



# City Research Online

## City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Samman, A. (2015). Crisis theory and the historical imagination. Review of International Political Economy, 22(5), pp. 966-995. doi: 10.1080/09692290.2015.1011682

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/6023/>

**Link to published version:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2015.1011682>

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

# CRISIS THEORY AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Amin Samman  
City University London, UK  
[Amin.Samman.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:Amin.Samman.1@city.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

This article makes a theoretical contribution to the constructivist and cultural political economy literatures on crisis. While these new approaches have highlighted the imaginary dimensions of crisis, they have neglected the specifically historical forms of imagination through which events are construed and constructed as crises. In particular, they have yet to adequately theorise how the recollection of prior crises might interact with efforts to diagnose and resolve a crisis in some later present. I respond to this lacuna by developing a novel set of tools for analysing the meta-historical dimensions of crisis. These include a typology that identifies three distinct ways of recalling past crises, and a concept of ‘history-production’, which captures how different interpretive practices feed into the diagnosis and negotiation of crisis episodes. Taken together these tools help illuminate a complex interaction not only between historical analogies, narratives, and lessons, but also between these representational modes and the imaginary dimensions of crisis.

## KEYWORDS

Crisis; constructivist and cultural political economy; history; ideas; narrative

## HOW TO CITE

This is a peer-reviewed pre-publication version of an article that appears in the *Review of International Political Economy*. If you wish to cite it please consult the final published version for the correct pagination. **Citations should appear as:** Samman, Amin (2015) ‘Crisis theory and the historical imagination’, *Review of International Political Economy*.

## INTRODUCTION

Episodes of rupture and transformation are grist for the mill of IPE scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This reflects a longstanding intuition that such ‘crisis’ episodes provide a window through which to glimpse the nature of both transnational order and change. Yet where early IPE scholars saw in crises the expression of objective forces and limits, contemporary theorists now also see the work of subjective interventions and historical myths, projections, or fictions (see Hall, 2003; Allon, 2009; Brassett and Clarke, 2012; Broome et al., 2012; Carstensen, 2013; Siles-Brügge, 2014). This shift reflects the recent import of linguistic, semiotic, and social theory into IPE. With the rise of constructivist and cultural political economy, it has become a commonplace to ask how the very portrayal of an event as a ‘crisis’ can determine the kind of turning point it will become (Hay, 1999; 2011; Blyth, 2002; Widmaier et al., 2007; Jessop, 2004; 2012). In this article I seek to further develop such approaches by foregrounding the role of distinctly historical forms of imagination. More concretely, I identify a number of ways in which the recollection of past crises can partake in the discursive production and negotiation of later crisis episodes.

This point of focus is derived from a critique of the ‘new crisis theory’ and its relation to a longer history of crisis thinking within the human sciences. As Reinhart Koselleck (2006: 373-5) points out, the modern concept of crisis is a means of exercising the historical imagination – it is a tool that theorists use to give shape or figure to history. The new crisis theorists redouble this wager by imagining crises as events that agents themselves take to be turning points within history. But if crisis episodes are what agents imagine them to be, then through what means do agents exercise their historical imagination? If the historical record provides agents with a repertoire of prior crisis episodes, then how do these imagined pasts shape contemporary efforts to diagnose and negotiate apparent crises? Recent advances in cultural political economy suggest an awareness of this question (Sum and Jessop,

---

<sup>1</sup> This article has benefited from conversations with David Bailey, Nina Boy, André Broome, Christian de Cock, Marieke de Goede, Martijn Konings, Andreas Langenohl, Ronen Palan, Elke Schwarz, and Ute Tellmann. I would like to thank them for their time and insight. I would also like to thank the RIPE editors and three anonymous reviewers for their challenging but constructive criticism.

2013: 395-439), but the reflexivity of historical imagination remains a dimension of crisis that theory has yet to fully explore.

I address this by developing a novel set of tools for crisis theorising in IPE. The first of these is a distinction between the *function* that a past crisis might perform within a later present, and the specific *practices* of historical representation through which that past crisis finds a determinate form. The second is a typology of three basic varieties of historical representation, which correspond to those produced through practices of *analogical reasoning*, *narrativisation*, and *lesson drawing*. The third tool is a concept of *history-production*, which captures how these varieties of representational practice can be combined to either *constitute* or help *negotiate* the historicity of a crisis in the present. Taken together these points highlight a complex interaction not only between historical analogies, narratives, and lessons, but also between these representational modes and the kinds of functions they can perform within a context of apparent crisis. It is this nexus that should form the basis for future crisis theorising within the constructivist and cultural political economy traditions.

I develop this argument over five sections. In the first I unpack the temporal and historical ambiguities implicit in the notion of crisis. I then locate these ambiguities within modern political economy and its various branches of crisis theory. After this I identify questions of historical imagination as an underdeveloped component of the new crisis theory, and introduce the analytical tools described above. Finally, I use a series of examples to illustrate the real-world significance of my argument, and also offer some broader reflections on its implications for the status of history within IPE scholarship.

## **AMBIGUITIES OF CRISIS IN THEORY**

In what way does ‘crisis’ provide a means of exercising the historical imagination? For Koselleck an answer is already written into the history of crisis thinking. In this section I reconstruct Koselleck’s argument, paying particular attention to how the ambiguities of the crisis idea give scope to the historical imagination of the crisis theorist. I begin with an etymology of the term and a brief survey of its uses in Ancient Greece. I then indicate how the foundational ambiguities of the term are multiplied through its transformation into a modern historical concept.

### ***Early meanings and uses of ‘crisis’***

When we talk about crisis we already reveal a fundamental ambiguity in terms of its meaning. In everyday usage, the word is used to indicate a mixture of danger, uncertainty, and the compulsion to act. This can be traced back to the Greek term *krisis*, which is derived from the verb *krinō* – meaning “to cut, to select, to decide, to judge; [and] by extension, to measure, to quarrel, to fight” (Koselleck, 2002: 237). The word itself therefore brings with it a double meaning, for it refers not only to the simple need for a ‘decision’, but also to the ‘measuring’ and ‘quarrelling’ through which such a decision might be reached.

As Koselleck (2006: 359) points out, this apparent two-sidedness is in fact a foundational unity, reflecting how modern ideas of subjective critique and objective crisis were still “conceptually fused” under the Greek notion of *krisis*. On the basis of their subsequent separation within European thought, however, it is possible to use these two domains of meaning as a tool for distinguishing between the basic analytical strategies of different crisis theories. Thus, while a given theory of crisis might focus on the *objective conditions* that constitute a danger and create the compulsion to act, another might stress the *subjective interventions* involved in overcoming uncertainty and enabling action (Koselleck, 2002: 237-47; 2006: 358-61; see also Starn, 1971: 3-5). Alternatively, and in keeping with the etymology of the term, a theory of crisis might instead seek to somehow grasp together these two phenomena (O’Connor, 1987: 145-9). These stylised vantage points are summarised in the table below.

Analytical focus	Phenomena of interest
<b>Objective</b>	Observable conditions that constitute a danger and create the compulsion to act
<b>Subjective</b>	Process of interpretation needed to overcome uncertainty and enable action
<b>Objective/Subjective</b>	Intertwinement of conditions and their interpretation in a critical moment

Table 1. *Basic varieties of crisis theory* (Source: Author’s own)

A further and specifically temporal ambiguity is created through early Greek uses of the word. If *krisis* connotes a critical moment or turning point within a larger

process, then it also brings with it the notion of time passing. But because the term is employed within different semantic spheres, it aims to grasp a diverse range of processes. This diversity produces a variety of temporalities for crisis. In legal discourse, for example, decision means a judgment or the reaching of a verdict, and therefore implies a potentially endless series of discrete legal rulings. With Thucydides, these include decisions regarding the Greeks' battles with the Persians, leading him to situate *krisis* within a broader rhythm of war and peace (Starn, 1971: 3-4; Koselleck, 2002: 237). According to Aristotle, however, it is through participating in such a general process of passing judgment that individuals become citizens and political orders become just (Koselleck, 2006: 359; Aristotle, 1998: 84-97). The juridical meaning of the word therefore implies a linear yet nested temporality, for it yields a vision of governmental decision-making that simultaneously encompasses discrete strategic dilemmas and an ongoing process of civic participation.

In theological circles, *krisis* acquires an eschatological meaning. The juridical sense of the word is retained, but in the ancient Greek translation of the Old and New Testaments, the verdict in question becomes the one that is eventually delivered by God (Koselleck, 2006: 359-60). As a result, it is the decisions that *will have been made* – rather than a mere ongoing or punctuated process of decision-making – which provide crisis with its temporal dimension. The coming Apocalypse operates through a “cosmic foreshortening of time” (Koselleck, 2002: 245), wherein one's faith both anticipates and enacts the Last Judgment before its arrival. The early Christian usage of the word therefore entails a non-linear and entangled temporality, for it designates an ongoing experience in the present of an event that has yet to actually occur.

In the sphere of medicine *krisis* takes on yet another temporality. Following its appearance in Hippocrates' treatise *On Affections*, Greek physicians use the term to denote a critical point or phase in the progress of a disease (Starn, 1971: 4). As a deciding moment in the “battle between life and death” (Koselleck, 2002: 237), its temporal dimension is relatively straightforward: it marks a threshold. However, as a “judgment ... about the course of the illness” that will ultimately determine the outcome of this battle (Koselleck, 2006: 360), a more complex figuration of time can be identified. Hippocrates himself provides a range of possibilities when he states that a crisis occurs “whenever ... [diseases] increase in intensity or go away or change into another disease or end altogether” (quoted in Starn, 1971: 4). The early medical usage

of the word therefore implies a non-linear and differentiated temporality, for in addition to an overarching and diachronic conception of the relationship between sickness and health, the word also suggests the possibility of recoveries, relapses, and displacements or mutations. The dimensions of *krisis* as they appear in each of these three registers is summarised in the table below.

Semantic sphere	Object/Subject	Alternatives	Frequency/Duration	Directionality	Temporality
<b>Law</b>	Governmental decision	Right/Wrong	Discrete points; Ongoing process	Open-ended	Linear (nested)
<b>Theology</b>	Spiritual judgment	Salvation/ Damnation	Singular event; Ongoing process	Teleological	Non-linear (entangled)
<b>Medicine</b>	Physiological threshold	Life/Death	Discrete points; Multiple durations	Open-ended	Non-linear (differentiated)

Table 2. *Dimensions of 'crisis' in its early Greek uses* (Source: Author's own)

### ***Crisis as a modern concept***

The etymology of crisis and its early usage already invests the term with a wide variety of meanings. But as a Latinised form of the word is translated into national languages during the seventeenth century, these meanings provide the basis for a further extension of the concept into new semantic spheres (Koselleck, 2006: 361-7). The medical variant dominates early modern social and political thought, where it is applied to the notion of a 'body politic' and used to describe a moment of upheaval in either the internal or external affairs of state (pp. 362-3, 368-70). The eschatological aspects of its religious variant find voice in later, speculative philosophies of history, where 'crisis' figures as both an ongoing epoch and coming threshold for humankind (pp. 368-81). It is also in this context that a distinctly economic meaning of the term begins to take shape, doing so at first through a medical language of 'convulsions' and 'blockages' (p. 389). The point, however, is not that ambiguities already implicit in the crisis idea are reproduced via its translation into nascent modern disciplines. Rather, it is that these ambiguities are multiplied as new questions about the nature of historical time prompt scholars to combine and redeploy some of the term's earlier forms and

meanings.<sup>2</sup> The table below disaggregates the various dimensions and functions of ‘crisis’ as a historical concept.

Function	Semantic origins	Definition	Frequency
<b>Periodising concept</b>	Medical usage	Ongoing and culminating point in a chain of events	Unique; Recurring
<b>Epochal concept</b>	Theological usage	Forthcoming and final point of transformation	Unique
<b>Epochal periodising concept</b>	Combined	Permanent or existential situation	Unique; Recurring
<b>Epochal periodising concept</b>	Combined	Historically immanent transition phase	Unique

Table 3. *Crisis as a modern historical concept* (Source: Author’s own)

Taken together, these different interpretive options produce a profound ambiguity regarding the nature of crisis. Once crisis becomes a properly historical concept, its meaning as an actual occurrence is opened up to range of seemingly endless possibilities. It compels a decision and thus marks a threshold, but the kinds of conditions or states that it provides a passage between is unclear. It can be unique or recurrent, specific or general, transient or final. It can be ongoing, forthcoming, or even both at the same time. Moreover, as a condition that must be recognised as such in order to properly exist, it can be any combination of these things.

According to Koselleck it is this ambiguity that defines the term as a modern concept. ‘Crisis’, he argues, “becomes a structural signature of modernity” because it gives free scope to the historical imagination: “it takes hold of old experiences and transforms them metaphorically in ways that create altogether new expectations” (Koselleck, 2006: 374). There are other ways in which such an operation might be performed, but it is “precisely the exciting possibility of combining so many functions” (p. 374) that makes the idea of crisis such an attractive one. The crisis idea can therefore be understood as a tool for imagining history; it is a means by which the

---

<sup>2</sup>Jacob Burckhardt provides a particularly clear illustration of this process in his 1868 lectures on *The Crises of History* (1979: 213-68).



theorist can impose pattern and rhythm onto an otherwise chaotic onslaught of events.

## **HISTORY AND CRISIS IN MODERN POLITICAL ECONOMY**

The chaos of global economic history has prompted a great deal of crisis theorising. In this section I identify two key trends in political economy thinking on crisis. The first is a move to affirm the status of crises as both historically novel and institutionally generated. This process begins with Karl Marx, runs through J. M. Keynes, and culminates in the work of the French Regulation School. The second is a growing interest in the path-shaping power of subjective interventions during crises. This emerges out of the Althusserian kernel in Regulation theory, and ultimately paves the way for the new constructivist and cultural political economy approaches to crisis.

### ***From exogenous shocks to endogenous tendencies***

The early classical economists saw the market as a natural order with laws of its own, but they had yet to situate economic fluctuations within these laws (Veblen, 1898: 381-2). As a consequence, bouts of instability could not be attributed to the economic process itself, and instead were typically framed as acts of God or Nature. Neoclassical economics moves away from this language after W. S. Jevons (1878), but 'crises' still retain an extrinsic quality. With the general equilibrium framework, for example, questions of growth and change are formally excluded from theoretical models, leaving the analysis of macroeconomic trends to empirically oriented researchers (cf. Walras, 2003/1874; Mitchell, 1913). Economic theorists must therefore take macroeconomic volatility as evidence of a periodic adjustment to exogenous shocks (Mattick, 1981: 30-1). This move is redoubled in the real business-cycle models of the 1970s, where fluctuations in output are now explicitly attributed to unexplained shifts in productivity or policy (e.g. Lucas, 1983; Hartley et al., 1998). Early neoclassical and later new classical visions of instability are in this way defined by the figure of the cycle. Such cycles are seen as properly belonging to economics, yet because the changes that trigger them are treated as exogenous shocks, capitalism itself is situated outside of history. Crisis, in turn, remains a quasi-natural occurrence.

In order to situate both capitalism within history and crises within capitalism, it would take theorists willing to begin with the accumulation process. This occurs in Marx's late writings via a return to David Ricardo's vision of the 'stationary-state' economy. In Marx's estimation Ricardo was right to question to perpetuity of profits, but wrong to seek an answer in the declining fertility of the land (Marx, 1973/1953: 754). Instead, Marx argues, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall should be traced back to a contradiction between exchange-value and use-value production, which drives an overdevelopment of the productive forces (Marx, 1977/1894: 247-59). Broadly speaking, this account of the accumulation process yields a dual role for crisis within history. In the first instance there are periodic industrial crises, wherein a destruction of the productive forces temporarily restores profitability to the process of surplus-value production (pp. 251-5). But because each of these crises only serve to further exhaust the scope for future profits, there is also singular and final crisis that is still to come, after which the productive forces of social labour will once and for all be transformed into the basis for a higher mode of production (pp. 257-9; see also Marx and Engels, 1998/1848: 41-2). Marx therefore embeds the figure of the cycle within a specific mode of production and a more general vision of historical progress. This imbues crisis with a powerful new telos: rather than a random shock or disturbance, crises are the relentless ratchet mechanism by which capital undoes itself.

There have been countless reformulations of Marx's crisis theory, but for the most part these do little to refigure the dual role of crises within capitalist history.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of the Great Depression, however, Keynes' (1936) financial theory of under-investment yields a new vision of the relation between cyclical and epochal crises. This theory is rooted in a claim about how uncertainty fuels financial instability. Keynes develops this through his 'beauty contest' analogy (p. 156), which suggests that stock market prices are determined by second-order expectations about prospective yields. When a stock-market boom goes bust, the beauty contest turns ugly and investors seek refuge in liquidity. This financial reversal is then deepened by a decline in the consumption of both traders and the 'stock-minded public' (p. 136), which only makes productive investment appear even less profitable (p. 319). Once this vicious circle takes hold, attempts to restore investor and consumer confidence via monetary or

---

<sup>3</sup> With underconsumptionism, for example, scholars simply identify a different motor behind the tendency towards terminal crisis. On the varieties of underconsumptionism and their critics see Bleaney (1976).

fiscal policy may not be enough to induce a return to growth and higher levels of employment (pp. 375-7). Keynes therefore sees the threat of crisis as consisting less in the ups and downs of a business cycle, and more in the breakdown of such a cycle at its low point. Crucially, though, such a threat cannot be fully understood with reference to the capitalist mode of production in general, for it grows out of a historically unprecedented subordination of industrial capital to finance. As Keynes (1936: 320) himself says, it is only “with markets organised and influenced as they are at present” that uncertainty can breed permanent under-investment. The upshot, then, is that crises are generated through the contingent evolution of economic institutions (rather than any basic laws of capitalist civilisation).

### ***From objective determination to subjective interventions***

Despite the success of Keynes’ *General Theory*, it is only with a later generation of economists that an evolutionary institutionalism is fully brought into crisis theory. The early works of Michel Aglietta (1979) and Alain Lipietz (1987) are decisive in this regard. Writing against a backdrop of persistent stagflation, both Aglietta and Lipietz set out to understand the foundations of capitalist growth and stability. In order to do this they supplement the notion of a capitalist mode of production with the concept of historically specific ‘accumulation regimes’, and then argue that each of these regimes rely on an associated ‘mode of regulation’ for their continued reproduction.<sup>4</sup> According to Lipietz (1987: 15), such a correspondence is a not “pre-ordained part of capitalism’s destiny”, nor even is it a product of conscious design. Its accidental discovery nevertheless still serves a crucial function in enabling a set of historically specific contradictions to be managed or “mitigated” (Aglietta, 1979: 383).

Here the Regulationists go beyond Marx, seeking to situate capitalism itself within the path-dependent transformation of intra- and inter-national social relations (e.g. Lipietz, 1993: 117; see also Boyer, 2000). This effort brings with it two new and distinct figurations of crisis. On one hand, there are those that have not yet transpired and exist only as tendencies kept in check or ‘mitigated’ by an effective mode of

---

<sup>4</sup> An ‘accumulation regime’ refers to a sustainable pattern of investment and consumption within a capitalist social formation (Aglietta, 1979: 68). A ‘mode of regulation’ refers to the ensemble of norms and institutions that stabilise this pattern and enable its reproduction (Lipietz, 1987: 14).

regulation. These crises are immanent to a social formation and in particular to its regime of accumulation. On the other hand, there are those crises that mark the dissolution of an accumulation regime and the beginning of the struggle through which a new one might be found. Rather than expressing either the normal functioning or structurally determined demise of a capitalist social formation, such crises are the transformative thresholds through which such formations pass and emerge out of qualitatively anew. That is, they are properly historical moments, invested with the power to create entirely new institutional modalities, interdependencies, and crisis-tendencies. Regulation theory therefore stresses both the historical novelty and the path-shaping power of crises.

In order to do this, however, the Regulationists are forced to retreat from the actual event of crisis as a site for theory. This is a corollary of their attempt to work both within and against the thought of Louis Althusser. Following Althusser, the early Regulationists envision social formations as complex and overdetermined – there is no “general ‘contradiction’” that drives their evolution (Althusser, 1969: 100; cf. Lipietz, 1993: 127). Yet Lipietz (1993: 120-38) is also clear that the concept of regulation is meant to moderate some of the more structuralist elements in Althusser’s account of social reproduction, and to restore a sense of agency to the process of history. The consequence of this double move is to relegate concrete analyses of crisis onto either side of their occurrence – on one side, there is the retrospective reconstruction of emergent contradictions within a social formation; on the other, a prospective identification of new and potentially stabilising complementarities between institutional forms and the classes that struggle on their behalf. In neither instance is the transformative threshold itself opened up to investigation.

In this respect the Regulationists lag behind an older tradition of social and political crisis theory in Marxism, which begins with the early Marx and runs from Gramsci through to Poulantzas, Offe, and Habermas (see O’Connor, 1987: 108-57). It is with Régis Debray (1975: 87-160), however, that the phenomenology of crisis becomes a proper object of Marxist theory. Reflecting his own debt to Althusser, Debray sees the outbreak of a crisis as “objectively overdetermined” (p. 113) – a knot in history’s fabric of contradictory relations. He also anticipates the position that Lipietz would eventually adopt, arguing that such events are “epoch-making” (p. 99) and therefore cannot be entirely reduced to the logics that either precede or follow

them. But rather than stopping here – that is, with the epistemic uncertainty that comes with the overdetermination of crisis – Debray goes a step further. “In every crisis situation”, he writes, “there is an interplay of darkness and clarity”:

The objective conditions provide a background, a containing framework of propositions, which restricts the spectrum of possible initiatives or responses to events, but that background then seems to fade ... So much so that the outline, the thing that can be seen by everyone, shifts from the objective to the subjective, the indeterminate, with the individual initiatives of a few characters suddenly thrust into the forefront of the stage. (Debray, 1975: 104-5)

In this visual metaphor, ‘darkness’ is the slipping away of certainty that accompanies the overdetermination of crisis, while ‘clarity’ is the shape given to such an event by those who speak out on it. Crucially, though, this latter process is as much a question of political praxis as it is one of theory. Try as we might to “untangle” the knot of crisis, what it demands is instead to be “cut” (p. 111). He continues: “We must try to untangle it in theory ... but only so as to be able to make practical decisions ... [based on] resolutely simple, even simplistic-seeming, formulae for action” (p. 111). Hence, it is only through the strategic reductionism of social agents that crises can ever be envisioned and resolved in one way rather than another.

Debray may be a marginal figure in conventional histories of crisis thinking, but within political economy he marks the confluence of two key trajectories. Following the lead of Marx and Keynes, he affirms both the historical novelty and path-shaping power of crises. Yet he also explicitly recovers the unity of subject and object inherent in the Greek notion of *krisis*, enabling him to ask how accounts of ‘crisis’ feed into the very processes they purport to explain. By making both of these moves at once, Debray profoundly refigures the relation between history and crisis. Put simply: It is through the subjective interventions they elicit that crises find their novel place with history.

## **HISTORICAL IMAGINATION AND THE NEW CRISIS THEORY**

Since the 1980s there have been a range of further developments in crisis theory.<sup>5</sup> Here I focus on the new constructivist and cultural political economy approaches developed by Colin Hay, Mark Blyth, and Bob Jessop (hereafter referred to as the ‘new crisis theory’). In these approaches, the resolution of a crisis situation is seen to hinge on the way in which social agents interpret it. But rather than providing a guide for political praxis, the new crisis theory aims to turn interpretive struggle itself into the object of crisis theorising. The result is to radically foreground the ambiguities of crisis, for if crises are at least in part what agents make of them, then it is to the historical imagination of said agents that the theorist must turn in order to situate crises within history.

### ***Crises are what agents make of them***

The new crisis theory emerges through the cultural and institutional turns in political economy. These draw in varying degrees from older Marxist and Keynesian concerns regarding the power of ‘ideas’ over processes of social reproduction and structural change. As a result, there are important differences in terms of both how and where the new crisis theory takes shape. All three of its major branches nevertheless stress the fundamental intersubjectivity of crisis.

The first of these branches is associated with the work of Colin Hay. Though now framed a broader approach to institutional analysis, Hay’s early research is a more or less direct response to the Althusserian moment in Marxist crisis theory. In particular, Hay (1996; 1999) takes up the question of how structural change might emerge from a situation characterised by subjective indeterminacy. His core contribution in this regard is to emphasise the role of narration in the discursive construction of crisis. There are a number of steps in his argument. Following Debray, Hay (1999: 323-7) conceives of crises as both overdetermined and indeterminate – overdetermined, because there are always too many contradictions behind the

---

<sup>5</sup> The most recent among these is a return to heterodox theories of money and finance (e.g. Lapavistas, 2009; Nesvetailova, 2010; Lucarelli, 2011). There has also been a steady stream of further advances in the Regulation approach, both within and beyond the original Parisian school (cf. Overbeek, 2004; Palan, 2006; Boyer, 2013).

breakdown of an accumulation regime; and indeterminate, because there is never any certainty about which diagnosis will prove to be path-shaping. Hay's response is to posit *narration* as a kind of a median level between these two registers. Before a crisis can be said to exist, contradictions must be discursively recruited as "symptoms" and incorporated into a "meta-narrative of crisis" (pp. 333-5). But once such a meta-narrative does emerge, it opens up an space of struggle between itself and other competing narratives, mapping-out a "discursively selective terrain" that privileges some narratives of crisis over others (1996: 261). Crucially, though, this process of narrative competition is itself indeterminate, for just as contradictions can be recruited as symptoms of systemic failure, so too can they be discursively negotiated in ways that absolve that same system from blame (Hay, 2011: 2-3). Hence, in what Hay (2006) would eventually term 'constructivist institutionalism', structural change is a non-necessary response to systemic failure, and its eventuation is contingent upon the public narration of that failure as a 'crisis' of pre-existing structures.

A similar line of analysis is also taken up under the banner of 'agent-centred' or 'uncertainty-based' constructivism (Widmaier et al., 2007: 752-3; Abdelal et al., 2010: 11-3). The central claim of these constructivists is that agents need simplifying ideas in order to overcome the uncertainty that comes with crisis. There are echoes of Debray in this formulation, but here the nature of uncertainty is somewhat different. Rather than a corollary of overdetermination per se, uncertainty instead specifies the inability of agents to derive their interests from existing economic structures. One of the first to develop this argument is Mark Blyth (2002), who does so via the notion of 'Knightian uncertainty' (pp. 8-10, 30-4). During periods of economic disorder, Blyth argues, agents become "unsure as to what their interests are, let alone how to realize them" (p. 8). But because purposive action requires both means and ends, agents need some kind of mechanism for overcoming uncertainty if they are to ever respond to it. Enter *ideas*. For Blyth it is the "ideas that agents themselves have about the causes of uncertainty" that enable them to identify goals and formulate strategies (p. 32). Moreover, it is through the attempts agents make to impose their ideas on others that collective or institutional responses to 'crisis' take shape (pp. 32-45). Business and policy elites might wage wars in the name of their various "crisis-defining ideas" (Blyth, 2007: 761), and these inter-elite debates may themselves be held to account by "everyday discourses constructed by mass public agents" (Seabrooke, 2007: 795). In

both instances, however, processes of interpretation and persuasion are integral to the dynamics of crisis. This vision of the crisis situation yields a double-function for the concept of crisis. 'Crisis' designates an event that agents "interpret as necessitating change" (Widmaier et al., 2007: 748), but at the same time, it also entails the "processes of persuasion" that such events ignite, and which ultimately determine the very nature of the change they produce (p. 749).

More recently, Bob Jessop has sought to develop a theory of crisis by situating Hay's notion of 'discursive selectivity' alongside his own notion of 'structural selectivity' (Jessop, 2007: 21-79). Jessop develops these concepts within the context of his 'strategic-relational approach' to state theory, but both have now assumed a central place within the broader 'cultural political economy' framework he is developing with Ngai-Ling Sum (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 48-54). This framework defies simple summary, but within the context of the present discussion there are three key points that deserve emphasis. The first is that Gramsci's account of hegemonic leadership provides a class-basis for the subjective interventions that crises elicit (Jessop, 2004: 166-70; Sum and Jessop, 2013: 72-90). This is implicit in Debray, increasingly less visible in Hay, and more or less absent in Blyth. The second is that the subjective indeterminacy of crisis is understood through the lens of complexity and systems theory (Jessop, 2007: 225-45). Specifically, Jessop (2004: 162-3) argues that the reproduction of an accumulation regime is always dependent on complexity-reducing *imaginaries*, which are what enable a subset of economic activities to be identified as an object of intervention or management. Once the contradictions that these and other activities produce are construed as symptoms of systemic crisis, efforts at complexity-reduction lose their unity and there is a proliferation of competing imaginaries (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 404). The indeterminacy of crisis therefore stems not from overdetermination or complexity itself, but from the multiplicity of ways in which complexity might be reduced. Finally, the third point is that the eventual diagnosis and resolution of a crisis episode is seen to hinge on the emergence of a "master economic imaginary" (Jessop, 2008: 83-4), whose role is to coordinate and lend structural coherence to the visions and strategies of key economic agents. This occurs through evolutionary mechanisms of selection and retention, which each possess both semiotic and material dimensions (Jessop, 2004: 164-5; Sum and Jessop, 2013: 405). Crises are therefore periods of hegemonic struggle. During such periods,



agents vie to remake social relations from within, and imagined economies serve in equal parts as weapons and bridges in this process.

### ***Crisis-histories feed on crisis-histories***

The intersubjectivity of crisis opens out onto and empowers what Koselleck terms the ‘historical imagination’. In order for a crisis to even exist, let alone be managed or resolved, the present must be situated in relation to prior events and processes. A crisis-history must be articulated. This much is implied in various appeals to the function of narration or storytelling, which provide the basic form for subjective interventions during crisis (see Hay, 1999: 333; Blyth, 2007: 762; Jessop, 2008: 83). But if subjective interventions can produce new crisis-histories, they may also be the product of prior ones. That is, crises might take shape through returns to the historical record – and in particular, to its inventory of other, apparently similar or affiliated crisis episodes. This idea that there is a practical function for the past has not been lost on those more ‘literary’ theorists of history (e.g. White, 2010; see Samman, 2014). The new theorists of crisis, however, have alluded to it only in passing.

In his landmark article on the crisis of the 1970s, Hay (1996: 253) begins by observing how “The winter of discontent continues to exert a powerful hold over the British political imaginary”. By way of elaboration he offers the following:

It acts as a discursive key to a collective mythology seemingly appealed to, and conjured, in each wave of industrial unrest, in each hint of political turmoil and, until recently, whenever the election of a Labour government looked credible. (Hay, 1996: 253)

These are insightful but nebulous comments. In one respect, Hay usefully draws attention to how an event from the past can live on in one of its narrative representations. And yet at the same time, it is not immediately clear how a past crisis is ‘conjured’, nor is it obvious why such a conjuring must always be in the service of a pre-constituted narrative rendered as historical myth. By conflating the function of the past with the practice of its recollection in this way, Hay is able to provide analytical clarity on neither.

The proponents of agent-centred or uncertainty constructivism have approached the question somewhat differently. In their co-authored editorial on the

endogenous construction of crisis, Widmaier et al. (2007: 755) highlight “the importance of expressive struggles over the ‘lessons of history’”. In so doing, they go some way towards addressing Hay’s shortcomings. First, by acknowledging how “intensified debate over the meaning of contemporary events often fosters reinterpretations of past wars and crises” (p. 755), they challenge the idea that appeals to a past crisis must necessarily involve a reiteration of its prior meanings. Past crises can acquire new meanings in a later present.

The uncertainty constructivists also offer some explicit comments on the function and status of the recollected past. According to Widmaier et al. (2007: 755-6), history matters because its lessons are “constitutive of future understandings and interests”. But because crises can be always reinterpreted, history can always provide new lessons. The construction of crises therefore involves a process of “ongoing persuasion” (p. 756), wherein agents seek to learn and teach lessons drawn from different crisis-histories. This is an important clarification vis-à-vis Hay, but a certain degree of ambiguity still remains. Most notably, Widmaier et al. are silent on the interpretive practices through which ‘lessons of history’ are drawn and contested. Agents no doubt require such practices, yet they do not appear in the analysis beyond an allusion to ‘expressive struggles’ between parties. This is because the category of ‘lessons’ is defined only on the basis of its broad function – i.e., to constitute the ‘understandings and interests’ of agents in the face of crisis.

Cultural political economy is by far the clearest on what we might term the meta-historical dimensions of crisis. According to Jessop and Sum (2013: 408-15), ‘lessons from the past’ are invoked in the course of learning in, about, and from crisis. By explicitly framing the question of history in terms of learning, Jessop and Sum are able to overcome the conflation of function and practice that marks constructivist crisis theory. On the side of practice, learning from the past entails an “effort to define appropriate historical parallels” (p. 415). On the side of function, its purpose is to provide “a basis for responding effectively to ... crisis in real time” (p. 415). But in coupling together function and practice through learning, Jessop arrives at a limited conception of each. Lesson drawing clearly relies on finding similarities between crisis episodes, but the ‘effort to define appropriate parallels’ must entail more than the parallels themselves. Conversely, it seems unduly restrictive to treat these other kinds of apparent affiliations as always and only subordinate components in a broader

process of learning. Hence, while constructivism suffers from a failure to distinguish between the form and the content of historical representation, cultural political economy is limited by too narrow a conception of the latter.

### **ENGAGING THE META-HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF CRISIS**

What, then, do we do when we talk about past crises? How do our appeals to a history of crisis interact with efforts to diagnose or negotiate a crisis in the present? Answering these questions will require a set of analytical and conceptual tools that the new crisis theory has yet to provide. Most fundamentally, the practice through which a historical representation is produced must be distinguished from the functions it is able to perform. This is because representations of past crises must first be produced before they can go on to influence the diagnosis or negotiation of another, later crisis episode. Yet these functions must also be theorised through reference to the interpretive practices on which they depend, for specific forms of historical representation do carry different contents. In this section I identify three basic varieties of historical representation, and then use these to indicate how past crises can partake in a meta-historical process of 'history-production'.

#### ***Recollecting past crises: Three varieties of historical representation***

To begin with practice is to begin with the question of how crises might be recalled or recollected within a later present. In response it is possible to identify three basic varieties of historical representation, each of which relies on a distinct kind of interpretive procedure. The most obvious of these are those representations that stress similarities or differences between crisis episodes. Such representations rely on a procedure of *analogical reasoning*, which consists in drawing analogies or counter-analogies between crises. The simplest analogies provide comparisons between 'point-like' aspects of crises, or otherwise seemingly self-evident processes of development. This is a resemblance forged between elements or dimensions of crisis episodes, rather than their episodic character as such. Analogies that deal in the episodic character of crises work instead through comparisons between causal-chains of events. This is a

more complex form of analogical reasoning, but at its root it too rests on an identification of similarities and differences between crises.

A second and perhaps more primary form of historical representation is narrative. Representation of this kind relies on a procedure of *narrativisation*, which imposes a story order on history through the selection, sequencing, and configuration of more than one of its events (White, 1987: 23-5, 44-6, 66-8). Such a procedure is implicit in existing appeals to the power of narrative within the new crisis theory. Here, however, it explicitly denotes a ‘grasping together’ of events that does not conform to the logic of comparison. The logic is narrativisation is therefore one of affiliation rather than mere resemblance. Through its imposition of a story order onto history, narrativisation enables past crises to be apperceived as belonging to a process that culminates in a later, crisis-ridden present.

Finally, there are those representations that purport to reveal the ‘lessons of history’. These rely on a procedure of *lesson drawing* that simultaneously entails those of analogical reasoning and narrativisation. The relation between lesson drawing and narrativisation is relatively straightforward: in order to draw a lesson from a past crisis, one must first develop a causal story for that past crisis. But in order for this crisis narrative to provide a lesson for contemporary agents a further operation is required. Specifically, the causal-chain that is constructed around a past crisis must be transposed into the time of the present. Such a transposition operates on the basis of analogical reasoning, for it is an apparent similarity between two crises that enables ‘lessons’ deduced from one to be deemed applicable in the other. Lesson drawing therefore encompasses the procedures of both narrativisation and analogical reasoning, while at the same remaining distinct from each in terms of the kind of historical representations it is able to yield.

Interpretive procedure	Formal properties
<b>Analogical reasoning</b>	Comparison between ‘point-like’ aspects of events or narrated causal-chains
<b>Narrativisation</b>	Selection, sequencing, and configuration of two or more events
<b>Lesson drawing</b>	Transposition of narrated causal-chain from one present into another

Table 4. *Three varieties of historical representation* (Source: Author’s own)

The above typology shows how past crises can be recollected in different ways. Historical analogies, narratives, and lessons may well be intertwined, but each relies on a distinct set of interpretive procedures. These seemingly formal differences are glossed over in vague appeals to the productive power of our debates over the past. Such debates clearly do involve “the use of history to make history” (Jessop and Sum, 2013: 415), but in order for a history to be ‘used’ it must first be produced, in one way or another. The question of function must therefore be routed through the question of practice; to understand how histories of crisis might be used to ‘make history’ we must ask ourselves how agents produce their crisis-histories.

### ***Producing crisis-histories: Three modes of history-production***

What does it mean to posit histories of crisis, capitalist or otherwise, as an input into the crises of economic history? Simply put, it means taking an exercise of the historical imagination as one of our primary tools for confronting the uncertainty characteristic of ‘crisis’. In theoretical terms this intuition can be further developed through the concept of *history-production*. With history-production, ‘using history’ and ‘making history’ are grasped together – that is, the subjective interventions through which past crises are recollected, patterned, and deployed are situated in relation to the discursive production and negotiation of crisis in some later present. In what follows I use the above typology to identify three different modes of history-production. The disaggregation is strictly analytical in character, but by treating each variety of historical representation in turn important clarifications are offered regarding the possible functions of the past during crisis.

For purposes of clarity in exposition I begin with history-production via narrativisation. Narrativisation gives figure to a sequence of events, and it can produce either linear or cyclical narratives of crisis. Linear narratives cast crises as the outcomes of novel developmental processes, whereas cyclical ones render them as inversions or tipping points within recurrent patterns of development. One possible function for each of these crisis-narrative types is to form the basis for lessons about how to respond to crises, whether in real-time or some unspecified future. We will return to this in our discussion of history-production via lesson drawing. But in order to form the basis for such lessons, crisis narratives must first deliver events over to

history in one way or another. This is the fundamental function of a crisis narrative: to lend a semblance of order to history. By relaying the present as a crisis episode, narrativisation renders that present intelligible (even if in traumatic terms). For example, the subprime ‘crisis’ may be grasped as a crisis of debt-based accumulation, rather than an inexplicable breakdown of global financial and banking systems.

This operation cuts both ways, though, because contending narratives can deliver events over to different, contradictory crisis-histories. Was the subprime ‘crisis’ an epochal crisis of capitalism, or merely another iteration in an eternal cycle of boom and bust? Crisis narratives both ask and answer this kind of question. In so doing, they reveal how the function of narrativisation during crisis is two-sided: crisis narratives are a means of *constituting* and *contesting* the very historicity of a present. These processes are history-producing because they provide an anchor for bouts of deliberation and struggle over crisis response.

A second and related mode of history-production is that which operates through analogical reasoning. Analogical reasoning works to identify similarities or differences between ‘crises’, and as we have seen, it is implicated in both lesson drawing and certain forms of narrativisation. But as a mode of history-production, it performs a specific function in relation to each of these other procedures. On the side of narrativisation, analogical reasoning works to *identify* which past crises are legitimate subjects for narratives of recurrence. The logic here is relatively straightforward: before some turmoil in the present can be relayed as a familiar and recurrent form of crisis, similarities between the two episodes must be identified. These similarities can be forged in terms of the specific ‘point-like’ elements of crises, or in terms of their imputed developmental aspects. Analogical reasoning can in this way serve as a direct input into history-production via narrativisation.

But if narratives of recurrence rely on analogical reasoning, then they also stand or fall on the credibility of their underlying historical analogies. Analogical reasoning therefore performs an additional function in relation to narrativisation, which is to *adjudicate* between competing narratives of recurrence. Again the logic is intuitive: once a parallel that is forged between two crises is contested, then any narrative that this similarity underpins is thrown into question. This has important implications for lesson drawing. Specifically, if the parallel upon which a cyclical narrativisation of crisis relies is undermined, then the lessons drawn from that

narrative come to appear as inappropriate guides for present action. The practice of analogical reasoning therefore not only supports the function of narrativisation, but also intermediates between this and the ones performed by lesson drawing. It is to these latter functions that I now turn.

As an interpretive procedure, lesson drawing hinges on the transposition of a crisis narrative from one present into another. This transposition is history-producing because it enables causal claims or inferences to travel between different presents. It is in this way that accounts of the past can become a source of practical guidance, counsel, or direction. When transposed from past into present, crisis narratives provide a means of attaching consequences to potential courses of action. From such speculated or projected consequences lessons can be then be drawn about how to negotiate the dilemmas posed by a crisis in the present. This is what Jessop and Sum (2013: 415) mean when they say that past crises can serve as “a basis for responding effectively to the crisis in real time”. Lesson drawing can therefore be understood as a process whose function is to aid the *negotiation* of a historicity already constituted through prior procedures of narrativisation and analogical reasoning.

However, lesson drawing can have other history-producing effects via its own peculiar narrativity. Lessons are not narratives per se, but lessons drawn from past crises themselves constitute a hanging or unfinished plot, whose completion hinges on an invitation to learn the lesson. This invitation has different implications depending on the mode of narrativisation upon which the lesson is premised. In the case of lessons derived from narratives of recurrence, the operative analogy necessarily opens out onto a wider range of family resemblances. Once an apparent crisis is construed as ‘another balance-sheet recession’, for example, lessons can then be drawn from any past episode already seen as belonging to this basic category. Lesson drawing therefore opens out onto a repertoire of prior crisis narratives and their associated lessons.

Conversely, when lessons are derived from a linear narrative of crisis, the emphasis on historical novelty means that the invitation is to learn a fundamentally new lesson. Such lessons can serve as the basis for responding to a crisis in real-time, but they can serve as preparation for the negotiation of a crisis in another, later present. Lesson drawing can also therefore be the means by which an existing repertoire of lessons is added to or expanded. Rather than an anchor, then, lesson

drawing provides a kind of compass with which to navigate new and uncharted historical territories, be these of the present or some still distant future.

Interpretive procedure	Formal outputs	Possible functions
<b>Narrativisation</b>	<i>Affiliations</i> Between two or more events	Constitute the present as an episode of crisis
		Contest the kind of crisis a present is constituted as
<b>Analogical reasoning</b>	<i>Similarities or differences</i> Between events or processes	Identify which past crises are legitimate subjects for narratives of recurrence
		Adjudicate between competing narratives of recurrence
<b>Lesson drawing</b>	<i>Generalisations</i> Based on patterns of affiliation and similarity or difference	Aid the negotiation of a historicity already constituted through narrativisation and analogy drawing

Table 6. *Three modes of history-production* (Source: Author's own)

These metaphors of anchor and compass encapsulate two basic functions for the past in relation to crisis. As 'compass' the past provides practical assistance in the form of guidance, direction, or counsel. In such instances, the historical record can guide agents in their attempts to negotiate the dilemmas posed by a moment of apparent crisis. But regardless of who may be seeking it, such guidance necessarily relies on first having established what the dilemmas posed by a crisis actually are. As 'anchor' the past can do this by providing the basis for narrative understandings of the present-as-history. Here past crises are made to reveal either the process of history or the kind of present it has produced. It is on this basis that practical guidance can then be sought regarding how such a present might be negotiated or learnt from. Taken together these points highlight a complex interaction not only between historical analogies, lessons and narratives, but also between these representational modes and the discursive production or negotiation of crisis.



## **META-HISTORY AND CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY IPE**

What does this new line of crisis thinking mean for scholarship on crisis within IPE? In this final section I would like to highlight the methodological implications of reframing crises as meta-historical phenomena. There are two points worth stressing. The first is that the approach developed here can help to further advance empirical research on crisis within the constructivist and cultural political economy traditions. I illustrate this through a series of concrete examples drawn from elite discourse on the ‘subprime crisis’. The second key point is that such an approach undermines the conventional wisdom that economic history is simply there to be used, misused, or abused by contemporary agents. In the place of this doxa I suggest that IPE scholars begin instead to ask how crisis-histories relate to the contexts in which they circulate.

### ***Elite crisis-histories during and after subprime***

The collapse of Lehman Brothers in late 2008 has become the subject of numerous, competing crisis-histories.<sup>6</sup> In their reformist variety these range from those that identify a crisis of confidence or liquidity, all the way through to those that diagnose a crisis of the financial industry and its associated modes of regulation. Critical alternatives typically go further, casting the undoing of global finance as a broader crisis of Anglo-Saxon capitalism, debt-fuelled accumulation, or neoliberal globalisation. This list could go on, for there are always more crisis-histories than there are crises. Yet neither the origins nor the productive force of these crisis-histories can be adequately grasped without reference to the meta-historical dimensions of ‘crisis’ itself. In what follows I identify three different ways in which past crises were put to work by global policymaking elites during the period of 2007-2009.

The first example I want to highlight is of a crisis-history that functions as a call to *remember lessons already learnt* through prior crises. During the build-up to what would eventually become ‘the subprime crisis’, representatives of the European Central Bank (ECB) repeatedly invoke the 1970s as a reminder of the rationale behind inflation-control. More specifically, they depict the stagflation of that decade as a

---

<sup>6</sup> In his attempt at summary Howard Davies (2010) identifies some fifty different accounts of financial crisis post-2008.

threshold through which discretionary monetary policies were first discredited, and then replaced by the ideas and practices of independent central banking (for example, see Smaghi, 2008; Stark, 2008). This is a familiar rendering of the 1970s as a crisis of Keynesianism. Here however, that narrativisation is made to do new things through practices of analogical reasoning and lesson drawing. This process entails three distinct moves. First, the ECB returns to the 1970s and once again extracts a configuration of events that casts monetary stimulus as a cause for crisis. It then identifies a similarity between that prior period of inflation and the recent boom in commodity and asset prices. Finally, on the basis of this analogy, it transposes its causal-account of the 1970s into the present. The result is the reiteration of a pre-constituted lesson: Never again, but especially not now, should central bankers seek to weather shocks or stimulate demand using monetary levers. The ECB's appeals to the 1970s therefore serve to constitute the present as a recurrent form of inflationary crisis, as well as to provide familiar guidance on the question of how to best negotiate such a conjuncture.

This kind of crisis-history can be contrasted with those that serve instead as an invitation to *learn new lessons* from old crises. In its own time, the Asian crisis was narrated as a crisis of 'crony capitalism' in the region, and this narrativisation yielded a series of lessons about the proper sequencing of liberal reforms in statist economies (see Hall, 2003). In late 2007, however, officials at the US Federal Reserve begin to link post-crisis policies in East Asia to emergent financial excesses in North America. Specifically, Chairman Ben Bernanke (2007) suggests that active over-saving in post-crisis Asia has contributed to a 'global savings glut', which is now fuelling a boom in US housing markets and the demand for mortgage-backed securities. The Asian crisis is therefore recast as the origin of another crisis some ten years later. This is not a meaning the Asian crisis could have had in its own time, and by retrofitting this onto it, Bernanke constitutes the present as an affiliated crisis of accumulated global imbalances. The result is a new configuration of events from which different sorts of practical lessons can be drawn, either in-and-for the present, or as a means to ward off another crisis in the future. John Lipsky (2009), for example, uses Bernanke's account to underline the need for his organisation – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – to provide viable alternatives to self-insurance for developing countries. The Federal Reserve therefore re-narrativises the Asian crisis in such a way that challenges existing

crisis-histories, and invites new lessons to be drawn from both that prior episode and the later crisis to which it is now linked.

Finally, there are those crisis-histories that provide grounds upon which to *identify the lessons that are being learnt*, regardless of whether these lessons are old or new. Crisis-histories of this kind proliferate during early 2009, when ‘green shoots’ of recovery prompt policymakers to seek out the sources of their apparent success. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, for example – then Managing Director of the IMF – repeatedly presents ongoing efforts at crisis management as an evolution of the multilateral project that began after the Great Depression (as in Strauss-Kahn, 2009a: Section I; 2009b: Section II). Here prior narrativisations of that event as the birth of multilateralism are extended to cover subsequent changes in the form and content of international cooperation, including the rise of the G20 and the normalisation of central bank liquidity swaps. The result is a narrative account of the very process through which lessons are drawn and learnt. This kind of crisis-history serves a crucial legitimating function, for by framing their efforts as part of a broader history of crisis management, policymakers effectively narrate their own progress in drawing and learning lessons from the past.<sup>7</sup> Without such a meta-narrative, the entire enterprise of crisis management would be stripped of its claim to objectivity and shown for what it is – a practical, and fundamentally imaginative task of thinking historically.

### ***On the uses of history in IPE***

If global policymaking elites cannot do without past crises, then what are we IPE scholars to make of their appeals to them? I have already suggested that the process of invoking past crises can be understood as a means by which agents imagine and respond to the dilemmas of their present. This is a logical extension of the new constructivist and cultural political economy approaches to crisis. Before concluding, however, I would like to highlight how such an insight complicates the meaning and place of history within IPE scholarship more broadly. In particular, I want to call into question the assumption that history itself furnishes lessons that agents then simply use, misuse, or abuse.

---

<sup>7</sup> I discuss this at length in a forthcoming article entitled ‘Conjuring the Spirit of Multilateralism: Histories of Crisis Management During the Great Credit Crash’.

For many in IPE, to be historical is to delve back into the archives and uncover the truth of the past. This view reflects IPE's troubled relationship with economic history. Take for example the case of hegemonic stability theory (HST). Although inspired by the work of a financial historian, proponents of HST took Charles Kindleberger's (1973) account of the interwar years and transformed it into a set of broader claims about the patterns and logics of the international system. Kindleberger (1986) soon distanced himself from these claims, and a prominent monetary historian – Barry Eichengreen (1992) – explicitly criticised what he saw as a preoccupation with the concept of hegemonic leadership (see Oliver, 2009: 282-83). In response, self-consciously historical IPE has become more closely aligned with economic history – either by drawing on the findings of historians, or by producing primary historical research of its own (cf. Walter, 1993; Germann, 2014).

The problem, however, is that economic history provides a very narrow lens through which to analyse the social function of the past. In his new book *Hall of Mirrors*, Eichengreen (2015: 14) explicitly addresses how the “experience of the Great Depression ... shaped perceptions and reactions to the Great Recession”. His basic argument is that while some useful lessons were drawn from the interwar years, others were looked over, distorted, or misused by agents who – for one reason or another – could not return to the past without reading it wrong. But how exactly are contemporary agents to tell whether they are reading history in the right way? Past events, structures, or processes become histories only through narrativisation, and there is always more than one way of narrativising the past. This means that the ‘lessons of the past’ can and indeed must change with the histories from which they are drawn. Such lessons are therefore the very terrain of interpretive struggle over history, rather than an authority that enables us to distinguish between right and wrong versions of it. From the perspective of historical IPE, this suggests clear limits to the use of methodologies drawn from economic history.

Economic history, however, need not monopolise historical research in IPE. As Ronen Palan (2009: 392) points out, the so-called British school has always been more historical than its American counterpart, and it has done this by stressing the status of each present as a unique or specific context for social practice. Such an approach has much to recommend itself when it comes to analysing the social function of the past. If all conjunctures are shot-through with questions about what is

happening, what is possible, and what is desirable, then imagined histories – whether or not these are histories of crisis – can be understood as ‘reflective’ devices that agents develop and deploy to understand the contexts in which they find themselves (Amoore et al., 2000: 60-66). On this view, taking history seriously means situating acts of historical imagination at the very interface of structure and agency.

From the perspective of the new crisis theory, this approach highlights an important question – namely, how do subjective interventions relate to the objective complexity that produces uncertainty and necessitates an exercise of the historical imagination in the first place? What, we must still ask, is “the context of expressive struggle” over past crises (Widmaier et al., 2007: 756), and how does this context inform the recollection of past crises and production of crisis-histories? Are past crises simply used and abused to suit the purposes of those that invoke them? In order to answer these questions researchers will need to be attentive to how different agents develop and deploy their crisis-histories.

Take for example the elite discourse on financial crisis discussed in the previous section. Financial elites inhabit a very particular milieu within the world economy, and there are a host of other agents involved in imagining financial crises, ranging from politicians and public intellectuals to civil society activists and radical anti-capitalists. In these latter instances, crises may be imagined through recourse to an altogether different repertoire of past events and historical narratives. They may also be imagined as events that call for an end to the practice of crisis management as such. Taking the historical imagination seriously will therefore require that scholars treat imagined crises as situated forces of history-production. Methodologically speaking, this implies a focus not only on the representational modes employed by different agents, but also on the repertoire of past crises that they draw from, and the specific contexts or milieus in which they put these to work. Whose crisis-histories will prove to be path-shaping, however, is ultimately an empirical question. There may always be more crisis-histories than there are crises, but all crises are traversed through discursive struggles over the past.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have sought to deepen the theoretical basis for crisis theorising in IPE. I have done this by returning to a longer history of crisis thinking in the human sciences. Within this broader tradition, the concept of crisis appears first and foremost as a means of exercising the historical imagination. Each theory of crisis specifies a different relation between crisis and history, and at least in principle, there is no limit to ways in which theorists can imagine this relation. Crisis thinking in political economy is a case in point. As an objective event, 'crisis' can signal a singular shock or a periodic process of adjustment; it can express a long-term tendency or its eventual culmination; it can even mark a transition between different institutional logics altogether. As a subjective process there is important variation too: on one hand, it can connote a profound uncertainty regarding the causes behind such events, on the other, a fundamental inability to determine which diagnosis will eventually prove to be path-shaping.

With the new constructivist and cultural political economy, these ambiguities are radically foregrounded through an attempt to turn the idea of crisis into a tool for analysing how events are construed and constructed *as crises*. After all, if a crisis is created and traversed through its recognition as one, then its nature and significance becomes dependent on the form given to it by the agents of history. The implication of this, I argue, is that theory must turn its attention to how agents themselves might generate and act upon imagined crisis-histories. To this end I propose a novel set of tools for crisis theorising in IPE. The first of these is an analytical distinction between different practices of historical representation and the functions they are capable of performing. The latter depend on the former but they cannot be reduced to them. The second tool is a typology that distinguishes between representations of the past produced through practices of analogical reasoning, narrativisation, and lesson drawing. Past crises relayed through these practices feed into the production and negotiation of crisis episodes in distinct ways. Finally, my third contribution is concept of 'history-production', which captures how past crises can serve as both anchor and compass in the search for appropriate responses to crisis. Together these tools enable some important clarifications regarding the meta-historical dimensions of crisis.

The first of these regards the immediately practical functions of recollected crises. Within the new crisis theory, debates over past crises are linked to the identification of appropriate responses to a crisis in the present. They are also seen as capable of legislating against particular kinds of crisis response. Both are plausible possibilities, but each process relies on a complex procedure of lesson drawing. In order to even formulate a lesson, agents must identify similarities between two or more crises, transpose a causal account of the past into the present, and infer from this the likely consequences of a particular course of action. Interpretive struggles over which are the 'right' lessons to learn are similarly grounded in the procedures of narrativisation and analogical reasoning, for it these that enable projected consequences to be imagined and appraised. Any analysis of how debates over the past might shape the negotiation of crisis episodes in the present must be attuned to this.

A second point is that past crises can perform practical functions in the future. Some crisis narratives refuse to die and live on long after they are first articulated. The same goes for the lessons that such narratives underpin. All efforts to learn from past crises are set against a repertoire of lessons drawn during prior episodes of crisis. This repertoire can be returned to and raided like a storehouse of practical manuals for the negotiation of crisis episodes. Yet it can also be added to through the drawing of new lessons. Such lessons can be drawn either during or after crisis episodes, and they are bequeathed to the future as a resource for facing crises to come. This too is an important practical function for the past that cannot be understood without reference to the interpretive procedures on which it depends.

A third and final point is that the recollection of past crises can have a function that goes beyond the mere provision of practical guidance, policy-related or otherwise. This stems from the centrality of narrative representation to the practice of lesson drawing. In order to draw a new lesson or adjudicate between existing ones, crisis narratives are needed. Yet these narratives do not produce themselves; they are produced through procedures of narrativisation. Narrativisation in this way performs a preliminary and more fundamental function, which is to render history itself intelligible. Competing crisis narratives may disclose different and contradictory histories, but without them past crises cannot even begin to provide agents with more practical forms of guidance. The upshot, then, is that crises are always and

everywhere meta-historical. They are produced through an exercise of the historical imagination, and it is this same basic capacity that is called upon in efforts to manage or negotiate them. The tools developed here provide constructivist and cultural political economy scholars with a means of better engaging these meta-historical dimensions of crisis.



## REFERENCES

- Abdelal, R., Blyth, M. and Parsons, C. (eds.) (2010) *Constructing the International Economy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Aglietta, M. (1979) *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The U.S. Experience*, London: New Left Books.
- Allon, F. (2009) 'The Futility of Extrapolation: Reflections on Crisis, Continuity and Culture in the "Great Recession"', *ephemera*, 9(4): 369-79.
- Althusser, L. (1969) *For Marx*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Amoore, L., Dodgson, R., Germain, R., Gills, B., Langley, P. and Watson, I. (2000) 'Paths to a Historicized International Political Economy', *Review of International Political Economy*, 7(1): 53-71.
- Aristotle (1998) *Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bernanke, B. (2007) 'Global Imbalances: Recent Developments and Prospects'. Berlin, 11 September 2007. Available at: <<http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/bernanke20070911a.htm>>. Accessed 23 April 2014.
- Bleaney, M. (1976) *Underconsumption Theories: A History and Critical Analysis*, New York: International Publishers.
- Blyth, M. (2002) *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2007) 'Powering, Puzzling, or Persuading? The Mechanisms of Building Institutional Orders', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51(4): 761-77.
- Boyer, R. (2000) 'Is a Finance-Led Growth Regime a Viable Alternative to Fordism?' *Economy and Society*, 29(1): 111-45.
- Boyer, R. (2013) 'The Global Financial Crisis in Historical Perspective: An Economic Analysis Combining Minsky, Hayek, Fisher, Keynes and the Regulation Approach', *Accounting, Economics and Law*, 3(3): 93-139.
- Brassett, J. and Clarke, C. (2012) 'Performing the Sub-Prime Crisis: Trauma and the Financial Event', *International Political Sociology*, 6(1): 4-20.
- Broome, A., Clegg, L. and Rethel, L. (2012) 'Global Governance and the Politics of Crisis', *Global Society*, 26(1): 3-17.
- Burckhardt, J. (1979) *Reflections on History*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Carstensen, M. (2013) 'Projecting from a Fiction: The Case of Denmark and the Financial Crisis', *New Political Economy*, 18(4): 555-78.
- Davies, H. (2010) *The Financial Crisis: Who is to Blame?* Cambridge: Polity.
- Debray, R. (1975) *Prison Writings*, London: Penguin.
- Eichengreen, B. (1992) *Golden Fetters: The Gold Standard and the Great Depression, 1919-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Eichengreen, B. (2015) *Hall of Mirrors: The Great Depression, The Great Recession, and the Uses – and Misuses – of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Germann, J. (2014) ‘German “Grand Strategy” and the Rise of Neoliberalism’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4): 706-16.
- Hall, R. (2003) ‘The Discursive Demolition of the Asian Development Model’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 47(1): 71-99.
- Hartley, J., Hoover, K. and Salyer, K. (eds.) (1998) *Real Business Cycles: A Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Hay, C. (1996) ‘Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the Winter of Discontent’, *Sociology*, 30(2): 253-77.
- Hay, C. (1999) ‘Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State: Interrogating the Process of Change’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1(3): 317-44.
- Hay, C. (2006) ‘Constructivist Institutionalism’, in Rhodes, R., Binder, S., and Rockman, B. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 56-74.
- Hay, C. (2011) ‘Pathology Without Crisis? The Strange Demise of the Anglo-Liberal Growth Model’, *Government and Opposition*, 46(1): 1-31.
- Jessop, B. (2004) ‘Critical Semiotic Analysis and Cultural Political Economy’, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1(2): 159-74.
- Jessop, B. (2007) *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Jessop, B. (2008) ‘The Knowledge-Based Economy’, *Naked Punch Review*, 10: 82-89.
- Jessop, B. (2012) ‘Narratives of Crisis and Crisis Response: Perspectives from North and South’, in *Global Crisis and Transformative Social Change*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 23-42.
- Jevons, W. (1878) ‘Commercial Crises and Sun-Spots’, *Nature*, 19(472): 33-37.
- Keynes, J. (1936) *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, London: Macmillan.
- Kindleberger, C. (1973) *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*, London: Allen Lane.
- Kindleberger, C. (1986) ‘Review: Hierarchy Versus Inertial Cooperation’, *International Organization*, 40(4): 841-47.
- Koselleck, R. (2002) *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Koselleck, R. (2006) ‘Crisis’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67(2): 357-400.
- Lapavistas, C. (2009) ‘Financialised Capitalism: Crisis and Financial Expropriation’, *Historical Materialism*, 17(2): 114-48.
- Lipietz, A. (1987) *Mirages and Miracles: The Crisis in Global Fordism*, London: Verso.
- Lipietz, A. (1993) ‘From Althusserianism to “Regulation Theory”’, in Kaplan, E., and Sprinker, M. (eds.) *The Althusserian Legacy*, London: Verso, 99-138.

- Lipsky, J. (2009) 'Asia, the Financial Crisis, and Global Economic Governance'. Santa Barbara, 20 October 2009. Available at: <<http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2009/102009.htm>>. Accessed on 4 November 2014.
- Lucarelli, B. (2011) *The Economics of Financial Turbulence: Alternative Theories of Money and Finance*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Lucas, R. (1983) *Studies in Business-Cycle Theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Marx, K. (1973/1953) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1977/1894) *Capital. Volume III*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1998/1848) *The Communist Manifesto*, London: Verso.
- Mattick, P. (1981) *Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory*, London: Merlin Press.
- Mitchell, W. (1913) *Business Cycles and Their Causes*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nesvetailova, A. (2010) *Financial Alchemy in Crisis: The Great Liquidity Illusion*, London: Pluto Press.
- O'Connor, J. (1987) *The Meaning of Crisis: A Theoretical Introduction*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Oliver, M. (2009) 'Economic History and the International Political Economy', in Blyth, M. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of International Political Economy: IPE as a Global Conversation*, London: Routledge, 280-89.
- Overbeek, H. (2004) 'Transnational Class Formation and Concepts of Control: Towards a Genealogy of the Amsterdam Project in International Political Economy', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 7(2): 113-41.
- Palan, R. (2006) 'Is the Competition State the New, Post-Fordist, Mode of Regulation? Regulation Theory from an International Political Economic Perspective', *Competition and Change*, 10(2): 246-62.
- Palan, R. (2009) 'The Proof of the Pudding is in the Eating: IPE in Light of the Crisis of 2007/8', *New Political Economy*, 14(3): 385-94.
- Samman, A. (2014) 'Making Financial History: The Crisis of 2008 and the Return of the Past', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 42(2): 309-30.
- Seabrooke, L. (2007) 'The Everyday Social Sources of Economic Crises: From "Great Frustrations" to "Great Revelations" in Interwar Britain', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51(4): 795-810.
- Siles-Brügge, G. (2014) 'Explaining the Resilience of Free Trade: The "Smoot-Hawley" Myth and the Crisis', *Review of International Political Economy*, 21(3): 535-74.
- Smaghi, L. (2008) 'From Tuscany's 19th Century Currency, the Fiorino, to the Euro: Dialogue on International Finance'. Florence, 15 May 2008. Available at: <[http://www.ecb.int/press/key/date/2008/html/sp080515\\_2.en.html](http://www.ecb.int/press/key/date/2008/html/sp080515_2.en.html)>. Accessed 4 November 2014.

- Stark, J. (2008) 'Monetary, Fiscal, and Financial Stability in Europe'. Frankfurt, 18 November 2008. Available at:  
 <[http://www.ecb.int/press/key/date/2008/html/sp081118\\_1.en.html](http://www.ecb.int/press/key/date/2008/html/sp081118_1.en.html)>.  
 Accessed 4 November 2014.
- Starn, R. (1971) 'Historians and "Crisis"', *Past and Present*, 52(1): 3-22.
- Strauss-Kahn, D. (2009a) 'Multilateralism and the Role of the International Monetary Fund in the Global Financial Crisis'. Washington DC, 23 April 2009.  
 Available at:  
 <<http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2009/042309.htm>>. Accessed 4 November 2014.
- Strauss-Kahn, D. (2009b) 'Economic Stability, Economic Cooperation, and Peace'. Oslo, 23 October 2009. Available at:  
 <<http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2009/102309.htm>>. Accessed 4 November 2014.
- Sum, N.-L. and Jessop, B. (2013) *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Putting Culture in its Place in Political Economy*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Veblen, T. (1898) 'Why is Economics not an Evolutionary Science?' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 12(4): 373-97.
- Walras, L. (2003/1874) *Elements of Pure Economics*, London: Routledge.
- Walter, A. (1993) *World Power and World Money: The Role of Hegemony and International Monetary Order*, New York: Harvester.
- White, H. (1987) *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (2010) 'The Practical Past', *Historein*, 10: 10-19.
- Widmaier, W., Blyth, M. and Seabrooke, L. (2007) 'Exogenous Shocks or Endogenous Constructions? The Meanings of Wars and Crises', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51(4): 747-59.