empirical developments. First, the massive post-war wave of capital investment and accumulation has clearly come to an abrupt end. This phase of capital expansion had been induced by war, domestic repression, the American accession to world dominance and state counter-cyclical stabilization and growth policies. The consequences of their demise are strange and unfamiliar. The deepening failure of macroeconomic stabilization policy is pressed by a combination of unresolved dilemmas and deep-seated tensions. Above all, these include (a) threats to the rate of profit — in large measure due to organized labour's struggle for higher wages and oligopoly capital's attempt at recouping these gains through its price-making powers — whose investment-disturbing consequences are synonymous with increases in the rates of inflation

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and unemployment; and (b) the failure, until now, of satisfying the need which has been created for a "political Keynesianism" (*i.e.* state-global coordination of corporate investment) in an increasingly interdependent and rationalized world economy still mediated through the anachronistic policies of competing nation states and no longer able to rely on the central coordinating role of the United States.

Secondly, within the centres of the advanced capitalist world, the state has become so interwoven with the accumulation and cultural reproduction processes that the latter tend to become functions of organized political/labour struggle *and* bureaucratic forms of state crisis-management. Therewith the political victories of the old industrial proletariat turn into losses. The class's militant thrusts into the sphere of the political (*e.g.*, through unionization and the formation of political parties), the consequent intrusion of the state into the sphere of civil society, sacks the objective, crisis-ridden foundations of the proletariat's own revolutionary dynamism. Yet this development has its unintended consequences. Isolated and naive corporate-taxpayer attempts to turn back the clock against all this notwithstanding, talk of "fiscal crisis", "ungovernability" and "overload" suggests correctly that any equilibrium between the state's "legitimation" and "accumulation" functions (O'Connor) is not attainable. Novel disruptive tendencies and patterns of conflict appear in the political system and its manifold functions, which are directly embroiled. Concerning this besieged state, the classic formulations of historical materialism obfuscate questions about the "internal anatomy" of political power and authority, its crisis-tendencies, and its drastically expanded role in the reproduction of domination. The continuing theoretical reliance on deriving accounts of the state from the "external", capital/labour logic of the mode of production ignores the fact that these "capital/labour" struggles are not simply "fought out" at the "level" of the state, but are already mediated and modified by this state.

Finally, state-corporate attempts to create a world after their own image have qualitatively increased since the time of Marx. Our world has become systematically written through and through with mass-produced systems of signs. It is true, this colonization of the symbolic interaction of everyday life with the imaginary (*e.g.*, through corporate and electoral advertising) tends to transfigure the historical and cultural into the natural, the connotative into the denotative. Significations, whose function (intended or not) is the legitimation of a system of sexual and class domination in political form, are presented and repeated as "the way things are", as impenetrable common sense. This development cannot be apprehended through the classical Marxian categories and its crisis theorems. This is no less true of certain important countervailing trends in the form of demystifying challenges to this imposed ensemble of

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“collective representations”. Symptomatic of these challenges, the talk of “crisis” (mentioned at the outset) correctly grasps that there are serious disruptions within the existing totality of institutions and significations. The “compactness” of the symbolic tissues tends to be torn by their own contradictory logic and structural problems within the political economy. Ambiguity, confusion and above all, the inability and refusal of speaking actors to recognize themselves through these manufactured images threaten this order’s legitimacy. A novel tendency haunts the industrial world: a falling rate of the production and reproduction of meaning, and artistic-political attempts at its reconstitution.

Whether this widening sense of the difficulties of reproduction within the economic, political and cultural spheres of the industrial world is symptomatic of either dilemmas easily overcome or of deep-seated impediments which allow us to speak of a crisis tendency in the more classical sense remains an unresolved issue. Indeed, the foregoing suffers from the serious weaknesses of many other similar accounts of the contemporary situation. Their language either relies too much on generic, abstractly universal propositions, or the complex mediations between the reproduction and breakdown of the political economy and culture tend to be lost in the simple, nominalistic language of factorial accounts of the systems of production (“the economy”), political power (“the state”) and cultural meaning (“ideology”). Even so, the truth of the old crisis theorem remains, the renewal of subjectivity continues to depend on the decay of this system’s objective structures and significations. On this score, the nagging difficulties within the industrial world are encouraging to an opposition which has so far been outwitted by an objective system of domination. Yet, the darker side of this truth should also not be hidden away in rosy prognostications and rash extrapolations. In the absence of widespread subjectivity, crisis tendencies are most often a condition of renewal of the existing order. As both Marx and Burckhardt forcefully pointed out in the nineteenth century, crises may allow the unilateral, authoritarian abolition of a host of practices from which it is deemed life has long since departed, and which could not have been swept away in any other fashion. Under no circumstances should this insight be forgotten. Our rightful concern with investment, employment, political and legitimation difficulties in the industrial countries may well obscure their more alarming fate — a more fully rationalized world, whose behemoth-like domination amidst plenty would bid farewell forever to the emancipatory dreams of its liberal-democratic heritage.

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