

When a person is in crisis, she goes to see a psychoanalyst. When society is in crisis, sociology emerges as psychoanalysis on a grand scale. And when critique enters into crisis, one turns to Rodrigo Cordero. Not that one will find a way out of the crisis, but following a rich investigation of the relation between critique and crisis in social theory, from Marx to Habermas and Arendt to Foucault, one will rediscover the human frailty in the cracks of society and our responsibility to respond to it.

Frederic Vandenberghe, *Professor in Sociology at the Institute of Social and Political Studies, Rio de Janeiro State University. Author of A Philosophical History of German Sociology*

Rodrigo Cordero has done a magnificent job in shedding light on the pivotal role that both crisis and critique play in the tension-laden construction of human reality. This book is a powerful reminder of the profound fragility that permeates the whole of social life, including its seemingly most solidified dimensions. I have never come across a more persuasive account of the multiple ways in which the dynamic relationship between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique defines—and, indeed, constantly redefines—the normative parameters for what it means to be human.

Simon Susen, *City University London. Author of The 'Postmodern Turn' in the Social Sciences and The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology*

“Society is not a solid crystal, but an organism capable of change, and constantly engaged in a process of change.” This quote from the Preface to *Capital* signifies not only a cornerstone of sociology but is more actual than ever. Society, and this is the brilliantly explained throughout Cordero’s book, appears as a solid crystal once critique is isolated from crisis and crisis from critique. Cordero’s fascinating and well written book forces the petrified oppositions between paradigms of discourse analysis (Foucault) and political action theory (Arendt), of societal (Habermas) and conceptual (Koselleck) theories of modern society to dance by singing their own tune to them. This opens the path to a new, and much stronger theoretical combine that reveals new paths to utopia within the existing relations of power and production. The solidity of the crystal consisted in frozen concepts. It needs a categorical spring to make them melt. This book is spring-time for the return of social theory.

Hauke Brunkhorst, *Professor of Sociology at the University of Flensburg, Germany. Author of Solidarity: From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community and Critical Theory of Legal Revolutions*

Crisis and Critique

Fragility is a condition that inhabits the foundations of social life. It remains mostly unnoticed until something breaks and dislocates the sense of completion. In such moments of rupture, the social world reveals the stuff of which it is made and how it actually works; it opens itself to question.

Based on this claim, this book reconsiders the place of the notions of crisis and critique as fundamental means to grasp the fragile condition of the social and challenges the normalization and dissolution of these “concepts” in contemporary social theory. It draws on fundamental insights from Hegel, Marx, and Adorno as to recover the importance of the critique of concepts for the critique of society, and engages in a series of studies on the work of Habermas, Koselleck, Arendt, and Foucault as to consider anew the relationship of crisis and critique as immanent to the political and economic forms of modernity.

Moving from crisis to critique and from critique to crisis, the book shows that fragility is a price to be paid for accepting the relational constitution of the social world as a human domain without secure foundations, but also for wishing to break free from and resist all attempts at giving closure to social life as an identity without question. This book will engage students of sociology, political theory and social philosophy alike.

Rodrigo Cordero is Associate Professor in Sociology at University Diego Portales, Chile.

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Crisis and Critique

On the Fragile Foundations of Social Life

Rodrigo Cordero

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For Vicente

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Acknowledgments

This book started as a PhD thesis eight years ago at the University of Warwick. My original idea was to write a dissertation on the therapeutic uses of law in situations of political and economic crisis. By looking at cases of neoliberal constitution-making in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America, I sought to investigate why and how the law had become such a powerful mean for reshaping the sphere of the social. The wealth of research on constitutional and political crises produced by sociology and political science in the last 50 years or so seemed a promising point of departure. However, it soon became apparent that this bulk of literature was rather limiting in one essential respect, namely, the a priori acceptance of the category of crisis and its use as a kind of compensatory artifact to grant arguments and situations immediate significance. In this context, the idea of developing a critique of the naturalization of the idea of crisis, especially in contemporary sociology and critical theory, attained a theoretical force of its own and signed an unexpected detour to a whole new project. This book draws on these original intuitions in order to reconsider the relationship between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique.

The book is the result of an extended conversation over the years with Robert Fine. He was an inspiring supervisor and has become a very good friend. His support at all stages of this project has been crucial, especially when my confidence about finishing the manuscript was failing. Working with Robert has been a challenging and rewarding journey; he has helped me appreciate the significance, difficulties and pleasures of thinking in the “severe style.” I would also like to recognize my intellectual debt to my friend Daniel Chernilo, one of the brightest social theorists of his generation; his work has been a source of permanent inspiration for my own thinking. Daniel’s sincere encouragement and criticism were essential in shaping the whole project. I have also benefited from discussing ideas and sections of the book with several colleagues and friends: Tomás Ariztía, Mauro Basaure, Andreas Kalyvas, Aldo Mascareño, William Outhwaite, Margarita Palacios, Francisco Salinas, Elisabeth Simbürger, Simon Susen, Chris Thornhill and Wolfhart Totschnig. My students at the Sociology Department and the Institute of Humanities at Universidad Diego Portales, Chile, have been important interlocutors; their comments and questions pushed me to clarify and rethink many of the arguments I develop in the third section of the book. Last but not least, the Social Theory Research Network (RN29) of the

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Little Vicente, when you are able to read these lines you will know that when we were not playing together I was writing this book for you.

Introduction

When the World Becomes a Problem

Social life is a delicate and complex achievement. Normally, the everyday surface of social institutions and practices makes us forget that the seemingly unitary and durable character of the social world is inherently fragile, without fixed and ultimate foundations. This sense of fragility circulates discretely, almost silently until something breaks and, like a seismic event, disturbs the common sense of order. This is the moment of crisis: the moment at which the world around us becomes problematic and loses its character as a unitary and natural phenomenon. The sense of distress, discontinuity and uncertainty all concur for crisis to become a moment ripe for questioning the conventional character of social norms and the intelligibility of social facts. By putting things into question practically, crisis interrupts the continuity of what appears solid, justified and functional; it opens a breach in meaning and established practices that we cannot simply bypass. In a way, crisis is the moment where we are compelled to ask questions: where are we, what is going on, what went wrong, how we can get out of here? This exercise of placing questions, however small it sometimes may appear, is precisely what breaks the silence of things and interrupts the sense of completion of the world. In other words, it places us in relation to the limits of the frameworks that sustain our forms of life and, therefore, in relation to a world that is not immune to questioning. For questioning means, above all, a call to move ourselves away from all firmness and mastery, a juncture that shakes the fantasy of security and the taboo of unity. This is the moment of critique: the moment at which subjects claim the right to interrogate the normativity currently in place, and perform actions that contribute to reveal society's inner fissures and contradictions.

Without such moments that provoke questions, I contend, social life becomes a dangerous abstraction; it consolidates the appearance of being a reality without question. This strong assumption is the running thread of the book and the basis of its concern with exploring the relationship between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique in modern societies. The main argument is that crisis and critique are both concepts deeply intertwined with moments of rupture. Such moments are sociologically significant insofar as we can get a grasp of the stuff of which the social world is made and how its differences are produced, but also

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because we are confronted with what threatens to tear social life from within. They remind us that the unity of society is never attained once and for all in a definitive manner. What underlies the notions of crisis and critique in the language of modern social theory, this book argues, is a claim to grasp the condition of fragility that comes into sight in moments of social rupture. In other words, crisis and critique are both signs of the irremediable fragility that inhabits the foundations of social life. Now, even if we accept that these concepts have a similar appeal, they are not the same and we should keep a sense of difference between them: whilst crisis designates an objective experience or situation, critique refers to a practice performed by subjects. Then, the question is how what is subjective in the practice of critique touches on what is objective in the experience of crisis.

Moving from crisis to critique and from critique to crisis, as it were, the book proposes to follow different modes of encounter of these concepts in social theory as well as in social life. To do so, it develops theoretical resources to trace the movements by which each term may register the content, embody the form and provoke the appearance of the other. From this angle, we may say that without objective situations of disturbance, of fissures in the consistency of things, the practice of critique can hardly begin: crisis provokes critique. This means that critique appears as a subjective response to the contradictions and problems that the crisis situation reveals, in such manner that critique documents and “brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation.”¹ And yet, we may also argue that without the communicative and normative translation of critique the objective form of crisis cannot come about: critique provokes crisis. This means that crisis is produced by an active involvement of critique in opening up and challenging the conditions that sustain a conflictual and intolerable social reality. Taken in this broad sense, “critique occurs in the mode of crisis,”² as it enacts this moment and embodies it as the mode of its own realization, which also includes the crisis of its own position as critique. These displacements shape the structure of the whole book.

Of course, this is not to say that crisis is the single object of critique, or to argue that crisis situations always lead to criticism and processes of questioning that open vistas for social transformations. In fact, the contrary seems to be the case, as when the experience of crisis is normalized by technocratic responses that transform political argument into a de-socialized monologue of therapeutic discourses, which jeopardize the possibilities of critique and normative considerations (i.e., crisis without critique). Or, it is also the case when the practice of critique dissolves itself into the inwardness of pure subjectivity and claims independence from the practical struggles of life; so critique loses vehemence and risks becoming comfortable with the master language of the house (i.e., critique without crisis). As a matter of fact, this book pays considerable attention to such instances of divorce between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique as the object of theoretical-empirical enquiry.

It goes without saying that in those historical periods that consciously self-describe as living in a state of crisis, the ubiquitous appeal of the concept holds the contradiction between its persuasive use and its far more elusive meaning.

The context of the global financial crisis has provided the most recent reminder of how pervasive the language of crisis itself is, and how important is the critique of the framework in which responses to crisis are modeled upon. Since 2008 public speech in Western capitalist countries has been overloaded by the concrete image of “things falling apart” and “cracks” appearing on the seemingly consistent surface of economic and political institutions on a global scale. The situation evokes “an ice sheet during a thaw: everywhere the ice is broken, dirty, full of puddles, treacherous.”³ The dramatic enunciation of the financial crisis and its catastrophic effects elicited a truly global sense of urgency without which bailouts, stimulus packages, austerity measures and similar policies would lack any justificatory power. The rationale of the therapeutic discourse of economic and political actors in this context lies precisely in the promise that the “painful” but “unavoidable” decisions of today will take us out of the crisis tomorrow. After all, what is at stake in the crisis is the exposure of the fragility of the capitalist social body and the need to do whatever it takes to preserve its unity, even if this means preserving what threatens unity in the first place. The most revealing aspect of the dominant language of “no alternatives” in today’s global politics is that it obscures what defines the essence of crisis phenomena: the appearance of a question that surpasses our capacities of response. In this moving terrain, the attitude of critique consists less in offering solutions to crisis than in shifting the framework in which crisis has hitherto been perceived and spoken, disclosing undescribed possibilities that our very responses to past and present crises have left behind.

Even if social movements and political activism have grown and made some gains since the financial downturn, the wish to return to normality as soon as possible permeates political discourse and carries an inner impulse to normalize. To normalize, as Alvin Gouldner explains:

is an effort to reduce the dissonance between how an object is supposed to appear and how in fact it seems to be, by treating it as if it really was what it was supposed to be; by actually perceiving its traits as they should be; or by denying or ignoring “improper” traits. Normalization includes all those devices by which disparities glimpsed between what we see and what we deem right are somehow reduced.⁴

To be sure, strategies of normalization are part of the inbuilt practical rationality that actors put at work in everyday life and which is necessary for the construction of a common world. As social phenomenologists have argued,⁵ strategies of normalization reduce dissonances that may appear between our conceptions of the world and how the world presents itself in specific forms and situations. However, the vindication of this natural-like practice clashes with an adequate understanding of the power-imbued character of normalization as something that must be produced. The politics of normalization put at work in crisis situations seeks to invest society with an identity without question, which usually leads to block spaces for critique. In this context, the struggle of critique consists precisely in resisting impulses to normalize the social world. Consequently, if

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critique is resistance to accept that the social world is a solid whole founded around one principle, one truth, one foundation, critical theory itself has to struggle to keep the riddle of history open. Here lies the significance of endowing crisis with the negative force of critique, for, in essence, society is a humanly living space precisely because it does not have a principle of closure.

Society Is Not Solid Crystal

In the post-Hegelian tradition of critical theory, the phenomenon of crisis plays a fundamental role in the diagnosis of systemic problems of capitalist society and its tendencies to reproduce through recurrent crises. Despite the important theoretical differences that exist between authors identified under this label, most of them share not only the idea that the experience of crisis is a condition for the beginning of critique, but also that critique is a necessary mean to produce a crisis consciousness that exposes the limits of our practices and institutions by confronting them with the norms to which they appeal.⁶ The issue at stake is that even if crisis situations disturb the normal sense of order, most of the times the horizon of expectations of what is seen as politically possible and accepted as socially desirable remain unaffected. Still, the fact that crises are “normal” events in modern societies does not mean that we have to accept and justify the stabilization of their negative consequences as the normal condition. For critical theory, consequently, the practice of critique is actually a way to reformulate the problem of crisis itself and problematize the logic of closure of meaning and action that drives forms of ideological unanimity.

In line with this description, this book defends an idea of critical social theory that assumes a resolute commitment to address and comprehend the actual fractures of the institutions, norms and practices that sustain human social relations, considering with equal attention the spaces these ruptures open for freedom of action and the forms in which they are eventually neutralized, de-politicized and lead to closure. In other words, critique is a way to explore and work through the fissures at the foundations of social life. From this perspective, what Marx wrote in the closing lines of the 1857 preface to the first edition of *Capital* about capitalist society, still has an extraordinary appeal to us:

There are signs of the times, not to be hidden by purple mantles or black cassocks. They do not signify that tomorrow a miracle will occur. They show that, within the ruling classes themselves, the foreboding is emerging that the present society is not solid crystal, but an organism capable of change, and constantly engaged in a process of change.⁷

The use of the image of crystal in this passage is intended to depict the fragile condition of capitalist society, in accord with an epochal diagnosis of its inner conflicts and far-reaching transformations at the end of the nineteenth century. Literally, it appeals to the transformation of society into a crystal palace, like a conservatory for commodity exchange and an exhibition piece of capitalist excess.⁸

This image, of course, is in direct connection with the expansion of glass architecture as emblem of modernity; in particular, Marx had in mind the iron-glass structure that housed the Great Exhibition which opened in London in 1851, known as the Crystal Palace. The monumental structure and visual attraction of the building were, in his view, nothing but the most revealing signs of the inner fissures of the capitalist mode of life. Marx expresses it in the following way:

The bourgeoisie is celebrating this, its greatest festival, at a moment when the collapse of its social order in all its splendor is imminent, a collapse which will demonstrate more forcefully than ever how the forces which it has created have outgrown its control.⁹

In the context of Marx's remarks, architecture acquires a special connotation as a metaphor of society's fragile constitution, for it confronts us with the fact that "the will to build a solid building" reveals itself as "the very absence of a proper foundation."¹⁰ This absence means that society carries within itself the source of its own fragility and therefore the forms of its possible ruptures. Walter Benjamin argues that this lack of proper foundations comes into sight "in the convulsions of the commodity economy," for in such crisis situations "we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie [epitomized in glass architecture] as ruins even before they have crumbled."¹¹

Besides the satirical connotation of Marx's epochal description and Benjamin's interpretation of the aesthetic-cultural meaning of the Crystal Palace, the dialectical image of a crystal-like society carries a more substantial connotation, namely, that fragility is a condition inscribed in the very core of the sociological idea of modern society. In ordinary language, fragile is any entity whose constitution is delicate and without a secure foundation, it is exposed to fissures and therefore needs the work of maintenance and care. This is precisely the condition of crystals, which, however solid their transparent surface may seem to be, can fracture and fall to pieces. And one could maintain, in a similar fashion and without wishing to overstress the parallel, that this is also an ontological property of social life as a mode of existence. This claim immediately raises the question of what is this component that makes social life so fragile?

The suggestion of this book is that the fragile condition of the social world is a result of its relational foundation. If we understand the social as a principle of coexistence (that is, a mode of proximity and being-together), relation is what defines the structure of the social world from the very beginning. This structure basically consists of the unity between qualitatively different entities which were not originally united and therefore could separate.¹² Seen in this way, social theory confronts the problem that in order to elucidate what makes possible the unity and relative solidness of life in common, it must examine at the same time what interrupts and tears it apart.

The definition of society as a form of relation then suggests that the social is a mode of coexistence whose unity is constituted in the absence of unity. Therefore, it lacks a substantial foundation, original identity or absolute destiny. In fact, the social means a relentless opening of existence toward the other and,

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therefore, the always-present possibility of estrangement, fissure and divorce.¹³ This fragile condition, although an intrinsic feature, remains for the most part at the level of an ontological premise. Fragility only comes into visible focus as things actually break, when a relationship is disturbed, a movement suspended, or the semblance of identity is fractured; when there is some kind of rupture. Once this happens, the world torn apart demands new attention—it acquires consciousness of itself as world.

A moment ago I argued that a society without moments of rupture is a dangerous abstraction, for it becomes a reality without question and therefore resistant to critique. Still, the task of bringing such moments into language is a necessary yet very demanding one. The question is how to grasp what exceeds our ways of life, that which eludes our conceptuality and shows its limits, without reducing it to concepts and descriptions that normalize the breach in meaning that interrupts the sense of completion of the social world? To address this issue, this book is committed to an understanding of critical theory that is materially grounded and directed to the way social relations are objectively produced and transformed; phenomenologically invested in the concrete experience of subjects and the everyday struggles for interpretation in which they are involved; and genealogically deployed through the examination of the historical constitution of practices, norms and institutions that hold social relations together, so as to untie the knots of their process of becoming “abstract” things that appear to have a life of their own.

Digression on Sociological Abstractions

Fragility is the price to be paid for refusing all forms of transcendence and accepting the relational constitution of the social world; but it is also the price to be paid for wishing to break free from the dominance of pure immanence and the closure of meaning and action. As I argued before, the claim of this book is that concepts of crisis and critique are indispensable means to grasp those moments that bring to the fore the fragile constitution of social life. More specifically, I argue that the unfolding of the very relationship between these terms provides access to the emergent middle space where the social opens itself to question. The precaution, though, is to avoid treating the relation between crisis and critique “as if the task were the dialectical balancing of concepts, and not the grasping of real relations!”¹⁴ From this perspective, two important considerations follow. In one sense, crisis and critique are empirical moments of the social world, so any interaction between them is a practical accomplishment of actors in concrete historical and institutional contexts. In another sense, crisis and critique are conceptual moments on the social world, inasmuch as their dialectic is held as an object of knowledge for critical social theory. My suggestion in this book is that in order to trace and follow the movement of crisis vis-à-vis critique, we should consider their conceptual forms as social forms. This claim requires a short but necessary digression on concepts that makes explicit some elements that inform the approach that runs throughout the book.

When philosophers of any kind are asked to describe what philosophy is

about, they often set the primal focus on concepts. Philosophy, they say, would be essentially concerned with reflection on and creation of concepts.¹⁵ If philosophical comprehension cannot exist without concepts, then the question about the origins and conditions of concepts becomes tantamount to the question of the beginnings and conditions of philosophical wonder. When sociologists are confronted with the same question, the immediate answer is that “society” is sociology’s fundamental object of concern. Even if society itself is regarded as an “abstraction” upon which the project of sociology as a scientific enterprise is necessarily founded,¹⁶ sociologists hardly ever conceive that it is possible to obtain sociological knowledge from an inquiry on concepts, or that concepts themselves may be sociological objects in their own right. Actually, it is often argued that when sociologists emphasize the conceptual dimension of their work, it is simply to justify the autonomy of theoretical reflection in relation to empirical reality and to privilege philosophical speculation divorced from concrete social problems.¹⁷

This vision works upon the conventional distinction between conceptual thought and empirical inquiry that, in my view, creates a false dilemma between philosophy and sociology. Among sociologists this often translates into methodological rigorism: an understanding of concepts as if they were accessories within a tool box which we can employ to produce knowledge of concrete empirical phenomena and then easily discard what does not meet this fundamental end. In a note of caution, Bauman has drawn attention to the habit of contemporary sociologists to “get bored” with concepts even before they begin to fully grasp them. This attitude is self-deceptive insofar as it makes a virtue of the principle of conceptual “obsolescence-cum-forgetting,” through which the “widely and wildly enthusiastic acceptance [of new concepts] is indeed rule-abiding.”¹⁸ Against this background, the book is informed by the idea that an important part of the work of sociology and critical theory consists of the art of undoing rigid concepts and conceptual regimes. The point of this practice, though, is not to declare concepts inadequate or false but to show that “what concepts ‘say’ is not a piece of information about the world, it is something about themselves, and their own relation to the world.”¹⁹

On several occasions sociologists behave as specialists without concepts, who rely on the certitude of officially sanctioned definitions in order to reduce the uncertainty of the social; or behave as sensualists without heart, who accept the conceptual horizon that pre-establishes the margins of what is accepted and what is possible, just to free themselves from using concepts in order to go beyond concepts. The ubiquity of the concepts of crisis and critique in the language of social theory testify to this fact. One only has to think about the customary habit of dramatizing explanations of any phenomenon and form of social change by making uncritical use of crisis, or in the joyful trashing of every concept that tastes old fashioned by having hypercritical recourse to critique. In the following chapters, I intend to leave aside the impression that concepts of crisis and critique are intellectual products of subjective imagination, mere representations of pre-constituted definitions, or essential unities of meaning with secure foundations. This supposes an important change of perspective: from understanding concepts as mere classificatory tools that help us measure social regularities to

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understanding concepts as constellations of elements apparently dispersed in social life. Put differently, concepts are crystallizations of the way in which social relations are historically organized. This perspective is based on three important considerations.

First, every concept in social theory is a “reconstruction” and, therefore, an essentially contestable and transformable unity of meaning.²⁰ The underlying view is that a concept embodies recognition of certain insufficiency in our theoretical apparatus that emerges in relation to experiences that arguably escape from the concepts we use to claim access to the world. If the social world is an open relational space that lacks a principle of closure, concepts can never be self-sufficient and coherent unities of meaning but spaces of struggle and social forms open to question. This is why, I contend, a critique of society cannot proceed without a critique of concepts. Accordingly, this book defends the idea that concepts are small clues to general social problems.

Second, I subscribe to the idea that human activity and social life processes give shape to our concepts, which means that they stand neither *a priori* nor *ex post facto* but in the middle of social life. This translates into the assumption that every concept establishes a horizon of relation with the world (not only a way of describing it) and, therefore, contains the crystallization of certain experiences, the traces of which are difficult to grasp simply by means of exact scientific definitions. Here it may be opportune to follow Wittgenstein’s advice of approaching concepts more like photographs with “blurred edges,” for “is it always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?”²¹ These questions can be tailored to our reflection on crisis and critique in the sense that both notions seem to share an intrinsic vagueness and generality, which is why they are continually open to normalization and dissolution in our social-theoretical language. But such inexactitude, I suggest, is not the sign of an inner defect but expressive of certain capacity of these concepts to put questions about the elusive and fragile character of the social world itself.

A final issue consists of the common objection that we should not try to understand the present with the conceptual tools of the past, for to fall in love with concepts is often the path to a marriage that grows old in conformism. In many cases, fashion in the sociological town dictates that classical notions, such as crisis and critique, must run into obsolescence. But even if, as Georg Simmel writes, “on innumerable occasions, our concepts of things are made so unalloyed and absolute that they do not reflect experience, these concepts are not for that reason thoroughly bad.” In fact, it is “only their qualification and modification by opposing concepts which can give them an empirical form.”²² Based on this assumption, the fundamental unit of analysis of this book is not individual concepts but rather the reconstruction of the relationship between them. On the one hand, this option is intended to challenge the devaluation and implicit disjunction of the concepts of crisis and critique in some mainstreams of contemporary social theory, whose main expression is the idea that one can think crisis without critique and critique without crisis. On the other, this option is consistent with the view that by tracing the links between crisis and critique we may be able to grasp social diremptions.

The Book

The book is committed to a non-essentialist mode of social theorizing. As such, it is committed to a critically open attitude toward the persistence of the negative in social life. This means to conceptualize, empirically observe and normatively evaluate the implications of moments that transcend the current shape of the social but which are immanent to its ontological condition of fragility. A social theory that ignores, or escapes, the concepts that may bring these experiences into focus dissolves the possibility of revealing the limits of existing modes of life and articulating ways of seeing the world through other eyes. Therefore, my concern with the concepts of crisis and critique is not simply a theoretical gesture or a way of granting immunity to these notions over others. Rather, it concerns our basic attitudes toward a world already dirempted.

The book is organized in three parts that trace and follow different moments of encounter between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique. It develops this analysis by engaging with debates on the status of the concepts of crisis and critique in contemporary social theory, and through a series of studies on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Reinhart Koselleck, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and Theodor W. Adorno.

The first part of the book, “Sociologies of Crisis/Critiques of Sociology,” reconstructs the various ways in which the idea of crisis has been criticized within the sociological tradition, and examines some of the main objections that social theorists have directed at the promises of social criticism. Chapter 1 places the concept of crisis at the core of the sociological tradition as an essential yet contested object. Against claims about the obsolescence of the concept for the analysis of contemporary world society, it offers a defense of crisis as a reflexive social mechanism. Based on a reconsideration of Marx’s lucid explanation of the unruly logic of capitalist accumulation, the chapter examines the normalization and dissolution of crisis in sociological theory, and criticizes the tendency to treat it as a static concept rather than as an open field of struggles. In particular, it addresses criticisms of the normalization of the Marxist concept of crisis that emerged in sociological debates that took place in the aftermath of the student revolts of May 1968. These debates on the adequacy of crisis as a tool for social analysis led to strong criticisms of sociology’s incapacity to critically engage with the new ways in which crisis tendencies were becoming an ideological tool of government in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite the lack of interest these debates may generate in the light of today’s developments in social theory, the truth is that they help us see an unexpected outcome: the dissolution of the concept of crisis that gained terrain with the advance of postmodern and global sociologies. A key insight of this chapter then is that the analysis of the reality of crisis is inseparable from the critique of the reification of the concept of crisis.

In close dialog with these considerations, Chapter 2 discusses the other side the story. It examines some of the main objections that social theorists have directed at the promises of social criticism and the prospects of a critical theory of society. It addresses, more precisely, the so-called “crisis of critique” frequently proclaimed in some streams of contemporary thought. It argues that the current

inhospitality to critique in social theory coincides with a domestication of critique's disruptive potential in social life. For in a world where the worth of things primarily depends on utility and potential use, critique is repeatedly urged to offer positive answers and constructive alternatives. It is drawn to assimilate to the enchanting power of the positive. Interestingly enough, rather than rebelling against such dominant assimilation, contemporary social thought has embraced it through the anti-dialectical celebration of the crisis of negativity. Drawing on Hegel and Adorno, the chapter analyzes the disconnection between critique and negativity, so as to challenge its main result: sociological approaches that turn the practice of critique away from the experience of crisis, and political attempts at giving normative closure to social life. Both conspire against our capacities to crack open society's fragile foundations.

The second section of the book, "Models of Crisis/Forms of Critique," brings together two seemingly antithetical approaches to theorizing the dialectical relationship between crisis and critique in modernity: Jürgen Habermas's critical theory and Koselleck's conceptual history.

Chapter 3 discusses Habermas's explicit attempt to reconstruct the dialectical relation between crisis and critique as a "model of analysis" of the paradoxes of rationalization processes in capitalist societies. It examines the mode in which he reconsiders each of these classical terms and then reasserts the dialectical link between them according to his communicative theory of society. This reading emphasizes Habermas's contribution to reinstate the practice of critique as a communicative translation of objective crisis, but questions the one-sided view of critique as a temporal predicate of crisis. As a consequence, his critical theory cannot adequately account for the other movement that also constitutes this relationship: notably, when critique actually initiates, enacts and furthers the moment of crisis. Chapter 4 follows this complementary thread through the work of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, who is not well-known within sociology and remains underrated among critical theorists. It proposes to read Koselleck as an ally to critical social theory. It re-assesses his original thesis of the revolutionary dialectic between bourgeois social criticism and the political crisis of absolutism, so as to consider the vicissitudes associated to the practical involvement of critique in political life and the crisis-ridden processes it helps to unfold. The chapter argues that Koselleck's analysis of the excess of utopianism that haunts modern critique, when read in the light of his work on conceptual history, warns against the impulses that drive critique away from the political struggles for interpretation that crisis situations open and intensify. It involves a defense of the non-closure of history that opposes any political claim to close the world around one principle.

The third part of the book, "Fragile Foundations/Political Struggles," puts at work elements discussed in previous sections in order to explore the relationship between crisis and critique in relation to two phenomena that shaped the social-political landscape of the twentieth century: the rise of totalitarianism and the rise of neoliberalism. Chapter 5 examines the stakes involved in Hannah Arendt's phenomenological interpretation of the totalitarian experience as "the crisis of our century." For totalitarianism not only radicalizes the experience of

crisis as a principle of rule, it also shatters the very elements that sustain the common world. The problem then is how to respond to a movement of destructive critique of everything that seems objective and human. The chapter discusses Arendt's unconventional answer, namely, that in times of political emergency the power of critique lies in its "modesty" rather than in its radicalism. Chapter 6 engages with Foucault's genealogy of liberalism as a political rationality and a therapeutic ethos. Even if crisis seems a minor topic in his work, the chapter shows how crisis emerges out of a new economy of power directed to the liberal government of the social, within which it is rationalized as an object of knowledge and a domain of political interventions. This reading aims to underlie the ways in which neoliberalism mobilizes crisis as a means to re-programming social life in the lure to produce more freedom, but also it aims to assert Foucault's unspoken attempt to extricate the concept of crisis from the neoliberal governmental matrix and restore to critique the ability to make truth and power more fragile.

Both chapters reflect on the limits and possibilities of critique to struggle against the logic of ideological closure of meaning and action that drive the nation-based utopias of totalitarianism, on the one hand, and the market-based utopias of neoliberal capitalism, on the other. If Arendt places her confidence in the "modesty" of critique as an act of questioning that opens a topos "to-stop-and-think" about our position in a world torn apart, Foucault privileges a form of critique that produces "tests" of fragility that open a "fracture" that render instable the conditions of acceptability of truth and power. In any case, both seem to share a common ground: the disquieting certainty that the foundations that moderns wish retain or feel the need to attach to, do not exist.

The book does not have a proper conclusion. I was tempted to write one but the very idea of bringing the argument to a close conspires against the basic claim the book defends: the impossibility of closure of the social. For this reason, the "Postscript" is not intended to systematize the findings but to formulate the basic intuition that runs through the book's attempt at grasping the irremediable fragility that inhabits social life. It makes a case for the philosophical actuality of sociology for the critique of contemporary society, for which it draws on a brief and late essay Adorno wrote on the concept of society. This actuality lies in the work of cracking open the "social hieroglyphs" that inhabit, circulate and give durable form to social life. To do so, sociology cannot restrict its work to either empirical science or pure theoretical propositions. It must embrace and defend its right to speculation!

Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 168.
- 2 Paul de Man, "Criticism and Crisis," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1983), 8.
- 3 Nietzsche cited in Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 370.

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- 4 Alvin W. Goulder, *The Two Marxisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 16.
- 5 See Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 35–75.
- 6 See Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure. Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 3–8.
- 7 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 93 [emphasis added].
- 8 See Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).
- 9 Karl Marx, “Review: May–October 1850,” *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Revue*, November 1, 1850, accessed November 12, 2014, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/11/01.htm.
- 10 Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 7.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 13.
- 12 Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 236.
- 13 See Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Being Singular Plural,” in *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O’Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–100.
- 14 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 90.
- 15 Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London and New York: Verso, 1994).
- 16 Georg Simmel, “The Problem of Sociology,” in *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, vol. 1, trans. Anthony J. Blasi, Anthon K. Jacobs and Mathew Kanjirathinkal (Leiden and London: Brill, 2009), 21.
- 17 Warnings about this trend are frequent in the history of sociology, such as Marx’s critique of “idealism,” C. Wright Mill’s indictment of “grand theory” or Luhmann’s discredit of the study of the “classics.”
- 18 Zygmunt Bauman, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 41, 70.
- 19 Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 50.
- 20 See Max Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, eds. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: The Free Press, 1949), 105–106.
- 21 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 29.
- 22 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge, 2004), 167.

Part I

**Sociologies of Crisis/
Critiques of Sociology**

1 The Critique of Crisis

From Marx to Beck

Introduction

Crisis is a fundamental concept to our understanding of modern society. It refers to the punctuational bursts that time and again exceed the structural possibilities of social institutions to control the course, conflicts and effects of processes of societal reproduction. On these occasions, the social world loses its character as a “natural phenomenon,” and the question of the natural or conventional character of social facts, norms and authority can be raised anew.¹ The sense of distress, discontinuity, uncertainty and acceleration, all concur for crisis to become a moment ripe for challenging the consistency of institutional arrangements and intelligibility of things—as “everything seems pregnant with its contrary”²—and for revealing some kind of truth about the social world that we are not completely aware of yet or remains hidden under the surface.

Sociologists have shown a persistent inclination to see crisis “as the true object of sociological analysis” in the belief that “[it] is a richer source of information than ordinary life.”³ This is not only because in crisis situations we would be in a better condition to grasp the stuff of which the social world is made of and how it actually works (cognitive dimension), since “men see more and differently now than in normal times.”⁴ It is also due to crisis demands coming to terms with the new situation, relaborating problems inherited from the past and devising solutions and courses of future actions; namely, it forces us to offer responses to the problems that the crisis reveals (normative dimension).

Still, along the wealth of empirical research on crisis phenomena, sociologists have made of the claim that sociology is the “science of crisis” par excellence (popularized by Habermas in the late 1960s)⁵, a vulgar cliché that justifies turning crisis into a default and self-evident notion; the often-dramatic enunciation of the crisis is itself taken for an explanation of the objective problems and processes we claim to be living in. Crisis is employed as an explanatory category to account for almost any form of socio-historical change (“the crisis of...”), or crisis itself is considered to be the transcendent norm to which all modern life inexorably and permanently submits (“a chronic condition”). Thus crisis becomes both a normalized and a normalizing concept because if crisis is found everywhere and everything is (said to be) in crisis, crisis phenomena become somehow a matter of moral and political indifference.⁶ In the context of

a globalizing world, the normalizing tone and “high intensity” of our present concern with crisis has meant that “the concept has become all but redundant”⁷ and “as wilted as the individuals who once were supposed to be shaken up by it.”⁸ This normalization of the idea of crisis, however, is not a mere intellectual trend; the successful absorption, multiplication and stabilization of crisis events as the normal condition are key features of modern capitalism. In other words, crisis becomes an increasingly abstract phenomenon enacted through the invisible flows and codes of social-digital networks,⁹ while it works as a practical device of organization and government of social life.

For many social theorists the contemporary normalization of crisis is nothing but the best indicator of the failure and obsolescence of crisis theories, especially those rooted in the Marxist tradition. The argument seems reasonably simple. The main problem with the concept of crisis seems to lie in its appeal to images of previous normality and unity of society that do not make sense anymore in a global and post-metaphysical world; somehow the concept itself evaporates with the alleged dissolution of “the social.” In this context, crisis only persists as a “zombie” category that no longer bears any real connection to the complex dynamics and structural problems of the present world society,¹⁰ or rather as an amplified image of “hyperreality” on mass media and digital networks.¹¹ Interestingly, despite the ubiquitous use and revival of the term in recent discussions on financial crises,¹² the prominent tendency over the last two decades has actually been to abandon the paradigm of crisis and move the focus toward sociologies of risk and disaster.¹³ Whilst it is correct to say that a changing social-historical reality may force alterations in our linguistic frameworks, the sociological concept of crisis should not be treated as a closed system of meanings without ambiguities and gaps.

Against this background, this chapter addresses crisis not as a theory but as a document of the human efforts to make sense of the conflicts and disruptions that affect social relations in modern societies. The aim is to follow the contradictory movement of the concept of crisis throughout social theory as a contested object. I take as a point of departure Marx’s lucid explanation of the unruly logic of capitalist accumulation. Beyond customary charges of being an economicist and teleological account of the catastrophic collapse of bourgeois society, I show the essentially reflexive mode in which crisis phenomena appear in, circulate through, and shape social institutions and relations in capitalist society. Rather, for Marx crisis is a conceptual mean to visualize and understand the inherent conflicts and destructive tendencies of capitalist development, as well as the very mechanism through which capitalist society reproduces the conditions of its acceptability. I suggest that Marx’s most relevant sociological insight is the idea that the analysis of the reality of crisis remains one-sided without the critique of the concept of crisis. For crisis is not a frozen concept but an open field of practical struggles through which actors mobilize normative ideas, historical experiences and political expectations that may have transformative as much as stabilizing effects in social life.

Based upon this reading, the chapter then addresses criticisms of the normalization of the concept of crisis within sociology, concentrating in debates that

took place in the aftermath of the student revolts of May 1968. In a more or less explicit dialog with Marx's legacy, these debates show the struggles to understand the reality of the social process underway through conventional crisis theories and the political-theoretical stakes involved in confronting the rise of neoconservative crisis literature. However successful and pertinent these attempts to relate sociological critique to social crises may appear in the light of today's developments in social theory, the truth is that they help us see an unexpected outcome; namely, the dissolution of the concept of crisis that gains terrain with postmodern and global sociologies. This tendency, I suggest, can no longer be excluded from but must be placed at the center of any critique of the crisis tendencies in contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Crisis and the Disclosure of Social Contradictions: On the Critique of Capitalist Society

It is a well-established opinion in the literature that the formation of modern social theory and sociological thinking has an intimate connection with a widespread consciousness of crisis in modernity.¹⁴ Since Marx sought to theorize crisis as immanent to the capitalist dynamic, while historians such as Jacob Burckhardt made it into a mean to designate the rupture of European cultural traditions, the concept is central to the self-understanding and criticism of modern society. Indeed, an idea of social and political malaise is at the bottom of classical sociology's epochal diagnosis of the development and destructive tendencies of modern capitalist societies.

It would be very difficult to conceive of the rise of sociology without the expansion of the notion of crisis beyond the spheres of theology, law and medicine.¹⁵ From 1857 on, more specifically, this term began to be employed to describe the frequent and often catastrophic upheavals of the financial markets and capitalist exchange. An important precedent for this transformation had taken place at the end of the eighteenth century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the context of the politics of the French Revolution and the bourgeois critique of the absolutist state, Rousseau was the first of the philosophers of the revolution to describe the preceding events as signs of a forthcoming crisis.¹⁶ In his famous treatise on moral education, *Émile*, Rousseau writes:

You reckon on the present order of society, without considering that this order is itself subject to inscrutable changes, and that you can neither foresee nor provide against the revolution which may affect your children. The great become small, the rich poor, the king a commoner. Does fate strike so seldom that you can count on immunity from her blows? The crisis is approaching, and we are on the edge of a revolution. Who can answer for your fate? What man has made, man may destroy.¹⁷

For Rousseau the advent of the revolution was not simply the sign of the political collapse of the great monarchies of Europe and of an unmistakable path to progress; it was also the sign of a generalized condition of uncertainty and

insecurity due to the expected transformations in the social order, which could be neither predicted nor preventable. Thus, Rousseau discovered crisis as a social-political specific phenomenon related to the structural contingency and destructive tendencies that were likely to rule modern social life. In contrast with Hobbes's understanding of crisis as a natural condition of pre-social forms of life dominated by lawlessness, violence and insecurity, Rousseau argues that crisis is a condition internal to modern bourgeois society, which not only disintegrates monarchical structures of power but also infuses social relations with the seeds of self-interest, division and disorder.¹⁸

Rousseau's insight about the potentiality and circulation of crisis-ridden phenomena had a significant influence in classical sociology's critical diagnosis of modernity. This is nowhere clearer than in Marx's critique of political economy, which is an analysis of the conditions and contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, as much as a critique of its forms of self-understanding and justification of commodity exchange as a regulatory principle of social relations. Within this framework, the notion of crisis acquires a novel theoretical significance: namely, Marx elaborates the idea that crisis is "immanent" to the unruly tendencies of capitalist accumulation and therefore is a structural feature of a society in which the economy had become "human destiny."¹⁹ The fundamental aim of Marx's critique of political economy is to understand capitalism as a specifically modern form of organizing social life in terms of market exchange (systemic level of social coordination) and capital as a materially embedded configuration of class-based relations and concrete practices of production of commodities (intersubjective level of social experience). What his analysis seeks to disclose is the inner logic of capitalist accumulation: a self-expanding mechanism of value production that works regardless of and against the concrete social relations in which those values are produced (human labor). In order to sustain its immanent drive to endless expansion, capitalist society must rely on commodities as abstract means of social connectivity that make equivalent and bring together socially heterogeneous things, as well as concrete sources of social meaning that provide a natural language through which actors read the world.

Interestingly, this double binding process is not a natural result of economic development but entails extra-economic mechanisms that trigger capitalist accumulation (i.e., dispossession, exploitation and class divisions) and institutionalize commodity exchange in various social and cultural forms (i.e., the state, the educational system, legal frameworks). The stabilization of these social mechanisms is, however, "the factor by means of which [capitalist] society reproduces its own existence" as much as the factor that "potentially tears it apart."²⁰ This explains why crisis is the *de facto* and normal *modus operandi* of capitalist society: first, because the logic of endless expansion leads to systemic excesses that destabilize the accumulation cycle and induce crisis on a regular basis; second, because this logic entails a compulsive movement of transgression of capitalism's own normative principles (i.e., free, equal and fair exchange), and of all social and moral limits that may jeopardize the process of accumulation as such.²¹

This formulation establishes a direct link between social upheavals and economic life, which in vulgar forms of Marxism became a kind of formula that exacerbated “teleological,” “economicist,” “utopian” and “totalizing” analyzes of the progressive self-destruction of capitalism. In fact, this is the source of a number of criticisms which, from Max Weber to Jürgen Habermas,²² question the adequacy of the materialist view of crisis. Still, Marx himself was reluctant to formulate a theoretical model of social crisis, as this would misrecognize that the forms and outcomes of crisis phenomena can neither be predicted nor controlled at will. For a crisis, if anything, breaks the appearance of society as a closed, identical and solid whole, and thus it discloses its relational structure as a fragile and contradictory human achievement. As Marx writes in the preface to *Capital*, crises “do not signify that tomorrow a miracle will occur,” they rather demonstrate “that the present society is not solid crystal, but an organism capable of change, constantly engaged in a process of change.”²³ The unfolding of such process, which often remains invisible until a crisis occurs, cannot be theoretically defined but has to be historically observed.

The crisis of world financial markets of 1857 was the first time when Marx had the opportunity to empirically test and elaborate his critique of political economy in a systematic manner. Like today’s capitalist downturn, this event hit Europe and the United States especially hard. At this time, Marx lived in London in conditions of poverty and political isolation. In order to make a living, he was a freelance writer for the *New York Daily Tribune*, while working long hours in the British Museum, where he devoted his attention to collecting material and drafting his economic manuscripts known as the *Grundrisse*.²⁴ Marx developed a great scientific fascination for the “monetary panic,” for which he kept a detailed record of the progression of events in three large books with diverse materials on England, Germany and France.²⁵

He considered crisis a key “period of theoretical research,” for in these moments we would be in a better condition to grasp the stuff of which the social world is made of, how its differences and relations are created, and how it actually works. This means, at least potentially, that we could have access to things that would otherwise remain hidden under the surface of social relations. The outbreak would bring into sight the “real movement” of capitalist development, both revealing the conflicts and magnifying the lines of tension already in place within capitalist society. The sociological challenge would therefore consist in producing knowledge that clarifies the internal connection between capitalist accumulation (self-production of value) and crisis (disruption of the accumulation cycle), as much as to explore the structural limits that capitalism transgresses in every crisis and the creative ways in which it reinforces itself and reshapes the grammar of social relations through this very process.²⁶ To put it differently, Marx considered the world economic crisis as a decisive “moment of truth,” literally an “experimental test situation” that had a scientific-intellectual meaning as much as a public-political one.²⁷

The basis of Marx’s approach was to take the objective manifestations of the crisis and connect them with its dominant representations, ideas and images in public discourses. If one aspect is isolated from the other, he argued, the

complexity of the event is lost. Namely, we are unable to see that the objective appearance of the crisis is mediated by the ways social actors try to make sense of the problems this moment reveals, not to mention the conflicts that emerge between the reality of crisis and the concept of crisis. After all, crisis is an idea publicly available for actors, who in defining an object or situation as being in crisis, not only describe a problematic state of affairs but also give it a normative meaning which, in turn, may inform and legitimize their concrete actions.²⁸ It is precisely in this sense, I argue, that Marx thought that the task of studying economic crises seriously also required taking the concept of crisis as an object of inquiry and as a field of practical struggles. Accordingly, the analysis of the reality of the crisis should go hand in hand with the critique of the concept of crisis.

This is clear in Marx's critique of political accounts that equated financial crises with the moral wickedness of single individuals, i.e., the "gambling mania" and greed of bankers. Such analyses, he says, would "resemble the now extinct school of natural philosophers who considered fever as the true cause of all maladies,"²⁹ leaving unexplored the structural limits of capital transgressed in every period of crisis. A different but equally deceptive representation is that of political economists who describe crisis as cyclical "accidents" or exceptional moments in an otherwise normal operation of the capitalist mode of production, and thus console themselves with the idea that state policy measures could domesticate the uncontrollable waves of financial excess and repair market failure.³⁰ And last but not least, Marx also questioned philosophical-historical accounts that elevated crisis to a permanent condition, universal constant or even cultural fate. The problem with such interpretations is not only that they fail to see that universal and "permanent crises do not exist"³¹ but also that they transform individuals into silent spectators of a process of decay and their future into something left to Providence. It is not difficult to notice the appeal these images still have in contemporary discussions about crisis.

What concerns Marx's critique is the way in which such reductive conceptions of crisis invisibilize and de-politicize the structural contradictions of capitalist society. Put in this perspective, the underlying suggestion of his analysis is to understand and observe crisis as a reflexive social mechanism. This means at least three things. First, that crisis is a moment that reflects the unobserved excesses and contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, insofar as it suddenly reveals a certain way of doing things and functioning as damaging. Second, it means that crisis is a mechanism that reproduces the system, insofar as it is the mean by which capitalist production manages temporary solutions to social contradictions, removes the very obstacles it creates, and restores the conditions for accumulation. And third, it means that crisis is the mechanism through which capitalism reintroduces under new forms "the terms of the contradictions that gave rise to the crisis in the first place."³² Interestingly enough, the reflexive character of Marx's concept of crisis is not limited to this threefold movement, like a revolving spiral that rotates around the same center as fate. It actually presupposes a fourth important element, namely, that the objective manifestation of crises forces society to turn itself into an object of reflection. Insofar

as social crises induce doubts and anxiety, they provoke questions regarding the nature and justification of social facts, practices and institutions. In doing so, they become theoretically relevant objects for Marxist critique, as they help to explore, visualize and analyze the immanent conflicts and destructive tendencies of capitalist development. But crises are also normatively demanding phenomena, as they open questions about the possible transformation of the conditions that govern the present organization of capitalist society, once those very conditions become unacceptable as they produce human suffering and damage social life. Here lies an important work for social critique. For the fact that crises are “normal” events in modern capitalist societies does not mean that we have to accept the stabilization of their negative consequences as the normal condition.

Marx’s key message seems to be that, “in the midst of the questions” that crisis poses on us, the social world needs “truth,” not false consolation, i.e., it needs the work of clarification of the “real struggles” of the “present time.”³³ But the truth that erupts into broad daylight, as it were, is not “an automaton that proves itself” and that one must simply “follow” and “apprehend,”³⁴ it has historical pulse and human shape. Although Marx insisted that crises were manifestations of the “fundamental contradictions” of the commodity form of capitalist production, he did not take the moment of crisis as a privileged repository of what is truth, in a positivist sense. His analyses were not aimed at telling people where the truth is and how to find it, as if crises were mere indexical representations of what is going on underneath. Real crises may well be “superficial expressions” of the immanent limits of the logic of capitalist accumulation, but the surface of crisis itself has a profundity that should not be disregarded: here, truth is open to endless reformulations and reconfigurations of what is experienced in reality. Readers that put a greater emphasis on whether Marx had a systematic theory of crisis, whether this theory is an adequate account and representation of capitalist dynamics, whether certain forms of crisis would be superseded in a communist society, or whether his explanations of crisis in nineteenth-century capitalism make any sense at all for us today, often overlook Marx’s emphasis on the politics of truth put at work in every crisis situation.

This is partly why Marx had no illusions that the waves of capitalist excess could inexorably lead to political transformation, as he was well aware that, as Jacob Burckhardt put it, “in all crises, turbulence very quickly turns into obedience and vice versa.”³⁵ Despite explicitly linking his political hopes of working class solidarity and revolution to objective situations of economic crisis, he was far more concerned with the way crises can reverse toward new forms of oppression that enhance power, justify dogmatic views of a well-ordered society, or even inspire destructive and violent passions that dismantle the realm of social relations altogether.³⁶ Put in such perspective, Marx never took for granted either the meaning or the actual course of crises. For in the midst of the mystical movement of commodities and capital, he knew that crisis might too become a mystical and fetishized reality—as it often happens when images of utopian futures, cravings for order and control, or melancholic sentiments of a lost unity tend to prevail.

This difficulty, however, was not a real obstacle for Marx but the very source of his scientific enthusiasm, insofar as understanding the persistence of crises in

the capitalist dynamic (self-reproduction through destruction of value) was instrumental in transforming truth into a political issue and a form of political intervention. Consequently, more than elevating crisis to a defining moment of break or fulfillment of history—the single point where everything is decided for better (reconciliation) or worse (catastrophe)—Marx’s critical theory addresses crises as transient expressions of the most fundamental contradictions of capitalist society and, therefore, as an open site of struggles. This is precisely what makes crisis a rather modest yet indispensable concept in Marx’s vocabulary. It is a modest concept insofar as it is a mean to understand the present configuration of social relations not a tool to imagine the future; and it is an essential concept because it is a mean to elucidate mechanisms that allow actors to regain some control over autonomized social processes rather than to succumb to the normalization of their destructive effects.

The Cultural Normalization of Crisis: On the Critique of Sociology

The normalization of crisis tendencies is, perhaps, one of the most revealing discoveries of Marx’s analyses of the contradictions and excesses of the capitalist mode of production. It demonstrates that “the focus of Marx’s work is not the crisis as catastrophic event, but the inherent tendency to crisis that underlies the permanent instability of social existence under capitalism.”³⁷ This supposes a way of thinking about crisis neither as an immediate result of pre-existing conditions nor as a definitive cause of future developments. As I suggested above, Marx’s explanation of the unruly logic of accumulation contributes to elucidate the essentially reflexive mode in which crisis phenomena appear in, circulate through and shape the forms of a society in which the economy prevails. This is a point that orthodox Marxist crisis theories often disregard when reducing crisis to a master code to decipher the imminent collapse of bourgeois society. And this is precisely why Marx considered it important to stress that the analysis of the reality of crisis was inseparable from the critique of the reification of the concept of crisis.

This insight, I suggest, is relevant to consider some of the limits of the post-war debate on crisis theory within Western social theory. With the progressive dissolution of traditional class politics, Marxist crisis theories lost their empirical referent and focus of attention as the capitalist expansion of material wealth coincided with the development of new forms of integration and legitimation that pacified but did not eliminate social contradictions. Within sociology this translated into a growing concern with the adequacy of the concept of crisis as a tool for social analysis. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, questions about the exhaustion of crisis theories proffered by Marxist theorists became particularly pronounced, as the neoconservative and neoliberal literature on crisis management took the lead.³⁸ Whether in the form of concerns about the confused meaning, ideological uses or normalization of the term, the critique of crisis captured the attention of several social theorists.³⁹ In what follows, I shall take as a case the debate that took place among French sociologists in the aftermath of the students revolts of May 1968.

In the midst of the economic turmoil of the 1970s, the French sociologist Raymond Aron criticized the way Marxist social scientists had turned the idea of “crisis” into a cliché of political discourse and a synonym of the “decadence” of European liberal democracies. The world economic crisis had revived the debate over the structural or conjunctural character of crisis phenomena in modernity; the “inflation crisis,” “oil crisis,” “welfare state crisis,” “crisis of democracy,” “crisis of civilization,” “crisis of authority,” “crisis of the subject,” “crisis of representation,” and many more populated descriptions of the major political and intellectual concerns about the self-destructive tendencies of Western liberal societies. As the post-war years of prosperity came to an end, a kind of fear for the future “shook public opinion, principally, because neither the governing circles nor the commentators or opinion-makers had any direct experience with the phenomenon [of crisis].”⁴⁰ In this context, the question of making sense of crisis turned into a crucial task for social scientists, as it demonstrates the remarkably long and diverse list of publications in sociology bearing “crisis” in their titles.⁴¹ However, according to Aron the widespread consciousness of crisis was not simply a direct expression of the economic recession (i.e., the rise of inflation, the drop of economic growth and the consequences of unemployment) but of a much more complex articulation of the social-cultural critique of industrial societies during the 1960s. In his view, the “crisis of civilization” became the signature of a catastrophist diagnosis of industrial capitalism that took a symbolic value in the student revolts and their sudden ability to bring to light “the social failure of economic success.”⁴²

Aron’s apprehension concerning the crisis-talk of those years was directed to the logically necessary link between economic crisis and social-cultural decline, which was symptomatic of orthodox Marxism. This kind of crisis diagnosis, he argued, was based on an intellectually misleading philosophy of history that over-generalizes a concrete crisis as the surest sign of the cultural collapse of the values and institutions of liberal societies. But it was also politically dangerous insofar as it undermines the normative achievements of human freedom and the legitimacy of its continuous defense. Aron’s point is not to deny the contradictions of capitalist societies but to question the mystification of their existential collapse as tantamount to a civilizational decline. For, he writes, “Western societies pay for their liberalism with instability, and for their complexity of organization by crises.”⁴³ For Aron this immanent fragility is not a pathological defect of the liberal culture. It is rather a condition of possibility of the very impetus of criticism and self-criticism, “the perpetual reexamination of every question,” that fosters the “originality” and “creativity” of liberal societies.⁴⁴ In a way, social fragility that manifests in crisis situations is a preventive mechanism against the sacralization of social and political institutions, as much as an important reminder that the quest for human freedom is not itself free from destructive excesses.

Aron’s liberal critique of Marxist crisis theories was, to a certain extent, a normatively driven response to the tendency to normalization of crisis during the 1960s in European sociology. It involved a direct call for the political responsibility of science, which is consistent with his idea that sociology’s scientific quest

of grasping the social as such is meaningless without the honest passion for “meditation on the crises of modern society” and their consequences.⁴⁵ If I have considered Aron’s critique at some length it is because it reflects part of the intellectual milieu in which the explanatory deficits of crisis theories were seen as concomitant with a more general crisis of sociology.⁴⁶

Shortly after the revolts of May 1968 in Paris, Marxist sociologist Edgar Morin joined the vibrant debate over how to interpret the events. In a little known essay, “Pour une sociologie de la crise,”⁴⁷ he argued that the student movement revealed the limits of dominant sociological approaches and put into question the very idea that crisis situations could be inscribed in statistical regularities or lineal historical interpretations. There he writes that since the crisis “means the irruption of the accident, the irreversible, the singular concrete in the fabric of social life,” it could be best described as “the monster of sociology,” a sort of mythical animal that required a “huge scientific effort” to be grasped with conventional research methods.⁴⁸ In line with Aron, Morin criticized the “soporific” effects that the widespread idea of the “crisis of civilization” had in public discourse and in the scientific commitment to understand the actual reality of the political process underway.⁴⁹ Despite the crisis of Marxist crisis theories, Morin was reluctant to abandon Marx’s intuition that crisis is a reflexive social mechanism that both reveals fundamental social antagonisms and triggers transformative dynamics of social reorganization. In this capacity, he argued, “a crisis is a micro-cosmos of evolution. It is a sort of laboratory for studying in vitro evolutionary processes.”⁵⁰ Therefore, for him “the crisis of the concept of crisis” did not mean the decline but “the beginning of theory of crisis.” What is noteworthy about Morin’s remark is the underlying attempt to elevate crisis to a “rich and complex macro-concept.”⁵¹ To be sure, at the time efforts to renew the sociology of crisis were customary,⁵² but Morin’s ambition goes far beyond that. It literally means the creation of a new disciplinary field. “Crisiology,” as he called it, consisted of a “general theory” of crisis as well as a “praxis” of crisis management, all based upon a “systemic,” “cybernetic” and “negentropic” concept of society (in a sense quite similar to Luhmann’s systems theory). The grandiloquence of the project consisted, somewhat paradoxically, in removing crisis from sociology and turned it into a “quasi-clinical observational method” with its own “crisis centers” of intervention.⁵³ In doing so, Morin’s crisisology is a well-intended attempt to transcend the normalization of crisis but that only replicates it in a conceptual style more attuned to management studies than to critical social theory.⁵⁴

A severe critic of this liberal-like type of theorizing was the Marxist sociologist Nicos Poulantzas, best known for his Althusserian inspired theory of the capitalist state and political power. He believed that the concept of crisis had “scientific” and “strategic” importance for a Marxist critique, inasmuch as the concept is concretely related to the conflicts and contradictions that traverse social relations in a specific stage of capitalist development. In the context of debates on the state crisis of the mid-1970s, Poulantzas’s interest in the concept of crisis was associated with efforts to elucidate the relative autonomy and dynamic relation between economic crises and political crises that were characteristic of the

so-called phase of “monopoly capitalism.” But to do so, he considered it necessary to address the epistemological obstacles that conventional conceptualizations of crisis create and the political mistakes they induce. Since his early *Political Power and Social Classes*,⁵⁵ Poulantzas obsessively defended the fundamental role that the formulation of “scientific concepts” had for Marxist political analysis. His position is that concepts are not essential entities already existing in the world or epiphenomena of external determinations, but they need to be constructed within a specific theoretical space of relations. Thus, his critical position toward the concept of crisis was precisely directed to the tendency of turning the concept into a general theory or fixing its meaning regardless of social-historical struggles. In Poulantzas’s view, the work of clarification of this concept was of strategic importance for political practice and essential to rectify the mistakes of “political strategy” of the European Left: most importantly, the deficient interpretation of the rise of fascism as the logical extension of the parliamentary democratic form of state and, therefore, as a momentary threat indicating the structural crisis of capitalism itself.⁵⁶

The bulk of Poulantzas’s objections was directed against two prevailing conceptions of crisis, the “bourgeois-sociological” (represented by Parsonian functionalism) and the “orthodox Marxist” (influenced by the policies of the Third International), as both dissolved the “specificity” of crisis into a fixed and general concept. Basically, Poulantzas argued that while the former approach reduced crisis to a “dysfunctional moment” in an otherwise “harmonious functioning” social system, i.e., it paid no attention to the organic role that crises have in the self-reproduction of capitalism, the latter over-generalized crisis in a historicist and economic manner, i.e., it misconstrued all crises as “constantly present,” “revolutionary situations,” and signs of the “general crisis” of capitalism.⁵⁷ Poulantzas’s basic claim is that “all teleological concepts of crisis must be mistrusted: the end of capitalism does not depend on any crisis whatsoever but on the issue of the class struggles that manifest themselves therein.”⁵⁸ According to this view, his proposition was to delimit the concept of crisis to “a particular situation of a condensation of contradictions” with its own “rhythm” and “particular traits.”⁵⁹ This amounts to saying that crisis is neither the exception nor the norm of the capitalist dynamic, but a “conjuncture” of intensification of social antagonism that expresses itself in “substantial modifications of the relations of force of class conflict.”⁶⁰ Thus, the forms of appearance, developments and outcomes of crisis situations depend directly on the historical modalities of class struggle inscribed in the specificity of the social spheres in which we situate our analyses (politics, economy, science, culture, etc.).

The structural identity of crisis and class struggle allows Poulantzas to claim that, in the last instance, crisis is a theoretically relative concept and an empirically relational phenomenon. In doing so, he is able to problematize the simplification and normalization of the concept, yet the fact that crisis is coupled to the rhythm of the conflict between class forces carries two problems: on the one hand, it makes crisis dependent on a single systemic logic; on the other, it reduces it to a strategic notion that serves as an instrument of political praxis.

According to Alain Touraine, who was critical of Poulantzas's Althusserian influences, these problems derived from a conflation between the categories of crisis and class struggle that misrecognized their fundamental differences. Within his own sociological work, Touraine opted for abandoning analyses in terms of crisis in favor of analyses in terms of conflict: "we have to stop talking about crisis and begin asking a different question."⁶¹ The question then was to choose between an image of social life that privileges dynamics of order-integration that are functional to institutional power (crisis), and another image that concerns dynamics of transformation led by social movements and collective action (conflict). Touraine clearly opted for the latter and phrased his misgivings about the sociological concept of crisis as follows:

An analysis in terms of crisis, which eliminates real social actors and the real relationships between them and which speaks indeterminately in the name of humanity as a whole, can only serve as an ideological instrument. Such an instrument permits the rise to power of new ruling classes, or rather of new ruling elites, that is, of new social categories which control the transformation of one society into another, and which set up new ruling forces.⁶²

This statement reflects two parallel critical arguments that run through a number of Touraine's writings during this period. First, that the concept of crisis is rooted in a universalistic idea of society that makes diverse practices, institutions and forms of life cohere around a static and abstract principle (e.g., "modernity," the "nation-state," "class"). So when processes of social and cultural differentiation dissolve the monolithic nature of this image of society, the idea of crisis becomes redundant. It is in this sense that Touraine argued that a "sociology without society" should be, by logical implication, a sociology without crisis.⁶³ The second argument stresses that the concept of crisis is practically allied to the ideology of dominant classes. This means that speaking in terms of "crisis itself is unexpectedly becoming the instrument of domination,"⁶⁴ for it serves "the point of view of the ruling forces" to justify reorganizing society according to strategic planning in the service of power and the logic of commodity exchange.⁶⁵

Touraine's misgivings about the notion of crisis are instructive of the sea change that crisis theories were undergoing in their socio-political clientele. For after the political failure of the student movement of the 1960s, a neoconservative reaction gave way to a crisis literature that "almost completely removed the remnants of its Leftist counterpart from the sphere of public attention."⁶⁶ As Claus Offe rightly pointed out, in a context in which neoconservatives "skillfully redefined and adapted" crisis as a mechanism of social regulation, "one is faced with the question of the specific political-theoretical role of crisis theories" that derive from the tradition of critical theory.⁶⁷ This question was central for Touraine in order to recognize the political-theoretical stakes involved in the normalization of crisis discourses that conceal social contradictions, especially through the technical expertise of policy sciences that tend to marginalize social conflicts and use social disorder as a means to neutralize critique and collective

action. In this context, he argued, sociologists should definitively abandon their belief in a “sociology of crisis” and rather focus their efforts on challenging the very idea of crisis that sustains “the dangerous fiction” of a unitary, autonomous and coherent social order. This means, more precisely, to move out of the neo-conservative logic of crisis through the criticism of a crystal-like society in which “calculation seems to have replaced action and strategy to have eliminated politics.”⁶⁸

This attempt to relate critique to crisis in a more decisive manner is not exclusive of Touraine’s sociology of action, it is a common feature that runs through the debates that took place in the aftermath of May 1968. More or less explicitly, the normalization of crisis is seen as indication of a severe deficit of critique that shapes public life and political debate in which actors are often reduced to disciplined spectators, but it is a deficit that also affects the intellectual resources of sociology to find normative and theoretical grounds for developing a convincing critique of society. At this stage, it becomes clear that most of the critiques of the concept of crisis examined so far were guided by the idea that crises are objective and historically situated manifestations of capitalist development, and so the concept should be reconstructed not only to understand new crisis-ridden phenomena but to find mechanisms that help social actors to regain some control over processes of functional differentiation gone wild.

The Reflexive Dissolution of Crisis: From Social Crisis to Risk Society

For the emergent postmodernist critics of the 1970s these sociological disputes were simply hollow as they still presupposed that crisis was something revealing, governable and possible to transcend. We may here refer to the best representative of this position, Jean Baudrillard, to whom the definitive collapse of the traditional concept of crisis was sealed by a technological-digital culture that dissolves any possible equivalence between signifier and signified. Baudrillard’s basic argument is that crisis could no longer work as a concept with any correspondence to the real (i.e., structural contradictions), not even as an ideological instrument of the ruling elites as Touraine so strongly implied. Instead, the concept of crisis turns into a performative code necessary for a system of symbolic production of actuality. In other words, crisis is nothing but the reflective mode, in the sense of imitation, in which contemporary capitalism stages the “spectacle” of its own destruction:

Taken together, the energy crisis and the ecological *mise-en-scène* are themselves a disaster movie, in the same style (and with the same value) as those that currently comprise the golden days of Hollywood. It is useless to laboriously interpret these films in terms of their relation to an “objective” social crisis or even to an “objective” phantasm of disaster. It is in another sense that it must be said that it is the social itself that, in contemporary discourse, is organized along the lines of a disaster-movie script.⁶⁹

If we follow this reasoning, in the Hollywood-like global culture of Western societies there would be no crisis in/of culture, not at least in the tragic sense that Georg Simmel once interpreted the fate of modernity. Conversely, Baudrillard saw that culture itself was becoming a field of production of an aesthetics of crisis that requires enacting the real through the permanent production of a surplus of crisis in which “the threat of symbolic destruction” resurrects and dramatizes capitalist society like a movie script.⁷⁰ This aesthetic imagination, he argued, is the stratagem that enables institutions and power to stage their crisis on mass media and digital networks, only “to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy [...] to seek new blood in [their] own death, to renew the cycle through the mirror of crisis.”⁷¹ This relentless dramaturgical excess, which for Baudrillard is the functional equivalent of sacrificial rituals, is “the perpetual simulacrum of crisis” to which traditional sociologies of crisis are now permanently blind.⁷² From now on, the only thing that crisis events may actually reveal is that there is nothing hidden underneath the surface of the social but pure simulation.

According to this postmodernist account, the notion of crisis no longer makes any sense for a sociology that assumes the “radical indeterminacy” and the “foundationless” nature of the material and symbolic structures of the social world.⁷³ For if the very logic in which contemporary society works dislocates all universalist claims about the social, the modernist concept and experience of crisis unavoidably dissolve into images of “hyperreality” to which social scientists may only respond as cultural cynics. So Baudrillard rhetorically asks:

What becomes of a thinking when it’s confronted with a world that is no longer exactly the critical world, the world of crisis and critical thought? Has it any purchase in a world that has become virtual and digital? I don’t think so.⁷⁴

The wide acceptance of this postmodernist outlook in the social sciences finds an interesting simile in contemporary sociologies of globalization that declare crisis to be an “obsolete” object of analysis and an “inadequate” notion to interpret the problems and conflicts of the present. This is particularly true in the case of Ulrich Beck’s influential sociology of risk, which is explicit in its attempt to eradicate the concept of crisis from sociological analysis on the grounds of the radical cultural and structural transformations that global modernity brings about. In fact, in most of Beck’s writings crisis is depicted as a petrified concept, one of those “zombie” categories that sociologists continuously use to grant value to their claims regardless of how the social world itself is changing.⁷⁵ Although some of Beck’s criticisms of the sociological tradition are well taken, the assumption that crisis must be replaced by risk is equivocal. This move not only dissolves the hermeneutic struggles and normative perplexities inscribed in the actuality of crisis situations into the inevitability of techno-environmental risks, but it also normalizes the very understanding of the concept as a fixed and coherent unity of meaning.

There are at least three fundamental ideas upon which Beck’s arguments about the notion of crisis are sustained: (i) First, the idea that the logic of “lineal”

historical change that was characteristic of industrial modern societies has been radically displaced by a logic of “reflexive” transformations. (ii) Second, the idea that the permanent production of “risks” is a defining factor of societal organization that alters the conditions of human experience and social action on a world scale. (iii) Third, the idea that, in this context, sociology is forced to modify its conceptual and methodological apparatus in accordance with the struggles and problems of the times.⁷⁶ Let me explain Beck’s position further.

The starting premise of Beck’s sociology is that “being at global risk [expresses] the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century.”⁷⁷ For in our technological, interconnected and complex societies, the production and expansion of new forms of insecurity are immanent to the operation of economic, political and scientific institutions. Risks are in essence incalculable, delocalized, non-compensable threats self-manufactured by social institutions, which, in turn, must revise and respond transforming their organizing principles to the reality of structural uncertainties that their own operation produces. Within this scenario of inescapability of risks, Beck identifies two important implications for sociological knowledge. On the one hand, the transformation of modern society can no longer be explained in terms of evolutionary leaps but rather as a “reflexive” movement of radicalization and overcoming of modernity’s own premises—this is the basis of what Beck’s calls a theory of “reflexive modernization.” On the other hand, the increasing global exposure of societies and individuals to risk threats would provoke a process of “enforced” cosmopolitanization of everyday life. In a historical scenario where no nation-state is able to master problems nationally, risks threats call into existence transnational communities of victims, as well as spaces of social criticism around the moral-political conflicts emerging out of living with unintended side-effects—this is the core presupposition of what Beck’s calls a “cosmopolitan sociology” with critical intent.⁷⁸

A direct implication of the double-binding theoretical project that Beck seeks to stimulate is that sociology should break free from the ballast of its “old” categories in order to regain a critical outlook on the present. In the first place, sociology should refocus its observations and base its normative claims on the “not yet” signature of risks in social life rather in any a priori consideration of the meaning of history and human suffering, like traditional critical social theories often did. In addition, sociology needs to transcend the “methodological nationalism” in which most of the categories of what Beck calls sociologies of the “first modernity” are based; in consequence, it has to adopt a cosmopolitan perspective if it wishes to grasp the reality of world risks.⁷⁹

The question one may ask is why within this conceptual framework sociology is forced to renounce the concept of crisis. The main reason is that crisis, as Beck understands the term, is unable to capture the new dynamics of reflexive social change. Namely, it cannot account for the fact that the triumphs of “first modernity” are responsible for bringing about the development and consolidation of “second modernity.” The incapacity of crisis to elucidate this process lies in that the concept is deeply rooted in a lineal and totalizing model of history in which one can see only breaks and ends. Beck writes:

In every sphere the bases of action reach a decisive turning point: they have to be rejustified, renegotiated, rebalanced. How is this to be conceptualized? “Crisis” is not the right concept, any more than “dysfunction” or “disintegration,” for it is precisely the victories of unbridled industrial modernization that call it into question. This is just what is meant by the term reflexive modernization: theoretically, application to itself; empirically, self-transformation; politically, loss of legitimacy and a vacuum of power.⁸⁰

From this perspective, crisis seems to be a concept functional to the “period” of methodological nationalism that furnished the descriptions of classical sociologies of the first modernity, but it is not suitable for a sociology that operates with a cosmopolitan concept of society. There is, above all, the suggestion that crisis dissolves as a concept because it becomes a perpetual condition in a society governed by the structural logic of world risks. Thus Beck explains the situation:

The way the theory of reflexive modernization describes the present and prospective future of social reality differs quite clearly from the descriptions offered by the classical sociologists. While the latter see breakdowns, crisis and ambiguities as occasional instances of intensification, the theory of reflexive modernization attributes the basic difficulties to the functioning of the system. Whereas the sociologies and sociologists of the first modernity see potential complication of the modernization process as exceptions and relegate them to the periphery, the “crisis” addressed by the theory of reflexive modernization has systemic origins; it is a “crisis” in perpetuity, and as such is no longer a crisis, because it invalidates the very concept.⁸¹

Beck’s argument seems to be in agreement with Baudrillard’s idea of the perpetual simulacrum of crisis mentioned above. Beyond their differences, the symmetry between both positions lies in simply assuming that crisis evaporates in the reflexive loop of manufactured uncertainties. Yet I do not find any convincing reason for why accepting the concept of risk necessarily has to mean ruling out the concept of crisis. Let us say on this point that Beck himself is unspecific in the justification of his criticisms of the concept of crisis. If we consider the objections made by sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s, Beck shares similar concerns about reductionist uses of crisis in teleological or totalizing views of society. And yet his analysis appears to be driven by a narrow reading of the history of social thought as it attributes this type of misconception to sociology as a whole. A more nuanced observation would admit the much more complex and rich understanding of crisis that exists in the work of classical sociologists, like my discussion of Marx suggested at the beginning of this chapter. In the same way, it is no less problematic than the reductionism to which the reflexive sociology of risk leads Beck to, since he fixes the concept of crisis to a static historical period and specific type of society, namely, first modernity and industrial society. In doing so, he binds his sociology to a dualistic vision of the history of modern society, one with crisis and another without crisis. However, the argument about the structural determination of risk in a transnational society

tells us a different story because, by way of equating structural risk with “not yet” crises,⁸² Beck invites us to accept crisis as a “perpetual” condition from which we cannot escape. The invitation, whilst attractive for those who, with Marx, situate crisis-ridden processes at the core of capitalist societies, is problematic because it not only dissolves the concept of crisis but also normalizes the experience of crisis itself. Unlike Marx, who thought that “permanent crises do not exist,”⁸³ for Beck crisis is everywhere and nowhere.

For these reasons, I suggest, crisis is doomed to disappear as an object of knowledge from the theory of reflexive modernity. Yet, as a concrete empirical reality, it becomes, somewhat paradoxically, the hidden term behind the all-embracing new concept of risk. If we take Beck at his word, this ambivalence leaves his cosmopolitan sociology in a rather odd position. It seeks to become the science of risks and, in that capacity, a “new” form of critical theory of society.⁸⁴ However, all signs indicate that while it attempts to provide risk-enlightenment, as it were, it overrides any realist sense of a politics oriented to overcoming risk. This may not be so problematic for the explanatory purposes of Beck’s social theory, but it certainly exposes his well-intended critical project to an insurmountable fate. The experience of crisis can never be reconciled with the practice of critique; in other words, the “not yet” crisis of risk society leaves scant room for a “not yet” social critique that never comes.

Closing Remarks

A central claim of this chapter has been that sociology’s scientific engagement with crisis is motivated by the diagnosis of the potentiality and circulation of crisis-ridden phenomena in modern capitalist society. That is, the discovery that crisis is an immanent feature, a normal *modus operandi* of a society in which the economy has become a kind of human fate. In this context, it goes without saying that crisis is a privileged object of cognition for sociologists, insofar as they find in crisis empirical means to observe social processes and practices which otherwise remain invisible. Phenomenologically speaking, crisis is the *epojé* that denaturalizes the sense of order and manifests itself in the form of questions that bring into discussion the naturalized appearance of things (i.e., the suspension and bracketing of what is posited). In historical periods in which social actors consciously self-describe as living in crisis, the concept somehow becomes an indispensable mean to make sense of the conflicts, excesses and disruptions that affect social and political life. In this capacity, crisis situations are also conceived as spaces for critique, insofar as they open normative questions about the limits and acceptability of the current state of society and about the very mechanisms of normative justification through which social actors accept and maintain a damaging form of life.

Despite these apparent virtues, the concept of crisis carries recognition of a gap in our theoretical frameworks, normative resources and practical knowledge; it attests to the very limits of our everyday criteria of response for the problems and contradictions the crisis situation suddenly reveals. This is perhaps what makes crisis an object of normalization, for the uncertainty of crisis situations

immediately puts at work an economy of social discourses that contribute to give it a recognizable form through conventional categories, models of explanation and ready-made courses of action. Interestingly enough, the idea of crisis itself becomes a way of mastering contingency and subjecting the “incalculable” to a “moment of calculation,” the “un-decidable” to a “possible decision.”⁸⁵ As I argued in the first part of the chapter, this is precisely the reason why Marx stressed that the analysis of the reality of crisis should not be separated from the critique of the reification of the concept of crisis, not to mention the critique of the normalization of its destructive consequences. And this is also the concern that runs through most debates in post 1968 sociology that explicitly question the normalization of crisis both in sociological analyses and in political debate as an indication of a severe deficit of critique.

Now, for many social theorists the normalization of crisis in world societies is nothing but the best indicator of the theoretical obsolescence and the empirical dissolution of the concept. This is the predominant view among postmodernists like Baudrillard and cosmopolitans like Beck, who seem to coincide in that crisis is an obstacle that fatally compromises our knowledge of the complex dynamics of a truly global, technological and immaterial form of capitalism. Whilst it is correct to say that a changing social-historical reality may force transformations in our conceptual frameworks, it is wrong to suppose that concepts simply die away. Baudrillard’s and Beck’s exaggerated claims fail to acknowledge that crisis is not a fixed or unified entity but always a proposal of reading the world, namely, a contested object; and they also fail to acknowledge that crisis is not a mere subjective representation but a code inscribed in the objective logic in which social relations are historically reproduced. In other words, they are unable to account for the contradictory forms assumed by the concept and its movement throughout modern societies as a space of struggles.

Marx’s understanding of crisis reminds us that the crisis-ridden logic of capitalism is a moving terrain, always dislocating itself. Thus, rather than getting out of this logic, the demand for a critical theory of society is to keep an attitude of forced attentiveness to the shaping limits of that logic and experimenting with the possibility of going beyond them. Here it lies, I argue, the significance of restoring to crisis the force of critique, that is, of revealing that there is no principle of closure of social reality. After all, “the real crisis would be the absence of critique at all,”⁸⁶ the imposition of the belief that society is a solid crystal.

What is more, the attitude of “getting out” of the crisis (of the concept of crisis, to be more precise), though, replicates the very decisional structure of the original Greek notion *krisis*: the point of a judgment, a choice between two opposed alternatives; in this case, a decision between one language and another. In so doing, it presupposes a “crisis of crisis” that, as Derrida recalls in a different context, is “the last symptom” of a “discourse of mastery in the wake of impotence.”⁸⁷ Although Derrida himself strongly criticized the metaphysical connotations of the concept of crisis in the Western philosophical tradition, as it carries a will to command and govern,⁸⁸ he suggests that the disavowal of the concept could not be a matter of mere choice. Because precisely when the idea is experiencing its greatest inflation, the concept has to be redeployed instead of

being terminologically fixed and turned away. And this means raising some basic but necessary questions: “Who is talking about crisis? Who is talking the most about it right now? Where? To whom? In what form? In view of what effects and what interests? By playing on what ‘representations?’”⁸⁹

With the return of the concept of crisis to the forefront of public discourse, these questions become as inescapable as understanding the mechanisms through which crisis phenomena appear in, circulate through and shape the forms of society. A characteristic trend in contemporary neoliberal capitalism is the transformation of the systemic problems that social crises reveal into technical problems that may be steered and solved by the expert management of state agencies, international financial institutions and the like. In this institutional environment, crisis becomes a means and a principle to govern the social. This tendency, as many have identified,⁹⁰ is coeval with a political rationale that excludes situations of crisis from the domain of interpretation and discussion by means of administrative decisions, technical knowledge and legal procedures disengaged from democratic mechanisms and at the expense of political debate. Within this context of growing de-politicization, the challenge for critical social theory is to contribute to create room for society to build up knowledge of itself and thematize the reality of social conflicts and structural problems.

The formation of a “crisis consciousness” is a necessary mean to challenge established constellations of power, reverse the normal circuits of communication in the public arena and explore the possibilities of concrete transformations of the conditions that create systemic problems and produce social suffering. Without putting into question institutional arrangements and introducing new inputs of normative communication into social systems, the horizon of expectations of what is seen as politically possible and accepted as socially desirable remain unaffected. It is in this very sense that crisis is a moment that triggers socially reflexive processes of social criticism which, in turn, may enforce dynamics of normative self-limitation, produce institutional restructuring and create spaces for political innovation.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 168–169.
- 2 Karl Marx, “Speech on the Anniversary of the People’s Paper,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, comp. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 368.
- 3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Toward a Critical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1976), 85.
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- 5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 4. See Chapter 3 in this volume.
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2 The Crisis of Critique

From Hegel to Luhmann

Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined the central yet contested status of the concept of crisis in sociology. The discussion showed how dynamics of normalization and dissolution characterize the actual movement of the concept within sociological debates about crisis tendencies in capitalist societies and sociology's actual engagement with the fragility of social life itself. Based on a reconsideration of Marx's understanding of crisis as a reflexive social mechanism, I argued that the disruptive condition of crisis situations lies mainly, although not exclusively, in their potential to put into question naturalized truths and show the immanent limits of social institutions. As the phenomenon of crisis dislocates claims to completion and unity, it is an existential reminder of the impossibility of closure of the social world. Put differently, crisis is a sign that negativity inhabits social life: the always-present possibility of fissures and ruptures of existing social relations.

In my view, this may explain why it is so tempting to neutralize the disconcerting reality of crises, either in discourses that assimilate their objective and recurrent manifestations but at the cost of normalizing their destructive logic, or in discourses that liberate us from the structural reality of crises but at the cost of suppressing the practical struggles around which social actors mobilize normative ideas, unconscious desires, historical experiences and political expectations. Thus, normalization and dissolution are both dynamics that move crisis away from critique; they conspire against our capacities "to crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible."¹ In close dialog with these considerations, this chapter discusses the other side of the story, which addresses the concept of critique more directly. The underlying claim is that what is true for the concept of crisis (normalization and dissolution) holds true for the concept of critique as well.

At least since Kant, critique is defined as an anti-dogmatic form of rational knowledge in opposition to tradition, that is, a will to resist established opinions and practices whose validity is self-positing. Marx polemically characterized with the term "critical criticism" the writings of those idealistic thinkers (the young Hegelians) who elevated critique to the position of a "cult," a "transcendent power" that stands in "absolute" opposition to reality.² For the sake of the argument, we

might refer here in a similar fashion to the inflationary ways in which contemporary human sciences profess the adjectival form “critique” to describe whatever they do and say. Interestingly enough, the issue is not simply that everybody claims to be critical (a harmless claim in any case) but, most importantly, that there is a pressing demand to conform to critique’s transparent virtue, the imperative to criticize. This imperative is somewhat paradoxical. Although “critique is essential to all democracy,” to the extent that “democracy itself is nothing less than defined by critique” which in turn is a “human right and human duty of every citizen,”³ it seems that occasionally the meaning of the term is taken for granted and the practice of critique itself becomes fixed like a positive doxa among social scientists. To be sure, it always feels right to be critical and declare the world as my opposite. But, in doing so, critique transforms itself into an ontological starting point, a place of subjective comfort, and a standard way of thinking. Oddly enough, it becomes an “abstract form” that disengages its activity from the perplexities of the world “by having its opinion of itself represented as the opinion of the world and by its *concept* being converted into *reality*.”⁴

Despite Marx’s well-known objections to Hegel’s critical idealism, the latter is perhaps the most eloquent of modern thinkers in foreseeing the perils involved in the all too human sense of self-assurance that inhabits the practice of critique in philosophical reflection as well as in social life. As a reflexive human activity, critique materializes in acts of negation that claim to dissolve the appearance of substance, transparency and completion of identities. But Hegel argues that whenever critique elevates the subjective freedom of thought (self-consciousness) to an absolute passion and moral standard, it becomes an empty ideal untouched by worldly contradictions. For it no longer recognizes that its very reason of existence is “the comprehension of the present and the actual, not the setting up of a world beyond” or instructing people about how the world “ought to be.”⁵ Alienated from social-historical conditions in the vanity of its own knowing, the creative and critical force of the negative can only find its concretion in the “fanaticism of destruction.”⁶ Still, for Hegel this situation of reversal was not a reason to refrain from the practice of critique and lament its self-destruction, but the very motif to continue “looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it.”⁷ This means that the negative is not mere dismissal or opposition to the world but the immanent form (activity) and the actual content (experience) of a critique that engages with the world.

The fetishistic exploitation of critique’s ability to master meaning and the elevation of its virtue for unmasking domination, are repeatedly stressed as symptoms of the contemporary “crisis of negation.”⁸ At least since the 1960s and 1970s the so-called negativity of critique has been attacked as it carries Enlightenment remnants of holistic-humanist descriptions of history and society that are unacceptable today. A movement toward the theoretical dissolution of critique is underway, in my view, in attempts to deny to critique and normative judgments a central place as components of social theory,⁹ in the tendency to substitute the “sheer ordinariness” of social practices and moral disputes for a theoretical critique of society,¹⁰ and in claims that urge us to find ways to refashion “enlightenment without critique.”¹¹ I do not attempt here to refute the merits of those

criticisms but simply take notice of the tacit formation of a new orthodoxy that declares the waning of critique and the advent of the “post-critical” age.¹²

Contemporary post-critical wisdom ironically depicts critique as being in a state of “unemployed negativity,” to use George Bataille’s expression.¹³ Critique is now synonymous of a “complaint syndrome”¹⁴ that is no longer of any use, since the post-historical condition has left it wondering adrift, without light and proper jurisdiction.¹⁵ As Peter Sloterdijk argues, a “negativity without use” is a negativity that, emptied of content and exhausted, “expresses itself as bottomless settlement, as an arbitrary taste for suffering and for letting-suffer, as roaming destruction with no specific motive.”¹⁶ Yet even if Bataille’s original expression seems to coincide with this account of critique’s ironic twist of fate, its meaning actually goes in a somewhat different direction. It is a warning against the domestication of the work of critique, “an indication that negativity can be objectified.”¹⁷ For in a world where the worth of things primarily depends on utility and potential use, critique is repeatedly urged to offer positive answers and constructive alternatives. It is drawn to assimilate with the enchanting power of the positive. Interestingly enough, rather than rebelling against such dominant assimilation, contemporary thought has embraced it through the anti-dialectical celebration of the crisis of critique.

The aim of the discussion ahead, however, is not to lament the decay of criticism in the hands of a “new affirmationism,” whose disdain for negativity transmutes into fascination with “complexity,” “assemblages,” “creativity,” “invention,” “the new” and “the event.”¹⁸ It is rather to elucidate the challenge this transformation creates for bringing critique closer to crisis, that is, closer to the experience of negativity that inhabits the world in which we live and act with others. The intention is to recover some confidence in that critique, despite seeming obsolete and exhausted, “lives on” precisely because it did not fulfill its promise of becoming “one with reality,” “because the moment to realize it was missed.”¹⁹

The Experience of Negativity: On the Beginning of Critique

When Nietzsche famously announced the death of God at the dusk of the nineteenth century, he gave a symbolic name to the need of coming to terms with the radical contingency of modern life and the perplexities it brings about. The philosophical event of questioning a *Weltanschauung* that places God as its unifying principle not only reveals the obvious, the fact that we live in a godless world; it also gestures a deep sense of rupture in historical-cultural representations.²⁰ The metaphor of the death of God epitomizes the experience of a void in temporality that weakens the authority of any claim that resorts to absolute principles, and it embodies the anxious recognition that our existential quest for certainty and mastering of life can no longer be reconciled with the freedom and uncertainties of human action. To be sure, such an existential void may always be filled with images of historical progress, scientific truth, political providence and moral duty, but time and again we are confronted with the fact that it can never be brought to a definitive close. It remains a negative space.

The thought of the constitutive negativity of existence nurtures the “uninterrupted chain of critiques” that characterizes the modern spirit since the Enlightenment.²¹ Given the absence of ultimate foundations for what exists, everything—from aesthetic beauty and scientific truth to political authority and moral norms—may be subjected to doubt and scrutiny. The relentless will to raise questions and make distinctions, then, sets into motion open-ended processes of self-understanding, which widen our awareness of the limits of the human world and the inherent fragility of the relations that constitute it. Thus, the unity of the world as world appears less and less dependent on a timeless essence or originary identity; it is revealed as the concrete and conflictive assemblage of a plurality of beings, of the generative fissures that both separate and tie individuals together in social-historical reality. The presupposition of critical thought is that the practice of critique can only begin in such active intervals, in the very space of co-existence that lacks an essential identity or firm ground—i.e., in the negative experience of non-identity. Yet critical thought also presupposes that this “broken middle,” as Gillian Rose aptly calls it, is the source from which new dogmatisms may too emerge.²²

The experience of negativity is without question the underlying motif of Hegel’s critical philosophy and of the tradition of critical social theory affiliated with him. In the opening chapter of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Jürgen Habermas argues that Hegel’s brilliance is to have discovered “the experience of the negativity of a divided life” as the formative principle of the modern world.²³ Modernity, to be sure, is an epoch with a deep consciousness of rupture and separation, namely, of the “diremptions” within culture and reason. The word “diremption” is the standard English translation of the German term *Entzweiung*, which Hegel employs to describe both the point of beginning and the situation of modern philosophy. In his first book on *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy (Differenzschrift, from 1801)*, he writes “diremption [*Entzweiung*] is the source of the need of philosophy.”²⁴ With this phrase, Hegel was referring to the number of rigid dualisms that populated modern philosophy since Descartes (spirit/matter; soul/body, etc.) and which he wanted to overcome because in these dualisms “the opposites lose their living connection and reciprocity and gain independence.”²⁵ Thus, the need of philosophy as critique actually emerges “when the power of unification disappears from the life of men,”²⁶ so that philosophy becomes a form of reflection of the concrete divisions that animate the movement of the modern epoch. Its task is twofold, “to suspend the rigidified opposition between subjectivity and objectivity” and “to comprehend the achieved existence (*das Gewordensein*) of the intellectual and real world as a becoming.”²⁷ The singular philosophical task therefore consists of penetrating the genesis of diremption, looking for its genealogical traces in time, so as to rediscover the inner “relationship” between the terms torn apart.

The experience of loss of unity that triggers critical reflection does not need to presuppose the existence of an essential Being or unconditioned identity. On the contrary, it works as a recognition that the world has already begun and therefore that there is no proper and solid foundation. This is the reason why

Hegel thinks that philosophy cannot begin with the positing of a principle, or with conceptual representations of an end: “no philosophical beginning could look worse than to begin with a definition,” since “it makes philosophy begin with philosophy itself.”²⁸ Rather, it must begin with an *Entzweiung*, that is, a gap in meaning that indicates that the worldly objects that strike our attention and we seek to comprehend were never complete, in order or totally united. Thus, philosophy would have its nonfoundational foundation in the experience of lack of identity between concept and reality: the moment of “separation” that discloses to knowledge the relations between things seemingly unrelated. Here, philosophical critique recognizes no first principles but relations, no essences but objects constituted by a difference or gap. This negative foundation manifests with a “crisis of communication”²⁹ between existing conceptuality and social reality. This leads Hegel to suggest the close link between the practice of critique and the corrosive experience of diremption in social life.

For diremption is not simply what activates philosophical reflection in the abstract, it also designates the “painful divisions and splits in every domain of culture, and the wounds that these inflict” in social relations.³⁰ Thus, Hegel’s philosophical concern with the experience of diremption is actually driven by a commitment to explore and comprehend the actual fissures that constitute the institutions, norms and practices that sustain modern life, considering with equal attention the spaces these ruptures open for freedom of action and the forms in which they are eventually neutralized, de-politicized and lead to violent closure.³¹ Taken in a social-theoretical sense, Hegel takes the experience of *Entzweiung* as both a “condition” and a “means” to investigate the fragile condition of the world (“the unresolved character of a world torn apart”);³² but he also uses it to interrogate the structures of thought that make it difficult to grasp the very fissures at the foundations of social and political life. Understood in this sense, as I believe Hegel does, the experience of diremption draws attention to the impossibility of a definitive and triumphant closure of social reality, since there is always a possible fissure in existing social relations, a hiatus that exceeds and dislocates the current shapes of social life. This is why one could say that, despite customary readings, “Hegel is not only the philosopher of reconciliation, he is also the philosopher of rupture.”³³

Read in this way, the Hegelian notion of *Entzweiung* carries an important message for critical social theory: namely, that critique is a form of comprehending the world that cannot but begin from the “middle” of the unresolved dualisms of modern life. From this perspective, its task is not to mend social diremptions “in heaven or on earth” but to resist the foreclosure of reality in “absolute forms,” “exclusive thought” or “partial action.”³⁴ Against the enchanting power of assimilation and the immediacy of things (identity), critique takes proper distance so as to bring into focus the world’s constitutive fissures and to unlock possibilities of seeing and living differently (non-identity). To do so, it must venture into the power of interruption, that is, the enactment of an interval that destabilizes the possibility of affirming any essential, original or final unity. The negative then is not only the actual content of a critique that engages with the contradictions of the world (the experience of diremption), but also the

inescapable form of a critique that wants to be more than mere denunciation of this world (the activation of diremption). Ultimately, for Hegel's critique the quest of negativity is not a matter of celebrating or accepting the destruction of the world as it is; it is a way of preserving the world as something other than it is.³⁵

The relationship between critique and diremption that I have so far described is relevant to understanding Hegel's contribution to a non-essentialist foundation of social critique: (i) It recognizes the eventful beginnings and fragile foundations of social forms while rejecting philosophies of first principles, on the grounds of the relational and historical constitution of the world. (ii) It assumes that society is neither a transparent nor a fully comprehensible domain of pure empirical facts, but a heterogeneous space of conceptual and nonconceptual entities. (iii) It advocates for speculative forms of expression that shake the illusion of an orderly, simple and logical world, by means of introducing a strong sense of the non-identical constitution of all identities.

Still, for most contemporary sociologists and social theorists Hegel is an object of antiquarian interest, the metaphysical icon of the Old Europe. And for the most part, the terminology of his speculative and dialectical philosophy is deemed alien to the scientific concerns and concrete struggles of our present, as it is mystified as a "system" loaded with dialectic acrobatics and totalizing propositions that claim to grasp world-historical spirit, the absolute in pure thought.³⁶ True, this seems obsolete and exhausted. But what I have attempted to show is that Hegel's critical thought lives on precisely as it reminds us of the persistence of the negative in the social world, and therefore because it refers us back once and again to the disquieting fact that the foundations that moderns wish to retain or feel the need to attach to, do not exist.

Domesticating Negativity: The Exhaustion of Critique

Disqualification of negativity and critique of Hegelian-Marxist roots became common currency in the period from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, which is surrounded by a mythical halo in which the celebration of "heroic radicalism" coexists with the lament of "defeated utopias."³⁷ The sudden closure of the post-war era of unprecedented growth, along with the escalation of socio-cultural conflicts, encouraged a process of re-examination of the fundamental presuppositions of the conventional categories of social and political thought. In this context, an entire epoch seems to have sided with the idea of moving away from Hegel's critical philosophy; as Vincent Descombes describes it, "in 1945 all that was modern sprang from Hegel ... In 1968, all that was modern was hostile to Hegel."³⁸

Writing at the end of the 1970s, Richard Bernstein summarized this intellectual constellation in terms of "an emerging new sensibility" leading to a significant "restructuring of social theory."³⁹ In this regard, the abundant disputes over "the crisis of Marxism" as a mode of scientific knowledge were a case in point of a larger revision of the basis of human knowledge and the possibility of a true representation of the world, not to mention the conceptual and epistemological impact of the so-called "linguistic turn" on the scientific study of society.

The resonance of these debates in the social sciences crystallized into at least three substantive challenges:⁴⁰ (i) A revision of conceptual frameworks whose descriptions and explanations draw from deep social structures and progressive philosophies of history; this led to new emphases on contingency, heterogeneity and eventfulness. (ii) Growing skepticism toward holistic and universalistic theorizations of society, which brought a re-evaluation of the idea of intersubjectivity as well as the atomization of “the social” into flexible network-style arrangements and contextual meaning. (iii) The rise of anti- and post-humanist critiques of the epistemic and normative privilege of the subject, which stimulated engagements with discourse, text, body and issues of fragmented selves, repressed desire and local narratives.

One may say that these intellectual concerns involved more than mere terminological disputes. For in the midst of the world economic recession and the various student, labor and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the period of the so-called “crisis of organized modernity”⁴¹, the question of the prospects of an effective critique of the transformations of capitalist modernity was unequivocally at stake. In this context, the idea of a “critical sociology” in particular came to be seen as a necessary response to the predominance of functionalist and positivist social sciences, and to the anti-critical impulses driving social and political thought more generally. Alvin Gouldner’s *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* is surely a landmark of such voices that sought to reconnect sociology to the radical tradition of critical social thought:⁴²

In adopting a conception of themselves as “value-free” scientists, [sociologists’] critical impulses may no longer find a target in society. Since they no longer feel free to criticize society, which always requires a measure of courage, they now turn to cannibalistic criticism of sociology itself and begin to eat themselves up with “methodological” criticisms . . . In return for a measure of autonomy and social support, many social scientists have surrendered their critical impulses.⁴³

The surrender of sociology’s critical impulses, as Gouldner explains here, is related not to a total abandonment of criticism but to its domestication in the estate of methodological debates. Like all forms of domestication, it takes significant amount of teaching and practice, punishment and rewards, to tame negative passions and critical vehemence. Among Marxist theorists such domestication became even anthropophagic, as political disputes about the historical failures to answering the question of “what is to be done” turned into methodological-epistemological disputes about the critical-humanist or scientific-structuralist fidelity to Marx’s thought.⁴⁴ Against this background, the great irony of Gouldner’s and others efforts at renewing critique by means of a critical sociology is that halfway through the period’s blooming social criticism of late capitalism, the idea of a theoretical critique of society was itself losing leverage, falling into a crisis of legitimation.

In his last lecture course in 1968, *Introduction to Sociology*, Adorno commented incidentally that the practice of critique was being jeopardized as a result

of the devaluation of theory stimulated by the “positivism” of social sciences as much as by the “actionism” of the student movement and the political left; both literally coincided in their “attempt to abolish concepts.”⁴⁵ So Adorno explained to his students the difficulty of the situation: “critical sociology is castigated no longer as utopian and avant-garde but as a kind of antiquated and obsolete metaphysics which any progressive and enlightened person is obliged to renounce.”⁴⁶ The separation of the practice of critique from the work of theoretical clarification produced, in Adorno’s account, the optimal conditions for a relapse of critique into the apologetic preservation of social order. Interestingly enough, the domestication of critique finds in “implacable dialecticians” unexpected aides; for in the lure to consummate critique through the logic of dialectical procedures, they claim absolute privilege to the “immediate knowledge of the whole” and thus suspend dialectics “with reference to the insurmountable gravity of facts.”⁴⁷ All in all, the methodological presupposition that “everything has its two sides” (i.e., thesis and antithesis) transforms dialectical critique into a contentless and “sedate exposition” of the sublation of social contradictions.⁴⁸

In the 1969 essay “Critique,” originally a radio lecture, Adorno takes further notice of this issue, this time with regard to “the appeal to the positive” that is so often placed against critique in public debate and politics. After introducing the topic by recalling the Kantian connection between rational critique and resistance to dogmatism, Adorno questions the “anti-critical tendency” in Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (as a sociological vindication of the state form) and somehow connects it with the growing political “hostility to critique” in post-war German democracy, where “whoever criticizes violates the taboo of unity.”⁴⁹ In this context, the mistrust to the “divisive” influence of critique is personified in the “rancor against the intellectual” and expressed in the injunction that “critique must be responsible.”⁵⁰ Adorno observes here an unspoken but widespread inclination to neutralize critique by transforming its public spirit into the privilege of qualified political actors and groups, and by abrogating its subversive freedom through the demand for positive proposals. These elements configure the basic anatomy of what Adorno describes as the anti-critical structure of German public opinion, whose vigor not only draws from those allied with established power but also from those social actors whose interest seem to lie close to critique. In a remarkable passage of the essay, he writes:

One continually finds the word critique, if tolerated at all, accompanied by the word constructive. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is being criticized . . . By making the positive a condition for it, critique is tamed from the very beginning and loses vehemence . . . Again and again the demand for positive proposals proves unfulfillable, and for that reason critique is all the more comfortably defamed . . . [F]rom a social-psychological perspective the craving for the positive is a screen-image of the destructive instinct working under a thin veil. Those talking most about the positive are in agreement with destructive power. The collective compulsion for a positivity that allows its immediate translation into practice has in the meantime gripped

precisely those people who believe they stand in the starkest opposition to society.⁵¹

These remarks on the alleged rancor against critique's negativity and the destructive nature of the craving for the positive, were coincidentally made soon after Adorno had become the target of attacks by student activists. The most embarrassing episode occurred in April 1969 when female sociology students from the German Socialist Students group surrounded the lecture's podium and exposed their breasts to the philosopher, after which Adorno left the room in silence and appalled. The students saw Adorno's reluctance to publicly support and engage with the movement as the failure of critical theory to connect theory and praxis, so the interruption of his lecture and other derogatory actions against him were not only intended to denounce his passivity but also to redeem critical theory's unfulfilled potentials. Adorno, on the other hand, attributed the students' attack to the "oppressive" and "narcissistic" elevation of immediate praxis as an absolute value, which he unreservedly deplored as intolerant of autonomous thinking and theoretical reflection. In any case, Adorno lamented the student's disavowal of critical theory as an attitude akin to the "anti-intellectual," "anti-critical" and "instrumental" structure of public opinion in capitalist societies.⁵² Interestingly enough, Adorno's lament for the crisis of negative thinking echoed in reverse the joy of post-structuralist French thinkers, who were busy dissolving the axioms of ideology critique and welcoming the crisis of the critical subject.

Indeed, Adorno's episode reveals a remarkable image of dissatisfaction with the authority of theoretical critique and the exhaustion of critique's self-confidence as a philosophical claim against ideology and domination. As Sloterdijk later recounted, "it was not naked force that reduced the philosopher to muteness, but the force of the naked."⁵³ And the muteness of the philosopher is a metaphoric enactment of the "crisis in the praxis of enlightenment" that appeared in the intellectual climate of the 1960s and 1970s. But beyond Adorno's despairing experience with the student movement, we should consider that the emergent sense of a crisis of critique was the signature of precise objections to the way in which, above all, traditional forms of ideology critique devalue its object: society. The main difficulty of this strategy of critique was that, on the presumption that everything in the social world responds to ideological apparatuses and action-orientations, it became entangled in the inertia of arguing behind its opponent's back and the busy "unmasking" of hidden interests but without really challenging power structures.

If we follow Sloterdijk's formulation, the crisis of critique had to do with the objectifying attitude of critique toward the social world and its pathological forms, not to mention the way critical theorists tended to favor the forensic skills of serious scientific theory rather than satirical imprudence. But the full measure of the limits of the critique of ideology could only appear once the symptoms of a new normality coagulated after May 1968:

Since the dissolution of the student movement we have been experiencing a lull in theory. There is, it is true, more erudition and sophistication than ever

before, but the inspirations are sterile. The optimism of “those days,” that vital interests could be combined with efforts in social theory, has pretty much died out. Without this optimism it becomes quickly apparent how boring sociology can be. For those in the enlightenment camp, after the debacle of leftist actionism, terror, and its intensification in antiterrorism, the world turned topsy-turvy.⁵⁴

The question which then arises is what happens to the idea and practice of social critique in a culture bereft of utopian illusions and dogged by a pessimistic but functional tolerance of circumstances.⁵⁵ One may say that, on the one hand, the practice of critique becomes epistemologically stagnated because “in a system that feels like a cross between prison and chaos, there is no standpoint for a description, no central perspective for a compelling critique;” on the other, the negativism of critique becomes normatively ineffective: “because [if] everything has become problematic, everything is also somehow a matter of indifference.”⁵⁶ Although Sloterdijk exaggerated his diagnosis of ideological critique within German intelligentsia, he rightly indicates some of the aspects that social theorists were already attempting to address during the 1970s to overcome the exhaustion of critique.

It can be argued that this holds true for the influential studies of Habermas and Bourdieu, which sought to draw resources for the defense of non-objectifying strategies of critique beyond ideology critique.⁵⁷ Their contribution was to mobilize questions of epistemology and anthropology into social theory in order to reconstruct critique as self-reflective knowledge inscribed in social practices and grounded in the normative structures of the social world. For now I shall not address the adequacy of these solutions to the problems of critique,⁵⁸ but rather highlight that they opened the way for another line of attack, now in relation to the a priori connection between critique and society.

Indeed, we may say that another privileged target of the intellectual disputes of the 1960s and 1970s was the presupposition that critique always speaks of the social, in the social and for the social, that is to say, that the social is the fixed territory of critique. This line of argument informed the criticisms that Foucault and others in France (e.g., Lyotard and Baudrillard) were directing to the human sciences due to their alleged naturalization of the category of the social, but we also see it soon after in a different form in the post-Marxist writings of thinkers like Ernesto Laclau.⁵⁹ Put in simple words, their main objection was directed at the way in which the practice of critique overvalues the object of critique when it presupposes a universalistic idea of society whose axiomatic extension excludes or downgrades non-social entities, subjects and struggles. From this perspective, when the universalism of society begins to crumble, as the “the social subject itself seems to dissolve in [a] dissemination of language games,”⁶⁰ the conclusion is that the legitimacy of the theoretical critique of society decomposes and splits apart.

The case of the essential distinction of the spheres of society (as social) and nature (as natural) has frequently been made as a manifestation of a pre-critical dichotomy in which critique may claim validity always from a society-centered point of view. This line of criticism has been continued in sociology by Bruno

Latour for whom the “the crisis of the critical stance,”⁶¹ means the end of the theoretical “purification” of society from nature. Elsewhere Latour has declared that “it is probably the whole notion of social and society that is responsible for the weakening of critique” in social theory,⁶² for the ontological and totalizing use of the concept would presuppose that society is always a cause and never an effect. Although this is not the place to discuss the merits of Latour’s work, it seems to me that his critique of the monopoly of the idea of society is well taken but it fails to acknowledge the far less coherent position and more diverse definitions of this concept in modern social theory, and therefore the existing difference between society as a category of knowledge and society as a practical accomplishment of actors.⁶³ In this sense, I am tempted to think that the problem with theoretical critique is not necessarily its reliance on a concept of society which is too universalistic, but perhaps on presupposing a concept of society which is insufficiently universal to grasp and representing the plurality of social relations (the unity of the world as world), including the networks of relations between social and non-social elements that Latour is trying to describe.⁶⁴

I cannot embark here upon a detailed discussion of the exact reach of intellectual struggles over the idea of critique in social theory. My intention so far has been to identify some general elements that challenged the acceptability of a critique of society. To be sure, the fundamental revision of reified presumptions of Marxist modes of theorizing, the positivist reduction of the “social” in social science, and the historical limits of categories sustaining the discourse of the Enlightenment, were all welcomed as intellectual contributions with significant impacts on social theory and sociology. And yet although the premise driving the wealth of these developments in the late 1960s and 1970s was the pursuit of non-dogmatic forms of knowledge, there is at least one paradoxical consequence; the introduction of new conceptual prohibitions. Somehow, Adorno’s experience described above attests to this situation. The claim that critique could no longer comprehend complex societies gained ground at that very time, but it is perhaps only with some contemporary social theorists that it reached a more radical twist: critique becomes a forbidden concept. Let me address this issue by discussing the particular case of Niklas Luhmann.

Curing Sociology’s Complaint Syndrome: On the Dissolution of Critique

The theoretical echo of the crisis of critique of the 1960s and 1970s resonates in the sociology of autopoietic systems of Niklas Luhmann, one of the most ambitious attempts to forge a new theoretical logic in sociology. Here I would like to consider briefly his sophisticated proposal of a “general theory of society” based on self-describing systems as an exemplary case of a more radical dissolution of the concept of critique in social theory. The importance of Luhmann for my discussion lies in the fact that, compared with the playfulness of postmodernism, his unorthodox objection to the concept of critique, and more generally to a theoretical critique of society, comes as an inescapable and necessary outcome of the evolutionary process of social differentiation.

The preface to *Social Systems* sets the guiding thread of what Luhmann believes is a breaking point: "Sociology is stuck in a theory crisis."⁶⁵ The theoretical crisis to which he refers has mostly to do with the alleged incapacity of the heritage of classical social theories to provide any substantive theoretical ground to elaborate adequate sociological descriptions of societies whose evolutionary path has taken the form of structural differentiation of self-referential and highly specialized social systems. Overall, his view is that sociology remains an immature science when it comes to achieving one of its most fundamental tasks, the description of society as a whole.⁶⁶ The limited theoretical progress that Luhmann observes in this area, and which he of course wants to remedy, is related to sociology's strong reliance on the premises of philosophies of the subject and foundationalist conceptions of society.⁶⁷

This is not the place to embark on a critical revision of Luhmann's monumental theory of society, but his justification for a paradigm shift in social theory deserves attention. Broadly speaking, his view is that since a functionally organized society cannot presuppose any operative principle or center around which societal coordination coheres, sociology is forced to reformulate its most fundamental epistemological assumptions and re-conceptualize the social. Essentially, Luhmann's claim is that "humanistic and regional (national) concepts of society are no longer acceptable,"⁶⁸ for they depend upon ontological standpoints for describing the unity of society. Instead he proposes to base sociology's theoretical edifice on a "radically anti-humanistic, radically anti-regional, and radically constructivist concept of society."⁶⁹ The radicalism of Luhmann's proposition consists of replacing a concept of society based on acting "human beings" with one based on self-observing systems of "communications." Within this framework, sociology should itself be re-conceptualized as a sub-system of communications whose "scientific" task is to contribute to the "self-observation" and "description" of society from the position of a "second order observer," without an overarching viewpoint from which to claim validity. From this perspective, sociological descriptions transform latency (what first-order observers cannot see) into contingencies. Specifically, it shows that the existent selections that shape the operations of social systems could be different, but it is unable to assign any normative evaluation or orientation to them.

In line with this, Luhmann rejects in principle the possibility of distinguishing between "positivist" and "critical" approaches for theorizing modern society. For this distinction would presuppose that to describe society as a whole (the aim of a theory of society), one has to choose between "representing" society's manifest factuality or "criticizing" its latent structures. Luhmann's main target here is the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School who, in his view, have elevated the distinction between "what society is" and "what lies behind it" to an epistemic premise for the scientific knowledge of society. He contends that this premise is untenable, as "the emotive term word "critique" hides a weakness that we can no longer ignore."⁷⁰ Namely, that critique is already a way of assuming a meta-standpoint while overlooking the fact that critique itself depends on a particular mode of observing society and, therefore, on a contingent distinction drawn by an observer within a larger world of communications. In this way, for

a theory of self-referential social systems it is natural to substitute the position designated as critique with the position of observers.⁷¹ The subsequent command of Luhmann's analysis is that social theory needs to surrender critique as a category of knowledge, and therefore its self-understanding as a critique of society, in order to be able to scientifically describe society as a whole. There is no other choice in a functionally differentiated society; to dress up social theory with new systemic clothes you ought to burn the old critical ones.

It is no wonder that Luhmann's objections to modern critique's a priori self-assurance as "better knowledge" and rational perspective are well made. However, his diminishing approach to the practice of critique seems based on a rather restrictive understanding of the concept: "negation without alternative concept" and "unmasking." He reads critique as a concept whose meaning was fixed once and for all by the European tradition of the Enlightenment from which he wishes to break free. If we follow Chernilo's revision of Luhmann's depreciative relationship to the past of sociological theory (and the study of its history),⁷² the privileged position he grants to his own theory of society as a radical new beginning is unsustainable, since the development of Luhmann's own theory shows that it is indebted and related to the tradition. In the case of critique we may say that a similar gesture occurs. According to Luhmann's own standards, a theory of society cannot provide any critique of society yet he needs to consider critique as one of theory's moments. Otherwise how can he justify his own procedure of unmasking and negation of the sociological tradition which itself is also part of the society he is trying to describe?

I would not like, however, to diminish Luhmann's argument about critique because there is a sense in which he does concede that some notion of critique may be acceptable in order to enter into a theory of autopoietic systems: critique as an "act of selection" that re-describes other descriptions and that it is internal to social systems' dynamics of communication. Put in this way, Luhmann rejects the idea of critique as a theoretical practice but accepts it as a systemic function. The question is whether what is left of the concept of critique is worth retaining for social theory. I think that we may draw some interesting conclusions if we consider Luhmann's critique of critique alongside his understanding of the sociological concept of "crisis." He writes:

Describing society as differentiated with respect to functions includes an awareness, even a prediction of continuing crises, time pressure and the need for restructurations which cannot even claim to open the doors for a better future. But this does not mean that societal system itself approaches a turning point for the worse if it does not change its structure. It has not even that chance. Its structure is not centralized enough to be in the reach of "revolutions" [...] This makes it obsolete to discuss these issues in terms of optimistic vs. pessimistic or affirmative vs. critical attitudes toward society.⁷³

To understand this paragraph we need to bear in mind that for Luhmann the concept of crisis is a "cultural semantic" employed by social systems as a mechanism of

“negative” self-description of its operational difficulties and excesses in situations of semantic uncertainty and structural transition. In this sense, crisis is a “critical” distinction drawn within the functional boundaries of a system, a distinction that manifests the system’s need to re-adapt according to the structural expectations already set by its “operational closure.” But what the paragraph above really tells us is that a theory of social systems can accommodate crisis but not critique. If we follow Luhmann’s reasoning, crisis cannot be the object of any normative consideration but only configure a descriptive device for coping with the operative structural maladjustments of social systems. Thus, in the interplay of second-order observations over observations, sociology can only affirm the contingency of first-order distinctions already placed in the operation of social systems. For that reason, it must remain silent about their appropriateness and normative implications for members of society. Of course, Luhmann is fully aware of the status of the relationship between crisis and critique in social thought, which he dismisses as something equivalent to “a complaint syndrome [that] signifies little more than the lack of a theory of society.”⁷⁴ It is precisely this syndrome that Luhmann wants to cure by removing critique from sociology.

All in all, Luhmann’s quest for a “scientific” description of society’s “unity of difference” can only be achieved at the cost of discounting social theory’s normative content and leaving unanswered the fundamental question of “what” sociology decides is worth observing in society and “why” it actually does it. In so doing, Luhmann’s theoretical “radicalism,” I think, consists of the observation that social theory may describe critique (as systemic communication), but cannot actually practice it, not even in times of crisis and distress.

The Hospitality of Critique: On Welcoming the Crisis

Throughout this chapter I have examined the meaning of the so called “crisis of critique” that is so frequently proclaimed in contemporary social and political thought. My intention, however, has not been to join the barracks of those who lament the decay of criticism but to comprehend those claims. This chapter parallels the exercise undertaken in Chapter 1 on the concept of crisis, arguing that dynamics of normalization and dissolution also characterize the notion of critique. The initial discussion on Hegel was important to highlight what is actually at stake in the domestication of critique’s disruptive voice experienced by Adorno, and the vanishing of critique’s disclosive potential asserted by Luhmann. What is actually at stake in this inhospitability to critique, so to speak, is disdain for negativity as both a mean and an object of critical thought. In a way, this is tantamount to inhospitability to what is present and available in moments of diremption that leave exposed the fragile foundations of social life.

In this last section I would like to briefly reverse the terms of the debate, so as to suggest that a way of dealing with this inhospitable environment consists of bringing critique closer to crisis, that is, closer to the experience of negativity that inhabits the world in which we live and act with others. The point of the discussion now is neither the “critique of crisis” (Chapter 1) nor the “crisis of critique” (Chapter 2), but the very relationship between crisis and critique.

Bringing the problem of crisis and critique to the fore is the running thread throughout this book. This thread carries echoes of a failed intellectual project, the literary journal *Krise und Kritik* that Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin were planning to launch soon after the outbreak of the Great Depression and just before the Nazi dictatorship came to power in Germany. The case of this journal is interesting as a metaphor of the complex nature of these concepts and delicate relation between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique in modern social life. When Benjamin and Brecht matured the idea of publishing their journal, the project was in principle a response to the crisis in the social and political life of the Weimar Republic. Indeed, they regarded the crisis situation both as “the journal’s field of activity” and as an “object” of scholarly reflection. From their perspective, the practice of critique should have “an active, interventionist role” in the public domain, opposed to the “ineffectual arbitrariness” of pure aesthetic judgments; they conceived critique as a way “to register the crisis” as much as “to bring it about.”⁷⁵

The journal was never published and none of the planned articles was ever written; only scattered meeting notes testify to their ambitious “literary” and “political” vision: not only to document the crisis but also to criticize its dominant representations and images. Differences on the editorial principles for contributions, the financial collapse of the publisher and an emergency press decree of July 17, 1931, all assisted to truncate the project. It is not difficult to realize though that the misfortune of *Krise und Kritik* is more than the failure of an editorial idea, it is perhaps a telling remark, virtually an allegory of the difficulties in pursuing a reflection on the ruptures of social life when society is willing to politically repress the meaning of crisis events and disarticulate democratic and public criticism.

Crisis seems to be the right place for critique to flourish. At this very moment, critique is skeptical of the fact that everything makes sense and driven by the idea that it is possible to see and say things in “another way.” Critique emerges as a way to reformulate the problem of crisis itself, to shift the framework in which crisis has hitherto been perceived and spoken. Still it should not take us by surprise that the habitual response in situations of crisis is one of hostility toward critique rather than a warm welcome. To be sure, the sense of panic, anguish and craving for security makes the plea for a prompt decision to the obvious path to return to normality. This often leaves critique in the position of a “completely ineffective” and “very expensive luxurious good.”⁷⁶ Its provocative and nonconformist character offers no practical assurance for what should be done in circumstances of urgency and need for immediate action. Thus, without a “constructive” project, critique is defamed as a negative enterprise and crisis becomes a tool of government. Benjamin and Brecht knew by experience that this characteristic divorce of crisis and critique was as real as the fact that these moments could not be thought away in modernity. This is perhaps the reason behind their proposal to give the title “Welcoming the Crisis” (*Die Begrüßung der Krise*) to one of the leading contributions to the first issue of *Krisis und Kritik*. We know that the ideas for this article were never put down on paper and yet its title encloses an attitude whose spirit I seek to embrace and problematize

in the course of this book. Welcoming the crisis, as welcoming the questions that the crisis puts and the perplexities it brings about in social and political life.

If we take “welcoming” to mean the attitude of receiving and treating someone or something foreign hospitably, it is likely that Benjamin and Brecht thought of crisis as a particular kind of experience that consists of opening ourselves to what limits and exceeds us, a contingent encounter with the other of the social within the social. The implications of this viewpoint are significant for the argument I am putting forward. We may always decide not to listen and walk away, either because we are afraid of offering crisis a place to stay or simply because we are unable to comprehend its message, which is so quickly reduced to the tones of familiar voices. In opposition to this attitude, critique stands as a mode of saluting and not of suppressing the crisis, a mode of translating meanings and not of disinfecting reality, a mode of facing up to the burden of particular events not of indulging in universal despair. The hospitality of critique, as I would like to name this approach, may sound paradoxical considering that critique wants to avoid the pleasure of feeling at home in the present as the very condition for overcoming the crisis. Yet for Benjamin and Brecht the idea of “welcoming of the crisis” is not naïve utopianism, it is rather the combination of a deep “political” and “aesthetic” sense of the world in which the relationship between crisis and critique is never a one-way street that we follow as in a route map. It is a dialectical and contradictory movement. In this sense, although the deployment of our critical capacities may well be a reflection on and a response to disruptive crisis events, critique does not simply wait calmly for the crisis to come, it also thinks of itself as welcoming the crisis in the sense of an active “intervention” that brings the crisis about. It produces the crisis by making it explicit in language and by rendering inoperative the social and normative conditions that sustain the operativity of power and institutions. In doing so, critique discloses new possible meanings and practices.

It is precisely this twofold movement identified by Brecht and Benjamin, from crisis to critique and from critique to crisis, which I shall theorize and reconstruct in the following chapters through a discussion of the works of Jürgen Habermas (Chapter 3) and Reinhart Koselleck (Chapter 4). The discussion ahead will show that although both trajectories are different in form, they permanently overlap in content. While the former attests to the fact that crisis works as a cognitive impulse and normative accelerator to critique, which in turn can render crisis into a meaningful phenomena, the latter movement captures the circumstance in which critique introduces crisis in social and political life, including the crisis of its own position as critique. In the course of this account, however, I shall also demonstrate that these trajectories may be interrupted. When the practice of critique is subjectified by distancing itself from the perplexities of the world (critique without crisis), and when the experience of crisis is objectified by interventions that curtail political argument and normative considerations (crisis without critique).

Notes

- 1 Jacques Rancière, "The Misadventures of Critical Thought," in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2009), 49.
- 2 Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *The Holy Family, or the Critique of Critical Critique*, trans. R. Dixon (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 106.
- 3 Theodor W. Adorno, "Critique," in *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 281, 284.
- 4 Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 194.
- 5 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20–21.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 7 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.
- 8 Alain Badiou, "The Crisis of Negation: An Interview with Alain Badiou," *Continent* 1, no. 4 (2011): 234–238; Alain Badiou, "'We Need a Popular Discipline': Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008): 645–659. Badiou's expression "the crisis of the negative" entails a threefold diagnosis about the exhaustion of Marxist critique: politically, it refers to the crisis of the idea of revolution and emancipatory politics; normatively, it suggests the crisis of the possibility of grounding different social practices in another organization of society; philosophically, the crisis of the negative is tantamount to the crisis of Hegelian dialectics.
- 9 Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, 2 vols., trans. Rhodes Barrett (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
- 10 Michael Walzer, "Introduction: The Practice of Social Criticism," in *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 3–28.
- 11 Bruno Latour, "The Enlightenment without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy," in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 83–98.
- 12 David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
- 13 George Bataille, "Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel . . .," in *The College of Sociology (1937–1939)*, ed. Dennis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988), 90.
- 14 Niklas Luhmann, *Political Theory in the Welfare State*, trans. John Bernardz (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1990), 58.
- 15 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.
- 16 Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 172.
- 17 Bataille, "Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel . . .," 91.
- 18 Diane Coole, *Negativity and Politics. Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Post-structuralism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative. A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
- 19 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.
- 20 See Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 21 Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 192–193, 232–233; see Robert Pippin, *Modernity as Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
- 22 Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

- 23 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 29.
- 24 Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (New York: SUNY Press, 1977), 89.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 29 Rose, *The Broken Middle*, xiv.
- 30 Richard J. Bernstein, "Reconciliation/Rupture," in *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 293.
- 31 This sort of analysis premises Hegel's account of the French Revolution as well as the formative process of the modern institutions of "ethical life." See Joachim Ritter, *Hegel and the French Revolution: Essays on the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Richard Dien Winfield (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984) 41–75; Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 58–77; Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §32.
- 32 Jürgen Habermas, "Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique," in *Theory and Praxis*, trans. John Viertel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 216.
- 33 Bernstein, "Reconciliation/Rupture," 299.
- 34 Rose, *The Broken Middle*, xv. See also Maeve Cooke, "Redeeming Redemption. The Utopian Dimension of Critical Social Theory," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 4 (2004): 413–429.
- 35 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2002), 7–9, 26, 72.
- 36 Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (New York: Verso, 2009), 36–45.
- 37 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Modern, Post, Anti, and Neo: How Intellectuals Have Interpreted the Crisis of 'Our Times,'" in *Fin-de-Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* (London: Verso, 1995).
- 38 Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 12.
- 39 Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (London: Methuen and Co., 1979).
- 40 See Luc Boltanski, "The Left after May 1968 and the Longing for Total Revolution," *Thesis Eleven* 69, no. 1 (2002): 1–20; Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990); Peter Wagner, *A History of the Social Sciences: Not All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Sage, 2001).
- 41 Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity. Liberty and Discipline* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 42 Of course, there were many other important sociologists arguing in favor of a critical sociology. Some examples: Zygmunt Bauman, *Toward a Critical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1976); Norman Birnbaum, *Toward a Critical Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Tom Bottomore, *Sociology as Social Criticism* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1975). There is also the now famous debate in German sociology about the divide between positivist and critical sociology, better known as the "positivist dispute": Theodor W. Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1976). And we are also reminded of editorial projects such as the journal *Insurgent Sociologist* (now *Critical Sociology*) launched in 1969 in New York by the "Sociology Liberation Movement."
- 43 Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 14–15.
- 44 Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 32–63.

- 45 Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 42.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 47 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 249.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Adorno, "Critique," 283.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 284.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 287–288.
- 52 Theodor W. Adorno, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno," *Monatshefte* 94, no. 1 (2002): 10–23.
- 53 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008), xxxvii.
- 54 *Ibid.*, xxxv.
- 55 It can be said that the conjuncture of the crisis of capitalism of the mid- to late 1970s marked a significant reversal for the practice of social criticism at large: a "silencing" and "domestication" of critique. For the initial strength of the social mobilization and protest that embodied critique on the streets, universities, factories and the press during the 1960s and 1970s soon dissolved into the frustration of expectations, the trap of political instrumentalization and the neoconservative reproach of order. According to Boltanski and Chiapello's sociological interpretation of the French experience, the "crisis of critique" amounted to the fact that the demands of social critique (justice, security, authenticity and autonomy) were entirely "disarmed" by the corrections introduced in the capitalist dynamic. So the great ability of capitalism was to assimilate critique as a catalyst of its self-transformation. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), 167–202, 324–327.
- 56 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xxxii–xxxiii.
- 57 See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 58 See Chapter 3 in this volume.
- 59 Ernesto Laclau, "The Impossibility of Society," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 7, no. 1–2 (1983): 21–24.
- 60 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 40.
- 61 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 35.
- 62 Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 230.
- 63 See William Outhwaite, *The Future of Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).
- 64 See Daniel Chernilo, *The Natural Law Foundations of Modern Social Theory. A Quest for Universalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 65 Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bernardz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), xlv.
- 66 Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, vol. 1, 1–4.
- 67 Niklas Luhmann, "The Two Sociologies and the Theory of Society," *Thesis Eleven* 43, no. 1 (1995): 28–47; Niklas Luhmann, "'What is the Case?' and 'What Lies behind It?'" *The Two Sociologies and the Theory of Society*, *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 2 (1994): 126–139.
- 68 Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, vol. 1, 10.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 71 Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, vol. 2, 327–328.
- 72 Daniel Chernilo, "Teoría Social y Teoría de la Sociedad: el caso de Niklas Luhmann," in *La Pretensión Universalista de la Teoría Social* (Santiago: LOM, 2011), 231–243.

- 73 Niklas Luhmann, "The Self-Description of Society: Crisis Fashion and Sociological Theory," *International Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 1–2 (1984): 65.
- 74 Luhmann, *Political Theory in the Welfare State*, 58.
- 75 Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (London: Libris, 2009), 188–190.
- 76 Raymond Geuss, "Bourgeois Philosophy and Criticism," in *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 185.

Part II

Models of Crisis/Forms of Critique

3 **Diremptions of Social Life**

Bringing Capitalist Crisis and Social Critique Back Together—Jürgen Habermas

Introduction

This chapter aims to theorize the inner connection between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique through a reading of the work of Jürgen Habermas. I shall assess Habermas's strong claim that the relationship between crisis and critique lies at the core of his analysis of the contradictions of "rationalization processes" in modern societies, and that crisis and critique are dialectically related terms in the study of social life.¹ Interestingly, Habermas has recently reasserted the significance of this link in the context of the financial crisis in the European Union:

What worries me is the scandalous social injustice that the most vulnerable social groups will have to bear the brunt of the socialized costs for the market failure. The mass of those who are in any case not among the winners of globalization will now have to pick up the tab for the impacts on the real economy of a predictable dysfunction of the financial system. Unlike the shareholders, they will not pay in money values but in the hard currency of their daily existence [...]. Such tidal shifts change the parameters of public discussion and, in the process, alter the spectrum of political alternatives regarded as possible [...]. Today, with the end of the Bush era and the bursting of the last neoliberal rhetorical balloons, [...] my hope is that the neoliberal agenda will no longer be accepted at face value but will be opened to challenge. The whole program of an unscrupulous subordination of the life-world to the imperatives of the market must be subjected to scrutiny.²

Besides the poignancy of this socio-political context, my contention is that the relationship between crisis and critique animates Habermas's social theorizing and his understanding of critical theory since his early writings. He shares a central claim of this tradition: that critique interrogates the norms, institutions and practices of society that generate crises and aspires to find emancipatory alternatives to the conditions that block free human existence and damage social relations.

It is from this viewpoint that he assesses Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason and criticizes what he sees as its negative impact on the

project of critical theory: notably, “the end of the cooperative division of labor between philosophy and social theory,” which Habermas interprets as “the uncoupling of a critical self-understanding of modernity,” provided by philosophical reflection, “from an empirical observation and descriptive account of its tendencies to social crisis,” provided by sociological research.³ Although the attempt to reconcile the disjunction between philosophical reflection and sociological research lies at the heart of the Habermasian project, it is striking how little systematic attention this aspect of Habermas’s work has received.⁴

Still there is a wider and more substantive reason to re-assess the relationship between crisis and critique more carefully. It has to do with the uneasy position these notions currently occupy in the mainstreams of social theory, where there is growing acceptance of the idea that our global and post-metaphysical world has eroded the societal space in which to accommodate the terms “crisis” and “critique” in any meaningful way. In Chapter 1, I showed to what extent for sociologists as diverse as Ulrich Beck and Jean Baudrillard, “crisis” appears as an obsolete concept either because it is deemed unable to account for the new realities of a “global risk society,” or simply because it is destined to be a cultural device in the “simulacrum” of capitalist self-destruction. Then, in Chapter 2, I explained why, on the other hand, making the case for “critique” in social theory has also become harder in a context of increasing disregard for normative concerns and predictions concerning the advent of a “post-critical” age.⁵ These tendencies, I argued, are to be found in the work of Habermas’s strongest antagonist, Niklas Luhmann, who dismisses concern over the relationship between crisis and critique as “a complaint syndrome [that] signifies little more than the lack of a theory of society.”⁶ Against this conceptual deflation, I propose a reading of Habermas’s work which forcefully situates “crisis” and “critique” as fundamental notions in the language of sociology and critical social theory.⁷ The question we are impelled to ask ourselves is why we need to address crisis through the idea of critique and vice versa, and what happens when these terms are divorced from one other both in our theoretical accounts and in social reality.

The argument of this chapter is that Habermas envisages a dialectical relationship between crisis and critique on the basis of two complementary goals: one to recover the capacity of social theory to combine “explanatory-diagnostic” analyses and “normative-practical” standards in addressing the contradictory processes of social reproduction in capitalist modernity; the other to raise awareness of both the socio-technical and moral-practical capacities of society to respond to the pathological effects crisis-ridden processes have over social integration, intersubjective communication and autonomous human life. The point of the Habermasian argument, as I read it, is that bringing the concepts of “crisis” and “critique” together is a way of grasping the “diremptions” of social life.⁸

To elaborate this reading, the first two sections of the chapter pay attention to the main problems Habermas identifies in conventional ways of understanding the concepts of “crisis” and “critique” in social theory, some of which I have mentioned in passing in previous chapters. The aim is to examine the mode in which he reconsiders each of these terms and then reasserts the dialectical link between them according to his communicative theory of society. I shall reconstruct and

comment on this relationship by taking as cases two of his most substantive works of social theorizing: *The Theory of Communicative Action* in which I stress the theoretical relationship between crisis and critique as immanent to the modern dialectic of steering systems and life-world contexts, and *Between Facts and Norms* in which I bring attention to crisis and critique as empirical moments grounded in the communicative and normative structures of modern democratic polities. Based on this interpretation, I argue that although Habermas contributes to resituate the practice of critique as a communicative translation of objective crisis, he does not adequately account for the other movement that also constitutes this relationship: notably, when critique actually initiates, enacts and furthers the moment of crisis.

Crisis and Social Evolution

As I discussed in Chapter 1, it is a well-established opinion in the literature that sociology was born out of a widespread consciousness of crisis in modern society. This account has been very influential in shaping the self-understanding of the discipline to the extent that even Habermas has called sociology the “science of crisis” par excellence.⁹ Be that as it may, the great importance attributed to crisis as a basic concept of the sociological tradition has brought about its own problems, not the least of which is the reification of the concept of crisis itself. This is clearly the case when sociologists use it to account for any form of social conflict or historical change “without the need to clarify exactly what is meant.”¹⁰ This rhetorical inflation not only divests the concept of its analytical value but also leaves us blind to its contradictory operation in social and political reality. As we know, the concept of crisis can serve to justify normative claims of “critical” opposition to the current state of society, as much as to bolster the “conservative” desire for social stability.¹¹

Habermas’s book *Legitimation Crisis* represents a direct attempt to reflect on the adequacy of the concept of crisis as a tool for social analysis. In the light of the crisis of welfare societies of the 1970s, Habermas sought to contest and offer an alternative to conventional accounts of the crisis tendencies in advanced capitalism, notably, the Marxist and the neoconservative. A central proposition of this book, the way I read it, is that the analysis of the reality of crisis cannot proceed without a critique of the concept of crisis.

Habermas places the thrust of his argument in the context of the active involvement of post-war European nation-states in productive functions and the “administrative” stabilization of the economic cycle, aiming to control economic crises and their “politically intolerable consequences.” The distinctiveness of this post-liberal stage lies in the fact that the apparent success of the political apparatus in filling the functional gaps of the market comes about with the displacement of crisis tendencies into social spheres beyond the borders of the economic system. This means that crisis phenomena arise at different points and circulate through different social spheres overflowing political control.¹² Within this framework, Habermas thought that neither traditional Marxist theories of economic crisis nor the neoconservative concern with cultural crisis could properly

identify the new dynamics of late capitalism and grasp its pathological consequences over social integration.

On the one hand, Habermas criticizes the Marxist concept of crisis due to its dependence on the premises of the labor theory of value. In its most orthodox version, crisis is the outcome of the materialist dialectic between capital and wage labor, manifesting itself in phenomena like the tendential fall of the rate of profit and the decline of real wages that drive the system to its collapse. Habermas's objection to this conception has to do, in the first place, with the profound transformation of the "empirical referents" of the theory of value, such as traditional class politics and the self-regulated market.¹³ Second, he considers that the primal focus on the sphere of productive forces as a "crisis complex" is short-sighted because it cannot observe that the consequences of crises do not necessarily appear in the sphere of economy and labor.¹⁴ And, third, he contends that the teleological understanding of crisis overshadows the fact that social systems might develop new structures of social integration through the "learning capacities" of its members while attempting to cope with systemic problems that threaten the reproduction of society.

On the neoconservative side, Habermas questions the anti-modernist tone that social scientists in the United States and Germany imprinted on the idea of crisis in the 1970s. In their view the objective malfunctioning of the economy and democratic institutions was secondary to, if not a direct effect of, the problems of moral orientation created by the expansion of hedonism and desire for unlimited self-realization. This would explain their primary focus on "the alleged loss of authority of central institutions"—"presented suggestively with key terms like ungovernability, decline in credibility and loss of legitimacy."¹⁵ Habermas's contention is that this conception of crisis attributes explanatory primacy to the cultural degeneration of advanced Western societies while blurring the effects of the expansion of functional imperatives into the socio-cultural sphere. In doing so, it favors the strengthening of authority and the renovation of cultural meaning (e.g., religious revival or ethnic nationalism) to the detriment of the role of processes of political will-formation for solving problems of society as a whole.

These criticisms highlight Habermas's explicit intention to advance a conceptual strategy that takes into account both problems of "system integration" and "social integration." "What is demanded [of a] social-scientific [concept of crisis]," he writes, "is a level of analysis at which the connection between normative structures and steering problems becomes palpable."¹⁶ That is to say, a sociological concept capable of grasping the objective manifestations of crisis—i.e., steering problems in the economic and political spheres—as well as the subjective experience of crisis—i.e., the practical effects that functional mechanisms have on consciousness and social relations. By taking this path, Habermas argued, sociology could no longer rely on a monistic concept of crisis; it had to adopt a plural conception that differentiates the number of crisis tendencies affecting Western capitalist societies. While he identified at least four types of crisis tendencies—economic crisis, rationality crisis, legitimation crisis, and motivational crisis—the primary focus of *Legitimation Crisis* was the pivotal role of problems of legitimacy as a new point of condensation of

social contradictions. The key argument is that “the structures of advanced capitalism can be understood as reaction formations to endemic crisis” insofar as “the continuing tendency toward disturbance of capitalist growth [is] administratively processed and transferred through the political and into the socio-cultural system.” Thus, if “politics takes place on the basis of a processed and repressed system crisis,”¹⁷ problems of legitimacy emerge induced by the expansion of state policies seeking to secure social integration. Although Habermas recognizes here new potentials for social critique as a practical discourse that problematizes political planning, he also observes a growing depoliticization of crises by means of administrative decisions, technical knowledge and legal procedures disengaged from democratic politics and public communication.

For now I am less interested in the applicability of Habermas’s theorem of crisis for interpreting current circumstances—something no doubt worth attempting—than in understanding the implicit justification he elaborates as to why social theory cannot do without a concept of crisis and standards for critically evaluating processes of modernization. On a meta-theoretical level, the concept of crisis appears to be necessary for a theory of society that seeks to comprehend the historical development of present social forms in terms of “learning processes” and rationalization of communicative structures. Habermas’s basic assumption is that the formation of any society depends on establishing “principles of organization” that temporally circumscribe “ranges of possibility” for its material reproduction and normative integration, and which may be contingently altered as a result of open processes of societal learning mediated by language. As such, these abstract rules institutionalize domains of social interaction and, for that reason, specify the levels of structural change and conflict that a social system might tolerate without threatening its whole existence.¹⁸ This indicates that societies have the inner capacity to learn and produce new forms of social integration by mobilizing their technical knowledge and moral-practical competences.¹⁹ In other words, society actualizes its learning capacities every time it needs to formulate solutions (i.e., institutional innovations) to situations in which expectations are disappointed, unseen problems appear, and challenges overload steering capacities.

But it would be too one-sided to rely on this structural determination between socio-cultural learning and crisis to justify the concept of crisis as such. My view is that Habermas’s reconstruction of the notion of crisis was aimed not only to elaborate better analyses of the problems of societal reproduction of advanced capitalism (description), but also to retain crisis as a ground from which to criticize and challenge the subordination of the lifeworld to systemic imperatives (normativity). It is in this sense that one could derive from Habermas’s theorem of crisis tendencies the important proposition that the concept of crisis is itself an act of communication with critical intentions. In essence, diagnoses and explanations of crisis phenomena are particular forms of communicative codification of the objective problems of social reproduction that seek to make visible at which level, and in what form, they damage social and individual life. In that capacity, the sociological concept of crisis and the empirical analyses derived from it are intended to make sense of the diremptions of social life, that is to say,

of “those rare moments when culture and language fail as resources” and “we need the repair work of translators, interpreters, therapists.”²⁰ This requires, at any event, that we understand the social-scientific knowledge produced about crises as possessing the potential of practical involvement in society’s reflexive production of definitions, alternatives and courses of action to intervene upon itself in response to the problems that threaten social relations. Only then, Habermas seems to suggest, could social theory reclaim the expressive capacity of the concept of crisis as critique, in opposition to crisis as a discourse of pure mastery and planning. That is, the capacity to expose “the stress limits” of our present society and so encourage “the determination to take up the struggle against the stabilization of a natural-like social system over the heads of its citizens.”²¹ But to recover the notion of crisis as critique, I argue, Habermas also had come to terms with the equivocations of the idea of critique itself, especially as it has been conceived in the tradition of critical theory.

On the Limits of Critical Theory

At least since Kant, critique has been regarded as an anti-dogmatic form of rational knowledge in opposition to tradition, that is, a will to resist established opinions and practices whose validity is merely posited in the world. In this compelling capacity, the practice of critique is however constantly exposed to challenges that obstruct the very possibility of a critique of society. These come from anti-intellectual trends that devalue the negative and reflective form of critique in the name of either positive science or political actionism,²² as much as from idealistic attempts to elevate critique to a “cult” or “transcendent power” that stands in absolute opposition to and divorced from social and historical reality.²³ The original claim of the Frankfurt School’s project of critical theory was precisely directed to avoid such distortions seeking “to work over the coexistence of philosophical construction and empirical research in the theory of society.”²⁴ That is, to advance a practically oriented critique of society that renders necessary to raise philosophical questions about the conditions of human existence hand-in-hand with systematic analyses of the socio-cultural conditions affecting society and the life of its members.

A key task for this type of critique is to reveal the immanent limits and uncritical premises of the theoretical and practical forms of self-interpretation of capitalist society, on the one hand, and to interrogate the “objectified” institutional forms of social relations in order to reveal the potentials for rational change and emancipation contained in the conditions of present reality, on the other.²⁵ Thus understood, “the goal at which [critical thought] aims, namely the rational state of society, is forced upon [it] by present distress.”²⁶ A critical theory of modern society is therefore compelled to attribute to the moment of crisis a significant amount of attention. It has to make conceptual room for analyzing crisis tendencies as empirical manifestations of the contradictions and problems of the social system, for they help to reveal the structural limits of social institutions and the transitory nature of our images of society. And yet critical theory also needs to allow normative scope for rendering these crises

experientially meaningful in the name of other ways of life and social transformation, insofar as they place a great burden on people's existence.²⁷

Be that as it may, the conviction of the early period of critical theory concerning the productive cooperation between philosophical thought and sociological knowledge would later be abandoned amid the destruction of war and the collapse of the liberal culture of enlightenment. In his own critique of early and contemporary positivism, Habermas²⁸ shared many of the misgivings that Adorno and Horkheimer had raised against the scientific objectification of knowledge in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.²⁹ However, he rejected the identification of the universalistic claim of rationality with an ideological principle of domination that cannot be transcended. What's more, Habermas objected to their decision to rule out scientific insights from philosophical reflection as the only solution to the problem of preserving critique against the subordination of social sciences to administrative power and the "anti-critical" structure of public opinion in capitalist societies. The analytical inflation of the critique of instrumental reason, as Habermas sees it, led to a profound "crisis" of the idea of critique. This crisis may be summarized as manifesting itself on two levels. On one level, if rationalization is seen as a purely "self-destructive process," social theory is divested of its capacity to conceptualize and analyze the "ambivalence" of socio-cultural modernization, for it is unable to differentiate the "evolutionary achievements" of modern society from its pathological deformations and contradictions. On the other, while leveling the image of a "totally administered society," critique deprives society of its competence and resources to deal with problems because "the 'diremptions' produced by instrumental reason, permeating all of society, cannot be overcome from within society itself."³⁰ As a consequence, critique ends up being an epistemologically stagnated idea and a normatively futile practice.

Since critical theory could no longer ground its "critique of society" in any appeal to reason within society, it had to abandon the "dialectic of enlightenment" that Hegel had discovered in the *Philosophy of Right*, i.e., the critical self-understanding of "the ambivalent expression of reason" in modern society and the empirical examination of "its tendencies to social crisis."³¹ Habermas recognizes here the significance of Hegel's science of right for having developed a model of reflection tailored to "the experience of the negativity of a divided life."³² This means a style of philosophical critique intended to grasp "both the antagonistic forms in which social disintegration appeared, and the historical developments and mechanisms through which the overcoming of these contrary tendencies, and the solutions of these stubborn conflicts, became comprehensible."³³ In pursuing this reading, Habermas seeks to demonstrate that in conditions of modernity philosophical critique cannot claim a view of the world as a whole; it is somehow obliged to become an empirically oriented social theory.

Even so, Habermas is not satisfied with the idea of grounding his social theory and the concept of critique in a simple methodological return to Hegelian philosophy.³⁴ For the task of re-establishing a cooperative division of labor between philosophy and sociology still faces a significant challenge. Namely, to restore the critical capacity of social theory to explain and normatively assess the

paradoxes of modernization processes, as well as awareness of the capacity of society to act upon itself in response to the problems that threaten social integration and human life. In order to address both issues, Habermas finds in the concept of “communicative reason” the most suitable philosophical foundation for his social theory and, consequently, for his understanding of social critique. In the *Theory of Communicative Action* the argument runs that for a theory of society to rationally validate its claims it has to begin from a post-metaphysical ground: the inner rationality of communication oriented to reaching understanding that characterizes everyday contexts of human relations and actions, and from the conditions of decentered understanding of the world and plural forms of life that constitute the reality of complex modern societies. This presupposes, then, that social theory has to tailor its basic concepts and methods, philosophically, to the universalistic and pragmatic presuppositions of linguistic communication, and, sociologically, to the analysis of the historical development of different forms of rationality in the practical organization of spheres of everyday social action.³⁵

Within this framework, the potential for critique is not placed in a source external to society (i.e., individual consciousness) but it is conceptualized as already inscribed in everyday communicative practices that require discursive justification. Critique is therefore a practical competence common to all social and individual actors involved in intersubjective exchanges, although the development and exercise of this competence may well be blocked at any point due to social and historical conditions. This is a strong reason why social theory itself requires openness to questioning the very symbolic structures upon which it relies, so as to help unblock potentials for contesting the norms and actions that sustain a damaging form of life.³⁶ The core of the Habermasian argument is that the practice of critique becomes fully immersed into both the architecture of social theory and the communicative structure of society right from the beginning, for “critical inquiry does not seek to achieve specific ends but rather to bring about those social conditions in which its insights and proposals might be validated or falsified by citizens themselves.”³⁷

After shedding some light in this section on Habermas’s diagnosis of the so-called crisis of critique and his attempt to refashion social criticism within the contours of communicative action, and after examining in the previous section his sociological reconstruction of the concept of crisis for a diagnosis and critique of late capitalism, we are in a better condition to return to the point by which I initiated this article: Habermas’s strong claim that the relationship between the ideas of crisis and critique accounts for a social-theoretic “model of analysis” concerned with grasping social diremptions. To this end, I shall comment on this issue taking as cases two of his most substantive works of social theorizing: *Theory of Communicative Action* and *Between Facts and Norms*.

Translating Crisis into Critique

One of the central aims of the *Theory of Communicative Action* is to “make possible a conceptualization of the social-life context that is tailored to the

paradoxes of modernity.”³⁸ That is, a form of social theorizing that restores to critical theory the capacity to combine “explanatory-diagnostic” analyses of crisis-ridden processes of societal reproduction with a “normative-practical” interest in defending autonomous forms of life and the capacity of society to act upon itself. As it is well known, Habermas’s analytical strategy is based on understanding modern social life as constituted by two different domains of social coordination—symbolically structured lifeworlds and self-regulated systems. That is to say, the pre-theoretical knowledge and everyday experience of acting individuals, and the reality of abstract structures and institutionalized norms that organize social interaction but which are not immediately graspable for actors. The implicit demand underlying this distinction is that the social theorist should always hold both moments together.³⁹ The constitutive gap between system and lifeworld allows grasping the paradoxical fact that the unity of modern society lies precisely in the disjunction between these domains.⁴⁰ And it also opens an analytical path to observe the interference of systemic imperatives (i.e., monetization and bureaucratization) in domains of social interaction and assess the extent to which they become damaging, and, therefore, an object of practical critique.

The importance of this conceptualization of society is that leads Habermas to develop a particular approach to crisis tendencies:

In modernized societies disturbances in the material reproduction of the lifeworld take the form of stubborn systemic disequilibria; the latter either take effect directly as crisis or they call forth pathologies in the lifeworld [...]. These systemic disequilibria become crises only when the performances of economy and state remain manifestly below an established level of aspiration and harm symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld by calling forth conflicts and reactions of resistance there. It is the societal components of the lifeworld that are directly affected by this. Before such conflicts threaten core domains of social integration, they are pushed to the periphery. But when steering crises are successfully intercepted by having recourse to lifeworld resources, pathologies arise in the lifeworld.⁴¹

Such theorization of crisis situations in terms of “lifeworld pathologies,” I contend, is crucial for the understanding of the dialectics between crisis and critique within the Habermasian framework. As Seyla Benhabib has rightly argued, it indicates two possible approaches to explaining problems of societal reproduction: “system-objective crisis” and “social-lived crisis.”⁴² The former describes the objective appearance of contradictions and structural-material disturbances at the systemic level of society, while the later addresses the distortion of the subjective and social experience of individuals who suffer the effects of functional problems and channel them through their needs, demands and dissatisfactions. The analytical difference between these types of crisis calls for both empirical analyses and critical understanding of the disruptions of the communicative fabric of social relations. In fact, this is the domain against which situations of crisis may gain public visibility and their consequences be normatively discussed and measured.

So if the concept, experience and consequences of crisis phenomena in capitalist societies move at the rhythm of the disjunction between system and life-world, as Habermas claims, it is possible to argue that the concept and practice of critique sits precisely in the space of that division. One could suppose, then, that by standing in the middle, critique becomes the arbiter of the dialectical dispute between system and lifeworld. Habermas's methodological formulation indeed makes room for such a problematic conclusion to emerge. However, he is convinced that by reconstructing critique as a practice dependent on "the same structures that make it possible to reach an understanding," critique may lay claim to nothing more than the resources provided by everyday discourse.⁴³ Thus, within the contours of communicative action, the social potential of the practice of critique acquires special connotation in capitalist societies due to the propensity of crises to be "excluded from the realm of situation interpretation" by technical management and expert mechanisms of steering.⁴⁴ For that reason, critique may well undertake the significant task of a discursive formulation of crisis, in the sense of providing conceptual form, explanatory substance and normative weight to the diremptions of social life.

Because crisis situations affect the parameters of public discussion and scrutinize power in unforeseen ways, the critical theorist becomes a "virtual participant" in contexts of everyday social action who can prejudge "neither the conceptual tool for diagnosing crises nor the way of overcoming them."⁴⁵ Instead, critique is tied to crisis much more in the mode of an act of translation of the objective language of systemic problems into practical problems of social integration and the language of human suffering. Or to put it in strict Habermasian terms, critique relates to crisis by way of alternating back and forth between a "propositional attitude" and a "performative attitude." In the former case, critique relates to crisis as a second-order observer who in diagnostic terms describes and explains the abstract mechanisms of crisis tendencies in society that are not immediately graspable for individuals; in the case of the performative attitude, critique approaches crisis at the pre-theoretical level of a committed actor who is subject to the crisis and delivered up to it. By keeping some symmetry between both attitudes, observer and participant, the critical inquiry may help to perform an important role: changing the framework in which crisis is publicly discussed and thought about.⁴⁶

It is in this sense that one could argue that for Habermas's social theory there is no critique without crisis: namely, that without objective situations of disturbance, of fissures unfolding in the consistency of things, the practice of critique can hardly begin; and yet without the communicative formulation of critique the experience of crisis cannot come into sight. However, one should not presume that between crisis and critique there is unbroken unity, since the translation of one term into the other can always fail; for instance, when social criticism distances itself from the perplexities of the world in pure subjectivity or moral denunciation without object (i.e., critique without crisis), or when our actual responses to crisis preclude the possibility of political argument and introduce normative considerations (i.e., crisis without critique). In contemporary capitalist societies the suspension of the trajectory from crisis to critique has too many

expressions to be discussed here. Suffice it to say that the response to the discontinuity that crises introduce (especially in the economic and political spheres) is often determined by the successful absorption and stabilization of crisis as the normal condition. Within this context, critique, although accepted, is often jeopardized by a de-politicized economy of therapeutic and technocratic discourses that frame crisis in the language of “no alternatives” and turn public debate into a de-socialized monologue. Still this should not prevent us from identifying a powerful motive for critique to combat the reification of crisis as well as the domestication of critique itself.

At any rate, if the theoretical critique of society is grounded in everyday communicative practices, as Habermas maintains, the relationship between crisis and critique cannot remain a constellation of concepts or “model of analysis” for the social theorist only. It should also be conceived and studied as an empirical relationship that takes shape when members of society engage in problematizing latent conflicts, raise concrete normative claims and call attention to the emergent consequences of crisis-ridden processes. It is only in this way that social critique may force changes in the parameters of public discussion and expose the limits and rifts of the institutions and norms that sustain social and individual modes of life.

Turning Crisis into a Political Problem

Earlier I argued that one of the aims underlying Habermas’s attempt to theorize moments of crisis vis-à-vis critique was to restore a sense of the socio-technical and moral-practical capacities of society to act upon itself in response to the problems that crisis-ridden processes produce over social integration and human existence. In his book *Between Facts and Norms* this issue gains renewed attention in relation to the institutional procedures and normative conditions that allow social criticism to penetrate the communicative operation of the political system in modern democracies. Habermas addresses this question informed by what he sees is a constitutive diremption between “legality” and “legitimacy,” that is to say, a gap between the legal institutionalization of collective decisions and the citizens’ practical involvement in shaping those norms through public deliberation. If we attend to his diagnosis of the reality of contemporary constitutional democracies, the existence of this gap is embodied in the participatory deficits of political decision-making processes that undermine the legitimacy of the normative order that sustain life in common.

The question, as Thomassen⁴⁷ asks apropos, is whether this gap can ever be closed and, I would add, what are its implications for the purposes of our understanding of crisis and critique. Through the Habermasian lenses, the existence of this hiatus between “legality” and “legitimacy” is evidence of the imperfection of democracy and therefore justifies the struggle for bringing both moments together in the realization of a “system of rights.” However, it is the very impossibility of closing this gap what assures democracy’s vitality and openness as an incomplete project whose principles may be always re-enacted. After all, as Habermas recalls, “the constitutional state does not represent a finished structure but a delicate and sensible—above all fallible and revisable—enterprise.”⁴⁸ It is

by recognizing this ambivalence that it is possible to grant normative and practical space for social criticism and, hence, make room for reconsidering its relationship with crisis. Let me develop this interpretation further.

Habermas defends the thesis that “in virtue of its internal relation to law, politics is responsible for problems that concern society as a whole.” Ultimately, “it carries on the tasks of social integration at a reflexive level when other action systems are no longer up to the job.”⁴⁹ The issue is that this problem-solving capacity may, and often does, “prevail at the citizens’ expense [...] in a manner that bypasses the communicative power of the public.”⁵⁰ This is clearly the case of today’s austerity measures designed by policy experts and implemented by governments on a global scale, which intend to control the uncontrollable waves of financial excess and repair market failure. Under such pressing conditions, critique is often framed as ill timed and a luxury good. The underlying conflict is that while the effects of this technical mode of decision-making are felt as real fissures in the flesh of individual’s daily existence, the logic of its practical operation runs disembodied from mechanisms of will-formation and the informal networks of public opinion.

The key point of the Habermasian argument, as I read it, is that for a complex society to act upon itself in situations of crisis, it is simply insufficient to rely only on “an executive system that can act for the whole and influence the whole;” for practical and normative reasons, it also requires “a reflexive center, where it builds up a knowledge of itself in a process of self-understanding.”⁵¹ The unspecialized character of the public sphere would precisely play the role of a perceptive and reflexive “warning system with sensors throughout society.”⁵² This is so because, by having recourse to its direct connection to the private experiences and life stories of individuals—the point of entrance of problems of social integration—the public sphere has the capacity to thematize crises and social conflicts in ways that give shape to “crisis consciousness” and the construction of public opinion around the reality of these problems.

There is no point in trying to idealize the role and capacities of the public sphere. The issue is rather to maintain a realistic sense in which, even if public opinion does not have the executive capacity of political decision, it does bear the communicative power of “influence” that might break society’s conventional modes of operation and introduce renovating impulses into the system’s inertial *modus operandi*, i.e., “communicative power” becoming “political power.” On this point Habermas writes that:

in periods of mobilization, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance between civil society and the political system then shifts [...] In a perceived crisis situation, the actors in civil society thus far neglected in our scenario can assume a surprisingly active and momentous role. In spite of a lesser organized complexity and a weaker capacity of action [...] at the critical moments of an accelerated history, these actors get the chance to reverse the normal circuits of communication in the political system and the public sphere. In this way they can shift the entire system’s mode of problem solving.⁵³

This could allow us to advance the argument that if in democratic societies the experience of crisis comes potentially impaired with the practice of critique, it is not by means of the dialectical skills of the social philosopher. Rather, it occurs as the contingent result of the citizens' engagement in challenging established constellations of power and reversing the normal circuits of communication in the public arena through public deliberation, social movements and acts of civil disobedience. The fact that the relationship between crisis and critique is not a purely theoretical business is demonstrated when the subterranean communicative power of social criticism is able to transform crisis into a politically relevant problem. That is to say, when the practical discourse of critique becomes involved in the struggle of making crisis situations visible as lived experiences, but also in the process of demanding public justifications of the norms, policies and institutional practices that sustain a "hegemonic form of life" and which are seen concomitant to the systemic problems revealed by the crisis in the first place.⁵⁴ Henceforth critique becomes instrumental in changing the parameters of public discussion and political decision-making, and in displacing the horizon of what is commonly accepted as desirable and conceivable as possible.

At this point, it begins to come clear that, from the perspective of Habermas's discursive approach to democratic politics, the experience of crisis cannot unfold before the objective conditions distressing social life acquire some kind of intelligible expression in language in a reflective manner. Put in this way, critique may become a practice that, in the mode of a performative effect, introduces crisis into the realm of the social by means of suspending the validity claims of forms of representation and justification that sustain the conditions of the present. However, his social-theoretic reconstruction of the dialectical relationship between these terms falls short of addressing this issue adequately. To be sure, Habermas stresses that critique operates in the field of crisis, namely, that critique is the communicative translation of a crisis rather than simply its indexical representation. Still, he does privilege a one-sided view of critique as a temporal predicate of crisis, namely, a subjective response boosted by objective crisis.

What I intend to argue here is that the dialectical relationship between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique should not be reduced to a flow that moves in one direction only, from crisis to critique, for crisis is not the fixed grammar which dictates the rhythm of social critique. In a subtle manner critique too manages to rearrange this grammar so as to use it "to bring about a real state of emergency."⁵⁵ This is why we should also need to consider the inverse movement from critique to crisis. In this case, the issue is that critique does not seek to overcome crisis but actually produces and preserves crisis as the moment of its own realization: it initiates, enacts and furthers this moment. Understood in this way, the practice of critique does not simply translate the abstract language of systemic problems into the language of intersubjective experience and reveal human suffering. It also assists in the task of transgressing the frozen images, silent behaviors and accepted practices that sustain the state of the present by means of producing a gap in the crust of social and political reality. Critique thus performs the hermeneutic work of unfolding an actual fissure which may encourage the entry of "other" forms of subjectivity and the opportunity of concrete

transformations. To make this clear, my argument is that critique may well be a reflexive practice encouraged by the real conflicts and sufferings disclosed by crisis situations, but it cannot be reduced to a reactive position. The “power of critique”⁵⁶ has also to do with raising normative claims that, while putting into question the truth claims of practices, discourses and institutions, may bring crisis about and lift space for imagining new possibilities. It is in this sense that I would maintain that critique also occurs in the mode of crisis.⁵⁷

This capacity of critique to dislocate present social and cultural arrangements, however, is not restricted to the form of a rational discourse aiming at truth. It is in fact deeply entangled with aesthetic language and expressive forms of action whose core is the assemblage of qualitatively different ways of speaking, alternative modes of living and acting, and plural forms of understanding. And ultimately this supposes to bear in mind critique’s inner connection with time. This is not simply about the temporal proximity between critique and crisis, or the differential duration, speed and rhythm of one and the other, but rather about the fact that this relationship does take place in and through the form of a temporal disjunction. For indeed critique has the capacity to disrupt lineal temporal experience by making intelligible in the present the non-contemporaneous of the contemporaneous condition.

Closing Remarks

Although the concepts of crisis and critique are ubiquitous in public speech, they are hardly ever the object of serious consideration by sociologists in order to find out what these notions mean and how we have come to think about what they really are. Allusion to these concepts is rather linked to attitudes of rhetorical inflation as well as of analytical deflation, which treat crisis and critique as absolute notions divorced from social and political reality. This chapter has attempted to address this problematic trying to elucidate Habermas’s strong claim that these are inescapable and dialectically related terms in the critical study of modern social life. The point though has not been about attributing any transcendental value to these concepts but instead reconstructing them as fields of semantic struggles that both register and embody real social-historical conflicts and transformations.

At the heart of the need to comprehend moments of crisis vis-à-vis critique there is a commitment of Habermas’s social theory to investigate the actual fissures that constitute the institutions, norms and practices that sustain our forms of life. This translates into the task of grasping the forms in which “social diremptions” produced by capitalist modernity appear alongside the socio-historical mechanisms and normative resources through which these tendencies may be explained, evaluated and transcended from within society.

Certainly, crises may reveal the systemic limits of social and political institutions and so work as accelerators of critique, which, in turn, may become a communicative formulation of the experience of objective crisis and its lifeworld consequences. What emerges from this reading of Habermas’s social theory is an understanding of the practice of critique as a mode of “crisis diagnosis” that

renders these events experientially meaningful. In doing so, critique may shape public discourse contributing to transform crises into politically relevant problems. Yet we must bear in mind that crises are also relevant in that they might halt critique when dislodged from the realm of interpretation and contexts of everyday social action through technical mechanisms of management, or even because the subjective freedom of critique detaches itself from the objectivity of crisis problems in reckless optimism or despair. Seeing in this light, our understanding of the relationship between crisis and critique cannot remain a constellation of theoretical concepts for the social theorist only, it should also be conceived and studied as empirical moments grounded in the communicative and normative structures of democratic polities.

The complexity of this relation though is lost if we restrict critique to a mere subjective response to objective crisis. The relationship between crisis and critique does not move in one direction only, for critique also has the productive competence to initiate crisis when it calls into question the very symbolic, temporal and normative orders upon which it draws. Should the connection between crisis and critique be formulated in this way, we may be able to interpret the relationship not as a causal determination but as a series of displacements in which each term may register, bring about, and turn into the other. And this approach, I contend, is an important, but often missed, addition to the politics of critique that Habermas seeks to theorize and comprehend. The fact that Habermas does not give enough attention to this second movement (from critique to crisis) makes highly debatable how politically effective is the “talking cure” which he optimistically advocates.⁵⁸ And yet, to put things in perspective, it is certain at least in one substantive respect, namely, that free communication remains a “force of production” in democratic societies and a fertile normative basis for a critical social theory.

The capacity of critique to produce crisis is a thread that runs through Reinhart Koselleck’s classic study on the rise of the modern world, *Kritik und Krise*. The main thesis of that book is that the critique the bourgeoisie practiced against the absolutist state brought about the very crisis that marked the revolutionary birth of political modernity, and yet the reality of the link between these moments remained hidden behind images of historical progress. Despite the conservative tone of Koselleck’s deconstruction of Enlightenment utopianism, he shares Habermas’s concern about the moralization of critique and the depoliticization of crisis as threats to public life. The fact that today’s neoconservatives seek to capitalize on the critique-crisis relationship—as their critique of existing institutional arrangements is hooked on the idea of creating a sense of real crisis propitious for their own agenda⁵⁹—demonstrates that the rather delicate nature of this relation remains a troubling question for us. In the next chapter, I shall turn to the work of Reinhart Koselleck in order to reflect on the perplexities of the practice of critique in modernity and his eventual contributions to critical theory.

Notes

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, "Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique," in *Theory and Praxis*, trans. John Viertel (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 213–222; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 20–21; Jürgen Habermas, "Conceptions of Modernity: A Look Back at Two Traditions," in *The Postnational Constellation*, ed. and trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 134–137.
- 2 Jürgen Habermas, "After Bankruptcy: An Interview," in *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 102–104.
- 3 Habermas, "Conceptions of Modernity," 142.
- 4 As far as I am aware, the more systematic account to date on the relationship between crisis and critique in critical theory is Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). For occasional and instructive commentary on crisis and critique in social theory, see Wendy Brown, "Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–17; Hauke Brunkhorst, "The Return of Crisis," in *The Financial Crisis in Constitutional Perspective*, eds. Poul F Kjaer, Gunther Teubneb and Alberto Febbrajo (Oxford: Hart, 2001), 133–172; Gerard Delanty, "Varieties of Critique in Sociological Theory and Their Methodological Implications for Social Research," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 19, no. 1. (2001): 68–92; Klaus Eder, "From the Crisis of Class Politics to the Critique of Class Politics: Reflecting on the Role of 'Crisis Discourses' in Modern Society," in *The New Politics of Class: Social Movements and Cultural Dynamics in Advanced Societies* (London: Sage, 1993), 185–196; Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006); Piet Strydom, *Discourse and Knowledge: The Making of the Enlightenment Sociology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000); Peter Wagner, "Critique and Crisis Reconsidered," *European Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 3 (2010): 473–478.
- 5 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.
- 6 Niklas Luhmann, *Political Theory in the Welfare State*, trans. John Bernardz (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1990), 58; Niklas Luhmann, "The Two Sociologies and the Theory of Society," *Thesis Eleven* 43, no. 1 (1995): 28–47.
- 7 Arguably, in the French tradition of critical sociology, Pierre Bourdieu's work could also be read as providing conceptual and empirical insights for understanding the relationship between crisis and critique; see Pierre Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 1977), 167–171. For an attempt to read Habermas's and Bourdieu's social theories together, see Simon Susen, *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology* (Oxford: The Bardwell Press, 2007).
- 8 Habermas, "Conceptions of Modernity."
- 9 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
- 10 Robert J. Holton, "The Idea of Crisis in Modern Society," *British Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 4 (1987): 503.
- 11 Jürgen Habermas, "Neoconservative Cultural Criticism in the United States and West Germany," in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 49.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 37–40.
- 13 Among other factors, Habermas highlights transformations in the relations of production due to the pacification of class antagonism through welfare-state policies and the capitalist expansion of material wealth; Jürgen Habermas, "Between Philosophy and Science," 195–196; Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy

- (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 37–39, 55; Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 348–355.
- 14 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 342.
 - 15 Habermas, “Neoconservative Cultural Criticism in the United States and West Germany,” 25.
 - 16 Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, 7.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 37–40.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 7–17; Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 120–123, 147, 153–154.
 - 19 The introduction of a theory of evolutionary learning was Habermas’s original solution to the methodological limits imposed by historical materialism as the framework for a theory of society. The introduction of “learning processes” was intended to overcome the monistic concern with the expansion of productive-technical forces, which relegated the rationalization of normative structures and the development of moral-practical capacities mediated by language to a secondary place. For critical assessments of Habermas’s solution, see Klaus Eder, “Societies Learn and Yet the World is Hard to Change,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 2, no. 2 (1999): 195–215; Piet Strydom, “Collective Learning: Habermas’s Concessions and Their Theoretical Implications,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 13, no. 3 (1987): 265–281.
 - 20 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 134.
 - 21 Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, 143.
 - 22 Theodor W. Adorno, “Critique,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 281–288.
 - 23 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family, or the Critique of Critical Critique*, trans. R. Dixon (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956).
 - 24 Max Horkheimer, “The State of Contemporary Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute of Social Research,” in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, eds. Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 33.
 - 25 Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
 - 26 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 216–217.
 - 27 Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, 141–142.
 - 28 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).
 - 29 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Verso, 1997), xi–xiv
 - 30 Habermas, “Conceptions of Modernity,” 140.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, 137, 142.
 - 32 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 29.
 - 33 Habermas, “Conceptions of Modernity,” 137; Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 21–29; Habermas, “Between Philosophy and Science,” 215–217.
 - 34 Despite Habermas’s reconsideration of Hegel’s model of critique and crisis, he strongly criticizes it for favoring a mystical image of anticipated reconciliation in which social diremptions are rationalized into the logic of a total and complete world-historical spirit that lurches forward, leaving critique in the awkward position of a contemplative second-order practice (i.e., the philosopher as therapist), divorced from the concrete intersubjective experience of social actors, and without normative power to contest a world that negates human freedom and dignity; Habermas, “Between Philosophy and Science,” 216–217.
 - 35 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 1–7.
 - 36 *Ibid.*, 400–403.
 - 37 Cristina Lafont, “World-Disclosure and Critique: Did Habermas Succeed in Thinking with Heidegger and against Heidegger?,” *Telos* 145 (2008): 161–176.

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- 38 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, xvlii; Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 396.
- 39 The debate about the “quasi-transcendental” character of the distinction of system/lifeworld in Habermas’s theory has been immense and it is not my aim to discuss it here. For early criticisms of this distinction, see Axel Honneth and Hans Joas eds., *Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). For an instructive overview of the controversy, see William Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 106–117.
- 40 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 152–155. Habermas’s thesis of the ambivalence of modernization processes consists of the idea that while the growing complexity of society does involve the formation of autonomous domains of coordination according to purposive rationality and functional imperatives (e.g., market exchange), this does not generate *ipso facto* reification and domination effects in individual consciousness or social life as a whole. Indeed, he maintains that modern rationalization also consists of the cultural differentiation of domains of knowledge, moral norms and expressive practices that expand the range of options and learning capacities individuals and collectives have for everyday action; see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 372–399; Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 382–383.
- 41 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 385.
- 42 Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, 224–253.
- 43 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 121.
- 44 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 385.
- 45 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 348.
- 46 At the basis of this communicative capacity of critique lies the priority Habermas gives to the argumentative use of language (oriented to mutual and rational understanding) over other forms such as poetic, aesthetic or symbolic language. In doing so, he fails to account for the capacity of critique to invoke aesthetic-expressive forms of action that articulate new perspectives and disclose previously unknown possibilities. This has important implications for the understanding of the relationship between critique and crisis as I will suggest in the next section. See Maeve Cooke, “Habermas’s Social Theory: The Critical Power of Rationality,” in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Karin de Boer and Karin Sonderegger (London: Palgrave, 2012), 193–211; Stephen White and Evan Farr, “No-Saying in Habermas,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 1 (2012): 32–57.
- 47 Lasse Thomassen, “Within the Limits of Deliberative Reason Alone: Habermas, Civil Disobedience and Constitutional Democracy,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 6, no. 2 (2007): 200–218.
- 48 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), 384.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 385.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 351–352.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 357.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 359.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 379–381.
- 54 White and Farr, “No-Saying in Habermas,” 44.
- 55 Walter Benjamin, “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 248.
- 56 Rainer Forst, “The Power of Critique,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 1 (2011): 118–123.
- 57 Paul de Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983).
- 58 Deborah Cook, “The Talking Cure in Habermas’s Republic,” *New Left Review* 12 (2001): 135–151.
- 59 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin, 2009).

4 The Non-Closure of Human History

The Vicissitudes of Social Critique and the Political Foundation of Concepts— Reinhart Koselleck

Introduction

The work of German historian Reinhart Koselleck is not well-known within sociology and remains underrated among critical theorists, mainly due to the alleged conservative and anti-Enlightenment footing of his early work, *Kritik und Krise*.¹ In recent debates, however, Koselleck's later contributions to the field of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) have received wide acceptance and been regarded as pivotal in enlarging our understanding of the complex relations between social reality, language and temporality. According to Peter Wagner,² Koselleck's awareness of the conceptual shaping of socio-historical experiences should be a key insight for a "new" sociology of modernity that moves beyond institutional analyses in order to address the history of modernity as the history of the plurality of its discourses and collective interpretations. Similarly, María Pía Lara³ argues that Koselleck's "method" has given us a way to theorize politics as "the space in which actors learn to do things with concepts" and "disclose" new territories of political agency. Despite such attempts, Koselleck's work is still seen in antithetical terms to critical theory. On the one hand, his interpretation of the misfortunes and reversals of political modernity in its attempt to secure human freedom, rights and progress has been overshadowed by the intellectual influence of Koselleck's former teacher, the controversial Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt.⁴ On the other, even sympathetic readers find that Koselleck's analyses of historical semantics conflict with the aims of critical theory, given its difficulties with addressing phenomena that defy naturalized European conceptions of politics, society and temporality.⁵

In this chapter, I distance myself from such readings so as to argue that Koselleck's genealogy of political modernity may indeed be read in the current of critical social theory. He belongs to a generation of European scholars who, after the events of 1914 and 1945, were struggling to comprehend the cultural and intellectual preconditions for the process of societal rupture that had led European societies to the political catastrophe of war, violence and totalitarianism. The book *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* is Koselleck's first and foremost attempt to investigate "why the world had collapsed before their eyes."⁶ One of his intentions was to draw the path through which language becomes a moral-ideological battleground and concepts political

instruments to shape social reality and give direction to history. In his view, the “uninterrupted chain of critiques” of modern society inaugurated by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution nurtures an “utopian surplus” that needs to be examined and deconstructed.⁷ To be sure, the attitude to question the semblance of necessity of what exists, as well as the capacity to put into crisis the norms and institutions that sustain power relations, are defining features of the modern world. But in the age of criticism, as Kant once put it, the spirit of critique (in art, philosophy and politics alike) is not free of the illusions of wholeness that haunt the religious and political discourses to which it opposes and seeks to debunk in the name of freedom. Koselleck finds the seeds of this potentially conflicting element in the Enlightenment attitude that elevates the subjective capacity of critique to a moral principle and historical force detached from the objective manifestations of the social and political conflicts of the day.

Despite the apparent gulf existing between Koselleck’s historical research and the German tradition of critical theory (expressed in the works of Marx, Adorno and Habermas, among others), I argue that throughout his writings there are a number of elements that intersect with some of critical theory’s lasting concerns: namely: (i) the vicissitudes of social critique as an observer and participant in political life; (ii) the role of concepts as means of self-understanding and social forms open to contestation and reification; and (iii) the potentials for social transformation anchored in the contingency and openness of history.⁸ By reading Koselleck along these problems, I intend to show that his work can be interpreted as an ally for critical theory’s attempt to find a space between the defence of the right to human freedom and the comprehension of the actuality of the world as it is. But I also wish to demonstrate that it stands for the actuality of its sociological and philosophical edges.

In the first section, I shall reconstruct Koselleck’s original thesis of the dialectic between the rise of bourgeois social criticism and the political crisis of the *Ancien Régime* that unfolded in the second half of the eighteenth century. Although he offers a largely empirical analysis based on a rich history of the philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment, the historical understanding of the complexities of the relationship between the practice of critique and the experience of crisis leads to an important reconsideration of a classic problem within critical theory: namely, the perplexities associated with the agency of critique and the practical and normative effects of its involvement in political life. My reading of Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* shall emphasize one of the book’s key and lasting contributions, the diagnosis and theorization of the pathologies of subjectivism that haunts modern politics. This is a central concern in the development of modern social theory from Hegel to Arendt,⁹ which Koselleck sees embodied in the failure of critique to recognize the crises it contributes to set in motion and therefore the inability to understand the concrete social divisions that both configure and threaten to damage life in common.

On the other hand, Koselleck’s investigation into the intellectual and sociological conditions of the unfolding of the revolutionary dialectic between critique and crisis carries a fundamental methodological implication: that concepts are privileged arenas to follow the traces of historical ruptures and dislocations

of social forms. This is a conclusion he draws from the analysis of the transformation of conceptions of history and temporality that accompanies the rise of the bourgeois culture between 1750 and 1850, and from textual evidence that shows that in this period a number of concepts were transformed and became instruments for giving direction to history and defining political and social positions.¹⁰ The underlying hypothesis is that although concepts may stabilize and appear as solid black-boxes, they are neither fixed codes nor neutral unities of meaning but material embodiments of discursive activity and proposals for reading the world and its problems. Taken in this sense, a concept—and the work of conceptualization through which it unfolds in time—is almost by definition an open and dialogical field of hermeneutic struggles. Based on this proposition, I shall suggest that Koselleck's work offers itself as a critique of the mystification of concepts and thus as a potentially fruitful complement to critical theory's quest of elucidating power-imbued experiences of social conflict and resisting forms of ideological closure of meaning and action.

And this leads us to a last but not least relevant aspect: Koselleck's normative concern with devising alternatives to the utopian excesses of the variety of philosophies of history which, since the second half of the eighteenth century until today, claim to offer toolkits to master and solve the riddles of history in a dream of final reconciliation. A distinctive way of approaching this problem emerges from Koselleck's own theory of historical time, which is based on the thesis of the widening gap between "experience" and "expectation" that configures modern temporality. This gap works as a clause of non-closure internal to the constitutive openness of human history and so it poses a challenge to any transcendental philosophy or utopian politics that reduce historical processes to a singular ought, telos, principle or determinate cause. This clause, I suggest, is a normative point of reference that allows Koselleck to assert a critical hermeneutics composed by a "plurality of non-convergent histories" rather than by an originary or absolute foundation. The key issue is that although the gap between experience and expectation can expand or contract (as it happens in revolutionary periods and catastrophes, or as a consequence of the temporal logic of acceleration of financial capitalism), it can never totally disappear.

Thus, if critique is resistance to accept that there is one truth, one principle, one foundation, it has to keep the riddle of history open, without closure, by constantly widening the horizons of expectation but without divorcing them from experience. After all, the world is a human place to inhabit precisely because it does not have a principle of final closure.

The Knives of the Critical Gaze: Between the Social and the Political

Since Jürgen Habermas's critical review of Koselleck's 1959 book *Kritik und Krise*, a number of readers have questioned the historian's interpretation of the birth of political modernity due to its strong emphasis on the self-destructive utopianism of the Enlightenment critique of sovereign power. It has been said that this interpretation bears a sociological deficit, as it ignores the richness of

the dynamics of bourgeois sociability and misrecognizes the institutionalization of the liberal public sphere of rational argument,¹¹ and a normative deficit, as it underestimates the importance of the practice of social criticism in modern politics and misconstrues the intellectual basis and normative foundations of the tradition of critical theory itself.¹² These objections, however, should not prevent us from giving attention to Koselleck's contributions to understanding the main dilemmas involved in the relation between critique and crisis in modernity.

In the tradition of critical theory, the moment of crisis plays a fundamental role in the diagnosis of systemic problems and contradictions of capitalist modernity, insofar as it would bring into sight the structural limits of capitalist development and put into question the norms and institutions that sustain this form of life. Thus, crisis situations prompt the practice of critique which, in turn, seeks to render these events experientially meaningful and politically relevant.¹³ In Chapter 2, I took as a case Habermas's explicit attempt to reconstruct the relation between crisis and critique as a model of analysis of the paradoxes of rationalization processes. I argued that although Habermas reinstates the practice of critique as a communicative translation of objective crisis, he does privilege a one-sided view of critique as a temporal predicate of crisis. Hereby, my suggestion is that rather than drawing attention to critique as a subjective response to and communicative translation of crisis, Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise* reverses this relation in an interesting way: his analysis explains how critique actually initiates, enacts and furthers a process of political crisis which then turns back against the critical practice itself. And this reversal reopens the question of the perplexities associated with the agency of critique itself in modernity.

Kritik und Krise was initially planned to be a study of the political influence of Kant's philosophy on the French Revolution. However, it turned into an explanation of the origins and fate of the Enlightenment criticism and its relation with the political collapse of the *Ancien Régime*. Koselleck's basic intuition was that by examining "the presupposed connection of critique and crisis" that underlies the revolutionary process that unfolded in Europe from 1789, we could understand the lasting antinomies and constitutive fissures of political modernity.¹⁴ The key to the unfolding of this "dialectic" would lie in an explanation that involves both socio-structural conditions and intellectual developments: on the one hand, the structural separation between state and society that gives shape to modern politics, and, on the other, the non-political and utopian self-understanding of bourgeois criticism.

The thesis of the separation of state and society, or politics and morality, is a structural condition and achievement of modernity, which is usually regarded as the Hobbesian doctrine of *raison d'état*. It consists of the division between a domain of public interest governed by the law of the sovereign and a private domain governed by the jurisdiction of a conscience alienated from and yet protected by the state. This doctrine is the historical solution that secured the expansion and legitimacy of the European absolutist state after the religious warfare of the sixteenth century. The exclusion of private consciousness from state power not only allowed politics to work regardless of moral considerations but also, Koselleck argues, "created the premise for the unfolding of a moral world," securing a space of autonomous opinion and critique.¹⁵ What is crucial about this

separation is that Enlightenment criticism “expanded into that same gap which the Absolutist State had left unoccupied in order to end the civil war in the first place.”¹⁶ In other words, the conditions that engendered the space of social criticism were the same that ended up threatening the state’s historical existence.

Alongside the rise of the bourgeoisie as an influential social class but without any real political power, critique acquired practical-political significance in the new institutional domains of society. The institutionalization of these “social” spaces (e.g., coffee-houses, clubs, salons and literary societies) granted citizens the freedom to pass judgments “in an alternation between moral censure and intellectual critique.”¹⁷ The activity of literary, aesthetic and historical criticism cultivated in these circles existed in parallel with the jurisdiction of the state, but soon surpassed its boundaries and became an implicit challenge to the legitimacy of the values, norms and practices embodied by state power. From this region of deliberation and discussion, bourgeois society came to perceive itself in strong opposition to the state because, from the universalistic viewpoint of man as a “human being,” the monarch and those in power appeared as immoral “usurpers” of their natural rights. Thus it was almost equally natural for bourgeois critics to arrive at the conclusion that society’s “protection by the state” should be reversed into society’s “protection from the state.”¹⁸ This was the Enlightenment’s “political” choice and the actual basis of the “non-political” understanding of critique they practiced and its rationalization into a philosophy of historical progress.

The notion of critique was already in use before the eighteenth century in Europe, but it only acquired a generalized meaning with the expansion of literary circles, like the Republic of Letters in France, and societies for the discussion of philosophy and the arts, like the Masonic Lodge in Germany. Until the eighteenth century, critique was predominantly associated with the practice of making distinctions in the search for truth in the field of art, philosophy and literature. With the expansion of bourgeois liberal culture and the emergence of the sphere of society from the French Revolution onwards, the term also acquired a more prominent position within political language as a way to describe “controversy” and “opposition.”¹⁹ In this context, critique experiences a decisive transformation: it takes the more generalized meaning of the “art of judgment” and becomes the signature of the condition of being modern, a reflexive attitude of relentless movement. According to Koselleck, the inner logic of the conception of critique prevalent within Enlightenment intelligentsia, the art of arriving at proper insights about the truth of things, presupposed two claims; the critic as a neutral authority that stands above the parties and the relentless movement of reason as a compulsion to unravel the authority and objectivity of everything: from aesthetic beauty and scientific truth to political authority and moral norms. Thus, if nothing escapes the gaze of the critic, and every moment of critique is a step toward “the yet-to-be-discovered truth,” the social world necessarily enters into an “infinite process of renewal that sucked out the present from under the feet of the critic.”²⁰ Without solid grounds upon which justify the practice of critique, the Enlightenment had to take “the pledge of a tomorrow in whose name today could in good conscience be allowed to perish.”²¹ This pledge means, in essence,

that the bourgeois critical indictment of the state had to adhere to ideas of progress and construct a rational image of the future that could compensate for the miseries of the present but which could not be captured by actual experience. Here lies the real source of the utopian surplus that nurtured the critique of the eighteenth century.²²

According to this interpretation, the dialectic in which critique based “the process of unmasking, simultaneously caused political blindness.”²³ Koselleck’s main contention is that the reality of the growing conflict between state and society remained hidden in “historico-philosophical” images of the future and the universalistic claim of rational judgment. Without recognizing its partisan character and active role in the political crisis, “critique became the victim of its neutrality; it turned into hypocrisy.”²⁴ The hypocrisy consisted in claiming “the political anonymity of reason” while transforming this “moral distancing from politics [...] into the ostensibly non-political basis of the fight against Absolutism.”²⁵ Essentially, the certainty of the state’s collapse was interpreted in terms of a moral trial (the advance of subjective freedom over state despotism), while the concrete reality of the revolutionary politics emerging from the crisis (violence, social disintegration and civil war) was concealed. In doing so, the utopian element in this philosophy of history proved its capacity to relieve the practice of critique of any “political responsibility” in the wake of the political crisis.²⁶

By subjecting all actors and institutions to the verdicts and standards of rational critique, the bourgeois critic depicted the world in an antinomic form (as a legal process) that paradoxically “served as the ferment for eradicating all differences and contrasts,” including the boundary between morality and politics that sustained the possibility of critique itself and “from which the Enlightenment drew its evidence.”²⁷ As a consequence, when political differences are translated into plain moral differences, one runs the risk of transforming the “moral point of view” into a universal standard of truth and the belief in “moral purity” into a principle of political rule. It is in this way that the knives of the critical gaze found in the guillotine “the liberal symbol” of their dramatic political failure.²⁸

Koselleck’s most radical indictment of this “moralization of politics” is that the self-glorification of bourgeois critique as an emancipatory social force was unable to recognize that the overthrow of state power was not the fulfillment of the moral laws of history, but a political process of real confrontation whose outcome could not be secured favorably by elevating the moral point of view as a rational justification of critique nor as a principle of political rule.²⁹ The point of Koselleck’s argument, as I read it, is to shed light on to the perplexities of the all-embracing capacity for critique that characterizes the modern spirit, rather than simply regarding “criticism as the real crisis of modern times.”³⁰ And this concern, seems to me, is closer to Hegel’s critique of the French Revolution than to Schmitt’s critique of the Weimar Republic.³¹

As Hegel maintains in the *Philosophy of Right*,³² whenever critique elevates the subjective freedom of thought to an absolute passion and eternal value, it no longer recognizes that its very reason of existence is “the comprehension of the present and the actual, not the setting up of a world beyond” or the instruction of

people about how the world “ought to be.”³³ From this perspective, the problem we often face is that although critique requires subjective freedom in order to carry out its work, pure subjectivism (i.e., the fixation of “empty ideals” and the exaltation of moral inwardness) isolates critique from the determinations of subjective freedom in the context of real social relations and contradictions. Within the sphere of pure reflexion, the consequence of this attitude is the transformation of “self-consciousness” into narcissistic introspection, the “fanaticism of pure contemplation” as Hegel puts it; but as soon as this unrestricted freedom displaces into the practical and institutional realm of politics, it reverses into the “fanaticism of destruction,” i.e., the activity of “demolishing the whole existing social order, eliminating all individuals regarded as suspect by a given order, and annihilating any organization which attempts to rise up anew” as they are regarded “incompatible” with moral commands or natural-like standards of justice.³⁴

This possibility demonstrates to Koselleck how the separation between “morality” and “politics” could easily develop into pathological forms such as the moralization of politics or the politicization of morality—for which the reign of terror in the French Revolution or the neoconservative rhetoric of good/evil in contemporary global politics offer suitable examples. And yet he deems it important to appreciate that the differentiation of these spheres is both a distinctive achievement and a necessary feature of the modern world.

To be sure, the fundamental purpose of politics is the realization of right and freedom through the “objective” configuration of social institutions regardless of the caprices of moral viewpoints; and yet the historical constitution of moral subjectivity is an important part of the very “right to subjective freedom” (i.e., the capacity of “self-reflection” and “critique”) that political communities require in order to uphold their existence. The whole point of the argument, as far as my reading of Koselleck goes, is that we cannot understand the conflictive and uncertain relationship between morality and politics in modernity if we simply treat them, as traditional liberalism often does, as completely separate spheres, the differentiation of independent totalities that cancel themselves out.

It is difficult to strike a balance between morality and politics, but one may say with Koselleck, and this applies to Hegel too, that modern politics is not the place for critique to play out the role of moral hero or true sovereign but to contribute to the rational transformation of politics into a place for citizens to engage with one another in a conflictive yet ethical order.³⁵

The Memory of Time and Power: Between Concepts and Reality

The ceremonial act of cutting the king’s head (God’s secular and mortal incarnation on earth) is perhaps one of the most striking scenes that materialize the judgmental course taken by the Enlightenment critique of sovereign power and the revolutionary political process it contributed to unfold. Taken as a general metaphor of the period, this image condenses a radical sense of discontinuity that manifests both in the actual dismemberment of the old political body and

the opening of a hiatus in temporal experience. In the writing of *Kritik und Krise*, Koselleck became convinced that this “epochal threshold” had transformed the way in which we relate to the world and that conventional forms of political theory and intellectual history were not theoretically and methodologically suited to grasp this radical transformation. Koselleck’s view was that this process could be studied by “tracking the history” of how the dissolution of the old society and the emergence of the modern world were conceptually registered.³⁶ Indeed, this claim is foundational for Koselleck’s project of conceptual history, insofar as it seeks to grasp the modern experience of temporal rupture through the linguistic traces that this alteration leaves in social and political vocabulary.

Indeed, the years from roughly 1750 to 1850 epitomize a period of major reorientation of the conceptions of historical time across European languages. With the advance of technology and science, secularization and the political upheavals of the *Ancien Régime*, a qualitative sense of “new time” (*Neuzeit*) emerged through which the present was experienced as “rupture” and a period of transition in which “the new and unexpected continually happened,” “events lost their historical secure character,” and the “expected otherness of the future” produced an “alteration in the rhythm of temporal experience.”³⁷ This consciousness of epochal uniqueness and acceleration meant that history was increasingly seen as a disposable process, a space available for human action, so the past was devaluated as source of exemplar knowledge and learning—something classically expressed in the idea of history as “magistra vitae”³⁸—the present lived as a swiftly and vanishing moment, and the future planned as a horizon of expectations.

A characteristic element of the linguistic consciousness that emerged out of this disjunction is that several concepts took the form of “categories of movement.”³⁹ Indeed, since the eighteenth century “there has hardly been a central concept of political theory or social programs which does not contain a coefficient of temporal change,” which means that “these concepts are based on the experience of the ‘loss of experience,’ and so they have to preserve or awaken new expectations.”⁴⁰ This is the case of a number of concepts, e.g., Revolution, Progress and Emancipation, whose meaning was radically transformed once their widespread use in social-political language turned them into indicators of temporal experience as well as modes of orienting action.

In this context, the notion of crisis, in particular, became “the indicator of a new awareness” that condenses all sorts of wishes and anxieties, fears and hopes.⁴¹ Koselleck’s classic essay dedicated to the history of this concept traces the complex semantic structure of crisis that, since classic Greece, articulates several meanings: juridical (legal decision and judgment); medical (diagnostic and decision in the course of an illness); and religious (eschatological event and promise of salvation). From the second half of the eighteenth century, this notion becomes “an elastic concept in time” which, by combining different interpretative possibilities (descriptive and evaluative) of the movement of events in the present, positions itself as an “autonomous concept of history” and thus as a “structural signature of modernity.”⁴² It captures in a generalized manner the

experience of the pressure of time and the urgency of situations that exceed the repository of available experiences and yet require response, judgment and action. One of the conceptual achievements of the philosophical and literary practice of the Enlightenment was to transform crisis into a “basic concept” (*Grundbegriffe*) of modern social and political language. However, as Koselleck comments, “our concept would have never become a central concept had it not acquired an additional interpretative content that reflected an experience increasingly common in daily life: economic crisis.”⁴³

This claim immediately forces the question of: what makes a notion of this kind a “concept”? What separates it from the level of “mere words” to the point of reaching the position of an almost “irreplaceable” part of the linguistic grid of modern life? All in all, what is the essence of this particular province within language that Koselleck calls *Grundbegriffe*?

The notion of *Grundbegriffe* entails a particular stance on the relations between language, temporality and social reality. Koselleck uses this term when referring to those notions that “combine manifold experiences and expectations in such a way that they become indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time.” Thus, he contends, “basic concepts are highly complex; they are always both controversial and contested.”⁴⁴ This brief but insightful formulation owes much to Koselleck’s encounters with Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and Heidegger’s phenomenology of Being, as well as to his reading of Nietzsche’s deconstruction of the Christian-bourgeois moral world.⁴⁵

A key aspect underlying the idea of *Grundbegriffe* is recognition of the fact that the human understanding of the world is linguistically mediated and that meaning-making never begins from scratch but always from a world pre-interpreted (a historically sedimented terrain of knowledge at hand).⁴⁶ This implies that a concept is not a datum of consciousness and a unified whole (as logic and metaphysics would have it) but a **hermeneutically embedded** experience which is inconceivable without the extra-linguistic elements of social and historical reality. However, this does not mean to say that there is identity between the stock of concepts available and the nonconceptual components of reality. To be sure, although concepts are essential for the linguistic articulation of knowledge and experience of the social world in a given time, this does not mean that they are epiphenomena of social reality, or that social reality can be fully grasped by its linguistic representation. As Koselleck argues, a “society and its concepts exist in a relation of tension” insofar as “there is always certain hiatus between social contents (or referents) and the linguistic usage that seeks to fix this content.”⁴⁷ Methodologically, this implies taking the hiatus as a mean to investigate the convergences and disagreements that emerge in historical processes between the concepts in use and the given state of affairs.

This leads us to acknowledge a second element in Koselleck’s understanding of *Grundbegriffe*, that is, the level of generality and ambiguity. In comparison to mere words, a defining feature of “basic concepts” is that they bundle together a plurality of semantic contents, meanings and temporal experiences. Therefore, they work as organizing principles that articulate possible relations and lines of

closure between a multiplicity of elements (words and things, facts and norms, actions and thoughts, experiences and expectations). Thus, basic concepts constitute a space that delimits a region of objects and possible actions, as well as “a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory.”⁴⁸ To be sure, concepts may stabilize and appear as hermetic black-boxes that hide this complex web of significations, but they are never fixed codes or neutral unities of meaning. Koselleck here directly appeals to a key proposition Nietzsche elaborates in the *Genealogy of Morals*: that those concepts in which entire social processes and historical experiences are “semiotically concentrated,” defy any attempt to formulate exact definitions, because “only that which does not have history can be defined.”⁴⁹ Thus, if concepts cannot be defined, they can only be “objects of interpretation.” In this capacity, “basic concepts” show as much as hide aspects of reality as they are constantly open to dispute and to be occupied by actors in their endless efforts to define social positions and the meanings of historical-political events. Seen from this perspective, a basic concept—and the work of conceptualization through which it unfolds in time—can never be a closed system of meanings without ambiguities and gaps. It is almost by definition an open and relational field of hermeneutic struggles that mobilize normative ideas, cultural images and anthropological presuppositions about the world.

A third and last attribute of *Grundbegriffe* I would like to stress consists of their capacity to become “indispensable” means to communicate and account for the pressing issues and experiences that affect social and political life. As individuals and groups attempt to make sense of the contingencies and events that shape the temporality of their existence, there are certain concepts that display an extraordinary capacity to organize experience and forms of vision and anticipation. This shows that a “basic concept” is not a mere casing of ideological representations but, as Heidegger puts it, a mode of establishing a “relation to the ground” in which we stand and, hence, a mean through which “we come in proximity with what strikes us essentially and make a claim upon us.”⁵⁰ Put in these terms, basic concepts are somehow surfaces of contact with the world, rather than shortcuts to understanding, which is why their absence often indicates the disappearance of ‘certain points of view’ and the absence of motivation to come to terms with “certain life-problems.”⁵¹ Interestingly, Koselleck translates this philosophical-phenomenological aspect into a methodological foundation of his conceptual history: insofar as the use of such concepts always leaves “linguistic traces,” we should treat them as documents of the human struggles to make sense of the conflicting relations between present, past and future. In so doing, we could argue that “basic concepts” attain their own mode of existence as material embodiments of discursive activity (comprise an economy of ways of speaking and translations, attitudes and practices), which disclose “not a piece of information about the world, [but] something about themselves, and their own relation to the world.”⁵²

The elements I just described to characterize “basic concepts,” appear condensed when Koselleck writes:

within a historical context, it becomes possible to call it a “basic concept” if and when all conflicting strata and parties find it indispensable to expressing

their distinctive experiences, interests, and party-political programs. Basic concepts come to dominate usage because at a given juncture, they register those minima commonalities without which no experience is possible, without which there could be neither conflict nor consensus. A basic concept thus comes into its own at the precise point when different strata and parties must interpret it, in order to provide insight into their respective conditions, and to achieve the capacity for action. For this reason, the semantics of what we conceptualize (*Begrifflichkeit*) is neither “subjective” nor “objective,” neither “idealistic” nor “materialistic.” In the medium of language it is always both at the same time.⁵³

Seeing in the light of Koselleck’s genealogy of modern society in *Kritik und Krise*, this formulation of “basic concepts” conveys a double methodological premise that is central for his examination and critical deconstruction of the political and social vocabulary of the Enlightenment: namely, that concepts have the semantic capacity to “register” the historical traces of power-imbued experiences of social conflict as much as the performative capacity to “participate” in the direction of social-political transformations. This twofold premise suggests, on the one hand, that insofar as we consider that concepts are capable of articulating and storing entire social and historical processes, the experiences that define the anatomy of an epoch can be deciphered through its central concepts; on the other hand, it too implies that concepts are practical factors of the reality and objects they seek to describe, as agents creatively use concepts to shape social reality and conduct the course of history. In this dual capacity, concepts work as mediators that set boundaries of what is sayable and a horizon of potential experience (provide tools for understanding and meaning-making), as well as vehicles of action, instruments of orientation and social positioning.⁵⁴

Based on this proposition, I shall suggest that Koselleck’s investigation into the history of modernity’s “basic concepts” (*Grundbegriffe*) offers itself as a critique of the mystification of concepts and thus as a potentially fruitful complement to critical theory’s quest of elucidating power-imbued experiences of social conflict and resisting forms of ideological closure of meaning and action. Indeed, my view is that Koselleck’s work intersects with the methodological importance critical theorists grant to concepts as means to elucidate the operation of power and disclose forms of social domination.

It is not a secret that the analytical focus on concepts is often seen by sociologists as a way of avoiding the empirical analysis of social reality, an escape route that covers systematic explanations with the clothes of plain intellectual history. However, one of the greatest contributions of Marx’s critique of political economy is to have devised a way of social theorizing in which the critique of concepts is a key and unavoidable moment in the critique of society. This means that to address the contradictions of capitalist society, the analysis of the objective configuration of social relations has to go hand in hand with the examination of the prevalent representations, ideas and norms that social actors employ to make sense of the world. This is so because the operation and expansion of the logic of commodity exchange in social life produces its own “real abstractions,” to the extent that a

society based on the commodity-form becomes an autonomous concept divorced from lived experience and everyday human labor. To be sure, real abstractions are not arbitrary or logical constructions of the human intellect but social-historical embedded results whose formation, validity and transformation have to be explained immanently rather than externally. From this perspective, the suggestion that concepts may attain the status of real abstractions in social life implies drawing attention to their regulatory force and effects over concrete social relations as well as to the fact that social relations and actions themselves may congeal into certain conceptual forms.

A detailed account of Marx's notion of real abstractions as an essential feature of the capitalist mode of production exceeds the scope of my paper.⁵⁵ For the sake of the argument, though, I must add that this notion is key for critical social theory insofar as it challenges two epistemological standpoints in the social sciences which are founded on the customary separation between the conceptual and the empirical: namely, the assumption that these are two fundamentally different ontological domains and the inclination to elevate one above the other. Marx's dialectical understanding of real abstraction refers to conceptual forms which do not spring from the solitude of human subjectivity but from the very actions and relations between individuals, and yet these conceptual forms inhabit and translate into subjective ideas, forms of self-understanding and everyday practices. This proposition works against the temptation to see the social world as a purely empirical object (for factual reality itself is conceptually mediated and constituted) and to use concepts as mere external representations (for social life produces its own forms of abstraction). For the purposes of critical social theory, the implication of Marx's proposition is clear: to address real abstractions as sociological abstractions.

Now, if I draw on this general description it is not to suggest that Koselleck's approach to *Grundbegriffe* may be equated with Marx's approach to *Real Abstraktion*, but that the former may offer a suitable methodological path to trace the "movement" of the latter. To be sure, Koselleck's book *Kritik und Krise* in no way claims to offer a materialist critique of bourgeois political economy. Rather, it focuses on a critique of the economy of political discourse of bourgeois thought so as to explain how "the political and social vocabulary of the Enlightenment acts as a means by which we can decode the political concepts and ideologies of the modern world."⁵⁶ Even so, my view is that Koselleck's work, regardless of its original intentions, configures a critical hermeneutics that brings a new impetus to the claim that the critique of society cannot do without a critique of the concepts that mobilize our ways of thinking and systems of knowledge.⁵⁷ It does so in a way that brings to the fore the socio-historical constitution and transformation of concepts in the plurality of practical struggles for definition in which social actors become involved when coping with problems.

Conceptual history, therefore, may become a kind of "antidote" to what Adorno calls in *Negative Dialectics* the "autarky of the concept," that is, the intellectual semblance of "being in itself" like a self-sufficient and transparent unit of meaning exempted from reality. A concept is a concept insofar as "it is entwined with a non-conceptual whole," which means that the concept becomes

a moment of the empirical but which can never be identical with it.⁵⁸ Thus, what dissolves conceptual fetishism is the insight that concepts have attained their existence under certain conditions and that the process of “their becoming fades and dwells within things” themselves.⁵⁹ Hence, if society cannot be known with independence of its concepts, critical theory cannot but proceed by localizing the conflicts and historicizing the contradictions immanent to our present conceptual frameworks, while following the linguistic traces of power and its dislocations in our present forms of life.

A Clause of Non-Closure: Between Experience and Expectation

The discussion of Koselleck’s work so far has allowed me to draw some key implications from his political genealogy of the Western modern world, which I suggest carry a philosophical as well as a sociological edge that may be read as contributions to critical theory.

One is associated to with perplexities immanent to the practical and normative involvement of critique in political life. In particular, there is Koselleck’s concern with the pathologies of subjectivism of social criticism in modern politics: i.e., the moralization of its objects and the de-politicization of its consequences. The ambivalence of the Enlightenment, which he observes as internal to the dialectic between critique and crisis, lies in that the freedom of critique to tier down the semblance of normality and unity of what exists is not free of the illusions of wholeness that haunt the religious and political discourses to which it opposes and seeks to debunk. But the pathologies of the critical practice do not mean that critique should be thought separated from the ground in which it stands, social life itself. On the contrary, if critique divorces from experience and the conflicts of the day by taking refuge in utopian fantasies or melancholic despair, it is precisely because the existing constellation of social relations contains both normative and practical conditions that create divisions that turn subjectivity apart from objectivity (and, for that matter, particularism from universalism, morality from politics, concepts from reality, norms from practices), or rather produce forms of ideological unanimity that make it difficult to grasp the actual fissures that inhabit the ground of social and political life.

The other element I have also stressed has to do with the generative distance between language and actuality that informs Koselleck’s theorization of “basic concepts.” According to this view, temporal experience and social reality are not possible without linguistic formulations, yet they are neither exhausted nor identical with their linguistic articulation.⁶⁰ The fact that the surface of conceptual language is unable to apprehend all elements of social reality directly (and sometimes says even more than the thing it represents), is not a cognitive defect due to the lack of adequate definitions of our concepts but rather due to the certain undecidability of social life itself. This intrinsic elusiveness, however, is not an impediment for subjects to use concepts to produce interpretations of the world and come to terms with its problems, it is the very cause that makes meaning-making possible in the first place.⁶¹ Thus, Koselleck’s suggestion is to take

concepts as means to decode experiences of social conflict and the political anatomy of an epoch, insofar as we conceive concepts as material embodiments of discursive activity and organizing principles for reading the world. Taken in this sense, a concept is almost by definition a domain of struggles between what is real and what is possible, and therefore a site where potentials for disobedience and critique as well as for domination and exclusion are both inscribed right from the beginning.

Still, there is a third implication relevant for the purposes of thinking Koselleck's hidden dialog with critical theory, namely, the "normative agenda" of his intellectual project since *Kritik und Krise*. This could be described in terms of the attempt to develop a concept of history that becomes normatively and epistemologically significant as an alternative to philosophies of history that reduce the plurality of temporal regimes and historical processes to a singular "ought," determinate cause or idea of final reconciliation.⁶² As it is well-known, this is a lasting concern in the post-Hegelian tradition of critical theory. In particular, one may suggest that Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* shares the main diagnosis and concerns of Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise*. Their book is passionately committed to the view that the alleged program of Enlightenment critique ultimately reverts into a self-destruction of reason and of the world it wishes to disclose: regression rather than progress, domination rather than freedom, delusion rather than truth, barbarism rather than justice, darkness rather than lightness. For them the totalizing trust in reason as a normative foundation of progress means that "for enlightenment the process [of history] is always decided from the start."⁶³

However close Koselleck's analysis of the Enlightenment may seem to Adorno and Horkheimer's, he is reluctant to accept the negative anthropology that underlies their main thesis. From the Koselleckean perspective, such analysis would resort to a concept of history in the singular which, again, reduces the constitutive openness of history and plurality of human action, removing contingency and the unpredictable from our current relation to time. A possible way to challenge this reductionism, which Koselleck himself was responsible of in his early work, would be "contained in the anthropological presupposition that language and history, discourse and action, do not fully coincide. . . . In this lack of coincidence rests the plurality of possible justifications [of history],"⁶⁴ that is, of the form in which a society articulates the relations between past, present and future. Thus, the non-identity between concepts and world makes impossible to conceive, in content and form, total concepts. "History takes place in the anticipation of incompleteness," therefore, "any interpretation that is adequate to it must dispense with totality."⁶⁵

Still, to base his argument on the constitutive openness, incompleteness and plurality of history, Koselleck draws attention to an additional element: the very gap between "the space of experience" and "the horizon of expectation" that configures modern temporality and which "has left its mark on our political and social language to this day."⁶⁶ As I commented in the previous section, the increasing separation between experience and expectation is one of the distinctive elements that gives shape to modern temporality. The main consequence of

this historical transformation is that it brought about a new qualitative sense of time in which the present is lived as a rupture and experienced as a period of transition. Indeed, the underlying thesis of *Kritik und Krise* is that the space of experience and the horizon of expectation actually split apart in modernity, even to a point in which is no longer recognizable for individuals due to the narrowing of the space of experience and the withdrawal of the horizon of expectations.

But the structural distinction between “space of experience” and “horizon of expectations” is not simply significant because the increasing separation between them is a phenomenon that takes place and becomes possible in European modernity only. Koselleck rather takes this separation itself as a mean to investigate the configuration of political ideologies as well as a normative point of reference upon which forms of ideological closure, especially in the realm of history, may be contested. In his view, experience and expectation are two meta-historical categories, anthropological conditions that make temporal experience and understanding possible.⁶⁷ This quasi-transcendental nature, though, does not mean that these categories are fixed; on the contrary, the relationship between experience and expectation is a varying one, which is why they serve as indicators of changes in temporal experience and consciousness. This difference is what makes possible to identify different temporal layers in which the novelty of unique events coexists with the persistence of structures of repetition. So Koselleck writes:

The unity of a series of events lies empirically there where a surprise is experienced. Experiencing a surprise means that something happens differently than previously thought. Suddenly you are faced with a novum, that is, a minimum temporal that generated between before and after. The continuum linking past experience and future expectation is broken and must be constituted again. It is this irreversible minimum temporal between before and after which introduces surprises in us. So we try again and again to interpret it.⁶⁸

A conclusion we can draw from this formulation is that social life is never a complete and fully transparent work; it is interrupted, broken in the middle, as it were. Thus the tensions, frictions and conflicts between experience and expectation in the concrete processes of self-understanding of modern society cannot be avoided. Still, this gap works as a clause of non-closure, that is, an in-between space that is normatively significant because it defies, albeit it does not prevent, attempts at claiming that the social world is a solid unity and essential whole founded around one principle. It is precisely because there is a hiatus between past experience and future expectation that history is not a mere succession of events in a chain of lineal progress but the space where something new can emerge; and yet the discontinuity of the new cannot be meaningfully articulated without the continuity of a common memory or being affected by the past. To be sure, we may wish to guide our present actions toward the future without any anchorage in prior experience (utopia), and we may too try to seek security from the contingencies of the future in images of a frozen past (tradition). However,

both alternatives misrecognize the crucial fact that these two poles are not simply opposed; they configure a structural difference, a gap and a relation of mutual mediation without which thinking about history as an open, plural phenomenon is practically impossible.

Indeed, as critique is embedded in the concrete processes of self-understanding of society, it cannot but operate in the interplay between past experiences (i.e., received meaning, concepts and traditions, memory of actions and suffering) and future expectations (i.e., hopes and projects, promises and fears) that define the temporality of these processes and the conflicts of the present. For without any form of duration there would be no truth, but without any hope of transcendence there would be no justice. In this moving terrain, critique seems to operate according to a double logic: it is always seeking to lose anchorage in acquired experience and naturalized practices that produce distortions and contradictions (logic of disintegration) while intending to outline the prospects of unprecedented forms of life that transcend a current problematic state of affairs (logic of disclosure).

The issue at stake in Koselleck's formulation is that although the space in between experience and expectation can expand or contract in specific social-historical contexts—as happens in periods of revolution and crisis, but also due to the inner logic of capitalist expansion and accumulation—we should not let the tension between them become a “schism” between unrelated identities.⁶⁹ This idea carries a clear normative and political meaning for critical theory and for the practice of critique more generally. After all, without the preservation of this in-between space there is no standpoint for a meaningful description of the world, no perspective for a compelling critique of society. For if critique is actually entangled in this moving and open terrain, the task of disclosing new meanings and practices becomes empty and lost without past experiences and existing forms of life; while the struggle to dissolve given meanings, norms and practices that produce domination becomes blind and even tyrannical without projects that we may act upon. To put it differently, if critique is a form of resistance to accept that there is one truth, one principle, one foundation, it has to keep the riddle of history open, without closure, by constantly widening the horizons of expectation but without divorcing them from experience. To strike a precarious balance between these two contradictory impulses is perhaps one of the most challenging issues for the practice of critique.

Closing Remarks

In this chapter I have been concerned with the contributions that Koselleck's original approach to the political genealogy of the modern world can make to critical social theory. His thesis of the dialectics between critique and crisis, in particular, reverses the customary and equally important interest that critical theorists have shown in theorizing critique as a subjective response to objective situations of crisis, that is, a kind of crisis theory and diagnosis. A key proposition that underlies Koselleck's analysis, though, is that in order to understand the historical collapse of the cultural and political structures of traditional society,

on the one hand, and explore its lasting traces in the configuration of the modern world, on the other, we need to reconsider the very role social criticism performs as a participant in the revolutionary process. And this means to conceptualize the disruptive potential of the critical practice as materially embodied in acts that problematize the reality claims that sustain power relations. What is interesting about Koselleck's point of departure is not simply the identification of the affinity between critique and crisis within the Enlightenment, i.e., that critique may initiate, enact and further a process of political crisis, but the dialectical logic that connects both moments, i.e., that this process may then turn against the critical practice itself and contradict its normative purposes.

The fact that claims of critique are so deeply bonded to acts of disruption of stabilized relations, norms and practices, may explain why these claims often engender a more or less acute sense of crisis. As the things submitted to the all-embracing capacity of the critical gaze are called into question, they are deprived, at least for a moment, of their claims of completion, certainty, consistency and order. Understood in this way, the beginning of crisis depends, first, on the capacity of critique to introduce dissonance in the self-evident assumptions of what is accepted as it is and, second, on the competence of critique to expose the fragile condition of the institutional frameworks and the immanent contradictions of the normativity currently in place. The capacity of questioning is, to be sure, a cognitive faculty of living subjects but its materialization, as concrete claims of knowledge and justification, judgment and decision, becomes possible only in a historical space of existing social relations. This makes it impossible to conceive critique as external to the vicissitudes of the crisis-ridden processes it helps to unfold, which often exceed critique's own capacity to control and predict the outcomes, and therefore as external to the political struggles for interpretation and action that crisis situations open and intensify—within which the quest of critique has no guarantee of succeeding.

Koselleck's main conclusion is that the inability to comprehend the reality of this dialectic, and take it seriously, is a factor that triggers the destructive excesses of utopianism and political fantasies that promise future redemption from the evils of the present, but without really engaging with the contingencies and uncertainties implied in constituting and sustaining a form of human life in common. This problem not only applies to the so-called Reign of Terror of the French Revolution but also to the nation-based utopias of totalitarianism, in which the principle of ethnic purity renders critique into absolute negativity that models itself on the natural movement of history,⁷⁰ and the market-based utopias of neoliberal capitalism, in which the economic imperative to compete rationalizes crisis as a permanent and necessary price to pay for the production of more freedom, happiness and wealth.⁷¹

While reflecting on the vicissitudes of the practice of critique in relation to the experience of crisis in modernity, Koselleck brings about a number of potentially fruitful insights for a critical theory attentive to the diremptions that both configure and threaten to damage life in common. The value and actuality of these contributions to critical theory lie, first and foremost, in recognizing that whenever critique elevates itself as an intellectual force that claims independence from historical

experience and social conditions, it closes off politics as a realm of human action. Thus, self-awareness of the excesses of subjectivism (i.e., the difficulties in striking a balance between the moral and the political dimensions of social criticism) is essential for critical theory's struggle against the logic of closure that drives forms of ideological unanimity.

For critical social theory this is a fundamental concern as it places the question of how to find a space between the defense of the right to human freedom and the comprehension of the actuality of the world as it is. Koselleck does not claim to answer this difficult problem but his work on conceptual history (understood as a critical hermeneutics) does contribute to the understanding of the very need to keep such space open in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it devises a way to grasp the unbridgeable distance between language and actuality as a generative space of meaning in which concepts may achieve the discursive potential to construct as much as the objective capacity to destroy—this works as a clause of non-identity between concepts and society. On the other hand, it recovers a sense of the constitutive openness of history which expresses itself in the structural gap between space of experience and horizon of expectation that characterizes modern temporality—this works as a clause of non-closure of history. It is by keeping in sight both clauses, I contend, that critical theory may continue to defend the epistemic claim to examine the development and contradictions of current social forms, and uphold the normative claim to reopen the world and explore other ways of living together. It is precisely for this reason that we may still say that critique should preserve crisis as one of its constitutive moments.

Notes

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, "Zur Kritik an der Geschichtsphilosophie," in *Philosophisch-politische Profile* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), 435–444.
- 2 Peter Wagner, *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation: A New Sociology of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).
- 3 María Pía Lara, *The Disclosure of Politics. Struggles over the Semantics of Secularization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- 4 William Scheuerman, "Unsolved Paradoxes: Conservative Political Thought in Adenauer's Germany," in *Confronting Mass Democracy and Industrial Technology: Political and Social from Nietzsche to Habermas*, ed. John McCormick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 221–244.
- 5 Kathleen Davis, "The Sense of an Epoch: Periodization, Sovereignty, and the Limits of Secularization," in *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory*, eds. Andrew Cole and Vance Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 39–69.
- 6 Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 19.
- 7 Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 192; Olsen, *History in the Plural*, 14.
- 8 To avoid treating "critical theory" as an empty vessel, I conceptualize it as an interdisciplinary form of knowledge intended to grasp the development and contradictions of current forms of life in common (description and diagnosis) as well as an ethically driven form of assessment of the practical, cognitive and institutional conditions that limit human self-determination (normativity and disclosure). See Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume; Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans.

- Gregory Elliott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory,” in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. James Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 19–42.
- 9 Robert Fine, *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2001); Robert Fine, “Natural Law and Critical Theory: Bringing Rights Back In,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 13, no. 2 (2013): 222–238; Axel Honneth, “Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy,” in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 3–48.
- 10 Reinhart Koselleck, “Neuzeit: Remarks on the Semantics of Modern Concepts of Movement,” in *Futures Pasts: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 246–247; Reinhart Koselleck, “Concepts of Historical Time and Social History,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke and Jobst Welge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 114–130.
- 11 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Peter Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere,” *October* 73 (1995): 27–54; Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, eds, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).
- 12 Hauke Brunkhorst, “Crisis,” in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*, ed. William Outhwaite (London: Blackwell, 2003), 130–133; Piet Strydom, *Discourse and Knowledge: The Making of the Enlightenment Sociology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).
- 13 Rodrigo Cordero, “Crisis and Critique in Jürgen Habermas’s Social Theory,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 17, no. 4 (2014): 497–515; Hauke Brunkhorst, “Crisis and Critique: Return of Marxism?,” in *Hegel’s Twilight: Liber Amicorum Discipulorumque Pro Heinz Kimmerle*, ed. Mogobe Ramose (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodolpi, 2013), 151–192.
- 14 Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
- 15 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 19 Giorgio Tonelli, “Critique and Related Terms Prior to Kant: A Historical Survey,” *Kant-Studien* 69, no. 2 (1978): 119–148.
- 20 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 109.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 183; Reinhart Koselleck, “The Temporalization of Utopia,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke and Jobst Welge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 87–89.
- 23 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 183.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 98.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 134. It is important to stress here that Koselleck’s argument should not be read as a rejection of utopia per se but as a critique of utopianism as a model of political planning based on a dualist interpretation of the world and final decisions. Utopias are imaginative visions of a better political and social life whose power lies in that their normative content may actually orient human action and thus contribute to disclose alternatives to the existing order of the world; without this horizon of expectations, politics would be reduced to a domain of “specialists without spirit.” However, the problem for Koselleck consists of the pathological distortions to which utopian thought leads to when it proceeds with independence of historical experience and social conditions. For it creates an image of the future upon which the actor, like a “sensualist without heart,” liberates himself from responsibility as the course of things

is already decided. In Koselleck's view, utopian excesses should be confronted by recovering a strong sense of the contingency and plurality of historical times, which often "run differently than how we are retrospectively and anticipatively generally forced to interpret them. Actual history is always different than we are capable of imagining," Koselleck, "The Temporalization of Utopia," 99. And this implies accepting the unattainability of all utopias rather than doing away with utopian thought altogether. The problematic place of utopia in modernity is particularly relevant for critical theory, for it has to maintain confidence in the idea of a good society projected upon a horizon of future possibilities, yet it has to avoid the risk of metaphysical closure of historical processes and human action that imposes a dream of final reconciliation. Thus, the emancipatory perspective of critical theory has to work with a certain metaphysical image of a better social condition and adhere to its normative power, but assuming its immanent contestability and elusiveness in social reality; see Maeve Cooke, "Redeeming Redemption: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Social Theory," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 4 (2004): 413–429.

27 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 122.

28 Barrington Moore, *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 67.

29 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 146.

30 Brunkhorst, "Crisis," 131.

31 This reading of Koselleck's position must, however, consider three important limitations. One is the risk of teleological simplification implicit in Koselleck's intention to interpret the formation of eighteenth-century utopian thought as an explanatory factor of the "pathogenesis" of modernity, and therefore a factor from which one can deduce the preconditions of twentieth-century political ideologies (e.g., Nazism and those in the Cold War) as part of one single historical process. The second questionable aspect is Koselleck's tendency throughout the book to portray the absolutist state and the monarchy as the passive victims of a historical movement working behind the scenes and driven by the critical weapons of the bourgeoisie. This approach certainly undermines his own attempt to avoid one-dimensional interpretations. Another problematic aspect in Koselleck's study is the paradoxical absence of any problematization of the changing meanings of the main notions that structure his thesis; the sharp distinction between the social and the political. To be sure, he does account for the historical transformations of the meanings of the concepts of critique and crisis, but he rather takes for granted the concepts of the social and the political. The issue that Koselleck seems to overlook is that the redefinition of the meaning of these fields was a substantive part of the historical struggle he was trying to explain, which is one of the reasons why he tends to equate the social with private morality and the political with the institutional structures of the state and sovereign power. This is an issue he partially addressed in his later work on conceptual history. For discussion on this point, see Timo Pankakoski, "Conflicts, Context, Concreteness: Koselleck and Schmitt on Concepts," *Political Theory* 38, no. 6 (2010): 749–779.

32 Georg W. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

33 *Ibid.*, Preface.

34 *Ibid.*, 5.

35 Domenico Losurdo, *Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns*, trans. Marella Morris and John Morris (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

36 Reinhart Koselleck, "Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011): 1–37.

37 Koselleck, "Neuzeit," 240–246.

38 Reinhart Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the *Topos* into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process," in *Futures Pasts. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 26–42.

- 39 Reinhart Koselleck, "Temporalization of Concepts," *Redescriptions. Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 1 (1997): 16–24.
- 40 Koselleck, "Neuzeit," 248, 252.
- 41 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 160.
- 42 Reinhart Koselleck, "Crisis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 371–377.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 389. According to Koselleck, the expansion of the notion of crisis beyond the spheres of theology, law and medicine is an invention of the nineteenth century. From 1857 on, more specifically, this term began to be employed to describe the frequent and often catastrophic upheavals of the financial markets and capitalist exchange. Indeed, Marx's critique of political economy shows in a nutshell the controversies over the exact meaning of crisis as a social-scientific term to understand the capitalist mode of production. An important precedent for this transformation had taken place at the end of the eighteenth century with Rousseau. As Koselleck argues in *Kritik und Krise*, although there was a connection between the political crisis of the absolutist state and the rise of bourgeois philosophies of history, crisis was not a central concept in the vocabulary of social critics and the politics of the French Revolution. In this context, Rousseau was the first of the philosophers of the revolution to describe the preceding events as signs of a forthcoming crisis. In so doing, Koselleck claims, Rousseau proved himself to be a political thinker rather than an epigone of the revolution; Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 161. Now, Koselleck's concern with the political meaning of the concept of crisis not only goes back to the equivocal place this notion had in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, it is also strongly influenced by the experience of political and social fragmentation in the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), a period in which the talk of crisis served the purposes of a variety of ideological positions regarding the German situation. For an overview of the concept of crisis in the Weimar Republic, see Rüdiger Graf and Moritz Föllmer, "The Culture of 'Crisis' in the Weimar Republic," *Thesis Eleven* 111, no. 1 (2012): 36–47.
- 44 Reinhart Koselleck, "A Response to Comments on the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe," in *The Meanings of Historical Terms and Concepts. New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte*, eds. Harmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1996), 62.
- 45 Olsen, *History in the Plural*, 26–29. In addition to these influences, Carl Schmitt also serves as a major source of inspiration in Koselleck's argument that the essential social and political modern concepts are secularized theological notions; see Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, ed. and trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005). For instructive discussion on the influence of Schmitt in Koselleck's work, see William Scheuerman, "Unsolved Paradoxes," 221–244; Reinhard Mehring, "Carl Schmitt and His Influence on Historians," *Cardozo Law Review* 21, no. 5–6 (200): 1653–1664; Niklas Olsen, "Carl Schmitt, Reinhart Koselleck and the Foundations of History and Politics," *History of European Ideas* 37, no. 2 (2011): 197–208.
- 46 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004).
- 47 Reinhart Koselleck, "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History," in *Futures Pasts. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 76, 86–87; see also Reinhart Koselleck, "Social History and Conceptual History," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke and Jobst Welge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 20–37.
- 48 Koselleck, "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History," 86.
- 49 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 53.
- 50 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, trans. Gary W. Aylesworth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 16.

- 51 Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (Orlando: Harcourt, 1985), 274.
- 52 Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 50.
- 53 Koselleck, "Introduction and Prefaces," 32.
- 54 Koselleck, "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History," 86.
- 55 See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978).
- 56 Jason Edwards, "Critique and Crisis Today: Koselleck, Enlightenment and the Concept of Politics," *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, no. 4 (2006): 441.
- 57 The use I make here of "critical hermeneutics" draws directly from Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 208–226. For a recent elaboration of "critical hermeneutics" as a method and philosophical approach in the human sciences, see Jonathan Roberge, "What Is Critical Hermeneutics?," *Thesis Eleven* 106, no. 1 (2006): 5–22.
- 58 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 12.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 60 Koselleck, "Social History and Conceptual History"; Koselleck, "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History."
- 61 See Margarita Palacios, *Radical Sociality: On Disobedience, Violence and Belonging* (London: Palgrave, 2013).
- 62 Olsen, *History in the Plural*, 42–52.
- 63 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Verso, 1997), 24.
- 64 Reinhart Koselleck, "Cambio de experiencia y cambio de método: Un apunte histórico-antropológico," in *Los estratos del tiempo: estudios sobre la historia*, trans. Daniel Innerarity (Barcelona: Paidós, 2001), 75 [my translation].
- 65 Koselleck, "Social History and Conceptual History," 23–24.
- 66 Reinhart Koselleck, "Concepts of Historical Time and Social History," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke and Jobst Welge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 129.
- 67 Reinhart Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories," in *Futures Pasts. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255–275.
- 68 Reinhart Koselleck, "Estratos del tiempo," in *Los estratos del tiempo: estudios sobre la historia*, trans. Daniel Innerarity (Barcelona: Paidós, 2001), 39 [my translation].
- 69 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 215–216.
- 70 See Chapter 5 in this volume.
- 71 See Chapter 6 in this volume.

Part III

Fragile Foundations/ Political Struggles

5 The Fragile World In-Between

Totalitarian Destruction and the Modesty of Critical Thinking— Hannah Arendt

Introduction

Totalitarianism is by far the most decisive political experience that marked Hannah Arendt's intellectual and personal life. In the concluding pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she described it as “the crisis of our century.”¹ She was well aware, though, that “crisis” was a necessary but not the best-suited notion to apprehend the incomprehensible drama of violence, terror and suffering experienced by large groups of population under Nazi and Stalinist rule. As a motto of modern politics, crisis suggests immediate analogies with other forms of social disintegration, political catastrophe and ideological domination existing in the history of Western modern societies. Arendt repeatedly stressed that such an analogical way of thinking was a common currency of positivist social and historical sciences, which in the lure for systematic descriptions and causal explanations failed to grasp the “phenomenal differences” that made totalitarianism “totalitarian.” For Arendt defended the idea that totalitarian domination is truly “unprecedented” to the extent that it transforms permanent terror and human destruction into a “new” principle of government that not only defies scientific comparisons but also precludes the possibility of political reconciliation.²

After knowing the first reports on Hitler's Final Solution in 1943 and 1944, Arendt was reluctant to believe like many of her fellow contemporaries the horrors of the concentration camps. The images of industrial fabrication of corpses exceeded the most untreatable pathologies of liberal democracy and even the wildest dreams of modern instrumental rationality; they testified to human actions that could not “be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives.”³ Therefore, it was not easy to come to terms with a destructive force that seemed unrecognizable for human understanding and even alien to our modern world, yet she insisted that totalitarianism had occurred “in the midst of human society” and not elsewhere. As Arendt commented to her friend and mentor, Karl Jaspers, the struggle to comprehend totalitarian domination lies in the radical logic of terror it unleashes. In comparison with traditional forms of revolutionary violence, which predicate the political destruction of the city upon the utopian founding of new institutions and forms of belonging, totalitarian violence obliterates any concern with the durability of the common world. For it is not simply a form of excessive violence aimed to injure and annihilate people

framed as dangerous enemies according to normative conceptions of the world (as dictatorships often do), it is actually a form of government that can only survive through nihilistically dissolving the plurality of human texture that makes meaningful social relations and free political action possible in the first place. Totalitarianism is, literally, “an organized attempt to eradicate the concept of the human being.”⁴ That is, a political attempt to separate “human life” from its concrete human form by means of reducing it to its biological determination as “naked life,” a life without concept and therefore a “thing” deprived of political-juridical protection and potentials of becoming a form of being with others.⁵ For Arendt this is precisely what yields “the crisis of our century,” the fact that the practical disintegration of political institutions (i.e., nation-states, parties, constitutional government) becomes deeply entangled with the ideological shattering of the concept of humanity *tout court*.

Still, in what ways does this general picture of totalitarian phenomena as a self-destructive and unprecedented force fit conventional meanings of crisis often linked to moments of functional disruption that are recurrent, if not normal, in capitalist societies? The aim of this chapter is to examine the conceptual, methodological and normative stakes involved in Arendt’s treatment of totalitarian experience as the defining and most radical “crisis” of modern times. This exercise, though, is not an exegetic clarification intended to draw from her writings any coherent “model” of social and political crises. The point is rather to explore the question of the possibilities of the practice of critique in relation to a power that destroys the very elements that sustain a free political community in a movement of relentless criticism of everything that seems objective and human. More specifically, what is the meaning and import of critique in times of political emergency, especially when crisis is transformed into an enduring state of instability and elevated to a principle of political rule? How to articulate a response to a radical movement that seems to leave no more options to individuals than embrace absolute negativity (perpetrators) or become passive observers of destruction (bystanders)? For Arendt these were real dilemmas involved in the intellectual task of confronting the originality of totalitarian terror and the political struggle against the “totalitarian elements” that persist and reproduce in post-totalitarian societies.

In what follows I shall address these concerns by considering Arendt’s phenomenological approach to crisis events in modernity. For her crisis phenomena are relevant as reminders of the fragile condition of social life, as they bring to the surface of our everyday existence the fact that the world we have in common is not an essential whole but a delicate web of words and things, an “in-between” space whose durability does not depend on single-transcendental principles but on the plurality and unpredictability of human action. But what makes a crisis a crisis? Arendt’s response is fairly conventional, namely, crisis is the *epoché* that puts into question and denaturalizes the sense of order upon which we ordinarily rely to move through and orient ourselves in the world with others. What is less obvious is her particular emphasis on the direct link between crisis and world, insofar as what is at stake “in every crisis” is the possibility that “a piece of the world, something common to all of us, is destroyed.”⁶ A minimum criterion for

recognizing such destruction, at least in political matters, is not the immediate appearance of systemic failures—despite their important functional effects—but the more elusive and complex “failure of common sense.” That is, the disappearance of the realm of meaning that allows subjects to experience reality from different perspectives while preventing them from falling into the loneliness of their inner subjectivity.

This approach to crisis events in social and political life, I argue, opens up a twofold problem which is central to Arendt’s critical engagement with totalitarian forms of power: the quest of understanding and the demand of response. The issue of understanding is linked to phenomena that challenge our human capacities of “making sense” inasmuch as they dislocate the meaning of traditional concepts and categories of thought and judgment. It is precisely this lack of adequate definitions that, paradoxically, makes crisis situations so prone to be subsumed under preconceived explanations and logical models of analysis that obscure the understanding of “phenomenal differences.” This inclination to the closure of meaning in crisis situations concerns Arendt not only because it reflects the cognitive flaw of our frameworks and descriptions. It also reveals a serious normative failure to confront the factual reality of crisis events that affect the common world, for a crisis demands from us to offer a response to problems for which we no longer possess an adequate principle of response. This may explain the all too human inclination to try to master the uncertainties of crisis situations through acts of sovereign decision, but at the cost of canceling out the political space for individuals to act in concert.

The destructive experience of totalitarian terror radicalizes these aporias even to the point of making them appear superfluous, as if meaning were dependent of the abstract rules of reasoning (rather than mediated by the socio-historical character of conceptual forms) and actions were immediate translations of higher principles (rather than the unpredictable result of common human experience). In this regard, the import of the practice of critique lies in bringing back to the fore the unsolved contradictions that inhabit the worldly experience of crisis. This may seem a hopeless undertaking in times of political emergency. Yet, in the face of the political excesses that shatter the space for human existence denying freedom and dignity, the ultimate political gesture of critique is moderation: to open a topos where one can sustain a position in the world to “stop-and-think” what we are doing.

The World “In-Between”: On the Fragility of Human Affairs

In order to capture the phenomenological meaning of Arendt’s claim that totalitarianism is “the crisis of our century,” we need to draw attention to her topological understanding of the human world as an “in-between” space. In her view the ultimate object of the “hidden mechanics” of totalitarian terror is precisely dismantling the structure of this space. Inasmuch as terror works against the texture of “all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world,” it dissolves them “into a conglomeration where everything seems to have lost specific value, and has become unrecognizable for human comprehension [i.e., meaning], unusable for human purpose [i.e., action].”⁷

In many of her writings, Arendt describes the common world as an interstitial space, the “in-between” (*Zwischen*). To begin tracing the meaning of this central yet elusive term, we can direct our attention to some of Arendt’s texts from the 1950s, the period immediately after the writing of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and before the publication of *On Revolution* (1963).⁸ In December 1952, Arendt writes in her thought diary (*Denktagebuch*):

As soon as there are many men, a specific de-deified sphere begins. This sphere is precisely what God could not create . . . because in the plurality the in-between is established as a merely human realm, not ideal, which from the idea as such cannot be foreseen or mastered.⁹

In a later fragment from the unfinished project *Introduction into Politics* (*Einführung in die Politik*), Arendt expands her explanation of the nature and significance of the “in-between”:

[W]henever human beings come together—be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically—a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another. Every such space has its own structure that changes over time and reveals itself in a private context as custom, in a social context as convention, and in a public context as laws, constitutions, statutes, and the like. Wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space [*Zwischen-Raum*] where all human affairs are conducted.¹⁰

The cited passages suggest that the “in-between” is, strictly speaking, a space that “comes into being” among human beings, as it emerges from the existential condition of being-together in the world as a “plurality” of individuals through the mediation of speech and action.¹¹ In Arendt’s thought, the “in-between” is thus equivalent to the world and, in turn, the world can only exist structured as an “in-between.” This means that the world, as a space that is common and does not belong to anyone in particular, relates people to each other precisely because it creates a gap that separates them. Thus, the “in-between” is the essential principle that makes social life possible, as it constitutes the middle ground where we can ultimately appear before, act with, be seen by and move among others, as well as the abyss that reveals that society is not founded on an essence, center or final ground. This conception immediately prevents us from indulging in the idea that the world is a solid unity and essential whole; it is, rather, akin to the shape of a fragile crystal that requires care to ensure its luminosity and permanence. The interstitial space of the “in-between” atrophies whenever the plurality of its members is dismantled, either by their radical fusion into a homogeneous mass that eliminates singularity or by an absolute separation that condemns them to solitary existence. The materialization of both possibilities is the core of Arendt’s critique of capitalist mass society and her analysis of the “originality” of totalitarian terror.

As Arendt describes it in *The Human Condition*, the “in-between” is far from being reducible to an empirical, physical space. To be sure, material things give

the world its distinct “objectivity” and “durability” as they generate “specific worldly interests” which lie “between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.”¹² Without the “stabilizing” function of this world of material things and human artifacts, there would be only the “eternal movement” of nature but neither objectivity nor remembrance.¹³ However, this material constitution does not exhaust the meaning of the world “in-between,” it is actually “overgrown with an altogether different in-between [that] owes its origin exclusively to men’s acting and speaking directly to one another.”¹⁴ This “in-between” configures what Arendt calls “the ‘web’ of human relationships,” which “for all its intangibility, is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common.”¹⁵ We can see in these remarks that the “in-between” is a category that designates a world of relationships constituted by the presence of others rather than by a substantive identity that draws us back to an original unity and forth to a common destiny. It entails a radical social ontology in which our individual existence is, right from the beginning, co-existence and sociation with other individuals capable of speech and action. The “in-between,” therefore, names the constitutive distance between individuals where a specifically human life can begin and where life in society becomes worth living. Insofar as the world appears different to every person according to their position in it, there is room for symbolization, meaning making and judgment, that is to say, for words to be heard, deeds to be seen, and events to be discussed and remembered. So the “in-between” indicates that the world is an open space of “perspectives” in which it becomes possible to recognize that “both you and I are human.”¹⁶

The significance of the social-ontological category of the “in-between” is that it allows Arendt to rethink the origin of politics and the relative “autonomy of the political,” in a way that both distances her from the tradition of political theory and challenges orthodox positivist sociology.¹⁷ As she writes, “politics arises between men, and so quite outside of man. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships.”¹⁸ This strong emphasis on the relational, non-subjective foundation of political life entails a defense of politics as a realm that relies on the human capacity to act in concert and give birth to a new state of affairs (*initium*). According to this view, what is at stake in politics is not biological life, particular interests or subjective ideas, but the existence of a politically organized space, a public world, for freedom to make its appearance. So, for all the pathologies associated with modern politics and the shattering political experiences of our time, Arendt still deems it possible and necessary to think political action as the only antidote that can renew the world and save it from its “natural ruin.”¹⁹

In *On Revolution*, Arendt is emphatic that the domain of the “in-between does not automatically come into being wherever men live together;”²⁰ as a “de-deified” and “non-ideal” space, the real existence of the “in-between” is “a product of human effort” and a “property of a man-made world.”²¹ In other words, “the in-between is the truly historical-political,”²² which is to say that, despite its strong ontological connotation, this space must be instituted and maintained by human action on terms which are not given. After all, constituting and preserving politics as a space “in-between” compels us to acknowledge that

the durability of the human world is rooted in “the absence of a maker” and solid foundation, which is the factor that accounts for “the extraordinary frailty of strictly human affairs.”²³

In the absence of a principle of unity or a proper foundation, the world “in-between” is permanently exposed to attempts at closure and is therefore a fragile domain that requires human effort to be maintained alive. Arendt’s main concern therefore is how to keep open such space, specifically through the establishment of lasting institutions based on the binding power of laws. In this regard, she questions classical solutions in political and social theory that resort to architects’ expertise to design the *nomos* (i.e., the walls of the city) or to the authority of superior entities (such as a lawgiver, sovereign power or natural laws) to ground the legitimacy of principles of political rule.²⁴ Arendt’s major claim in this regard is that we have no other means at hand than “action” and “power” to enact and maintain this political space. This is because action, even with all its uncertainties and dangers, is “the only faculty that demands the plurality of men,” and because power, which should not be reduced to the will to command or to violence, is “the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related.”²⁵ Actually, both human attributes interpenetrate each other in the field of politics to the extent that action in concert with others is the living source from which power actually springs, while power is the relational force that keeps people together for the purpose of action.

Interestingly enough, the peculiarity of action and power is that both are highly “unreliable” human attributes; yet Arendt’s crucial suggestion is that they “combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of promises.”²⁶ Thus, the capacity of individuals to commit themselves to living together under certain normative conditions—is a means of dealing with “the ocean of future uncertainty,” a means which does not need adherence to any absolute or transcendent source of authority. By establishing and keeping mutually binding pacts, the faculty of promising weaves the normative **texture that provides stability** and brings about the laws that regulate the realm of the “in-between” as a domain for political coexistence. It does so without closing this space off since “the promise is the only thing that can stabilize without suffocating.”²⁷ In line with her reading of Montesquieu’s *Spirit of Laws*, Arendt’s major claim is that, because no political community and political existence is imaginable without space, the creation of a space is the first task of laws as human artifice. In this sense, we should understand the “in-between” as a space of normativity and, in turn, normativity as a mode of spacing, for “what lies outside this space is lawless and, even more precisely, without world; . . . it is a desert.”²⁸

Now, despite the stabilizing quality that Arendt finds in the practice of promising and law-making, she is well aware of the intrinsically fragile nature of the relational structure of the common world. The reason is that “the laws and all ‘lasting institutions’ are inevitably exposed to the contingency of human action and therefore may break down not only under the onslaught of elemental evil but under the impact of absolute innocence as well.”²⁹ Totalitarianism makes of this possibility a founding principle and factual reality inasmuch as it uses the means

of law to sweep away the normativity that stabilizes communication between people and to deprive individuals of legal protection to the point of making them superfluous beings. According to Arendt, the destruction of the worldly space “in-between” is the essential telos of totalitarian politics: “by pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them. . . . It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion, which cannot exist without space.”³⁰ In doing so, totalitarianism not only dismantles the only sphere where human beings have “the right to expect miracles,”³¹ but also institutes a whole new tradition of political destruction sustained by a restless attack on all human boundaries.

Understanding Radical Destruction: The Totalitarian Logic of Conceptual Change

In the process of writing *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt became deeply aware of the great risk of reifying totalitarian terror to the extent of turning the event into a moral “obsession” and the political crisis it represented into a model applicable to other political forms of domination. This risk was, in her view, no less significant than “the tendency to escape from reality and the real discomforts of political struggles.”³² Her uneasiness had to do with the possibility that such a “radical” and “unprecedented” rupture in Western modernity could be reduced to the authority of scientific explanation and conventional categories of philosophical systems. This concern was in no way restricted to methodological or epistemological issues; it had to do with how our own forms of expression may contribute to the expulsion of facts from language, limiting our abilities to comprehend and respond in word and deed to the “shattering political experiences” of our time.

To be sure, the view that language is one of the first victims in times of crisis is patent throughout Arendt’s writings on totalitarianism. In her opinion this manifests itself in how rapidly our social and political vocabulary is populated by clichés, stock phrases and ready-made generalizations. The implicit assumption is that concepts are no longer important as means to grasp reality and therefore become “empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality.”³³ In the intellectual milieu of post-war Europe and America, she perceived this tendency as a clear symptom of a growing incapacity for making distinctions:

There exists a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right “to define his terms.” Yet does not this curious right . . . already indicate that such terms as “tyranny,” “authority,” and “totalitarianism” have simply lost their common meaning, or that we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaning, so that . . . we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of

meaning, and demand only that each other of us remain consistent within his own private terminology?³⁴

The concern Arendt raises here may seem slightly exaggerated. But the issue at stake is that the struggle for definitions and the tendency to remain within the safe bounds of disciplinary terminology—like the individual who holds fast to the certainty of her own opinion—is not simply the mark of cognitive flaws of our conceptual frameworks. It is actually the result of social-historical processes that dislocate the very meanings of established definitions. Hence the tendency to treat concepts as functional means to represent and compare empirical phenomena, which consequentially assigns more value to the “sheer formality” of understanding “the consistency of arguing and reasoning” over the quest of understanding a common world.³⁵

It is against this background that we should read the puzzling questions that Arendt sought to address in her own attempt to confront what she called “the crisis of our century.” How to account for the “unprecedented” nature of totalitarianism’s ideological violence yet avoid its rationalization in functional analogies and pseudo-scientific theories? How to grasp its “terrible originality” without “becoming blind to the numerous small and not so small evils with which the road to hell is paved?”³⁶ How to write about a historical phenomenon that one does “feel engaged to destroy” and yet wants to understand without depriving it of its qualities inside human society?³⁷ In other words, how not to transform totalitarianism into another ism, a master key for all mysteries and misfortunes of the modern world?

“No theories, forget all theories” was Arendt’s contentious response.³⁸ She defended the claim that to address totalitarian domination and its destructive consequences over human life as worldly phenomena we need our eyes unclouded by theories and traditions. It would be a mistake to take this curt answer for Arendt’s anti-theoretical prejudice or disregard for conceptual reflection; the perspective of her thinking is rather defined by a resistance to shed light on political experiences relying on the authoritative assistance of systems of thought, or any historical or logical form of necessity. “If the series of crises in which we have lived since the beginning of the century can teach us anything at all,” she argued, “it is the simple fact that there are no general standards to determine our judgments unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty.”³⁹

Thus, rather than apply predefined conceptual tools, or even prescribe novel and more consistent definitions, Arendt proposes that we engage with the “elementary structure” of totalitarian power and the logic of conceptual change it produces. This is the running thread through the three books that compose *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁴⁰ Indeed, totalitarian movements owe their radicalism not to their often-explicit aim at the revolutionary and ruthless transmutation of society, but to a much more complex process of transformation of the concept of humanity and human nature itself.⁴¹ Such a process involves more than the mere oppression and killing of large groups of the population, it is intertwined with a whole reconfiguration of the grammar that structures political life. Behind

the bureaucratic surface of totalitarian regimes there is “hidden an entirely new and unprecedented concept of power, just as behind their *Realpolitik* lies an entirely new and unprecedented concept of reality.”⁴² That is, a concept of power divested of utilitarian motives and grounded in a lawless mode of government, and a concept of reality loaded with images of a fictitious world and grounded in the premise that “everything is possible.”

The totalitarian logic of conceptual change (power, reality and humanity) is the correlate of a threefold mechanism of destruction at the core of totalitarian domination:

- (i) The first mechanism consists of the production of a “state of permanent instability” and “rootlessness.”⁴³ Arendt’s exploration of the experience of Nazi and Bolshevik regimes points out that a key feature of totalitarian rule consists of using the façade of a normal bureaucratic state—holding out promises of a new form of political stability—in order to subvert state power. This is manifested in the existence of a number of secret institutions that respond to the so-called “movement” (incarnated in the ruling party) rather than to the rule of law. Accordingly, the political primacy of the “movement” over the state is the product of a “planned shapelessness” of governmental power, which is not only strategically consistent with the consideration that “total domination needs the most extreme flexibility”⁴⁴ but also ideologically attuned to a view of the human world as governed by the natural law of pure movement. The challenge of totalitarian rule is to establish and validate the principle of movement “as a tangible working reality of everyday life” and, at the same time, “prevent this new world from developing a new stability; for a stabilization of its laws and institutions would surely liquidate the movement itself.”⁴⁵ The consequence of this destructive logic is that insomuch totalitarianism cannot root its power in any stable political structure; it must politically transform the world itself into a rootless place by violently attacking anything that is objective and permanent.⁴⁶ This leaves no other option than transforming terror into a foundation of the body politic and fear into a catalyst of action.
- (ii) The second mechanism consists of the production of a sense of “unreality” and “wordlessness.” It is true that Arendt attributed to all crisis situations the capacity to introduce epistemic and hermeneutic uncertainty into established criteria of truth and meanings that give a sense of consistency to reality.⁴⁷ But the “basic experience” of totalitarianism, the belief that “everything is possible,” goes beyond simply tearing the façades of our concepts, for indeed it defies all categories and definitions at the foundation of our political traditions. The rule of total domination, Arendt stresses, operates upon the production of an “atmosphere of unreality” created by the apparent lack of instrumental purpose and a propaganda machinery through which “all facts can be changed and all lies can be made true” according to an ideology and in the pursuit of power.⁴⁸ Under such circumstances, factual reality becomes “a conglomeration of ever changing events and slogans” and “mere opinion” turns out to be the only reliable criteria of truth.⁴⁹ This

relativity about facts and truth is what allows totalitarian power to maintain the logical consistency of its fictitious sense of reality, while making the world of things that a plurality of individuals arguably have in common collapse. Without sharing any tangible realm, they are condemned to experience the world from one single perspective. Now, this sense of unreality and wordlessness has its most ruthless materialization in the politics of concentration camps. As the camps were carefully kept out of public sight, reports about the real horrors and senseless suffering within these laboratories of human extermination were assailed by a “peculiar unreality and lack of credibility.”⁵⁰ In a way, the very revelation of the madness of camps produces a counterfactual effect: it empties concepts of their traditional content (e.g., crime, death, labor, humanity, power) and leaves the reality of terror nameless outside the realm of human speech, beyond imagination and comprehension. This is why Arendt eloquently asks “what meaning has the concept of murder, when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?”⁵¹

- (iii) The third element is the “atmosphere of disintegration” and “lawlessness” that permeates the structure of social relations in totalitarian societies. The production of these conditions is essential for the destruction of freedom and the reduction of human experience to absolute impotence. To do so, totalitarian power profits from and exacerbates the inner fragility of the normativity that sustains conventional institutions and makes them somehow predictable. As discussed earlier, the stabilization and continuity of the common world is dependent upon mutually binding positive laws that relate individuals and create a space “in-between” them. This is precisely why totalitarian regimes do not abandon legality but transform it into a transcendental mean to regulate the social world with total independence of people’s behavior and will. But they do so only to abolish the boundaries of positive laws that sustain a space of individual autonomy and set limits for actions. The practice of putting certain categories of people outside the protection of law and to whom no law applies (“rightless,” “stateless”) is one of the manifestations of this process. This practice is consistent with a more general principle of “lawlessness” that dominates the totalitarian movement, which is taken to its extreme in the system of concentration camps where people were literally cut off from the world and denied the right to belong to humanity. In the institution of camps, terror becomes the only normativity left in place, while strict adherence to the laws of nature and history becomes the unequivocal sign of a permanent crisis against which humans stand as superfluous and powerless beings, without legal rights, moral ties and personality. Such a crisis is not a natural event though; it is the very product of “the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested” and a form of government that disintegrates the capacities for living and acting together.⁵² What’s more, totalitarianism elevates the experience of permanent crisis to a principle of political rule.

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that Arendt’s phenomenological approach to crisis is determined by the priority she assigns to the world, as an

interstitial space that relates individuals while keeping a distance between them, and a realm of discourse and action that shelters both permanence and the possibility of new beginnings. Thus, if “in every crisis a piece of the world, something common to us all, is destroyed,”⁵³ we may say that totalitarianism radicalizes this principle to the extreme of destroying the ground of human life and shattering the elements that sustain a free political community. This reification of the experience of crisis, as it were, brings about a twofold problem for a critical engagement with totalitarian forms of power: the quest of understanding and the demand of response. In the essay “Crisis in Education,” although it does not deal with totalitarianism directly, Arendt makes this point with lucidity:

[the very fact of the crisis] means that we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realizing they were originally answers to questions. A crisis forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case direct judgments. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgments, that is, with prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides.⁵⁴

The dilemma this paragraph describes is at the center of the problem of understanding and confronting the destructive experience of totalitarianism: the dissolution of traditional concepts and categories of judgment. Thus, once we are deprived of the resources to answer the urgent questions that crisis brings about, the temptation to draw from preformed judgments, conventional categories and explanatory models is like running in circles. The point is that if we simply discard customary concepts as “dead load” and hastily assume or bring into play new categories, we may succumb too easily to the totalitarian predicament that “usurped the dignity of our tradition.”⁵⁵ The question to raise here then is how to enhance, and not preclude, the “experience of reality” and the “opportunity for reflection” that crisis provides.

In her own writings, Arendt sought to confront this dilemma by bringing about the normative value of describing events and experiences that are actually incomprehensible. To do so, she had special recourse to two literary means very much at odds with the abstract impartiality of traditional methods of social and historical sciences; metaphoric descriptions and exemplary stories. I cannot address these issues in detail here but a few words might be instructive.⁵⁶ With regard to her sustained use of metaphoric thought-images for reflecting on the crises of our time, the most common metaphors she used were “sandstorms in the desert,” “border situations,” “shipwreck,” “dark times.” Such metaphors had the nonconceptual faculty to illuminate phenomena which the concepts at hand were unable to describe in their distinct aspects. The “gift of condensation” of metaphors, she wrote, gains us unique access to what “cannot be seen but can be said.”⁵⁷ This “poetic intelligence” is ultimately what Arendt considered of significance beyond any literary mannerism inasmuch as “the problem of style is [also] a problem of adequacy and of response.”⁵⁸ It is for this reason that Arendt

defends the claim that to describe the concentration camps as “Hell on earth” is more adequate to the essential features of the phenomenon than positivist descriptions that end up condoning their reality.⁵⁹ And yet Arendt thought that metaphors could not stand by themselves. They require the support of exemplary stories in order to reveal the full import of our accounts of the ruptures that traverse social life. In her writings examples were not annotations on the side, subsidiary to the logic of theoretical reasoning. They had their own argumentative force as examples store the memory of previous responses to “incidents of living experience,” and, in that condition, are the necessary “guideposts” out of which thinking “takes its bearings.”⁶⁰

Even though Arendt’s writings find in metaphors and examples fundamental resources to grasp the destructive experiences of the human world, this does not answer in full the key problem of response she poses in connection with the quest of understanding crisis phenomena in general and “the crisis of our century” in particular. Arendt casts more light on this issue when she writes:

[W]herever the crisis has occurred in the modern world, one cannot simply go on nor yet simply turn back. Such reversal will never bring us anywhere except to the same situation out of which the crisis has just arisen. The return would be simply be a repeated performance . . . On the other hand, simple, unreflective perseverance, whether it be pressing forward in the crisis or adhering to the routine that blandly believes the crisis will not engulf its particular sphere of life, can only, because it surrenders to the course of time, lead to ruin; it can only, to be more precise, increase estrangement from the world by which we are already threatened on all sides.⁶¹

The tension between distinct temporalities in this paragraph is really about opening the anthropological problematic of “how to sustain a position in the world,”⁶² without reverting to nostalgia for the past or presuming the irresistible force of the future. To “escape” in either direction would simply curtail our capacity to judge events and act according to circumstances. Taking this problem seriously meant for Arendt that, as far as the question of response to the experience of totalitarian crisis was concerned, the great challenge is to sustain a position somewhere in the “in-between” space of the existing human relations so to be able to resist the temptations of both unthinking indifference and reckless actionism. Following the experience of totalitarian terror, this partisanship for the world, so to speak, is another way of describing the task of humanizing human conflicts by means of bringing their reality back to their human dimension.⁶³

As I have discussed so far, Arendt identified totalitarian ideology as a destructive movement that radicalizes the experience of crisis to the point of destroying the common world of human relations. Hence, for her the fundamental task of understanding the “constitutive elements” of such radical destruction was also a fundamental way of recovering the critical spirit of modernity so as to continue challenging the legacy of totalitarianism in our society. Be that as it may, the

problem that appeared evident to Arendt is that any such critique that claims to be just as radical as its object would find itself without moral and political efficacy. For totalitarianism appropriates the so-called critical spirit so as to take it to a whole new level: a movement that, following “the logic of an idea,” attacks anything that is objective and permanent in the world, the sheer negativity of destruction. Thus, without a standpoint for a meaningful description of the world and no perspective for a compelling critique of society, totalitarian destruction leaves individuals with little options other than to embrace absolute negativity or become passive observers of destruction.

Reconsidering Our Attitude Toward the World: On the “Modesty” of Critique

Responses to the aforementioned problem are difficult to handle, for they largely depend on our modes of orientation and ways of acting in the world. In what follows, I argue that Arendt’s distinctive approach to the problem of response to totalitarian violence was to introduce an unconventional twist. She seeks to reconsider the political import of the practice of critique, to be precise “critical thinking,” may have in times of political emergency. This does not mean to rule out action as the political faculty par excellence and take shelter in an activity of the mind. Rather, it stresses that action is simply hopeless, tyrannical and even destructive if there is no space where one can sustain a position in the world to “stop-and-think” what we are doing. Critical thinking is, in Arendt’s sense, tantamount to an act of spacing, literally the opening of a topos. As I will show, this spatial connotation contains an ethical core that may be quite significant in the face of political excesses, namely the idea of “keeping within bounds.”⁶⁴ For the ultimate political gesture of critical thinking is moderation rather than radicalism. Its landmark is a concern for the world, an attitude of “commitment to face up to reality instead of escaping into private or collective fantasies” and a way of taking responsibility for what is “happening in the world instead of surrendering in the supposedly inevitable trends.”⁶⁵

On the Critique of Political Escapism

Before addressing Arendt’s understanding of critical thinking more directly, it is important to consider that the background of her reflection is not limited to the totalitarian disdain for the common world, it is also concerned with the very way the responses of social and political actors stimulate a “flight from reality” in times of crisis: taking refuge in a frozen past or in the promise of a better future, in the comfortable quietness of subjectivity or in the jubilant movement of the multitude. These attitudes are problematic for Arendt not only because they replicate the retreat from the world that totalitarian domination induces, but because “such an escape from reality is also an escape from responsibility.”⁶⁶ In line with this diagnosis, Arendt did not hesitate to claim that “nothing in our time is more dubious than our attitude toward the world.”⁶⁷ As it is well known, the philosophical and political significance of this remark is imprinted in the diagnosis of

capitalist mass society that Arendt elaborates in *The Human Condition* in terms of “world alienation.”

Still, one may say that this doubt regarding the “attitude toward the world” is also the underlying premise that runs through Arendt’s recurrent observations on the anti-political attitudes that populate modern political life: namely, appeals to politics made in terms of material needs, strategic interests, sovereign power or violence. Such claims are attractive precisely because they protect individuals against the most disturbing fact of political life: that there is no “political substance” or ultimate “ground” to which they may hold on. Under this protective umbrella, the uncertainties of human action and the perplexities involved in instituting a political space for freedom are more easily discharged. Among the many manifestations of political escapism, Arendt pays special attention to some archetypal figures to whom she referred as “professional thinkers,” “professional revolutionaries,” and “professional problem-solvers.”⁶⁸ The adjectival form “professional” she uses to describe these characters is of course deliberately critical. It aims to fasten on the tacit “arrogance” of expertise that subsumes particular political problems beneath the dictates of pre-established standards of judgment and the authority of systematic knowledge.

The case of “professional thinkers” is well known and the most recurrent in Arendt’s writings as it reflects her view of the conflictive relation between philosophy and politics in the history of Western thought, as well as her more general concern about the place thinking has in political matters. She rejects in principle that the activity of thinking is a privilege of specialists devoted to the pleasures of *vita contemplativa*; she writes, thinking is an exercise that “we must be able to ‘demand’ from every sane person.”⁶⁹ This may seem a common sense attribution, however, Arendt’s reflection is indeed motivated by the lack of common sense demonstrated by Nazi perpetrators such as Adolf Eichmann, and therefore by the astonishing consequences that the lack of thinking may have in political life. Now, Arendt seems to have been even more astonished by the extent to which the thoughtfulness of her fellow philosophers, professional thinkers par excellence, coexisted with their peculiar silence before the moral and political challenges posed by totalitarian terror. The ethical issue at stake for Arendt is that in times of emergency “one cannot be simply a bystander.”⁷⁰ To be sure, the activity of thinking requires a certain distance and even withdrawal from the realm of political action, yet what troubled Arendt about most philosophers was the way they carry out the “bracketing of reality” in favor of the pure experiences of the “thinking ego.” In her view, the failure of the professional thinker is to elevate intercourse with himself to a solipsistic model of relating to the world.⁷¹ From this perspective, crisis situations have nothing to do with the world and, therefore, can only be referred back to mental phenomena or spiritual diseases.

Another instructive case of political escapism is provided by twentieth century “professional revolutionaries,” incarnated by the Communist intelligentsia and party leaders. Arendt’s remarks on these professionals of political action are made in the context of her attempt to recover the “lost treasure” of the revolutionary tradition, namely, the quest for the foundation of a body of lasting

political institutions which guarantees “the space where freedom can appear.”⁷² What she criticizes is the formulaic understanding of revolutionary action that most revolutionaries promote. Guided by the light of historical necessity, their error is to believe that revolutions are the sort of phenomena that can be carefully planned in advance, like an architect’s design for a building, or executed according to predefined roles like a playwright’s script. Actually, this is what, in Arendt’s view, characterizes the failures and excesses of “professional revolutionaries” who, haunted by the belief that the act of foundation could be executed following the teachings of the “school of past revolutions,” eradicate the radical contingency and spontaneity of concerted action as the real source of revolutionary power. Whether it is the collapse of a regime and the progressive loss of authority of its whole power structure, the momentous gathering of people on the streets and public spaces demanding their rights or the emergence of organized struggles against oppressive rule, the outbreak of most revolutionary crises surprised “professional revolutionaries” not on the streets but busy in their headquarters planning ahead the process of inevitable disintegration of the state and society.

While Arendt had respect for some philosophers and revolutionaries, she unreservedly lamented the growing influence of “professional problem-solvers,” the new political aristocracy of modern government (e.g., strategic advisors, policy makers, data analysts, intelligence officials, public opinion and media experts, etc.). The success of this profession in post-war democracies was, she argued, partly due to its ability to transform the art of political judgment into a pseudo-scientific technique of decision-making, forecasting, and strategic manipulation of facts. This is what Arendt considered to be the most revealing aspect in the Pentagon Papers concerning the policies of the United States during the Vietnam War in the 1960s, for they disclosed the extent to which trusting the rational calculability of reality had become a key principle of political rule. The secret art of solving problems, she stressed, is made possible by a brand new alliance between political power and the behavioural sciences. (Arendt had in mind the influence of sociology and psychology.) The role of professional problem-solvers in government then consists of modeling political crises and events according to well-crafted systems analyses, management of data and techniques of image-making. The measure of success of this political profession is the extent to which it is able to get rid of the “disconcerting contingency” of experience in the name of scientific accuracy.⁷³ According to Arendt’s phenomenological view of crisis phenomena, this profession may be able to solve technical problems but it is totally helpless in addressing serious political questions. For, strictly speaking, crisis events that affect the common world are not something modelable and decidable in advance. They require critical thinking and judgment.

At this point, we may say that, despite their differences, there is a common thread running through these Arendtian ideal-types of political escapism, namely, a certain disdain for the texture of factual reality that is instrumental in the reification of the experience of crisis. Whilst the solipsism of professional thinkers invisibilizes crisis, the actionism of professional revolutionaries over-politicizes it, and the decisionism of professional problem-solvers neutralizes it

technically. If a crisis calls into question our edifice of certainties and practices, affecting our principles of response, to persevere with unreflective actions and predetermined judgments is simply a way of increasing our “estrangement from the world.” The elusive responses to the crises of our time represented, in Arendt’s opinion, powerful reminders of the need to reconsider our attitude toward the world. It is in line with this discussion that I shall now situate Arendt’s interpretation of “critical thinking”: an anti-dogmatic attitude and form of reflection that “ceases to be a political marginal activity” whenever one begins to reflect on phenomena that transcend the limits of the present and force us to take account of the past, “judging it,” and the future, “forming projects of the will.” “And such reflections will inevitably arise in political emergencies.”⁷⁴

On the Political “Modesty” of Critical Thinking

Arendt primarily understands the practice of critique in terms of a mode of world-orientation rather than a systematic method of philosophical thinking. Partly because of the history of the term from Kant to Marx, and its later association with critical theory, she had misgivings about using “critique,” going so far as to say, “I hate to use the word because of the Frankfurt School.”⁷⁵ Arendt objected to the attempt of critical theorists to make a theory out of an activity of the mind that is common to all human beings. Still what she really resisted was the equation of critique with dialectics as it came to be traditionally conceived in Western Marxism.⁷⁶ To be sure, Arendt’s idiosyncratic reading of Marx’s appropriation of Hegel’s method had as its target not only the conception of history as a “process” of unfolding of a single proposition, but also the conception of critique as an exercise of dialectical “inversion.” If critique “turns everything on its head,” she writes, it can only operate within the conceptual “framework of the tradition” it is criticizing. Thus critique is forced to adopt “the given terms” of the tradition in a way that while it rejects their “authority,” it is ultimately unable to challenge or redefine the substantial content of those terms outside the traditional framework.⁷⁷ Put in these terms, the notion of dialectic is far from the Socratic conception that Arendt more enthusiastically advocated, i.e., “talking something through with somebody.”⁷⁸ It is in this sense that she preferred to deduce her notion of critical thinking not from a method, as it were, but from the existential question of what are we doing when we think critically and what makes us think.

The position Arendt defends, then, consists of understanding “critical thinking” as an anti-dogmatic way of addressing reality; that is, a way of refusing to bind thinking itself to pre-fabricated categories, fixed standards or expected results. Unlike dogmatic thought, “critical thought is in principle anti-authoritarian,”⁷⁹ it questions and dissolves the solidity of “frozen thoughts,” “normal concepts,” and “accepted opinions.” Taken in this sense, critical thinking is a “resultless enterprise” for it has an inner aversion against the normalization of its own results. This is why Arendt considered that critical thinking is somehow “self-destructive,” since its existence primarily depends upon encouraging sustained reflection and permanently breaking the crust of conventions. On

this point she went even further, saying that “what we call nihilism is actually a danger in the thinking activity itself. There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous.”⁸⁰ Awareness of the boundlessness of critical thinking is of great importance for Arendt as it means bearing in mind that critical thinking opens the door to its own perplexities. It “can at every moment turn against itself, as it were, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare these as ‘new values.’”⁸¹ This reversal of critical thinking into new forms of dogmatism is especially prominent in totalitarian politics. For totalitarian movements, in essence, inspire a hateful and relentless critique of the pathologies of liberal society that places itself as absolute.

If we follow Arendt in her description of critical thinking—i.e., an activity of the mind that has mostly negative results and carries an implicit claim to inaction—how should the possible status of critical thinking as an ethical attitude and political response in times of crisis be justified? One alternative is to see it in the role of a judge that solves controversies over claims of truth, yet Arendt explains that when it comes to political conflicts the will to knowledge must give way to the more important and less pretentious search for “understanding,” that is, the search for “meaning” about “what we do” and “what we suffer.”⁸² Another possible answer would be to assign critical thinking the role of bridging the gap between theory and practice, as implied in the Marxist tradition. However, Arendt immediately discards this option because critical thinking can neither automatically become nor lead to political practice. Should the connection between critical thinking and politics be reinstated, it is not by way of reducing one as a means to the other.⁸³ According to Arendt such hypothesis, which is also essential to Marxist revolutionary politics, is potentially misleading because the theoretical dismantling of a political system through critique is not automatically followed by the practice of destroying it.⁸⁴ Thus the point that Arendt is trying to make, I believe, is not to establish a definition of critical thinking as a form of political intervention per se, but rather to explore its ability to become an activity with political meaning and efficacy in times of crisis.

At one point in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt discusses this issue somewhat elusively by opposing the figures of the “skeptic” and the “dogmatic.” It may be the case that in everyday life we all start out and behave as dogmatists attached to beliefs held as solid truths; against such imposing attitude skepticism claims the arbitrary nature of such beliefs and truth itself. At the height of crisis situations the tension between these positions becomes particularly pronounced: due to sound truths begin to crumble and everyday prejudices are no longer reliable, while skepticism regarding the validity of conventions and general norms gains terrain. From the skeptic’s point of view, this situation reveals the indefinability of truth and the very limit of our capacity to judge without standards; from the dogmatist’s point of view, it reveals the inevitability of truth and the impulse to lay down new principles or reshuffle old ones. In Arendt’s account both positions represent equally doctrinarian forms of distancing oneself from reality that invalidate one another. So she says that “it would be a great error to believe that critical thinking stands somewhere between dogmatism and skepticism. It is actually the way to leave these alternatives behind.”⁸⁵

Now, it is impossible not to mention here the way in which totalitarian politics addresses the conflict: it gets rid of the antagonism by way of a synthesis that turns the skeptic into an ideologue of destruction and the dogmatist into a destructive ideologue. Both become one and the same.

Confronted with these alternatives, Arendt argues that critical thinking “recommends itself by its modesty.”⁸⁶ What is this modesty that critical thinking claims for itself in times of emergency? It is possible to say that this modesty consists, first and foremost, in recognizing the limits of the critical practice, namely, that it is not a solution to crisis. Positively put, critical thinking is an attitude to facing up to reality and a human activity whose importance derives from creating a virtual space where one can sustain a position in the world to “stop-and-think” what we know, what we do, and what we suffer.

Following her Kantian intuitions, Arendt explains that the activity of “critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection [...] and thus moves in a space that is potentially public.”⁸⁷ In this way, critical thinking “does not cut itself from ‘all others’” because, although still a “solitary business,” it has to make use of an “enlarged mentality.”⁸⁸ Accordingly, critical thinking seeks to make a space in which to share one’s perplexities with others and in which, by training our imagination “to go visiting,” one might move from one perspective to another by “travelling through words.” Thus critical thinking adopts the world we all inhabit together as its main point of reference in a mode that is closer to the universalistic claim of Kant’s “world citizen.” But it does so not in order to empathize or agree with others’ perspectives but to “think something through” them.

The emphatic reference here to the relationship between critical thinking and space appears to be quite fundamental for the purposes of re-conceptualizing the practice of critique and its link with politics. Since totalitarianism “kills the roots” of human existence by destroying the space in-between human beings, the deepest aim of critical thinking is precisely “to create a space” in which one could sustain a position in the world. This view suggests that Arendt held to the normative expectation that critical thinking, despite its inner negativity, could deploy political potential. This potential consists in its capacity to virtually assemble a ground where, even in the form of an “oasis” in the middle of a “desert-world,” spectators and actors may be able to bear the burden of reality and consciously examine the disruptive experiences that traverse social life. It is for this reason, Arendt writes, that “thought of this sort, always ‘related closely to the thoughts of others,’ is bound to be political even when it deals with things that are not in the least political.”⁸⁹

But this expectation should be borne with considerable precaution. Arendt understood that the space created by critical thinking in no way resembles a smooth topography, much less an empirical space. It reminds us of Kafka’s parable cited by Arendt in the preface to *Between Past and Future*, where an individual is confronted with antagonist forces: “the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead.”⁹⁰ By bringing this image to the fore, Arendt is trying to draw attention to how difficult it is to maintain a position somewhere in the middle without either jumping out of the “fighting line” or choosing

one side.⁹¹ The issue is that, without the assurance of standards or traditions that provide orientation, critical thinking should also remain alert to prevent the excesses of its own subjectivism when isolated in the comfortable shelter of pure thought.

In spite of the difficulties, the idea that critical thought could have practical implications beyond itself never abandoned Arendt's political thought. The basis for this conviction lies paradoxically in the implicit claim to inaction that characterizes the activity of critique, that is, the fact that it interrupts and breaks the continuity of unthinking routine and slows down the rhythm of action. Arendt reinterpreted this attribute, often associated with an ineffective and apolitical attitude, as the very source of a response with political significance in times of crisis. Because the critical thinker prefers to "stop-and-think," rather than follow the footsteps of "sleepwalkers" (those who submit to what everybody else does, says and believes in), the practice of critique may well have a "liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man's mental abilities."⁹² It is in this context that Arendt contends that critical thinking "ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters" as long as the capacity to judge particular situations, the essence of the Kantian "reflective judgment," may prevent us from holding fast to whatever the social conventions and rules dictate. Certainly, this abstention from action does not help to improve or change the situation, but it might become an act of resistance.

Taken in this sense, critique is not an all-powerful capacity that in times of crisis provides tools for devising courses of intervention. It may contribute to assembling a virtual space in which to examine the unexamined opinions, practices and experiences that traverse human life in common, but it is not political action and cannot work as its substitute because it is impotent to autonomously improve and initiate "something new" in the world. What's more, even if critique has the ability to make ground for judgment and action when it breaks the crust of conventional opinions, it also needs judgment to save itself from its own subjectification and will to encourage any possible resistance to the ruin of the worldly space in-between in which human affairs take place.⁹³ Hence only when those who have the ability to judge also have the courage to speak their minds and expose their opinions to the examination of others in the public realm, may critical thinking make some modest claim to have contributed to the difficult task of coming to terms with the diremptions of social life.

Concluding Remarks

The world is an "in-between" space that both separates and binds us together, and which must be sustained and renewed since human life in common is threatened wherever this gap no longer exists. The "in-between" therefore configures the existential condition and the basic relational structure of the world as a space of plurality. In the absence of a principle of unity or a proper foundation, it is permanently exposed to attempts at closure and is therefore a fragile domain that requires human effort to be maintained open and alive. Drawing on this formulation, I

approached Arendt's reflections on the destructive nature of totalitarianism. Her phenomenological depiction of "the crisis of our century" challenges us to see that what is at stake in totalitarian politics is more than the excesses of state violence in the lust for power; it is actually an organized attempt to destroy the roots that make possible human and worldly forms of life. In a sense, totalitarianism consists of a movement of restless and destructive criticism that radicalizes the experience of crisis in a twofold way: by making crisis a permanent state of things and by shattering the categories of understanding and standards of judgment.

It is in this context that I situated Arendt's interpretation of "critical thinking" as an anti-dogmatic way of facing up to reality that may enable us to sustain a position in the world during times of political emergency. However, Arendt was fully aware of the paradoxes that critical thinking may lead to and her own work can be read as a critique of critique. Totalitarianism was in essence the expression of the subjectification of criticism gone mad, a movement of destruction of everything that appears to be objective in the world. Consequently, if critique is an activity that assists the struggle against such radical destruction, it should be an attitude toward the world that "recommends itself by its modesty." For the ultimate political gesture of critical thinking is moderation rather than radicalism. This means the recognition by everyone who claims to be critical of the contradictions and limits of the critical activity itself, and of the fact that critique must remain attached to the perplexities of the world rather than to the arrogance that is proper to acts of decision, claims of scientific truth and the certainty of dogmas.

The alleged modesty of Arendt's concept of critique may well seem insufficient by the light of the often urgent and extraordinary demands imposed by crisis situations. But if a crisis calls into question our edifice of certainties and practices, our principles of response, to persevere with unreflective actions and predetermined judgments is simply a way of increasing our "estrangement from the world." To put things in a broader perspective, we should only need to remember once again the extent to which the radical ruptures and excesses of the twentieth century made the political discourse of radicalism lose almost all political meaning. Arendt's reconsideration of the modesty of critical thinking recognizes this fact. And this amounts to saying that critical thinking can hardly point the way to the exit in times of crisis and emergency, nor even becomes a means dialectically transforming theory into practice. If critical thinking has any political potential, as Arendt strongly suggests, it is in its capacity to gather a space in which one can stop and interrupt the chain of continuity by asking again and again what are we doing? What we may finally get is not a definitive result, not even a clear answer, but perhaps an attitude that can make a difference "when the chips are down."

I think this is the intention that ultimately underlies Arendt's writings. For they contain an expressive call to reconsider our attitude toward the world and to struggle against contemporary forms of escapism. In a way, this also implies a demand to reinstate the link between thinking and politics that totalitarianism had destroyed. Namely, restoring to politics the humanity of thinking and restoring to thinking the humanity of the political condition of acting and living

together. This means that we cannot renounce reflecting on what limits and exceeds our current ways of life, yet we cannot infinitely push this questioning in the face of reality either. The forgetfulness of this aporia is the signature and triumph of the totalitarian predicament.

All in all, the notion of the “in-between” constitutes the true matter and radical form of Arendtian thought, which sees the world as a human place to inhabit precisely because it does not have a principle of final closure. This social-ontological claim does not work against the political task of instituting and keeping such space open. On the contrary, it is the very reason why, even if the attempt to found lasting institutions that secure political freedom proves to be a total failure, and even if sheer violence turns the world into a suffocating totality, it is from the very interstices of the non-tangible yet objective ground that lies “in-between” human beings that one may still appeal to the right to resist in word and deed a reality that closes itself while denying freedom and human dignity.

Notes

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 593.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, “A Reply to Eric Voegelin,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 404–405; Peter Baehr, *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
- 3 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, xxvii.
- 4 Hannah Arendt, “Letter from Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers, December 17, 1946,” in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, eds. Lotter Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 69.
- 5 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- 6 Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin, 2006), 175.
- 7 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, xxvi.
- 8 Arendt’s topological understanding of the world and human existence has been widely discussed in reference to the public realm or space and the phenomenon of world alienation in modernity, see Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Michael Janover, “Politics and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” in *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, eds. Anna Yeatman, Charles Barbour, Philip Hansen and Magdalena Zolkos (New York: Continuum, 2011), 25–38; Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). In recent discussions, the Heideggerian roots of this worldly spatiality have been highlighted with regard to the experience of appearance and the question of the place of thinking, see Peg Birmingham, “Heidegger and Arendt: The Lawful Space of Worldly Appearance,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, eds. Fracoise Raffoul and Eric Nelson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 157–163. However, a more detailed and systematic investigation into the status of the notion of the “in-between” itself is yet to be carried out; see Rodrigo Cordero, “It Happens In-Between: On the Spatial Birth of Politics in Arendt’s On Revolution,” *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 1, no. 3 (2014): 249–265. Such enquiry into the “in-between” as the human production of a common world may prove relevant to Arendt’s relationship to sociology. In the best tradition of Simmel, for instance, the

- social understood as sociation and as an emergent domain seems to be precisely the kind of general ontology that Arendt's notion of the "in-between" seeks to capture. For a discussion of Simmel's sociology of the "in-between," see Olli Pyyhtinen, "Being-With: Georg Simmel's Sociology of Association," *Theory, Culture and Society* 26 no. 5 (2009): 108–128.
- 9 Hannah Arendt, *Diario Filosófico, 1950–1973*, trans. Raúl Gabás (Barcelona: Herder, 2006), 265.
 - 10 Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 106.
 - 11 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 199.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 182.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 137.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 182.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 183.
 - 16 Hannah Arendt, "Socrates," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 14.
 - 17 See Peter Baehr, *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Dana Villa, "The 'Autonomy of the Political' Reconsidered," in *Public Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 338–354; Philip Walsh, "Hannah Arendt, Sociology and Political Modernity," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 8, no. 3 (2011): 344–366. Arendt's indictment of the social sciences, especially sociology, is mostly directed at their attempt to produce accurate social scientific explanations based on well-crafted theoretical models, ideal types and conceptual analogies divorced from the normative texture of human reality. In her view, these analytical tools deny human freedom the moment they reduce human action to predictable behavior and transform the contingency of history into a chain of necessary causes. This critique, however reductive in its view of sociology as a positivist discipline akin to social engineering and decision-making, does not put Arendt at odds with sociology as a whole. It actually brings her closer to a long tradition of a philosophically informed form of sociology that we can trace to Marx and Simmel via Adorno, Habermas, Joas and Archer. See Daniel Chernilo, "The Idea of Philosophical Sociology," *British Journal of Sociology*, 65 no. 2 (2014): 338–357.
 - 18 Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," 95.
 - 19 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246–247.
 - 20 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990), 19.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 31.
 - 22 Arendt, *Diario Filosófico*, 171.
 - 23 Hannah Arendt, "Labor, Work, and Action," in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000), 180; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175–247.
 - 24 Hannah Arendt, "The Great Tradition I. Law and Power," *Social Research* 74 no. 3 (2007): 713–726; Hannah Arendt, "The Great Tradition II. Ruling and Being Ruled," *Social Research* 74 no. 4 (2007): 941–954.
 - 25 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 175.
 - 26 *Ibid.*
 - 27 Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 235.
 - 28 Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," 190.
 - 29 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 84.
 - 30 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 600.
 - 31 Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," 114.
 - 32 Hannah Arendt, "The Eggs Speak Up," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 272.

- 33 Hannah Arendt, "Preface to *Between Past and Future*," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 14.
- 34 Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 95.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 96.
- 36 Arendt, "The Eggs Speak Up," 272.
- 37 Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," 402.
- 38 Hannah Arendt, "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century, First Session," Seminar at the New School for Social Research, New York, Spring, 1968, Hannah Arendt Papers at Digital The Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Accessed December 10, 2014. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/mharendtFolderP04.html>
- 39 Jerome Kohn, "Introduction," in *Hannah Arendt, Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), viii.
- 40 Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," 402.
- 41 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 591.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 540.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 509–510.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 550.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 509.
- 46 Robert Fine, "Totalitarianism: Impact on Social Thought," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Niel Smelser and Paul Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001), 15,791–15,794.
- 47 Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," 102.
- 48 Hannah Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 252.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 566.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 568.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 591.
- 53 Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," 175.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 55 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, xxvii.
- 56 See Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 167–196; Lisa Disch, "More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (1993): 665–694; David Luban, "Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Theory," *Social Research* 50, no. 1 (1983): 215–248.
- 57 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 109.
- 58 Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," 404.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Arendt, "Preface to *Between Past and Future*," 14. For instance, to give an account of the modern "crisis of authority," Arendt discussed the crisis of the American education system. To demonstrate the existence of a "crisis of tradition," she looked at the genealogies of the main Western political concepts (e.g., revolution, freedom, history). To understand the "crisis of humanity," she rendered visible the unprecedented politics of de-humanization in Nazi extermination camps. To estimate the consequences of the "crisis of the European nation-state" in the midst of its apparent rise, she studied the expansion of capitalist economy and imperial politics. To come to terms with the "crisis of constitutional democracy," she drew elements from American politics in the 1960s.
- 61 Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," 191.
- 62 Charles Turner, "Open Behind: Myth and Politics," in *Social Theory After the Holocaust*, eds. Robert Fine and Charles Turner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 241.

- 63 Robert Fine, “Dehumanising the Dehumanisers: Reversal in Human Rights Discourse,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 6 no. 2 (2010): 179–190.
- 64 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 191.
- 65 Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: *A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 66 Arendt, “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule,” 250.
- 67 Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 4.
- 68 Here I refer primarily to the books Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990); Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972); Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978).
- 69 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 13.
- 70 Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 5; See Lisa Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).
- 71 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 157.
- 72 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 125.
- 73 Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 11.
- 74 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 192.
- 75 Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 309.
- 76 Arendt considered that this equation had become a dogmatic principle within Marxist forms of “process-thinking,” whose implications she found not only philosophically unfortunate but intellectually discouraging. For instance, she noticed the way in which Adorno occasionally jeopardized Walter Benjamin’s work of criticism, arguing against its supposedly “un-dialectical” character; see Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 166–167. It is therefore interesting to see how Arendt on various occasions cited with approval Benjamin’s un-dialectical references to critical thinking; see Hannah Arendt, “Walter Benjamin: 1892–1956,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 153–206. For an account of Arendt’s personal irritation toward Adorno, see Joanna Vecchiarelli, “Alien Nation: Hannah Arendt, the German Émigrés and America,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 3, no. 2 (2004): 167–176.
- 77 Hannah Arendt, “From Hegel to Marx,” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005) 71–73, 77.
- 78 Dana Villa, “Thinking and Judging,” in *Philosophy, Politics, Terror. Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 87–106.
- 79 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 38.
- 80 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 176; Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 177.
- 81 Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 177.
- 82 Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 309.
- 83 Dana Villa, “Thinking and Judging,” 88.
- 84 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 36.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 86 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 87 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 88 *Ibid.*

- 89 Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: A Laudation,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 79.
- 90 Arendt, “Preface to *Between Past and Future*,” 7.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 10; see Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 203–210.
- 92 Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 188.
- 93 Cordero, “It Happens In-Between,” 249–265; Robert Fine, “Judgment and the Reification of the Faculties: A Reconstructive Reading of Arendt’s *Life of the Mind*,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 34 no. 1–2 (2008): 155–174.

6 Making Things More Fragile

The Persistence of Crisis and the Neoliberal Disorder of Things— Michel Foucault

Introduction

The few times Michel Foucault made any direct reference to the concept of crisis in his writings were, mostly, in a sardonic tone. He often described this term as a “magical” device in the language of modern human sciences put at the service of analyses,¹ especially within orthodox Marxism, in which “the moment of the present is considered in history as the break, the climax, the fulfillment.”² For some readers, this skepticism attests to Foucault’s anti-Enlightenment mode of thinking which, in essence, would be antithetical to any form of crisis theory,³ while for others it is rather the flipside of a history of ideas that reinforces the Western metaphysics of crisis the very moment it attempts to move away from it.⁴ In my view, both interpretations are misguided insofar as they lose sight of a line of inquiry present and yet underdeveloped in Foucault’s work: namely, the constitution of crisis itself into an object of knowledge and a domain of political intervention in modernity.

Linked to the historical proliferation of crisis discourses and theories in capitalist societies, we find a number of practices, forms of living and institutions that constitute, organize and operate through and in relation to things that are said to be in a state of crisis: the family, the individual, the nation-state, educational institutions, democracy, nature, markets and technological infrastructures. What’s more, the language of crisis serves the purposes to describe and make sense of phenomena as diverse as the effects of the abstract logic of financial markets, the concrete human suffering in political emergencies and environmental catastrophes, or the legitimacy problems of democratic institutions and political authorities. In this chapter, I intend to explore some Foucaultian insights to interpret the emergence of crisis as a more or less appropriate way of thinking and speaking about problems concerning society as a whole. To be sure, the way we speak of crisis today is not exactly the same as in the nineteenth or the twentieth century. Still, the proposition I hereby seek to advance is that there is a common thread to the many contemporary uses of crisis, which is related to the expansion, from the eighteenth century onwards, of modern regimes of power concerned with the management of problems related to “population.” Crisis becomes the actual horizon of justification of a number of practices that seek to produce corrective and therapeutic effects when social processes are threatened

by rupture, failure or illness, which, as a consequence, mobilize, produce and assert truth discourses that claim to possess a real force of cure. The expansion of this “therapeutic spirit” is particularly noticeable in the case of neoliberalism as a political rationality that seeks to exert a positive influence on social life (enhancing its freedom, health, wealth, competition, security, etc.), but for which crisis is a vital source of knowledge and focal point of experience of governmental interventions and management of social problems.

However, the aim of my reading of Foucault in this chapter is not simply to outline the conditions that allow the contemporary language of crisis to become little more than a mode of justification for the expansion of a therapeutic politics over the conduct of individuals and their social environment. The fact that in contemporary capitalism crisis is rationalized as an object to be known and managed technically, mystified as an essential experience and defining moment, and objectified as a strategic domain of technical-political intervention, does not mean that one has to accept the imposed terms nor abandon the concept to move to something else. For if there is something true about crisis, it is precisely that in such moments of distress truth becomes a political problem and therefore an open site of struggles. It is in this sense, I contend, that we should consider what could be interpreted as the late Foucault’s particular attempt to extricate the concept of crisis from the neoliberal governmental matrix and thus re-appropriate it as a moment of the practice of critique itself.

Put differently, if the labor of critique consists in working on the limits of our present forms of life, reflecting upon them, and exploring the possibility of going beyond them, as Foucault claims in his late lectures at the Collège de France, crisis then becomes a kind of experimental “test” introduced by critique—very much in the sense of classical medicine as a struggle of truth—which opens a “virtual fracture” in the conditions of acceptability that sustain our ways of thinking, acting and living. Formulated in this way, critique does not get around the question of government; it insists with the ethical imperative of enhancing our capacity for self-government by rendering the ties that bind us less stable than previously thought. Here lies, I argue, the significance of restoring to crisis the force of critique, that is to say, of making things more fragile.

The Work of the Concept of Crisis

The starting point for this reflection is a minor but revealing remark that Foucault made in one of his lectures on the birth of biopolitics at the Collège de France (1978–1979). In the fifth lecture, Foucault is trying to reconstruct the intellectual foundations of German ordoliberalism, as a key to understand the genealogy of neoliberalism as a modern political rationality. He takes as a case a book titled *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, published in 1945 by the German political economist Wilhelm Röpke, which according to Foucault became “a kind of bible of neoliberalism.”²⁵ What seems to call his attention is not simply Röpke’s particular influence in post-war debates on the “crisis of liberalism” and the definition of a new “liberal art of government,” but a more general transformation that this book epitomizes: namely, the status economists attain as new physicians and the

authority of economics as specialized knowledge with scientific purchase as well as normative-therapeutic power on social life. The first line of Röpke's book is eloquent: "this book is the result of the reflections of an economist on the sickness of our civilization and on the manner of its cure."⁶ While commenting on the book's apparent reference to Edmund Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences*, published almost a decade earlier, Foucault mentions in passing that this kind of literature shows in a nutshell the "sad fate" of the concept of crisis in political vocabulary and social thought.⁷ Besides this general remark, Foucault leaves the issue unexplored and says nothing about what the "sad fate" of crisis may actually mean.

To understand the meaning and implications of this original remark, we should briefly consider some indications Foucault makes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where he develops a general approach to the history of Western thought in which concepts and conceptual forms constitute the raw material, both the "instrument" and "object" of archaeological research.

On the Life of Concepts

In our everyday language concepts tend to appear as continuous and ready-made surfaces of meaning that serve the purposes of grasping and describing the phenomenal world as it is. Without concepts there would be no possible experience. However, this does not mean that they are frozen components of our discursive practice, mere referents of pre-constituted ideas or elaborated products of subjective imagination. As a general claim, Foucault argues against the widespread intellectual attitude that conceives concepts as if they were "discursive monuments" in the dust of books rather than concrete effects and material embodiments of actions and events. This position immediately raises the question of the constitution of concepts and the privilege we assign to some conceptual forms as tools attached to specific objects. The locus of Foucault's archaeological inquiry is precisely to decipher the conditions of possibility for the "historical irruption" of certain bodies of knowledge and system of norms that articulate around some fundamental concepts. In other words, the emphasis is placed on the actual processes of emergence of styles of thinking and discourses that articulate novel conceptual forms which, in turn, contribute to the reordering of the relations between words and things. As a consequence, archaeological inquiry must begin by tearing away from concepts the virtual self-evidence they hold in order to show the moment of apparition and constitution, as well as the circulation and transformations of conceptual forms.

This way of proceeding implies putting attention to those moments of discontinuity that "create cracks not only in the geology of history" but also in our discursive practices.⁸ This is not to say that the emergence of a new concept is tantamount to a radical break that in one stroke divides two periods as "a sort of great drift that carries with it all discursive formations at once,"⁹ let alone to suggest a view of history with no structural continuities. Foucault prefers to speak of the occurrence of a "discursive event."¹⁰ By using this term, he refers to those often-tiny and unexpected moments that mark the sudden beginning of a

new discursive regularity that enables a number of things to be said, known, transformed or even forgotten according to certain rules and parameters that have to be conceptually specified and empirically described. Thus, a discursive event is a “mode of appropriation of (political-juridical) discourse” that creates a sort of epistemic scission.¹¹ In essence, it establishes a discontinuity that suspends the semblance of continuity of a given domain of knowledge and practices, while revealing how such continuity has been actually achieved through moments of “transformation that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations.”¹² Accordingly, the archeological approach to concepts should follow at least two criteria: to focus on the very existence of continuity as an object of historical reflection and produce “a pure description of discursive events.”¹³ Both criteria in combination imply that a concept is constituted right from the beginning as a heterogeneous and conflictive terrain of “continuous discontinuity.”¹⁴

This approach involves a severe critique of any philosophical-historical tradition that relies on the lineal progress of ideas and places the figure of the subject as the last foundation of all possible knowledge. Within this framework, the proposal of conceiving concepts as “discursive events” is elaborated with the clear intention to emphasize that concepts are not inanimate abstractions that occur in a text or in the subject’s mind, but living abstractions “dispersed between institutions, laws, political victories and defeats, demands, behaviors, revolts, reactions.”¹⁵ This formulation owes a lot to Foucault’s reading of George Canguilhem’s analyses of the history of life sciences and the implicit philosophy of concept it develops. In his view, Canguilhem’s work demonstrates that our forms of knowledge do not exist separated from the phenomenon of life—as if knowledge was driven by the orderly progression of concepts and life was defined by the restless dynamism of bodily organs.¹⁶ Quite the contrary, life and concepts are mutually mediated. For knowledge about life would be unthinkable as pure “lived experience,” that is, regardless of “the modes of that information which every living being takes from its environment and by which conversely it structures its environment.”¹⁷ Thus, the argument goes:

[t]he fact that man lives in a conceptually structured environment does not prove that he has turned away from life, or that a historical drama has separated him from it—[but] just that he lives in a certain way, that he has a relationship with his environment such that he had no set point of view toward it, that he is mobile on an undefined or a rather broadly defined territory, that he has to move around in order to gather information, that he has to move things relative to one another in order to make them useful. Forming concepts is a way of living and not a way to immobilize life; it is a way to live in a relative mobility and not a way to immobilize life.¹⁸

According to this formulation, for the archaeologist a concept is always a social innovation and a material response to the inquietudes emerging from the inherent contingency and disconcerting deficiencies of human life. It is testament to a singular way of living and therefore to human attempts to give coherence and a

sense of continuity to our historical existence. This way of understanding the formation of concepts is intended to remove the spell of the concept as a “discursive monument.” It invites recognition of the fact that a concept is less a domain of stable and permanent truths than a series of “interruptions,” “accidents,” and “gaps,” and less a unity of solid definitions than “a population of dispersed events” brought together by the very work of the concept.¹⁹ The task of the archaeologist, therefore, consists of following the epistemic and normative operation of concepts in order to show how their “relative mobility” unavoidably creates “the reassuring form of the identical” upon which our forms of life move around.²⁰ In other words, the archaeologist must carefully “untie all knots that historians have patiently tied,”²¹ for only then concepts begin to lose the embrace apparently so tight between language and experience and we are suddenly able to see “the crumbling soil on which they are based.”²² After all, the world is a “conceptually structured” space of relations that constitute the grid of objects and subjects, meanings and norms, appearances and differences upon which life in common acquires its sense of reality and exteriority.

As is well known, this is the principle that guides Foucault’s examination of the historical birth of the concept of “madness” and the subject of the “madman” at the end of eighteenth century, which brings together a variety of scientific notions and theories, medical institutions and juridical-political practices which are pivotal for Western culture of science and reason.²³ And this is also the principle that informs his approach to the historical emergence of “labour” and “population” within political economy; notions which not only embody a knowledge of the human and natural forces that make social life possible but also give rise to a political consciousness of the fragile condition of the social world itself.²⁴

These preliminary indications are relevant in order to apprehend, at least partially, the meaning of the “sad fate” remark that Foucault makes in his lecture regarding the concept of crisis. What seems to be so sad about this semantic signature of the experience of modernity is the transformation of crisis into an abstract universal in contemporary discourse. The familiarity of the notion tends to subsume the constitutive heterogeneity of concrete social phenomena under a totalizing, ready-made and essential entity: a single moment of break. The underlying suggestion of Foucault’s remark, the way I read it, is that we should not take such a universal as the starting point of analysis but instead the very question of how a series of practices, institutions and forms of knowledge organize around and through something that is supposed to be a crisis or being in a state of crisis. Thus, the “sad fate” remark is not simply about the canonical use of a vocabulary that then becomes a fetish of scientific and political language alike. It refers to the very forgetfulness of the complex ways in which such a concept expands itself as a discursive grid that gathers a population of diverse events, objects, repertoires of action, modes of enunciation and theoretical structures.²⁵ This implies that crisis can no longer be conceived as the place of discovery of any truth about social life that is given in advance, hidden for a long time or distorted by illusion. It is actually closer to what Foucault calls a “discursive event.”

If considered along these archaeological lines, crisis stops being an indivisible unity and starts becoming a heterogeneous set of practices around which a type of discourse of truth is formed. It involves the constitution of a domain of objects (including subjectivities) to which this discourse is addressed and the articulation of forms of knowledge that examine, measure, register, encode, display and enact statements upon which one can recognize and describe a problematic state of affairs. In other words, crisis is a moment of “discursive production” (which administrates and produces silences too), of “production of power” (which creates spaces for action and prohibitions), and of “propagation of knowledge” (which may put into circulation “mistaken beliefs,” “misconceptions,” etc.).²⁶ It is a discursive event insofar as it is both a site of inscription of truth and a mechanism of formation of truth, and therefore a field opened to multiple social and political struggles. In this sense, one may suggest that from a Foucaultian perspective, crisis is neither a word nor a concept in the conventional sense but rather a field of discourses and practices concerning things that are said to be in a state of crisis.

Crisis as Therapeutics of Truth

It is from this perspective, I argue, that the fact that Western societies have been and still are crisis-talking societies had for Foucault a historical and political significance that needed to be explained. Even if Foucault never produced any systematic account of the history of the concept of crisis, there are two distinctive discursive fields of knowledge to which he gave significant attention in his research and whose history is deeply entangled with the idea of crisis: philosophy and medicine.

The affinities between the history of philosophy and the history of medicine always called Foucault’s attention. This is so because of the commitment that both fields of knowledge show toward the practice of diagnosis and the disclosure of truth since ancient Greece. The philosopher and the physician are, strictly speaking, *alēthourgēs*, those who listen and speak the truth by making use of a set of verbal and non-verbal procedures (like rituals) that make intelligible something that is manifested and recognized as truth. But this connection between philosophy and medicine around the practice of truth-telling runs parallel to an equally important concern with the phenomenon of disease and therapy. That is, concern with the limits and mortality of our present forms of living, as well as with the procedures to alleviate, if not modify the conditions that produce illness.

To be sure, for Foucault philosophy was a way of reflecting about our relationship to truth rather than establishing the foundations of what is truth. It is only in this sense that he accepted and defended the locus of his research to be described as philosophical. Still, Foucault also felt close to medicine even to the extent to suggest that his work was akin to the medical practice: “I’m neither [a philosopher] nor [a historian], I’m a doctor, let’s say I’m a diagnostician and my work consists in revealing, through the incision of writing, something that might be the truth of what is dead.”²⁷ Interestingly, even if this proximity to medicine

may be attributed to Foucault's family context—his father was a surgeon and his grandfather was a physician—he does apply this description to himself in order to invoke his closeness to the “paternal figure” of Nietzsche, to whom “philosophy was above all else a diagnosis, it had to do with man to the extent that he was sick. For him, it was both a diagnosis and a kind of violent therapy for the diseases of culture.”²⁸

Having said this, though, Foucault observes that in the history of Western thought the therapeutic ethos that underlies both philosophical reflection and medical practice could be better understood if referred back to the fundamental question of government. That is, the question of how the challenge to guide the conduct of oneself and others is inseparable in our societies from the practical search, production, manifestation and assertion of truth. In other words, the key issue has to do with “the government of men by the truth,” by the therapeutic power that truth enacts, especially when we are confronted, epistemologically and politically, with the fragile and uncertain condition of life processes that are threatened with rupture, failure and illness.²⁹

The connection between truth-telling and practical intervention in political life is, in fact, an issue Foucault sought to address in his final series of lectures of the late 1970s and early 1980s around the practice of *parrēsia* or true discourse in classical Greece.³⁰ As he put it: “the problems of governmentality in their specificity, in the complex relation to but also independence from *politeia*, appear and are formulated for the first time around this notion of *parrēsia* and the exercise of power through true discourse.”³¹ Foucault observes that this question of truth-telling was deeply embedded in, if not motivated by, the decline of city-states, the crisis of Athenian democratic life, and the events of the Peloponnesian War.³²

It is therefore at the intersection of the question of government with the particular time of political crisis that Foucault examines the emergence of a “new character,” the philosopher as a political advisor to the prince, for which he takes the case of an encounter between Plato and the tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse.³³ What Foucault specifically discusses is the conflictual relationship that Plato had as a counsellor of Dionysius and Dion (Dionysius's brother-in-law) in his three visits to Sicily. Around the therapeutic scene of political advice at the sovereign's court Foucault intends to decipher the therapeutic role of philosophical *parrēsia* in Greek political life.

To this end, Foucault takes Plato's Seventh Letter and reads it as an account of his career as political advisor and a theory of philosophy's role as political advice. He finds here the starting point for a genealogy of “political thought as advice for political action” conceived “much more than as the foundation of right or as the foundation of the organization of the city.”³⁴ By taking part directly in political advice, Foucault suggests, Plato identifies that philosophical logos, or the notion of the organization of the ideal city, is insufficient to play a meaningful part in political life. It requires, instead, to become an activity whose reality is tested by speaking the truth (practicing “veridiction,” *parrēsia*) “in relation to” power.³⁵ Whether or not this is a representative view of Plato's political philosophy as a whole, Foucault wants to show the irruption of therapeutic

advice as the key task of the philosopher as political counsellor, a form of practical and ethical engagement “when things are going wrong, when there is illness.”³⁶

The philosopher has, if you like, a critical role in the sense of a role performed in the realm of crisis, or at any rate of trouble and illness, and of the patient’s, in this case the city’s and citizen’s awareness that something is going wrong. Second, the role of philosophy and the philosopher [...] must be like that of free physicians who address themselves to people who are free, that is to say, who persuade at the same time as they prescribe. Of course, he has to say what is to be done, but he has to explain why it has to be done [...]. The philosopher’s role will actually be to persuade both those who govern and those who are governed. Finally, third, the philosopher will not simply have to give advice and opinion regarding this or that trouble affecting the city. He will also have to rethink entirely the city’s regime, he will have to be like those physicians who think not just to cure present ills but wish to take the whole of the patient’s life into account and in hand. So the object of the philosopher’s intervention must be the entire regime of the city, its *politeia*.³⁷

In this passage Foucault credits Plato for putting the philosopher for the first time into the shoes of the physician, the doctor who welcomes the crisis as a field of struggle and uses *parrēsia* as a therapeutic technique of intervention in the political realm. Apparently this interpretation does not add substantive evidence to the role we know therapeutic practices have played in Western culture since Hellenistic philosophers developed the analogy between the practice of philosophy and the art of medicine.³⁸ However, what I think is noteworthy is Foucault’s attempt to reflect on the ethical imperative of the Platonic clinical scene, namely truth-telling as a way of scrutinizing the perplexities and problems of human life in common rather than prescribing a norm or moral code. In this framework political advice still appears to be a form of critical knowledge and therapeutic practice that in times of crisis stands before and addresses power insofar as it refuses to be its cheerful servant. It is perhaps the same attitude of interpellation that Foucault saw reconstructed, although in a new form, in Kant’s critical philosophy: namely, “the free courage by which one binds oneself in the act of telling the truth[;] the ethics of truth-telling as an action which is risky and free.”³⁹

Broadly understood, the therapeutics involved in the practice of *parrēsia* consists of taking the risk of revealing truth about something or somebody in the attempt to intervene and modify the conditions of a problematic situation with a singular curative intent. However important this case is for Foucault’s interest in a philosophical practice concerned with the emergence of truth discourses and an ethics of truth-telling, he does not intent to find here a normative model one can fix and then set against to denounce modern types of therapeutic rationality as intrinsically tyrannical, ideological or instrumental. The point is rather to understand the changing character of the relationship between truth and power,

so as to be able to problematize the growing authority of therapeutic expertise in the wide range of technologies of government in modern societies. What interests me in this regard is the possibility of tracing more clearly the connection between crisis and therapeutic practices. A way of proceeding is by paying attention to Foucault's remarks on the changing epistemic status of medical knowledge in modernity and the appearance of the idea of social therapeutics in political discourse.

Indeed, Foucault concludes in *The Birth of the Clinic* that at least since the second half of the eighteenth century in Europe the conditions of therapeutic practice began to change. The transformation he observes consists of the rise of a medically invested society expressed in the fact that a number of non-medical phenomena began to be treated as part, or according to the "clinical gaze," of the field of medical knowledge, and also in that medical concepts and methods increasingly shaped the epistemic horizon of political power, so that medical thought becomes "fully engaged in the philosophical status of man."⁴⁰ What is of interest here for the purposes of my analysis is not so much the thesis of the "medicalization of society" but Foucault's identification of a singular process, namely the disappearance of the discourse of crisis from medical diagnosis and its displacement into the realm of society.

Prior to the constitution of pathological anatomy in the nineteenth century, Foucault tells us, "crisis" played an important role among the techniques and knowledge of classical medicine. It was considered to be a method for treating illnesses and finding a cure, literally the decisive and particular moment in which "the reality of the disease [is] becoming truth," so the doctor "must consider the crisis as the way, practically the only way, through which he can get a hold of the disease."⁴¹ Thus, if the existence of diseases means an alteration of the functions of self-conservation of the body and, therefore, a confrontation with the precariousness and mortality of organic structures, the crisis means a test that above all turns the body itself into a source of truth (or the site where truth becomes flesh). Similarly, Foucault argues that crisis also played a part in the "therapeutic ideas that organized the cures of madness" until the end of the eighteenth century,⁴² specifically through the "theatrical realization" of the object of delirium which is a method aimed at confronting the madman with his own insanity. The characteristic aspect here is that doctors could manipulate, produce and introduce crisis at a propitious moment, very much as a strategic game between reason and unreason in which the concept of crisis "marked the point where illusion, turned back into itself, opened itself to the blinding nature of truth."⁴³ In this capacity, the therapeutic effect of truth (healing) associated with the moment of crisis lies in the communicable dimension of the disease, for in order to live one needs to know. As Foucault's recalls in a later interview, in the moment of crisis:

the physician isn't someone who speaks, he's someone who listens. He listens to other people's words, not because he takes them seriously, not to understand what they say, but to track down through them the signs of a serious disease.... The physician listens, but does so to cut through the

speech of the other and reach the silent truth of the body ... The only words he utters are those of diagnosis and therapy. The physician speaks only to utter the truth, briefly, and prescribe medicine.⁴⁴

However, a radical change in these therapeutic practices of crisis occurred with the entrance of “anatomical-pathological” and “statistical” medicine, after which the clinical observation and verbalization of the pathological will depend on the “invisible visibility” of the organs of the living body rather than on any crisis.⁴⁵ As the sites of observation of suspected pathologies changed on the basis of new apparatuses and techniques to identify organic diseases, crisis “not only disappears as a notion but also as an organizing principle of medical technique”⁴⁶ and, consequently, the body stops being a source of truth and becomes an “object of calculation” and a domain of “administrative control.”⁴⁷ Foucault, however, finds a paradoxical twist in the case of psychiatric knowledge. While psychiatry rejected crisis on similar grounds as did general medicine (the hospital is a disciplinary system that cannot permit the disruptive nature of crisis, and pathological anatomy invalidates theoretically the truth of crisis), it found itself needing to invent a new medical crisis to claim therapeutic authority: dementia and hysteria. The main reason for the reintroduction of crisis, Foucault explains, lies in the fact that the structure of psychiatric knowledge cannot find any real basis for its therapeutic power in anatomic pathology as general medicine does. Essentially, psychiatry can only ascertain its truth as medical knowledge at the point of the “absolute decision” that the psychiatrist takes between madness and non-madness, reality and simulation. And it is in the confessional practice of psychiatric questioning that the medical crisis is enacted again and again.⁴⁸

Even so, this process of disappearance of crisis as a concept and method within medical practice did not mean the dissolution of the discourse of crisis *tout court*. As a matter of fact, it corresponded to a wider reconceptualization and transference of the idea of crisis from the medical body to the social body. Foucault situates the beginnings of this change around the French Revolution for it is then that the concept of crisis came to articulate a diffused and mobile political consciousness of disease, introducing the idea of the restoration of health to a (morally or biologically) sick society, an everlasting therapeutic enterprise for the government of populations.⁴⁹ Indeed, the status of the doctor and medical knowledge more generally were profoundly modified at the end of the eighteenth and during the nineteenth centuries when, linked to the expansion of the capitalist mode of production, “the health of the population became one of the economic norms required by industrial societies.”⁵⁰ The question is how we may account for this fundamental transformation in the epistemic and political status of the concept of crisis?

Governing by Crisis: The Therapeutic Imperative of Liberalism

As I showed in Chapter 4, Koselleck’s classic study of the conceptual history of crisis shows abundant evidence of the semantic displacements of the legal,

theological and medical meanings of the term in social and political language after the French Revolution. Although Foucault's account of this process bears some similarities,⁵¹ his focus is put less on the semantic articulation of a new consciousness of time than in how the concept of crisis is linked to a new economy of power that emerges out of the practices and discourses that seek to deal with the government of a new political subject, the constitution of society and its population. That is, it has to do with the emergence of liberalism as a new art of government of social life.

The Liberal Government of the Social

"We live in an era of governmentality discovered in the eighteenth century."⁵² This statement articulates what Foucault thought to be the essence of the new "economy of power" that accompanied the rise of bourgeois liberal culture and capitalist development in European societies. He first introduced the notion of governmentality in the 1977–1978 lectures on Security, Territory and Population at the Collège de France with the intention of specifying the birth of a way of reflecting on "the art of government" and reorganizing power relations and practices around the far-reaching political management of life.

Foucault argues that the general problem of "how to govern" is an essential aspect of the exercise of any form of power inasmuch as, understood in its simplest sense, "to govern is to structure the possible field of action of others."⁵³ He observes that the way in which this question is addressed begins to change fundamentally in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for a new range of reflections about the effective conduction of the state appeared linked to the development of the administrative apparatus of the monarchies, a sort of rationalization of the Christian pastoral tradition into the practice of "the political government of men" under the principle of *raison d'état*. However, what marks a decisive point in the political constitution of modernity, Foucault observes, is the progressive dissociation during the eighteenth century of practices of power from the exercise of sovereign authority; or rather, the development of a "political rationality" that sets a whole series of problems referred to government outside the juridico-territorial horizon of the state.

The point of inflection that Foucault seeks to stress is the new awareness that eighteenth-century demographic, commercial and economic expansion brought about processes underlying the material conditions and conflicts associated with the fact of human beings living together. It is in this context that Foucault situates the advent of liberalism not as a theoretical doctrine but as a new style of thinking concerned with how to govern better, and whose key innovation consisted of refocusing the practices and objects of the governmental domain on the political management of problems related to "population." The introduction of this "new political actor" into the practice of government, Foucault argues, meant an important redefinition of the technologies of power, for the central problem of the state could no longer be simply thought in terms of the foundation and legitimate exercise of power over "juridical beings." Instead, it becomes

more and more about how to secure and “improve the condition of the population, to increase its wealth, its longevity, and its health.”⁵⁴

The reconfiguration of the phenomena of population as a political problem, to be sure, was determined in a significant way by the epistemic reevaluation of the status of humans in their individual condition as “biological beings” and also members of a “living species.” Foucault explains that with this entrance of “life” into history and the domain of political power, not only the biological features of the human body become the focus of technologies of power but also collective human existence is discovered as having its own life process. Thus the regularities and “natural forces” of population could become the new horizon of modern governmental practices by means of scientific knowledge and systematic observation (e.g., demographic and economic indicators) and technical regulation and therapeutic intervention (e.g., social medicine and police practices).

In Foucault’s view, it is in this historical conjunction of institutions, techniques and analyses having population as their target where we must find society’s “threshold of modernity.” For alongside the political structure and system of rights that gave distinctive shape to the modern state, a whole new domain of objects, practices, concepts and categories began to emerge in direct relation to the processes that constitute the specificity of life in common (e.g., the town, bodies, family, markets, civil society, etc.).⁵⁵ On this point Foucault explains that:

what was discovered at the time—and this is one of the great discoveries of political thought at the end of the eighteenth century—was the idea of society. That is to say, that government not only has to deal with a territory, with a domain, and with its subjects, but that it also has to deal with a complex and independent reality that has its own mechanisms of disturbance. This new reality is society. From the moment that one is to manipulate a society, . . . one must take into account what it is. It becomes necessary to reflect upon it, upon its specific characteristics, its constants and its variables.⁵⁶

The identification and problematization of the reality of society was one of the great effects of the development of “a social point of view” that accompanied the advent of liberal thought.⁵⁷ And in Foucault’s account the creation of political economy, in particular, played a significant role in bringing to light the “naturalness” of society as a domain whose autonomous mechanisms and optimal functioning could not be controlled or altered at will by state intervention, like the autonomy of market forces.⁵⁸ According to this view, then, the knowledge and management of society becomes the basis of a political rationality that recasts the practice of government into the human life of population and its environment. It is only after this mutation that society is constituted as a domain susceptible to pathological processes and hence in need of therapeutic interventions when the continuity of its normal and natural processes are in danger.

Understood in these terms, Foucault contends, the “liberal art of government” constitutes a real breakthrough in the history of governmental rationalization. On

the one hand, it seeks to exert a positive influence on the conditions of life, which means optimizing and improving the autonomous processes of population. On the other, it is preoccupied with the vulnerability of these same processes and how they may affect the conditions of human freedom. So if society is considered to be simultaneously natural and fragile, the new challenge of political power becomes to assert institutional conditions for the continuous invention of regulatory, corrective and security mechanisms so as to ensure the defense and enhancement of society.⁵⁹

As we see, Foucault's analysis of governmental rationality suggests that the phenomena of "governmentalization" of modern society was not the result of an ideological project nor a mechanical effect of state domination *tout court*, but a much more complex rearrangement of power relations that was linked to the increasing importance of life problems for political power. On this account, what seems to distinguish the process of formation of political modernity is a quite singular combination of individualizing technologies of power directed at the lives and conduct of subjects, and techniques of government that seek to integrate them into the framework of a community or society as a whole. Much of Foucault's work is indeed interested in how the structuration of the field of action and experience of individuals in modern societies lies in the intersection of forms of production of truth and production of normativity, which are integrated into but not reducible to the state form.

It is in this area that a particular element haunted Foucault, namely the penetration of medical knowledge into governmental practices and its translation into more general discourses about society. This expressed itself more clearly in the development of "medico-administrative" forms of expertise concerned with the health and sickness of society and the development of systems of qualification of subjects and phenomena according to notions of "normal" and "pathological."⁶⁰ And indeed Foucault believed that the development of the social and human sciences in the nineteenth century could not be isolated from this epistemological-political framework. As he put it, if the prevalent view is that "societies live because they are sick, declining societies and healthy, expanding ones,"⁶¹ there are greater changes for which clinical knowledge could become a form of "jurisprudence" through which the conflicts, problems and crises threatening the normal continuity of a population's life are systematically referred back to a governmental horizon in the mode of therapeutic interventions.⁶² Thus:

If the science of man appeared as an extension of the science of life, it is because it was medically, as well as biologically based: by transference, importation, and, often, metaphor, the science of man no doubt used concepts formed by biologists; but the very subjects that it devoted itself (man, his behavior, his individual and social realizations) therefore opened up a field that was divided up according to the principles of the normal and the pathological. Hence the unique character of the science of man, which cannot be detached from the negative aspects in which it first appeared, but which is also linked with the positive role that it implicitly occupies as norm.⁶³

Within this epistemic framework the management of populations finds its rationality, and also it is where a notion and consciousness of crisis can be scientifically and political formulated. By taking this approach, one could affirm that to the extent the phenomenon of crisis faces us with the question of what is to be done in those situations when life is threatening (e.g., a body, a city, a market, a society), the notion of crisis makes its political appearance, more than in the form of failure, in the form of a productive moment of governmentality through the invention, operation, opposition and application of different practices of knowledge and strategies of power. Thus, if one reconstructs Foucault's reasoning in this way, the constitution of crisis into a permanent object of scientific enquiry (for instance, in nineteenth-century political economy and sociology) would only make sense when seen in correlation with the constitution of a broader field of political intervention and technologies of power oriented to the management of populations and their problems. In other words, the constitution of social therapeutics, or therapeutic rationality, which traverses different domains of collective life and operates through two interrelated claims: the claim to know society and the constitutive fragility of its processes and the claim to secure society's ideal state and establish the *nomos* that organizes and regulates relations. Thus, for the liberal art of government crisis becomes a novel mechanism of formation of truth as well as an innovative mean of regulation and re-programming of social life.

From the perspective of governmentality that Foucault is advancing, liberalism is from its beginnings an important critique of state reason and its reality. It had, to be sure, moralizing overtones in relation to the legitimacy of state power, but it should not be reduced to a utopian doctrine originating in the historical development of the bourgeoisie as a social class with economic influence but divested of political power. For Foucault, the liberal critique of power is less a coherent ideology than a way of thinking about and problematizing the issue of how to govern better juridically and economically: governing less and more efficiently in order to produce freedom. Thus, what he sees beneath the surface of modern liberalism is not a deformation, or ideological misrecognition, of the realm of politics by the critique of the state, but the very re-conceptualization, rationalization and expansion of the domain of government beyond (although not excluding but in relation to) the state power and, subsequently, the framing of a new concept of social freedom based on the autonomy of market exchange between individual parties as its functional and normative principle.

The rationality of the transition to this new political stage of liberal governmentality is something that Karl Polanyi,⁶⁴ years before Foucault's lectures, addressed in *The Great Transformation*. In this book, first published in 1944, Polanyi demonstrates the political foundations and human consequences of a world interpreted and organized in market-financial terms. His main thesis is that the almost religious effort to establish self-regulated markets as the principle of social life is the basis of the crisis that led to the collapse of the liberal state. This is so because the liberal project is based on the utopian but ultimately destructive belief that the economy can operate disembedded from society. It is utopian because the very idea that the economic system operates with independence of

the human texture of social relations lies in a historical fiction: that the development of self-regulated markets was the result of the natural laws of evolution of economic life. And this belief is also destructive because in order for the self-regulated market to exist and function at all, conditions should be created for the institutional liberation of markets: that is, government requires to intervene in the motivational structure of human action to introduce the profit motif and re-program the space of social life to subordinate it to the logic of commodity exchange. It is this combination of utopian naturalism of economic theories and creative destruction of political regulation that, according to Polanyi, sustains the normative force of the economization of society that nineteenth-century liberal capitalism brings about. But it is also the factor that debilitates the economic principle of self-regulation the moment its compulsive expansion threatens the destruction of society and increases the need of governmental intervention to domesticate the perverse effects of the immanent tendency to crisis of a marketized society.

The Neoliberal Disorder of Things

The contradiction Polanyi recognizes at the heart of liberal rationality—that the means of maintaining freedom themselves “adulterate” and “destroy” freedom, while increasing social dislocations, insecurity and injustices⁶⁵—is further elaborated in Foucault’s genealogy of the rise of neoliberal governmentality in his 1978–1979 lectures. The fundamental argument that Foucault introduces here, I suggest, is that while classic liberalism places the origin of these distortions in the incapacity of actors themselves to follow the natural principles of *laissez-faire* and economic freedom, neoliberalism consciously and willingly embraces the contradiction as an enabling and productive mechanism of government. Based on this premise, Foucault reconstructs neoliberalism as a political rationality and a series of practices centered on the government of society which from its beginnings is structured in the mode of crisis consciousness.⁶⁶

In essence, Foucault argues, neoliberalism is a critical response to the deep “crisis of liberalism” that unfolded with the Great Depression of 1929 and World War II. He draws specifically upon post-war German and American debates to suggest that this “crisis manifests itself in a number of re-evaluations, re-appraisals, and new projects in the art of government.”⁶⁷ In fact, books such as Wilhelm Röpke’s *The Crisis of Society*, which I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, became “a kind of bible” in debates on the future of liberalism and the transformation of the government of society. To be sure, neoliberalism shares the classical concern over how to regulate state intervention in the economy and society, however, it abandons the traditional idea that the juridical protection of *laissez-faire* and the reinforcement of the autonomy of market relations are effective means to secure the progress of economic and individual freedom. The new predicament of the neoliberal program consists of the most radical extension and incorporation of market principles, particularly “competition,” into a universal model for the foundation, regulation and overall exercise of legitimate political power.⁶⁸

The formalization of this orientation into new economic theories and its mobilization through policy interventions brought about a revalorization of the political and epistemological role of economic knowledge in public life, which materialized in the status economists attain as new physicians, and the authority of economics as specialized knowledge with scientific purchase as well as normative-therapeutic power on society. But it also meant a complete turn of classical sociological conceptions of society based on forms of solidarity and moral ties between actors as well as systemic mechanisms of functional differentiation and coordination. Here the idea of social collectives is severely criticized and replaced with a form of rationalism that grounds the value of human action in the individual capacity to make choices according to economic principles of competition.⁶⁹ Still, to produce social coordination out of individual competition neoliberal thought requires producing a further inversion, namely to introduce a process of societal dedifferentiation between economics and politics: “Instead of accepting a free market defined by the state and kept as it were under state supervision, [it has to] completely turn the formula around and adopt the free market as organizing and regulating principle of the state.”⁷⁰

According to this broad description, what Foucault seems to be trying to account for is the emergence of a new therapeutic rationality based on the generalization of the dynamic of “competition” as the principle for regulating social relations. Within this framework, the overall exercise of political power would then be directed to “intervene” and re-program society in order to ensure that the mechanisms of competition can produce more freedom rather than to correct the destructive effects of the market over social life. At the basis of this emerging political rationality lies the “production of freedom” as a new therapeutic imperative of society, while the “competition mechanisms” of the market reveal themselves as principles of truth (“veridiction”) and normativity (“jurisdiction”) that regulate social relations.⁷¹ The predicament of these therapeutics of freedom is that while they produce new regulations, institutions, policies and technical devices to attain their goal, they permanently risk producing less freedom, more insecurity and, therefore, recurrent crises that need to be governed.⁷² It is for this reason that neoliberalism must operate as a discourse and form of government of permanent crisis. As Foucault puts it:

[W]e arrive at the idea that in the end this liberal art of government introduces itself or is the victim from within of what could be called crisis of governmentality. There are crises which may be due, for example, to the increase in the economic cost of the exercise of these freedoms [...]. So there is a problem, or crisis, or a consciousness of crisis, based on the definition of the economic cost of the exercise of freedom [...]. Another form of crisis would be due to the inflation of the compensatory mechanisms of freedom [...]. This is, if you like, the ambiguity of all the devices which could be called “liberogenic,” that is to say, devices intended to produce freedom which potentially risk producing exactly the opposite.⁷³

From this perspective, liberal reason is permanently compelled to find ways to restructure its internal principles as well as re-program the external realm of

society when conflicts with freedom arise. Accordingly, what neoliberalism seeks to construct is a particular “project of society” or rather “society as the target and objective of governmental practice.”⁷⁴ To do so, it has to work on a process of conceptual change that imbues social life with a set of normative ideas that stimulate competition and institutional designs modeled upon the logic of enterprises; simply put, the neoliberal concept of society is “not a supermarket society, but an enterprise society.”⁷⁵ The generalization of this conceptual form creates an social environment in which individuals are constantly exposed to both instability and control, which in turn conditions them to conducting their lives according to a managerial ethos, taking risks and “living dangerously,” and experience their present as insecure and uncertain, yet opened to achieve self-realization.

Within this culture of danger and fragility, so to speak, the instability and disorder of the social world become positive conditions to preserve collective life—as they open new opportunities and projects for governing,⁷⁶ while their pathological consequences are divested of collective significance—as they are framed as results of personal failures and vices.⁷⁷ Thus, discourses of crisis become a common sense way to governmentally produce and manage rather than prevent such scenario, upon which neoliberal interventions are established as the most rational and viable approach. A case in point is the doctrine of “there is no alternative” that has informed the austerity measures in EU countries in recent years and which has been instrumental in the expansion of therapeutic politics that work regardless democratic will. So, living in a state of crisis is framed as a sacrifice we all have to make in order to secure the possibility of freedom. What’s more, crisis constitutes itself into a mechanism of “immunization,” as it forces protecting parts of the societal body for the sake of survival by means of introducing antidotes that contain the same principle that causes the disease (e.g., privatization of public goods, reduction of social security, restriction of rights, bail out of banks, fiscal reform, etc.). The point is that beyond a certain threshold, as seems to be the case of the financial and debt crisis of 2008, immunization practices threaten to destroy the very way of life they seek to protect as they deepen the roots of instability and disorder.⁷⁸

All things said, the “sad fate” of crisis that Foucault remarks on in his lectures on the birth of biopolitics may well be referring to the way in which, most notoriously during the 1970s, the concept of crisis was almost completely abandoned by the Left the very moment it was becoming the privileged object of reflection of conservative theories and the domain of political intervention of neoliberal governmental practices.⁷⁹ Still, the fact that in neoliberal capitalism crisis is rationalized as an object to be known and managed technically, mystified as an essential experience and defining moment, and objectified as a strategic domain of therapeutic intervention with constraining effects over the conduct of individuals and their social environment, does not mean that one has to accept the imposed terms nor abandon the concept to move to something else. As Foucault suggests, the fact that these governmental practices carry and enact a discourse of truth mean they are inevitably open to contestation and critique. It is in this sense, I contend, that we should consider what could be interpreted as Foucault’s

unspoken attempt to extricate the concept of crisis from the neoliberal governmental matrix and thus re-appropriate it as a moment of the practice of critique itself.

Making Things More Fragile

Later Foucault repeatedly stressed that governmentality is truly a political phenomenon not because there exists an oppressive power limiting and shaping human freedom externally, but because there are practices of “dissidence” and critical forces that revolt against the exercise of power that conditions our social and individual actions. Indeed, “it is because there are such voices” that interrupt the consistent flow of our forms of life, Foucault contends, “that the time of human beings does not have the form of evolution but that of ‘history.’”⁸⁰ It is for this reason that the question of governmentality cannot be dissociated from the question of critique.

Foucault’s reconsideration of the relationship between critique and power has received considerable attention in secondary literature,⁸¹ especially due to his explicit engagement with the Kantian-philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment, which is interpreted as a direct response to the question of government and autonomy,⁸² on the one hand, and the genealogical attempt to trace the historical interplay between a number of movements of “counter-conduct” and the crises of different regimes of government in Western societies since the sixteenth century, on the other.⁸³ The basic proposition underlying this analysis consists of the need to displace our focus from an idea of philosophical critique restricted to a rational procedure for establishing the conditions and limits of true knowledge, to a more general conceptualization of critique as an “attitude,” a way of “thinking, speaking and acting” in relation to what exists, to the truths to which we adhere and the present in which we live, which is deeply entrenched in modernity. Foucault recognized that this move from one concept of critique to the other had been the essential concern of the tradition of thought that goes “from Hegel to the Frankfurt School, through Nietzsche and Max Weber,” and to which his work itself is said to belong.⁸⁴ Still, he objected that the most critical philosophy had attributed some kind of transcendent status to rationality and knowledge—treating what is beyond their limits as illegitimate, error or illusion—and had approached the phenomenon of power as something identical to repression, prescription and prohibition, thus, granting critique the benefit of being a practice not only able to judge but to move beyond power.

Foucault saw in Kant’s conception of the Enlightenment a great innovation, consisting fundamentally in “the insertion of critique in the historical process of *Aufklärung*,” namely the introduction of “the present” as a philosophical problem and, for that matter, the field to which philosophy belongs, must relate to, and reflect upon in order to move beyond the conditions of “self-incurred tutelage” that limit without rational justification the capacity to constitute ourselves as free agents. It is according to this interpretation of the Enlightenment as a critical ethos that Foucault justified his intention to displace the center of gravity of critical philosophy from the traditional examination of the universal conditions of

legitimacy of knowledge, “analytics of truth,” toward the practice of interrogating the conditions that sustain and have given form to our historical present, “ontology of the present.”⁸⁵ But what are the implications of this philosophical-historical displacement and how does it affect the position of the practice of critique in relation to neoliberal governmentality and the social therapeutics it enacts?

The first and most important consequence is that the practice of critique acquires the form of “a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, and saying.” Put in this way, Foucault’s most elemental proposition is to transform critique into the practice of “analyzing and reflecting upon limits.”⁸⁶ This means that if critique is not tied to the issue of the lawful use of reason, its goal is rather to describe the historical formation of the truths, practices and concepts that govern our relation to the present and to ourselves, to “problematize” what constitutes their acceptability (epistemological question) and, therefore, make available what is presented to us as “inaccessible” and experienced as “universal, necessary, and obligatory” in terms of their possible transformation (political question). It is in this precise sense, Foucault concludes, that critique becomes the concrete work of subjects who give themselves “the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.”⁸⁷

What is significant about this formulation is that Foucault seems to be bringing his understanding of the Kantian critical attitude in line with his adoption of the Nietzschean genealogical critique of power.⁸⁸ For the attitude of critical interrogation (ethos) is directly linked with a form of analysis that traces the historical emergence of our forms of life and the truths upon which they are based (knowledge). As a consequence, once we are able to examine, understand and reveal the “fragile fabric” within which the practices, concepts, norms and institutions that govern who we are and how we live came about, it becomes possible to experiment with possibilities to bring forth a situation in which what exists may no longer exist as it is (diagnosis).

Since truth is not an essence that one must simply discover, but a historically and politically embedded result, and power “has no intrinsic legitimacy,” but it rests “on the contingency and fragility of a history,”⁸⁹ the point of Foucault’s critique of neoliberal governmentality is not to change people’s consciousness but to transform the material and institutional conditions of the capitalist regime of production of truth: i.e., a concept of society understood as a domain governed by permanent instability and the therapeutic imperative of individual freedom. For this transformation to take place at all, critique has to begin by opening the question of “the non-necessity of all power of whatever kind” and, therefore, by revealing that there is no principle of closure of social reality.⁹⁰ So, if the neoliberal government of crisis serves to fix the boundaries of the political and social space, insofar as it retraces the limits of what is conceived as possible, rational and adequate in times of distress, the struggle to which critique must hold on to consists precisely in working on the edges of those very limits in order to enact their contingent (albeit naturalized) constitution. In other words, “it is a matter of making things more fragile.”⁹¹

The Work of Critique as Crisis: Concluding Remarks

In order to assert this right to make things more fragile, critique cannot simply disavow and accept “the sad fate” of the concept of crisis; it has to restore to crisis the force of critique and redeploy it as one of its constitutive moments, very much in the sense of classical medicine to which I referred earlier: an experimental “test” in the struggle of truth to encourage the entry of other forms of life and subjectivity into history. For like a physician who cuts and surveys the body of others trying to reveal the site of the lesion and pain, a genealogically driven critique raises questions and problems to “incite new reactions, and induce a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions.”⁹² This attribution of critique’s ability to introduce and enact crisis, however, does not comport with a predictable or lineal effect. It rather consists in producing a “virtual fracture which opens up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, that is, of possible transformation.”⁹³ In the search to enhance our capacities of self-government, critique’s “historical sense has more in common with medicine than philosophy.”⁹⁴ This is so neither because critique calls on the past to diagnose problems of the present nor because it uses history to substantiate what is to be done like a doctor prescribes one’s diet or a political advisor instructs on strategy. Instead, we should confer therapeutic credit to the practice of critique because it is a reflective “work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings,”⁹⁵ an activity of “orientation in thinking” through examples that help us re-experience the present.⁹⁶

This claim, I should add, is not intended to dissolve the effects of the activity of genealogical critique into a purely cognitive and epistemic level. It also suggests that this reflection may have practical implications of a more general order because, as Foucault puts it, “from the second [things are] historically constituted, [they] can be politically destroyed.”⁹⁷ And yet the notion of destruction should neither be understood as the freedom of demolition (absolute negativity) nor associated with the moral ideal of a society without power relations (positive utopia). In fact, the practice of critique “must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical” and, at the same time, avoid the facile view that the present in which we live in is a moment of “total perdition, in the abyss of darkness, or a triumphant daybreak.”⁹⁸

Understood in this way, the critical knowledge produced by genealogical inquiry can claim to participate in historical struggles against forms of domination only inasmuch as it dedicates all its efforts to the “patient labor” of raising questions and problems “as effectively as possible” as to give form “to our impatience for liberty.”⁹⁹ This proposition, I think, is ultimately what Foucault understood to be the “anti-strategic” ethos animating this model of critical thought: “to be respectful when a singularity revolts, intransigent as soon as power violates the universal.”¹⁰⁰

Notwithstanding this therapeutic and non-strategic attribution, there is a point at which one notices that Foucault does not want to go so far as to set principles for a model of contemporary social critique. There is a sense in which he would even like to retreat from offering any advice about how to practice or conduct a critical inquiry. This is the point, I suggest, at which he rather prefers to embrace the “philosophical ethos” and reverse it as a way of conducting himself, a mode

of practicing his work as an act of self-transformation, a permanent exercise in “the art of living.”

Having said this, a last comment is required. From the perspective of standard social theories it may appear that the way I discussed the concepts of crisis and critique in this chapter remain severely ill-defined as appendices of power relations, practices of knowledge, and contingent histories, and do not truly address the fundamental contradictions in the realm of social relations. Be that as it may, it would be a mistake to read Foucault’s work as providing any foundation for a general theory of crisis or defining the a priori conditions that make this concept work in modern society. It is really about formulating and introducing the concept into historical reality not to prove that it is true or false, right or wrong, but in order to test reality in its own particular universality. Ultimately, the challenge of critical theory is not about having the willingness “to change, if not the world, if not life, at least their ‘meaning,’ simply with a fresh word that can come only from the critic.”¹⁰¹ It is really about changing the rules that govern the production of truth, especially in times of crisis.

Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, “On the Ways of Writing History,” in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 2, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), 282.
- 2 Michel Foucault, “How Much Does It Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth,” in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 359.
- 3 Andrew Barry, Thomas Osbourne and Nikolas Rose, “Introduction,” in *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*, eds. Andrew Barry, Thomas Osbourne and Nikolas Rose (London: UCL Press, 1996), 1–17.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 36–76.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave, 2008), 104.
- 6 Wilhelm Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1950), iii.
- 7 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 104.
- 8 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 31.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 193.
- 10 Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France 1970–1971 and Oedipal Knowledge*, eds. Daniel Defert, Françoise Edwald and Alessandro Fontana, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave, 2013), 194.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 6.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 14 Judith Revel, *Foucault, une pensée du discontinu* (Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuits, 2010).
- 15 Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know*, 194.
- 16 Luca Paltrinieri, *L’Expérience du Concept. Michel Foucault entre Épistémologie et Histoire* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2012).
- 17 Michel Foucault, “Life: Experience and Science,” in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 2, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), 475.

- 18 Ibid. [emphasis added].
- 19 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 24.
- 20 Ibid., 24.
- 21 Ibid., 187.
- 22 Ibid., 153.
- 23 Michel Foucault, *Madness: The Invention of an Idea*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).
- 24 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 25 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 83.
- 26 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 12.
- 27 Michel Foucault, "Interview between Michel Foucault and Claude Bonnefoy, 1968," in *Speech Begins after Death. In Conversation with Claude Bonnefoy*, ed. Philippe Artières, trans. Roberto Bononno (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 45.
- 28 Ibid., 46. For instructive discussion of the therapeutic ambitions of Nietzsche's philosophy, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, "Beyond Comparison: On Nietzsche's Moral Therapy in Dawn," *Continental Philosophy Review* 44, no. 2 (2001): 179–204.
- 29 Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979–1980*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).
- 30 These lectures refer to Foucault's courses at The Collège de France, respectively published as: *On The Government of the Living (1979–1980)*, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject (1981–1982)*, *The Government of Self and Others (1982–1983)*, and *The Courage of Truth (1983–1984)*. There are also the lectures he gave at Berkeley in 1983, later published under the title *Fearless Speech*. In these lectures he examined in great detail the different variations and domains in which the notion of *parrēsia* and the practice of truth-telling was inserted in ancient literature. For instance, in the 1982–1983 course Foucault discusses truth-telling in Ancient Greek literature in relation to practices of spiritual direction (Plato's *Alcibiades*), the revelation of a truth and the reproach to power for an injustice and its political consequences (Euripides' play *Ion*), and the conditions for exercising true discourse in order to have ascendancy over other individuals in a democratic *politeia* (Polybius's *The Histories*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Isocrates' *On the Peace*).
- 31 Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gross, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 159.
- 32 Ibid., 183–184.
- 33 Ibid., 48–50, 193–194, 214–215.
- 34 Ibid., 215.
- 35 Ibid., 230.
- 36 Ibid., 232.
- 37 Ibid., 233.
- 38 Alvin Gouldner, *Enter Plato. Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967); Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice of Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
- 39 Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 66.
- 40 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), 245.
- 41 Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974*, ed. Jacques Lagrange, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave, 2006), 243.
- 42 Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Kahlfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy (London: Routledge, 2009), 307.

- 43 Ibid., 331.
- 44 Foucault, "Interview between Michel Foucault and Claude Bonnefoy, 1968," 35.
- 45 Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 188–204.
- 46 Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 248.
- 47 Georges Canguilhem, "Health: Popular Concept and Philosophical Question," in *Writings on Medicine*, trans. Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 48.
- 48 Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 252–275. For a detailed discussion of Foucault's position on the anti-psychiatry and anti-medicine debates in France, see Thomas Osborne, "Medicine and Epistemology: Michel Foucault and the Liberality of Clinical Reason," *History of Human Sciences* 5, no. 2 (1992): 63–93; Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Philosophy in Turbulent Times*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 65–96.
- 49 Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 32–36.
- 50 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 56. The argument about the influence of capitalism in the transformation of technologies and rationality of government is present throughout Foucault's work. The main suggestion is that the expansion of industrial capitalism would have been impossible without the articulation of new technologies of disciplinary power and biopower. See Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin, 2004), 35; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 140–141.
- 51 This is clear, for instance, in Foucault's thesis that the period from 1750 to 1850 epitomizes an epistemic threshold in Western thought as new forms of knowledge (e.g., human sciences) and regimes of power (e.g., medical institutions) were taking shape. In a similar way, Koselleck emphasizes the transitional aspect of this period (saddle period), which accompanies the rise of the bourgeois culture and materializes in a major reorientation of the conceptions of historical time and temporality across European languages; see Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 52 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave, 2007), 109.
- 53 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 3, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2002), 341.
- 54 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 105.
- 55 A case in point is the example Foucault elaborates on about the expansion of the mechanism of security to manage epidemic diseases in urban areas during the eighteenth century, such as the control of smallpox, around which a new set of notions were introduced into the political language, such as danger, risk and, in particular, crisis. See Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 57–62.
- 56 Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 3, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2002), 352.
- 57 Nikolas Rose and Thomas Osborne, "In the Name of Society, or Three Theses on the History of Social Thought," *History of the Human Sciences* 10, no. 3 (1997): 87–104; Keith Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," in *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, eds. Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 95–119; Peter Wagner, "An Entirely New Object of Consciousness, of Volition, of Thought. The Coming into Being and (Almost) Passing Away of 'Society' as a Scientific Object," in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 132–157.
- 58 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 109, 349.
- 59 Graham Burchell, "Peculiar Interests: Civil Society and Governing 'The System of Natural Liberty,'" in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Collin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: Chicago University Press,

- 1991), 119–150; Collin Gordon, “Governmental Rationality: An Introduction,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Collin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 1–52.
- 60 Michel Foucault, “The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 3, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2002), 100; Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 41. Foucault’s problematization of this distinction is directly influenced by his engagement with the work of the French philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem. See Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 2007). The concern with the historical constitution and manifestations of this antinomy is the focus of Foucault’s lectures in 1974–1975 entitled *Abnormal*, where he also refers for the first time to the “art of government;” see Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), 31–80.
- 61 Foucault, *Abnormal*, 41.
- 62 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 38.
- 63 Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 41.
- 64 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
- 65 *Ibid.*, 262–263.
- 66 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 69–70.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 131.
- 69 Nicholas Gane, “Sociology and Neoliberalism: A Missing History,” *Sociology* 48, no. 6 (2014): 1092–1106.
- 70 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 116.
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 *Ibid.*, 68–69.
- 73 *Ibid.*
- 74 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 76 Luigi Pelizzoni, “Governing Through Disorder: Neoliberal Environmental Governance and Social Theory,” *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. 3 (2011): 795–803.
- 77 Roger Foster, “The Therapeutic Spirit of Neoliberalism,” *Political Theory* (2015): 1–24, accessed July 7, 2015. doi: 10.1177/0090591715594660.
- 78 Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Maurizio Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015).
- 79 The classic book *Policing the Crisis* provides a great account of this process of conservative-neoliberal construction and mobilization of crisis as a domain of government, which in Britain especially targeted the poor and racial minorities, see Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, eds., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978).
- 80 Michel Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 3, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2002), 452.
- 81 Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (London: Blackwell, 2002), 212–228; Colin Gordon, “Question, Ethos, Event: Foucault on Kant and Enlightenment,” *Economy and Society* 15 (1986): 71–87; David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 57–100; Thomas Lemke, “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique,” *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002): 49–64; Thomas Lemke, “Critique and Experience in Foucault,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 28, no. 4 (2011): 26–20; David Owen, “Genealogy as Exemplary Critique: Reflections on Foucault and the Imagination of the Political,” *Economy and Society*

- 24, no. 4 (1995): 489–506; Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, "Between Nietzsche and Kant: Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment,'" *History of Political Thought* 20, no. 2 (1999): 337–356.
- 82 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lontringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), 41–81; Michel Foucault, "What is Revolution?," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lontringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 83–95; Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lontringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 97–119; Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 7–40.
- 83 This is the case of the critique of "pastoral power" brought about at the end of the Middle Ages by the Reformation movement and Luther's "revolt" against the confessional practices and dogma that sustained the ecclesiastical rule of Christianity; see Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 191–216; Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 295–296. Another case is the critique of "sovereign power" that crystallized in the second half of the eighteenth century and whose challenge to the legitimacy of state power was the effect of revolutionary discourses about "natural rights;" see Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 133–135, 189–212, 215–216; Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 39–40. Equally important are Foucault's references to the critique of "disciplinary power" that disrupted with "astonishing efficacy" the post-war conformism of the affluent capitalist societies of the West at the end of the 1960s; see Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 329–332. In this last case, Foucault highlights the capacity of social movements to expand the "criticizability" of things, practices and institutions, and multiply the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" that began to raise questions with regard to women, sexuality, minorities, the environment and disciplinary institutions; see Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 6–9.
- 84 Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 21; Foucault, "What Is Revolution," 95.
- 85 Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 20–21, 35; Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment," 95, 118.
- 86 Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 113.
- 87 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 88 David Owen, "Orientation and Enlightenment: An Essay on Critique and Genealogy," in *Foucault contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory*, eds. Samantha Ashenden and David Owen (London: Sage, 1999), 21–44.
- 89 Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 77.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 91 Michel Foucault, "What Our Present Is," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lontringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 138.
- 92 Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 74.
- 93 Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism," in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 2. ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), 450.
- 94 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Essential Works 1954–1984*, vol. 2. ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), 383.
- 95 Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 115.
- 96 Owen, "Orientation and Enlightenment," 21–44.
- 97 Foucault, "What Our Present Is," 139.
- 98 Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 114; Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism," 449.
- 99 Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 114, 117.
- 100 Foucault, "Useless to Revolt?," 453.
- 101 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 232.

Postscript

Decoding Social Hieroglyphics: Notes on the Philosophical Actuality of Sociology— Theodor Adorno

I

One of the most central claims of the tradition of critical theory that begins with Hegel and Marx is that a “critique of society” cannot proceed without a “critique of concepts.” The underlying suggestion is that the concrete analysis of social relations and contradictions that shape human life in common should not be dissociated from examining the concepts through which this reality comprehends and seeks to incarnate itself. For concepts are not mere subjective constructs external to the thing represented but rather material products of the way in which social relations organize historically under certain objective forms. It is for this reason that, for critical theory, understanding the social world empirically involves an inescapable “speculative moment,” a point in which one’s thinking is not backed by the security of facts.¹ Here, the “speculative” is not “troublesome ornamentation” that diverts our attention from concrete social problems and real scientific concerns in favor of philosophical questions, it is actually the way to break through the appearance of self-evidence of the empirical world and the idea that factual reality is nothing more than factual reality.²

As is well known, this issue is stressed in Marx’s analysis of capitalist society. In his view, the real challenge to comprehend a society organized in terms of commodity exchange lies in that it “transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic.”³ The observer is therefore confronted with “suprasensible” and “abstract” things that appear to have a life of their own and defy immediate comprehension. So, the quest to decipher the “secret” of such “social hieroglyphics” is like being forced to read a foreign language without a dictionary, for grasping commodities means following their traces as real artifacts in the social world rather than subsuming them under established rules of interpretation. Marx’s key suggestion is to capture the double binding process by which commodities become highly abstract principles of social coordination that hold heterogeneous things together and at the same time work as concrete sources of meaning that produce a sense of identity while intensifying social divisions. In fact, commodities not only expand social connectivity regardless and beyond the concrete relations between individuals in which they are produced; they also shape the texture of social relations by turning value-exchange into the natural language through which actors read the world and their individual experience.

The fundamental riddle is how to ground a convincing “critique of society” if the language that allow us to name things and grasp events is already corrupted by capitalist exchange, and then how to ground a “critique of concepts” without resorting to transcendental principles, normative categories or idiosyncratic definitions that oppose existing conceptuality as simply false. These concerns were at the heart of post-war debates in critical theory and continue to resonate today even after the communicative turn introduced by Jürgen Habermas became the master key to address the dilemma. Yet, imperious attempts at “correcting” critical theory’s so-called sociological and normative deficits have tended to obscure one of the most original intuitions of Marx’s dialectical critique of political economy, namely the idea that, if in capitalist society “individuals are ruled by abstractions,”⁴ critical theory then is compelled to become an empirically grounded examination of how such abstractions become historically valid and practically true in social relations as principles of vision and division of the world. To do so, critical theory can neither sacrifice the ability to raise philosophical questions that exceed the array of scientifically valid methods, nor to employ existing concepts as material artifacts to decode the objective configuration of social relations and disclose possibilities of non-reified forms of life.⁵ The justification of this claim is twofold.

First, if social life is never a fully transparent object to our senses, critical social theory requires articulating concepts so as to make intelligible the relations and contradictions between universal processes and concrete experiences and objects. However, there is always the implicit danger to hypostatize concepts as self-sufficient unities of meaning that the theorist “can pin down like the figures of geometry.”⁶ This is far from being an issue of formal epistemology. It has to do with finding forms of expression adequate to account for socially embedded human experience and with a “style” of thought that aims to shake the illusion of an orderly and logical world projected by conventional categories of knowledge. In Adorno’s view, speculative thought is precisely the antidote to the philosophical fetishism that fixes concepts into consistent propositions regardless of what is beyond concepts but exists within concepts as their actual content (i.e., materiality and experience).

Second, if social life is not a purely empirical reality that exists independently from conceptuality, critical theory requires examining concepts becoming contingent results of social-historical practices. The key issue is to comprehend the process of stabilization of social relations into abstractions that claim autonomy from and yet organize concrete experience, as if social life were a unanimous whole with secure foundations. When concepts begin to work over people’s heads as real facts, the task of critique is to set these concepts into motion so as to reveal their “arbitrary nature” and show that “they have become under certain conditions.”⁷ This insistence on following the speculative movement of concepts through social life itself is what allows the unlocking of the moment of non-identity between conceptual forms and social reality, the constitutive gap that shows the inconsistencies of concepts as well as the impossibility of closure of the social world.

In what follows, I would like to reflect on a fundamental implication of this double statement about conceptual forms in social theory, namely, that the

conventional distinction between conceptual thought and empirical inquiry is based on an untenable ontological division that creates a “false dilemma” between sociology and philosophy.⁸ To do so, the focus of my attention will be a late and little known essay titled “Society,”⁹ which in the context of Adorno’s main philosophical works seems a minor text concerned mostly with sociological issues. However, I will follow Adorno’s advice here to read his fragmentary writings as “thought models” of specific concepts or phenomena intended to register and decode their socially mediated nature. As he writes, “the whole lives only in the individual moments.”¹⁰ Accordingly, I would like to read this essay as an indication of the actuality of sociology that Adorno places at the core of his philosophical project—or, more precisely, as an indication of his unequivocal defense of the philosophical actuality of sociology for the critique of contemporary society.¹¹

II

Adorno’s essay “Society” should not be read as a “step-by-step” description of what sociology is or ought to be, but rather as a “critical model” on the challenges sociology confronts when approaching its most essential and problematic concept: society. The essay offers a critique of sociological knowledge as well as a critique of society. Both moments appear condensed in a brief remark Adorno makes in relation to the actuality of sociology: “the task of sociology today [is] to comprehend the incomprehensible, the advance of human beings into the inhuman.”¹² This insightful description brings together three elements which, when taken as isolated propositions, lead to one-sided forms of sociological thinking that immobilize the concept of society as much as impoverish our understanding of social life: the idea of society’s basic comprehensibility (idealism), the idea of society’s basic incomprehensibility (positivism) and the idea of society’s human foundation (humanism).

As I hope to show, the problem of each of these individual positions is their limited view of the social elements that condition them as descriptions of society. If we follow the dialectical logic of Adorno’s remark, the key issue is that, despite the fact that existent society becomes an increasingly incomprehensible reality to us (a “social hieroglyphic,” in Marx’s words), it may be made comprehensible and therefore an object of critique if we follow the concrete movement through which social relations become an abstract totality that binds things while pulling them apart. This is the task of Adorno’s sociology of mediations: to deprive things of their claim of completion. Let me explain this idea in more detail.

The fact that society is a term that refers to a collective mode of existence dependent upon forms of sociation, makes it the object of all sorts of disputes about what society really is, how it ought to be and whether it actually exists at all. A central aim of Adorno’s essay is to defend the concept of society against customary accusations of being a “philosophical residue in the development of science.”¹³ For him, society is an essential category of sociological analysis, yet it is also an impossible concept since it “can neither be defined as a concept in

the current logical sense, nor empirically demonstrated.”¹⁴ The idea of a “sociology without society” struck him as scientific failure, for it neglects the objective connections that hold the life of individuals together while succumbing to an image of social life as the mere sum of individual “monads” disconnected from general processes.¹⁵ The point of Adorno’s argument, however, is not to affirm that society is “the supreme concept of sociology” and a higher reality under which everything that is particular is subsumed. In his view, both the dissolution of the concept of society and the reification of the concept produces the same effect: it transforms society into something absolute and incomprehensible, inaccessible to sociological knowledge and critique.

What is essentially missing from these positions is the idea that “society,” strictly speaking, is a “mediated and mediating” relationship: it means that individual human beings, situations and institutions are constituted by society, but also that society is constituted and shaped by them. The category of “mediation” suggests at least two things: first, that society is configured by apparently unrelated elements which the concept puts into relation within itself (social/non-social, universal/particular, ideal/material, objective/subjective); second, that each of these non-identical elements are constituted in relation to one another. In order to trace these mediations, sociological thinking is compelled to operate conceptually but on condition that it cannot rely on the sufficiency of subjective definitions and the coherence these seem to project on society.

Adorno is extremely critical of the idealist view that takes for granted that society can be comprehended, for it relies on the capacity of individuals for rational interpretation and meaning making. This presupposes that social meaning is transparent and comprehensible for individuals as their own product, but at the cost of misrecognizing everything in society that resists conceptual definitions and is inaccessible to direct subjective experience (i.e., things that are actually incomprehensible). To stress this point, Adorno recalls one of the most important lessons he learned from Nietzsche: namely, that those concepts in which entire social processes and historical experiences are “semiotically concentrated,” defy exact definitions because “only that which does not have history can be defined.”¹⁶ Society is precisely one of those concepts which, rather than being “fixed in arbitrary terminology” to the benefit of precision, has “to be deployed” dialectically.¹⁷ From this point of view, concepts are not “classificatory” tools that help measure social regularities but rather “constellations” of apparently dispersed elements in reality; a mobile field of tensions between the possible and the real.¹⁸ Thus, all concepts involve a process of concept formation and change that can be determined by looking at the conceptual tendencies contained in social phenomena. The movement of the concept of society, in particular, “can only be determined if one perceives in [social] facts themselves the tendency which reaches out beyond them. That is the [speculative] function of philosophy in empirical social research.”¹⁹

Now, the very possibility of rescuing this speculative moment in sociology requires, on the other hand, reintroducing the sociological moment into speculative practices. Adorno expresses the issue as follows:

Philosophical reflection must fracture the so-called train of thought that is unrefractedly expected from thinking. Thoughts that are true must incessantly renew themselves in the experience of the subject matter . . . To think philosophically means to think intermittences as much as to be interrupted by which is not thought itself.²⁰

The issue for Adorno is that philosophy can neither take refuge in transcendental subjectivity as the foundation of true knowledge nor trust in the “autarky of concepts” to delineate the margins of reality. In order to preserve the autonomy of thinking, the dignity of intellectual work and the power of critical reflection, philosophy cannot help but “incorporate within itself social and political reality and its dynamic.”²¹ That is to say, if empirical sociology requires the conceptual mediation of the object, philosophical thought has to impregnate itself with facts, the nonconceptual elements that constitute but exceed conceptuality. This is why, after all, to “comprehend” the social world is always an open and persistent struggle with the object, never a finished work.²²

III

This leads me to the second aspect of Adorno’s initial remark—the idea that society is something “incomprehensible.” If hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches place too much trust on subjective experience and the interpretative power of concepts as means to apprehend the social world, the radical positivist attitude advocates a kind of conceptual asceticism that disregards theoretical reflection in favor of the methodical description of existing empirical objects (whatever these objects may be), as if they were brute facts one can measure without concepts and speculation. In doing so, the positivist view invokes “what appears” as the normative standard of true knowledge, while leaving untouched the phenomena that are not immediately perceptible but which are crucial for understanding the configuration of society.²³

That said, Adorno’s sociological reflection on the “incomprehensible” refers not only to an epistemological obstacle given the definitions sociologists usually employ to describe social life or the functional complexity of society that shows that apparently “everything is connected with everything else.” Rather, the notion of the “incomprehensible” seeks to capture the diagnosis Adorno shares with Marx: that the capitalist mode of life transfigures social relations into increasingly abstract forms that subsume the qualitative nuances, particularities and differences of human action under the identitarian logic of commodity exchange. Social reality then becomes really “incomprehensible” as the individuals themselves have a limited capacity to make sense of the actual connections between their experience and the systemic elements of the society in which they live; this is so because the expansion of the commodity form as a model of social relations transforms society into a totalizing entity divorced from everyday lived experience. Thus, the abstraction of society (its becoming a concept, a real abstraction) takes place “not so much in scientific thought” but in the very way social relations are historically organized: “something like a ‘concept’ is implicit in society in its objective form.”²⁴

This proposition works against the positivist temptation to see the social world as a purely empirical object devoid of concepts, for factual reality itself is conceptually constituted. These conceptual forms may not be immediately accessible through the collection of “empirical findings,” but they are real to the extent that they inhabit and circulate through subjective ideas, forms of self-understanding, norms and practices. And yet, this proposition also works against the idealist temptation to use concepts as mere external representations and rational constructions of the human intellect, for social life produces its own forms of abstraction. Thus, inasmuch as concepts contribute to give form to our experience of social reality, they are not fixed substances with solid foundations but documents that register and condense the traces of social-historical processes.

This amounts to a radical reconsideration of concepts as complex social forms that are both means of sociological thinking and objects of sociological research. From this perspective, in order to address the contradictions of capitalist society, critical sociology has to draw upon concepts so as to “give a name” to what holds things together (the objective configuration of social relations),²⁵ but also must examine the ideas, concepts and theories that actors themselves employ to make sense of the world (the subjective configuration of social relations). As I suggested at the beginning of this postscript, this is precisely one of the greatest contributions of Marx’s critique of political economy: to have devised a mode of social inquiry in which the speculative critique of concepts is a key and unavoidable moment of the critique of society.

If society cannot be known and observed with independence of its concepts, sociology must become “speculative” in the best sense of the word—i.e., it has to embrace concepts “in order to reach beyond concepts.”²⁶ It has to capture the process by which social reality acquires the conceptual appearance of being something in itself as much as the way concepts attain empirical existence in social reality. The fact that this sociological work cannot be achieved without speculative reflections does not mean that “the power of thinking is enough to comprehend the totality of the real.”²⁷ It means, rather, that if sociology curtails its “right to speculation,” it simply “deteriorates into the technique of conceptless specialists amid the concept.”²⁸ In other words, sociology not only restricts its ability to raise questions that exceed the array of scientifically valid methods and pre-structured categories, but also its ability to actually say something meaningful about the present condition of the social world and the humans who inhabit it.

IV

The third and last aspect involved in the sociological task of coming to terms with the “incomprehensible” is the normative concern that underlies the cognitive will to “comprehend” social life. Adorno’s initial remark would remain a formal statement if restricted “to comprehend the incomprehensible;” what saves it from that is the phenomenal content to which it explicitly appeals: “the advance of human beings into the inhuman.” This phrase concerns the process

by which the human elements of subjectivity and collective life become dehumanized due to the way social life is functionally organized in capitalist society, even to the extent of threatening the very concept of humanity. The inclusion of the “problem of humanity” in Adorno’s definition of the task and problem of sociology is clearly intended to debate the idea that human beings constitute the essential reality and foundation of society. The problem with this assumption is that it fixes the form and content of society according to a normative principle exempted from socio-historical processes. It assumes that society is already human and should remain human, without being able to relate our conceptions of humanity with the actual conditions that shape our concrete bodily human existence.

Hence sociology’s normative concern with “the advance of human beings into the inhuman” has nothing to do with holding on to a normativist definition of the social world drawn from a dictionary. It is rather a disposition to create solidarity with the living. For the struggle of sociology consists of reading the social world “without a dictionary”:²⁹ that is, to learn and understand the process through which the concept of humanity is concretized while being suffocated by the form of existing social relations. To do so, Adorno argues, we are forced to anchor knowledge in the very experiences that shake established norms and cognitive forms: that is, the experience of crisis and human suffering. It is precisely in this sense that we may interpret Adorno’s strong claim that “to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth.”³⁰

The key question is why this should be the case and what are the implications for sociological knowledge and writing. After all, the human body and the experience of suffering refer to a domain of somatic processes and inner subjectivity which defy direct communication and are hardly “comprehensible” to the sociological eye. Still, Adorno argues that suffering is a condition of truth since what individuals experience subjectively is actually objectively mediated by societal conditions. We may not feel and live the same, but individual experiences of suffering may be accounted for as social “objectivity that weighs upon the subject”³¹ and therefore as indications of social phenomena. In a way, “society becomes directly perceptible when it hurts.”³² Adorno recognizes that this may sound slightly exaggerated, but given the metaphysical exaggerations that social reality imposes on human existence, it counts as a sober and ethically responsible description.

Suffering thus becomes for Adorno a nonconceptual basis of knowledge, as “the smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world ... tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.”³³ On the one hand, this means that the bodily experience of suffering registers and incarnates the progressive advance of human beings into inhuman conditions upon which individuals depend and which “constitute their concept” as humans.³⁴ On the other hand, it means that this process can be perceived in social processes if one recognizes that human elements still palpitate in what has become dehumanized-objectified, as long as humans themselves can still think, act and speak. In Adorno’s view, sociology’s struggle to “comprehend” then becomes the struggle for the concept of the human, the struggle to express it. Here “the concept of the human is what ultimately matters,” he claims, not

because we have to secure a place for a humanism that elevates man as an absolute standard against the variety of anti-humanist forms of concealing reification and suffering. It matters because real “human beings are needed to transform the petrified state of things.”³⁵ In order to face this struggle, sociology cannot refuse to work with concepts, inasmuch as there are things that matter sociologically precisely because they cannot be empirically articulated.

“Once we recognize this,” concludes Adorno in a conference a few months before his death:

the term “philosophy” that some reproach us as if it were a shame, ceases to cause horror and reveals itself as the condition and goal of a science that wants to be something more than simple technique servant to technocracy.³⁶

The real horror actually lives in dissimulating “the undiminished persistence of suffering.”³⁷

V

From this perspective, we may see why the distinction between sociology and philosophy confront us with a “false dilemma.” If understanding the social world consists of producing knowledge on the actual state of things and how they became what they are, sociology’s scientific claim to knowledge cannot help but get involved in philosophical matters. For coming to know the social inevitably leads to examine and render unstable the self-certainty of concepts that claim full access to the real, while showing that society is not a unanimous whole with secure foundations but a space that draws its life from humanly worthy relations.

These brief remarks not only invite us to consider the sociological actuality of Adorno’s speculative philosophy but, most importantly, they are an argument for placing more trust on the philosophical actuality of sociology.

Notes

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993), 3.
- 3 Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1, A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 167.
- 4 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 164.
- 5 Samir Gandesha, “The Aesthetic Dignity of Words: Adorno’s Philosophy of Language,” *New German Critique* 33 (2006): 137–158.
- 6 Adorno, *Hegel*, 98.
- 7 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 52.
- 8 Theodor W. Adorno, *Filosofía y Sociología*, trans. Mariana Dimópulos (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2015).
- 9 Theodor W. Adorno, “Society,” in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 267–275. This article was originally published in 1965.

- 10 Adorno, *Hegel*, 91.
- 11 Although Adorno's work is highly regarded in philosophy and discussed as part of the canon of critical theory, it has had a rather limited reception and valoration within sociology. Many seem to have sided with Habermas's interpretation that Adorno's post-war writings abandon the rational insights of sociological knowledge in favor of a metaphysics of negativity and the mimetic impulses of art; see Jürgen Habermas, "Conceptions of Modernity: A Look Back at Two Traditions," in *The Postnational Constellation*, ed. and trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 142; Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 339–402. A remarkable exception to this trend is Gillian Rose's classic introductory study of Adorno; see Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014). For recent attempts to reconsider the actuality of Adorno's sociological thought, see Axel Honneth, "A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno's Social Theory," *Constellations* 12, no. 1 (2005): 50–64; Matthias Benzer, *The Sociology of Theodor Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 12 Adorno, "Society," 270.
- 13 Theodor W. Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1977), 68.
- 14 Adorno, "Society," 269.
- 15 Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); Theodor W. Adorno, "Society," in *Aspects of Sociology* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 16–33. This article was originally published in 1956.
- 16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 53; Adorno, "Society," 267.
- 17 Adorno, "Society," 269.
- 18 Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," 69.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 20 Theodor W. Adorno, "Notes on Philosophical Thinking," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 131–132.
- 21 Theodor W. Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 14.
- 22 Rose, *The Melancholy Science*.
- 23 Adorno, "Society," 270.
- 24 Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 32.
- 25 Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," 68.
- 26 Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 95.
- 27 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos* 31 (1977): 120.
- 28 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 29.
- 29 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 13.
- 30 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 32 Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 36.
- 33 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.
- 34 Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," 86.
- 35 Theodor W. Adorno, "Sociedad," in *Epistemología y ciencias sociales*, trans. Vicente Gómez (Madrid: Cátedra, 1965/2001), 17 [my translation].
- 36 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 37 Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy," 14.

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