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An Eventful Critique of Crisis Language in Historical Sociology

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What work does the term "crisis" do for historical sociologists and historically oriented social science in general? And how does "crisis" relate to contingencies and conjunctures – the twin poles of socio-historical analysis? I begin with a concern that the term "crisis" is deployed with such casual frequency that, despite its apparent ability to capture something urgent about the turbulent and bleak times we live in, it ironically risks loss of the meaning it is intended to convey. Indeed, as several skeptics have asked, if everything is crisis, then what is outside it (Freeden 2017; Holton 1987)? Later in this essay I will debunk the "crisis – non-crisis" dichotomy raised by several authors, who are concerned with delimiting the use of the term itself. I begin, though, with the observation that frequent usage of the term "crisis" might reveal something important about the inadequacy of the concepts routinely employed in social science history.

An excerpt from Nancy Fraser's (2022) "Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet and What We Can Do About It" is exemplary of both this "crisis talk" *and* the dilemma that we face when attempting to convey the intangible about the current conjuncture:

> "The upshot is that we now face a tangle of multiple crises: an economic crisis, a crisis of social reproduction, an ecological crisis, and a two-sided political crisis. To my mind, this adds up to a general crisis of capitalist society. Its effects pop out all over, first here, then there, then somewhere else . . . Every effort to patch up one outbreak only leads to others . . . until the whole social body is overwhelmed . . . .One could say that the whole first half of the twentieth century up until the defeat of fascism at the end of World War II was *just one long, roiling general crisis of liberal-colonial capitalism*." (emphasis added)

In this excerpt, Fraser is clearly reaching for the language of crisis to express something about the heightened nature of various interconnected and deep-seated

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problems, contradictions and deadly effects of unbridled capitalism. But this heightened use may suggest something that is useful for historical sociologists to look at.

Drawing in part on Koselleck and Richter (2006) centering of the concept of crisis within historicist thinking, Roitman (2013) suggests that crisis has been mobilized as the defining category of our contemporary situation, such that crisis and critique are inherently connected. The idea of crisis, however, has a much longer history, and therefore even if it appears to be mobilized more routinely in the present, there is nothing new about thinking in crisis terms. This lineage suggests that far from invalidating our use of the term it is a worthwhile exercise to consider what work the analytic of crisis does in historical sociological analysis. Is a crisis merely a historical conjuncture that points to alternative pathways, or is it in fact a fundamental societal rupture that has profound epistemological consequences?

The idea of crisis

The language of social crisis draws on much older aesthetic and medical usages. In the structure of drama, for example, crises are those key moments in a narrative when the problems of human life and relationships, or of the fate of the self are dramatized in such a way that a resolution is needed. This structure presupposes that crisis is an abnormal and discontinuous feature of narrative rather than a permanent fixture. However, as Roitman (2013) suggests, increasingly crisis is mobilized in narrative constructions as a means by which to think "history" itself. Indeed, Koselleck and Richter (2006) made an important move in historicizing the idea of crisis itself. "Crisis" thinking, he argued, played only a peripheral role in the German Idealist philosophy of history because the spirit (Geist) naturally triumphed over any acute crisis. But by the end of the eighteenth century, crisis had assumed central place as a praxis and action-oriented philosophy whose goal was freedom from the historical constraints that would be overcome through human action. Such a quintessentially enlightenment philosophy involved judging history *correctly* with the aim of overcoming crisis and moving towards progress. This idea of crisis entailed a specific historical consciousness which posited history as a *temporality* upon which one can act. For this historical consciousness, crisis is a criterion for what counts as history, such that crisis *is* history. For Koselleck, in fact, crisis is the "signature concept" of modernity.

A somewhat orthodox reading of Marx's theory of the development of capitalism through a preceding crisis of the mode of production – and the emergence of crisis tendencies in capitalism is very much what Koselleck had in mind. In another reading of Marx, however, the notion of the crisis of capitalism is endemic and multifaceted – regarding crisis as disastrous, dehumanizing, necessary, inevitable, and desirable all at the same time (Freeden 2017). Arguably crisis is written into the Marxist analysis of history itself and constitutes the moving force behind major transformations even as it underpins the very working of capitalism. Crisis is rupture and routine at the same time.

Such ubiquity of the language of crisis deserves closer scrutiny. This observation has been made before, when Holton (1987) criticized the "transcendental deployment of the crisis metaphor," and argued that an analysis of crisis must be

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de-limited by some sense of normality. This, in his view, avoids the utopian problem of rejecting social totalities as comprehensively crisis-ridden and hence pathological. If that is the case, then what would "non-crisis" mean? What assumptions do we make when we characterize the opposite of crisis in terms of its antonyms – calm, order, stability and continuity? From ubiquity to rarity – underpinning each idea of crisis are some unexamined assumptions which can be opened up fruitfully through the tools at the disposal of the historical sociologist.

Disciplinary considerations

Steinmetz (2018) suggests that the word "crisis" is integral to the discipline of Sociology. This is because "it calls attention to the great social pathologies and failures and also to a moral struggle aimed at overcoming those conditions." The objectivity of the historical process that is punctuated by moments contains within itself the optimistic will to surpass these moments, or more precisely to a struggle to redefine and reorient the course of history towards a desired outcome. Crisis, then, in Steinmetz's view is itself a form of critique which resists epistemologies of causal regularities and the positivistic methodologies associated with these epistemologies – a critique that is in fact central to the practice of historical sociology.

It is worth mentioning that crisis thinking is in fact foundational to the discipline of sociology. While Marx's legacy of crisis thinking was of crisis as a driving force, in Weber's writings crisis was less visible as an analytical element in sociology. Methodologically, Weber was deeply committed to an array of concepts that linked to the decisionism underpinning his idea of revolutionary transformation. It is in this context that contingencies, conjunctures and counterfactuals emerged out of Weber's historical methodology, whereas one can argue that a structuralist concept of crisis is more central to Marxian methodologies. Both thinkers, however, resisted the positivistic and empiricist social sciences. Another critical founder of the discipline, W.E.B. DuBois, in 1910 coined the periodical *The Crisis*, associated with the creation of the NAACP, as a call to show the dangers of race prejudice at a "critical time for the history of the advancement of men."

Crisis and events

The sociological legacies of crisis-analytical language forestall a positivistic epistemology because they punctuate the regularities of social life with an inherent irregularity, enabling us to think of particular moments as a confluence of sharpened possibilities and dangers that would not necessarily be visible otherwise. Following from this, I would also suggest that crisis thinking is inherently agentic in two respects – it contains, as in Marx's vision of capitalism, the seeds of its own dissolution, while at the same time it represents the reflexivity that is the hallmark of modernity.

Historical sociology is intrinsically entwined with the idea of crisis because of its fundamental ambivalence towards the idea of causal regularities and its radical challenge to the temporalities associated with positivistic social science (Sewell 2005:83).

Sewell famously contrasted teleological and experimental temporalities with "eventful temporality." Experimental temporalities, as he argued, assumed uniform causal laws across time and the causal independence of occurrences from previous ones. Indeed, in contrast to the idea of "path dependence" where past occurrences influence future outcomes but implicitly assume that actors exercise similar preferences over time, eventful temporalities allow for change in the balance of causal forces over time. Events are seen as altering the very logic of action or the "rules of the game" that govern future action so that such a logic – political or cultural is never merely assumed as constant. The cultural categories, systems of meaning and indeed therefore the meaning attributed to the historical process and struggle, inherently shift what is at stake in the struggle.

Employing an eventful temporality in turn means that a working concept of crisis would be contextualized in much the same way as an event. By this I mean, returning to the opening example of this article, that characterizing an era or epoch as a "crisis" is of limited value[1] because it appears as a transcendental, structuring force akin to a teleological temporality in which an originating event or point sets up a future in which partially contingent events are "robbed of their efficacy and reduced to the status of markers on the road to the inevitable future" (ibid.: 88). The pitfalls of the two temporalities – teleological and experimental - appear surreptitiously even in the most historically sensitive accounts of present crises because of embedded and taken-for-granted methodological and disciplinary norms which lack an agentic and reflexive analysis of crisis.

From event to crisis and back

In Sewell's original argument events are particular occurrences that transform structures, i.e. they have "momentous consequences" (ibid.: 226). Indeed, for Sewell, events are theoretical categories that are marked by the importance of underlying social and cultural structures such that "a proper understanding of the role of events in history must be founded on a concept of structure" (ibid.). Sewell does not define structures explicitly but argues that social life is patterned and reproduced fairly consistently over time. In turn, events are singular in their effect of transforming structures in unpredictable ways. The argument is central to Sewell's category of events because in his view smaller events and ruptures tend to be reabsorbed into existing structures rather than touching off events that create durable transformations. An historical event, rather, is a "ramified sequence of occurrences" that is recognized as notable by contemporaries and results in the durable transformation of structures. Likewise, events do not merely create new "path dependencies", because path dependencies do not analytically capture the altered logic by which occurrences happen, and consequences flow.

Thinking eventfully, locating conjunctures, is thus central to what it means to think historically. I would situate a theory of crisis within such an eventful concept of history, such that crisis periods are themselves thought sequentially and

[1]There is of course rhetorical value in invoking the idea of crisis, and as a 'call to arms' it can itself carry much political value. However, in this paper I am limiting the concept of crisis to one that does analytical work (which of course has political valence).

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conjuncturally rather than as a steady state. Unless we want to adhere to a notion of permanent crisis, which is inherently a non-eventful notion of history, we are squarely in the realm of an eventful concept of crisis. Crisis thinking is in other words, eventful, inherently historicist.

"Crisis" and "Non crisis"

By suggesting that crises should incorporate an eventful temporality, we are still left with the question of what lies outside crisis. If crisis is not a steady state, then what is a "non-crisis" What word, and what concept, is the opposite of crisis – calm, order, stasis, stability, regularity, continuity (Freeden 2017)? We might immediately recognize the difficulty of such a binary – "stability vs disorder" – as a replication of modes of sociological theory, most significantly Parsonian functionalism, which pathologized the latter. However, part of the difficulty arises from the absence of an adequate discussion of the relationship between crisis as an objective "fact" such as climate change, late capitalism, financial meltdown, and that aspect of the historical moment that is grasped or perceived by various agents who seek to define and shape the meaning of this moment. Is the rhetorical inflation of the use of crisis terminology, in fact, obscuring from view this agentic domain, where furthermore, there is an unequal distribution of the resources to articulate the meaning of the crisis?

Berlant (2011) breaks down the distinction between structure, agency, and traumatic event by focusing our attention on the idea of the everyday, on sensory and affective life. How do people orient themselves in the face of continual crises with a small "c" – or as they put it, "what is the good life when the world that was to have been delivered by upward mobility and collective uplift promised by national/capitalism goes awry in front of one?" (ibid.: 69). Contrasting "slow death" to large traumatic events such as genocides or military invasions, Berlant suggests that such crises are experienced in time that is labile, yet also presented as ordinary. Thus, instead of thinking in terms of historical events which are intense and impactful, Berlant thinks of "environments" or "scenes" where structural conditions are mediated in ways that may go under the radar. Their key point is that all transformative impacts do not need the inflationary language and genre of "trauma". Instead, the concept of "crisis ordinariness" points to how heightened threat can be "managed in the context of living," such that the "ballast of ordinariness . . . distribute(s) our analysis of "structure" as a suffusion of practices throughout the social (ibid.: 101)". Crisis, in other words, is lived and experienced as ordinary life rather than necessarily or exclusively as an occurrence with traumatic impact. Berlant's important thinking on the affective domains suggests that the ordinary and everyday are critical to an understanding of the practices that form the fabric of structures, and this very quality of crisis as lived experience forestalls an inflationary crisis language.

In an analogous argument Steinmetz (2008) has raised the question of whether events should, analytically, only be limited to occurrences that are recognized by contemporaries and that alter structures. Instead, Steinmetz argues that alteration can also be a "slow ruin", or accretion of changes. Structures undergo gradual

changes and alterations merely through the repetition ("stylized repetition" in Judith Butler's concept of gender, for example), such that the reproduction of structures always opens up space for change and resistance even if not necessarily manifested in large-scale or collectively recognizable ruptures. Events, Steinmetz argues furthermore, may remain unsignified or only "unconsciously recognized" and yet can contribute to the transformation of social structures: "[s]urely trauma, the unconscious, and the failure of representation are as much part of the human condition, and hence of the human sciences, as semiotically embedded practices. An ontologically realistic theory of structure cannot drive an artificial wedge between these different sorts of human practice" (2008: 538). Might it be, drawing on Schmitt and Weber, that some individuals or events "outside" of structures in fact can be decisive in altering them?

We can illustrate this argument through a closer look at a major, transformative event, the Partition in India in 1947. This was a momentous event that is considered to mark the birth of two modern nations, India and Pakistan. The reverberations and ramifications of this violent and decisive moment are felt to this day, dividing as it did, a population into essentialized religious and national communities at the very moment of freedom from colonial rule. Although the idea had been taking shape for several years, it seemingly took a sudden and violent moment to cleave India in two. Between 14 and 15 August 1947 fourteen million people were displaced and several millions killed. These extraordinary and violent few days could be categorized as an event from which a full-blown crisis – political, social, economic – encompassing a mass refugee exodus, rape, abduction and long-term cultural and economic displacement developed.

Drawing on the critiques of either sharply delineated or transcendental concepts of crisis as outlined earlier in this paper, suggests that a singular focus on the Partition as an event obscures at least two decades of gradual, slow erosion of the social fabric, of the fraying of social lines along which violence would eventually occur in the course of the actual event. It is only from not only the historian's writings but also from novels depicting the 1930s and 40s that we get a sense of the shifting, darkening mood as political uncertainty grew – of changing household relations, neighbourhoods (*mohallas*) in which mundane happenings that seem irrelevant from the point of view of a historical sociologist, are in fact that terrain upon which an event of the magnitude of the Partition violence was made possible. Indeed, routinized violence not merely between Hindus and Muslims, but colonial violence and the harsh exclusions of caste, and the hierarchies of gender, marked bodies as disposable and dangerous long before the frivolous and irresponsible decisions of colonial officials and nationalist leaders. However, it was not only actual occurrences of violence but equally the telling of stories and remembrances of heroic sacrifice, of memories of violence in the colonial context (events such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre) that consolidated and hardened political subjectivities (Misri 2011). Writing about the novelist Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (xx) Misri (2011) suggests that the retelling of stories between generations about what was done to male and female Sikh bodies served to harden the boundaries of community and thereby "descends into the body of the listener and hardens into instinct" (ibid.: 6).

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Neither merely structure, nor event, these historical vignettes offer what Lauren Berlant calls "a perceptible scene, an atmosphere that can be returned to." (2011: 100). In these ordinary environments, episodes are occasions that frame experience but do not change much of anything. Yet the idea of "slow death" or what they call "crisis ordinariness" conveys how heightened threat can be lived through for long periods of time. Raymond Williams drew our attention to this idea through the concept of "structures of feeling." This is the "slow ruin" or accretion of changes that make a big moment like the Partition violence possible. Likewise, do events have to be recognized as significant by contemporaries? What about events such as the Partition that remain unsignified or are only unconsciously "recognized?" Is the emphasis on conscious recognition rather than say the unconscious, the failure of representation somewhat misplaced or narrow? In arguing for a "lyrical sociology" Abbott (2007) suggested that we might try to imagine a sociology that is not exclusively narrative, that is, aimed at recounting, explaining and comprehending but equally one that aims to "communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality". This, he argues, avoids the narrative temptation to embed particular moments in a teleological string of events, and . . . the descriptive temptation to embed its subject in larger social formations that will define it. " . . . To the evanescent quality of "nowness" in time it adds an equivalent sense of the changing quality of "hereness" as we move in social space."

One of the great Partition writers, Sadat Hasan Manto used the metaphor of the asylum to represent the whole subcontinent in disintegration; the madness of its inhabitants (and his own mental illness) symbolized the madness of the partition violence, an event that escaped signification. In his novel, *Toba Tek Singh* (2017 [1954]) the protagonist says: "I found my thoughts scattered. Though I tried hard, I could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India". The inmates of the mental asylum in the new Pakistan spoke among themselves: "[W]here was Pakistan? What were its boundaries?" They did not know; they could not figure out whether they were in Pakistan or India, and if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in India when they had not moved from the asylum at all?

The event of the Partition did not create new cultural categories in straightforward ways, and crisis ordinariness was marked by disavowal, silence and a collective cathectic move to celebrate independence rather than speak the language of crisis. This kind of disjuncture between felt experience and language, between subjective and objective representations in fact plagues the concept of crisis. The question of whether we need a concept of non-crisis that is the opposite of crisis – stability, peace, order – can therefore be answered in the negative. Neither exists purely outside human consciousness. Rhetorical invocations of crisis language, though, risk neglecting crisis ordinariness, alternative forms of crisis consciousness not easily legible and not easily accessible by traditional social scientific methods. Rather than simply foreclose enquiry with a taken for granted gesture, my hope is that crisis language might open us to these critical questions.

In my final set of comments, I want to raise the point that crisis thinking has important implications not only for regulating narrative constructions and foreclosing or opening certain questions, but for the very idea of social order. What is clear is that the value and meaning placed on the idea of crisis is rhetorical,

contingent, and political. Rather than juxtapose crisis to order and stability, we can recognize social order itself as contingent and always potentially unstable. Whether this is understood as such by those inhabiting these worlds crisis is never a given. There is a long line of thinking drawing on Stuart Hall (1996) and more recently on "political articulation" (De Leon et al. 2015), which argues that "structures" do not de facto create identities outside of being articulated. While patterned regularities of social life exist, they are continually reproduced in imperfect iterations. The connections between these social practices and social groups are, as Stuart Hall (1996) put it, *non-necessary*. We have shown in our work that political parties use specific forms of signification to stitch together constituencies that come to be defined as social categories such as class – e.g., the white working class, Hindu, Muslim, Black etc. This involves political and cultural work given that such constructions are always at threat of falling apart. We can situate crisis thinking somewhere here, as the convergence that takes place between crisis as manifested in the objective, unsignified realms, and subjective, everyday "crisis ordinariness" that articulation work draws together. The work that "crisis" does is not given in the "nature of things" which raises the incredibly challenging problem that underpins contemporary populism, namely, that the language of crisis is indiscriminatory and easily appropriated. This renders it even more crucial that we are reflexive in our deployment of the term.

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