SOCIAL THEORY FOR TODAY

1

SOCIAL THEORY AND CRISIS

Crisis is a process, not a fixed condition. It suggests a decisive moment of limited duration. Yet crisis has come to be understood as operating at different levels (psychological, institutional, national, planetary), extending over different time periods and spaces, and with different degrees of intensity. Instead of a moment of exception precipitating a turning point, crisis becomes a normalised, semi-permanent condition. As something latent to modernity, the signs of crisis may be faint enough that they don't register in public discourse and only become manifest as political and economic crises break through the surface of social life at a certain trigger point. Latent crises are rendered visible by theories that make intelligible underlying processes, structures and relations. The difficulty is that the abstractions of theory transform the dynamics of crisis as a process into crisis as a fixed condition.

THE ROOTS OF CRISIS

Terminologically, crisis is closely related to 'critical', 'critique' and 'criticism', *Kritik*, of coming to a decision or judgment (Koselleck, 2006). From the ancient Greek term *krisis*, the modern term 'crisis' has three sources: medical, legal-political and religious. Medically, crisis refers to the turning point of a pathological condition identified by the expert judgement and decision making of a medical practitioner. When a body is said to be in a critical condition, it is in mortal danger unless careful prognosis and diagnosis allow the patient to recover. Crisis requires critical knowledge to reverse trauma and entropy.

In terms of legal, social and political crisis the term took on a double meaning: on one side, it refers to the theoretical criteria to diagnose objective conditions; and on the other side, the pathology of illness rests on an ideal of healthy normality to be restored or end in death. Finally, this was translated into the Christian worldview of apocalyptic visions of the Last Judgement that only a decision to seek salvation can remedy.

As the historian Reinhardt Koselleck (2006) argues, the modern meaning of crisis broke from the classical sense of crisis as forcing a change in life. It began to be used less as a concrete diagnosis than as a metaphor in the social sciences in the context of revolution and war. A crisis of social relations is different in kind from a medical crisis. Critically, the concept referred ambiguously to both a chronic, more or less permanent and long-term condition and a more limited, cyclical process. Such ambiguity gives crisis its unique semantic power.

When it was extended to also cover economic imbalances and shortages of trade, finance, consumption and production, 'crisis' became a central concept in the lexicon of everyday life. The new modernist historical sensibility recast 'crisis' as a break with both blind optimism in human progress and an eternal cycle of change that follows a predetermined historical pattern. Economic crises were reassuringly viewed as cyclical, short-run phenomena from which recovery could soon be expected.

Crisis is redolent of drama, decision and deed. It is not only normative – improving the condition of social suffering by outside intervention; it is also dramaturgical – when human groups actively identify with the power of recovery and renewal and overcome the mythic power of fate with collective resources of their own making. This is when decisions have to be taken 'for or against' in legal, political, social and moral judgements. This sense of crisis entered the English language during the English civil war of the 1640s and acquired its modern sense in the French enlightenment of the 1780s (Koselleck, 1988). Connotations of illness, legal judgement and catastrophe lend crisis a considerable metaphorical power to measure the present against some future perfect state. Crisis became the authoritative judgement on historical time. History is pictured as one long crisis or, punctuated by crises, history is forced to take a decisive change in direction (Koselleck, 2006: 371).

Perceptions of the end of an epoch and a transition to a new one can be measured by an increased use of the term 'crisis'. Crisis authorises a leap into the future based on prophecy, as much as prognosis, to redeem any number of fantasies, hopes and anxieties. When crisis is announced it is cast as the final one, at least once an ultimate decision has been taken to make the future something entirely different from how it had been conceived previously. Increased usage of the term is accompanied by a sense of bringing the old things to an end, whether with triumph or regret (the end of history, the end of ideology, the end of class, the end of modernism, the end of neoliberalism) and the start of the new ('new times', 'new realism', new social movements) and a move beyond, signified by the transcending prefix 'post' post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-history, post-colonialism, post-Fordism.

CRISIS AND CRITIQUE

Crisis itself seems to be so self-evident as a category that it is rarely interrogated by social theory while its counterpart *critique* is subject to endless commentary. While there is a crisis of critique there is rarely a critique of crisis as a concept. Yet

in an important sense, social theory itself is only made possible by crisis. Crisis allows competing theories to identify critical points of dissonance in other theories and in social and political life. Today, however, contemporary critique induces crisis in social theory, not in social or political life itself. Without crisis it seems necessary for social theory to invent one.

Crisis becomes the occasion for social theory to renew itself. This standpoint was stated most famously by Alvin Gouldner in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1971). As far as Gouldner was concerned, ideological disarray rather than empirical anomalies tends to lead sociologists to substitute the more comforting games of Grand Theory for political action. Plato only turned to philosophy after his political ambitions were already in tatters; early positivists like Auguste Comte in France turned to social theory when excluded from political influence; Karl Marx retreated to intensive theoretical study after the defeat of the revolution of 1848; Max Weber's failed bid for political office resulted in deeper specialisation in theoretical and methodological studies.

By the late 1960s the dominant strand of American, or 'Western', sociology, as Gouldner put it, was an elaborate theoretical system called 'functionalism'. Developed by Talcott Parsons under conditions of crisis in the 1930s as an intricate theoretical edifice, functionalism emphasised the self-correcting stability and equilibrium of the 'social system' as always able to absorb and nullify the chance emergence of social and political crises, conflict and disorder. For Gouldner and other radical sociologists of the period, Parsons' construction of a grand theoretical system merely disguised a hidden premise: that social theory's role is to stabilise any crisis of legitimate authority of the kind experienced in the 1930s and later in the 1960s. In trying to 'professionalise' social theory, Parsons aimed 'in the midst of the Great Depression to mend the rift between power and morality and to find new bases of legitimacy for the American elite' (Gouldner, 1971: 154).

Social theory changes, Gouldner argues, not only through 'internal' technical or formal developments within theory itself but also as a result of 'external' changes in the social and cultural 'infrastructure' that supports the practical life and tacit assumptions of social theorists. When social theory takes on the appearance of a technical 'finished' system it no longer depends directly on the support of its social and cultural infrastructure. In turn a more fundamental critique is developed by the infrastructure heralding a crisis of the once-dominant social theory.

In the 1960s this discontent came from the radical culture of young student activists known as the New Left, many drawn to the promise of sociology as an enemy of self-serving illusions. At the same time the rapid expansion of the postwar welfare state supported the enlargement of academic sociology to address social problems and conflicts that functionalism consigned to merely secondary importance in this orderly, best of all possible worlds.

Not only functionalism but also a crisis of theory deeply affected orthodox Marxism as the official ideology of the Soviet Union and its satellites. This was expressed by the proliferating varieties of Marxist theory, some versions coming close to the 'finished' system of functionalism, while others stressed the more open-ended possibilities of praxis and cultural sociology. Theoretical proliferation is for Gouldner further evidence of intellectual crisis.

As a way out of professional and theoretical crisis Gouldner advocated what he called 'reflexive sociology', a self-conscious sociology of sociology. Unless sociologists take steps to avoid being burdened with doomed social theories and professional conformism they will fall into the tragedy of wasted, life-sapping efforts. All that the sociologist can do is to make a Pascalian wager:

> When sociologists commit themselves compulsively to a life-wasting high science model they are making a metaphysical wager. They are wagering that the sacrifice is 'best for science'. Whether this is really so, they cannot confirm, but they often need no further confirmation than the pain that this self-containment inflicts upon them. (Gouldner, 1971: 506)

The tragedy of social theory can only be overcome, Gouldner claims, by an appeal to the robust individualism of the engaged scholar. Here sociologists ought to follow their own 'inner impulses', 'special bents or aptitudes', and 'unique talents'.

Yet the crisis of social theory will not be resolved by placing a bet on the metaphysics of an 'authentic' self playing the role of sociologist. For one thing, sociology has and is becoming more 'worldly' and integrated with the heterogeneous demands of the neoliberal university and beyond in policy making – the alternative apparently estrangement and irrelevance. In the face of this a determined effort has been made to establish a broader role for 'public sociology' and 'critical' sociology (Clawson et al., 2007).

SCIENCE AND CRISIS

Gouldner's style of reflexive sociology as a tough-minded independence of thought and intuition is familiar enough from the image of radical American sociologists like C. Wright Mills as 'outlaws' fearlessly speaking truth to power. Such calls are symptomatic of what Raymond Boudon (1980) identified as the 'epistemological uncertainty' that results from sociology's dependency on external social influences and abrupt theoretical change through periodic crisis rather than cumulative empirical results. A predictable symptom of latent crisis, Boudon argues, is the profusion of epistemological and methodological disputes in sociology, for instance, in the exaggerated opposition between micro-sociology and macro-sociology, or that between quantitative and qualitative research methods.

It is instructive to compare the crisis of social theory to theories of crisis in the natural sciences. Most famously, Thomas Kuhn (2012) in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* identified a crisis in science as occurring when problems or 'anomalies' encountered by a dominant 'paradigm' mount up, reaching a point where they can no longer be ignored. A paradigm for Kuhn not only concerns the formal or explicit propositions of theory but also includes the underlying assumptions, practices and tacit understandings involved. Paradigms restrict 'normal science' to routine problem-solving activities or 'puzzles' without needing to address anything more fundamental. In normal conditions paradigms are

robust enough to displace, marginalise or eliminate problems and discrepancies, what Kuhn calls 'anomalies'. With its variety of theories and methods, sociology lacks one dominant paradigm (in Kuhn's sense) that would structure the discipline as a unified field.

Paradigms will protect theories for relatively long periods of time from failure by sacrificing empirical accuracy for increased theoretical complexity. As theories become more and more baroque and increasingly unable to solve routine puzzles they also become vulnerable to critique from rival paradigms. What were once considered routine puzzles may from a rival viewpoint become a source of crisis. An acute sense of explanatory failure and a proliferation of novel theories are what Kuhn recognises as a 'crisis' of theory: 'All crises begin with a blurring of a paradigm and consequent loosening of the rules for normal research' (2012: 84). As theories proliferate, crisis relaxes the grip of the dominant paradigm and opens a space for alternative theories to not only emerge but also to be more widely recognised and shared as a valid standpoint. With divergent theories, the scientific field is no longer structured by a common source of authority. Attention is increasingly focused on the 'trouble spots' of theory.

Outside of crisis conditions novel theories are singularly ill-equipped to challenge dominant paradigms so long as they continue to solve problems that they themselves establish as the core business of scientific practice. Indeed, paradigms structure the very worldview that makes 'facts' possible in the first place and are only surrendered after a protracted crisis. Theoretical invention is a more painful process than factual discovery, requiring a severe crisis of theory to conquer normal science. Much more than factual anomalies are needed for a revolution in science to occur. Theories are not discarded lightly and cannot be falsified all in one go by a factual anomaly, as Popper (1992) would have it. Crises either, first, result in the restoration of the dominant paradigm through solving recalcitrant problems, or, second, the problem is put aside and suspended for a later generation; finally, the revolutionary establishment of a new paradigm solves the crisis in a novel way.

CRISIS OF SENSATE CULTURE

Since sociology is not subject to paradigms in the manner of Kuhn's model of the natural sciences it makes more sense to locate theoretical crisis in historical context. A grand attempt was made by Pitirim Sorokin (1992) to situate crisis in a large-scale social theory. Amassing huge quantities of historical data for his multivolume *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1985), Sorokin divided all societies into three stages of knowledge – sensate, ideational and idealistic. A 'sensate' epoch in history occurs when the sensible bodily experiences of the empirical world predominate culturally; an 'ideational' epoch refers to the predominance of supersensory cultural values; finally, 'idealistic' culture is a rational synthesis of the other two. Essentially, Western culture has passed back and forward between these epochs of knowledge since ancient Graeco-Roman culture. From the

thirteenth century sensate culture has predominated as the pace of technological invention and scientific discovery intensifies, stimulating empiricism in philosophy, nihilism in culture, and materialism in society.

By the twentieth century, 'sensate culture' was in serious crisis. Theoretically, Sorokin claims, sensate culture abandoned the distinction between truth and error, and knowledge was reduced to expedient arbitrary constructs based on the principle that whatever works is useful. Sorokin (1992: 100) protests against the disenchantment that sensate culture produces, making all knowledge and values relative, genius an object of mockery, and moral integrity something to be suspicious about. Sorokin was scathing about the mediocrity of his contemporaries in social theory: 'Since Comte and Spencer, Hegel and Marx, Le Play and Tarde, Durkheim and Max Weber, Simmel and Dilthey, Pareto and de Roberty [1843–1915, Russian positivist], there has hardly appeared a name worthy of mention in sociology' (1992: 104). Intellectual decline was taken as evidence of the crisis in the theoretical system of sensory knowledge. Despite the resources lavished on economics the dismal science singularly failed to prevent recurring crises and declining measures of happiness and security. Sorokin pile up the symptoms of mid-twentieth-century crisis resulting from the empiricism of sensate dogma – war, revolution, crime, suicide, mental illness, tyranny, exploitation, fraud, force, and so on.

Behind the welter of data, Sorokin adopted the role of a prophetic sociologist. Sensate sociology needs to be tempered by ideational sociology. Crisis had put Western culture at a crossroads – either further decline and decadence of human values or the restoration of ideational or idealistic human culture. From his comparative historical analysis of the rise and fall of cultures, Sorokin (1992: 260) delivered a theory of revolution through what he claimed was a 'sound sociological induction', summed up in the formula 'crisis-ordeal-catharsis-charisma-resurrection'.

Initially, the crisis is drawn out as material prosperity declines and the 'ordeal' of a brutal, violent period is endured under failing attempts to reform sensate culture. As cultural failure appears irreversible to many people, a collective sense of 'catharsis' places greater faith in a higher, eternal spiritual culture in contrast to the ephemera of material culture. This is consolidated by a 'charismatic' phase organised around a more stable belief system based on altruism, duty, norms and universal solidarity. Society is 'resurrected' as an 'integral', stable system that promises a long period of security and belonging. Yet it is not so easy, Sorokin laments, for society to learn from the medical metaphor of crisis and to enter recovery without first experiencing the fiery ordeal of violent disintegration. Sensate cultures stubbornly cling to 'momentary pleasures' even as 'an infinitely greater catastrophe' awaits (1992: 263).

A late-twentieth-century follower of Sorokin, theoretical physicist Fritjof Capra (1982), in his book *The Turning Point*, captured the spirit of the alternative ideational system to the ongoing crisis of sensate culture. Numerous symptoms of crisis persist, including nuclear arms, large-scale hunger, toxic pollution, social disintegration, violent crime, suicide, income inequalities, and other social pathologies. Like Sorokin, Capra takes a long-term, dynamic perspective of crisis as a process of transformation. Modern transformation is more dramatic than any before, because

the rate of change in society is faster, more extensive, and on a planetary scale, with several changes happening simultaneously. In the case of the latter, Capra notes three major transitions: the decline of patriarchy, the end of fossil-fuels, and a shift away from sensate culture. This transition will be 'fundamental', 'deep', 'thorough' and 'profound', Capra prophesises, with limited need for the kind of struggle and conflict that Marxists typically anticipate. Instead of class struggle Capra appeals to the ideational knowledge of the ancient Chinese book of wisdom, the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*), as complementing Sorokin's model of continuous cyclical fluctuation between the archetypal polar opposites of the yin and the yang. It is not a choice of isolating one or the other, Capra argues, but of finding the dynamic balance between extremes of rational knowledge (yang) and intuitive wisdom (yin). In the absence of an 'idealistic' solution, the crisis of sensate culture has, if anything, deepened. The question is why.

CRISIS AND HISTORY

Historians traditionally use the term 'crisis' in a self-evident way, for instance to denote a 'general crisis' of politics, war or society. Crisis allows historians to balance between patterns in historical development and the uniqueness of historical events. This leaves a great deal of scope for historians to speculate on the meaning of crisis. Randolph Starn (1971) argues that 'crisis' is twice-removed from the historical evidence. It is first removed from what crisis intends to signify and it is at a second-remove because it is a metaphor borrowed from biology and medicine. This does not necessarily count against using the term so long as it adequately describes what it sets out to. How well crisis functions as an explanatory or descriptive concept depends on the cogency of the narrative in which it is embedded. However, with the crisis metaphor of sickness and malaise a danger lurks that social pathologies may be looked for everywhere to the neglect of more mundane, unexceptional processes: preoccupied with the sickness, theorists neglect the patient (Starn, 1971: 21). A focus on crisis may also lock social theory into the present and the short term and neglect long-range developments.

Crisis may also be experienced as a threat to traditional normative and cultural values. For the historian of the Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), the long crisis of the nineteenth century and the disorderly effects on the individual of democracy, socialism, revolution, and technology confirmed the decadence of modernist culture (Hinde, 2000). In his 1870 lecture on crisis Burckhardt (1979) mystically found in the idea of crisis the possibility for history to sweep away everything that was mediocre and demeaning to the human spirit and to prophesise catastrophe and chaos for the twentieth century as technology, war and revolution produced mass destruction and individual demoralisation. Such anti-modernist sentiment was given an even more dramatic expression by Burckhardt's great admirer, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who looked to crisis as the last chance for European culture to raise itself out of the hypocritical morass of modernity.

Other historians see the source of crisis less as a result of too much political activity but of too little as politics becomes separated from the greater appeal to moral critique. For Reinhardt Koselleck (1988), as for Comte a century earlier, uninhibited moralistic critique of political authority and utopian fantasies precipitated the crisis of the French revolution by fatally weakening the political authority of the pre-revolutionary absolutist state. Koselleck's theory of crisis built on the philosophical critique of the Enlightenment theory as totalitarian developed by the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno under the influence of Nietzsche as well as Marx. A later critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas (1989: 267) challenged Koselleck's account of modernity's first crisis, pointing to early capitalist rationality in politics and economics, but acknowledged Koselleck's 'outstanding investigation' as a major influence on Habermas' own, more famous, model of the bourgeois public sphere.

Klaus Eder (1993) broadly accepts Koselleck's location of crisis in the moralistic sidelining of politics. Moral critique introduces a radical break between past and future. Critique sees the future as open, not closed by absolute state authority. It stimulates a heightened consciousness of history and invests events with unique significance. Nothing is immune from critique except the right of critique. However, this also makes critique vulnerable to unattainable utopian fantasies unless it is rooted in the contradictions of modernity.

> Without such 'contradictions' modern society runs into crisis for two reasons: (1) because such societies are not able to react to their systematic problems; and (2) because they are not able to correct pathogenic learning processes. (Eder, 1993: 194)

Eder's crisis theory is critical of a political culture that refuses to recognise that class contradictions are constitutive of modernity. Instead, society produces contradictory knowledge about itself. This generates the need for a 'reflexive turn' in social theory to address the way that a society that masks its own contradictions necessarily blocks knowledge about itself (Eder, 1993: 185).

Like Comte and Eder, Piet Strydom (2000) identifies the enduring sense of crisis with the inability of modern society to regulate the course of its own development. Ever since the early modern period, through what Strydom calls the 'consequent pathogenesis of modernity', the discourse of modernity has taken the form of a discourse of crisis. Strydom advances a specifically sociological account of crisis rather than reducing it to a problem of moralist or political critique alone. Crisis is generated by social relations and a failure to take collective action to resolve collective problems. Illusory ideals about a fully rational society and civic moralism were proposed by the main groups in the French revolution, republicans and Jacobins respectively. Such ideal solutions to crisis denied that society is inherently divided and conflictual, leading to escalating cycles of repression and disorder.

A failure to recognise conflict in a divided society remains for Strydom the source of crisis today: 'the core of the persistent crisis of modern society has been and remains to this day the absence of a participatory politics of conflict, contestation and compromise and, supporting it at a more fundamental level, a culture of

contradictions' (2000: 266). Specifically, Strydom claims, crisis discourse raises three sets of problems, or 'societal semantics', that predominate in different periods: violence, poverty and nature (see Table 1.1). Early modern crisis took a violent form with states facing the constant prospect of wars and revolution. As the new state stabilised its rule, internal crises of social justice and economic systems predominated. Most recently, crisis discourse identifies nature as the main threat to human survival. Such three-stage models of development are popular in social theory. At the outset of sociology, August Comte identified three stages of theology, metaphysics and science, while Sorokin's three stages of culture – sensate, ideational and idealistic – was developed a century later to account for crisis.

Table 1.1 *Changes in crisis discourse from the 16th century to the present (Strydom, 2000: 286)*

16–18th century	Late 18th–20th centuries	Late 20th century–present
Violence	Poverty	Risk
State	Economy	Ecology
Order	Growth	Sustainability
Constitution	The social	Nature
Rights	Justice	Responsibility
Law	Money	Knowledge

RISK AND CRISIS

In recent years, social theory has preferred to talk about 'risk' rather than crisis. On 26 April 1986, an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine released radioactive material over a wide geographical area, as far as the Scottish Highlands and Wales, spreading public fear across Western Europe. This helped to popularise the idea that people now live in a 'risk society', developed in the mid-1980s by the sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992). A risk society is one that is organised around the need to identify and manage future threats of catastrophe that the process of industrial modernisation both makes possible but also aims to control. Because of increased global interdependencies, risk is not limited to nations or states.

Crisis has become cosmopolitan and the risk of crisis has become permanent. Bauman and Bordini (2014) argue that 'liquid modernity' has fundamentally transformed the nature of the crisis in important ways. Crisis is a result of the uncertainties and insecurities of the transition from the 'solid modernity' of mass bureaucratic society founded on a rigid work ethos, to a still dimly-perceived 'liquid modernity' of a fragmented market society composed of isolated and morally indifferent individual consumers (Bauman, 2007).

Subjectivity is now determined by the gratifications enjoyed from 'pure relations'. In a pure relation each individual treats the other as a 'thing' divested of the

moral attachments of mutual commitment and empathy. Individual relations are increasingly 'adiaphoric', cut adrift from the pressures of moral evaluation by the dominance of the pure exchange model of consumer–commodity relations (Bauman and Bordoni, 2014: 153). Individuals are joined-up as aggregates in networks rather than being founded in coherent communities. Economic, political or environmental problems are dispersed from the centres of power and wealth for states and localities to resolve. What Manuel Castells terms 'the space of places', especially big cities, are called upon to resolve problems created elsewhere by the 'space of flows', a process captured by Castells' hybrid term 'glocalisation': '"Glocalization" means local repair centres servicing and recycling the output of the global problem industry' (Bauman and Bordoni, 2014: 125).

Crisis is a result of profound long-term secular change, of which the financial crisis of 2007–8 is a symptom not a cause. Financial crises merely reinforce the main trend identified by Bauman (2000a) of shallow and utilitarian social relationships of 'liquid modernity'. A crisis of democratic agency results from a divorce between politics and power, where politics is understood as the right to take decisions, and power is the ability to effectively carry them through. Politics are emptied of substantial content as globalisation processes weaken the capacity of the state to dominate economic processes. Politicians are unable to protect citizens from crisis, undermining further the legitimacy of the liberal democratic state. For instance, the ecological crisis is not limited to the boundaries of any one or group of nation-states.

With the unification of Germany after the collapse of Stalinism, European elites, especially France, wanted to integrate Germany economically through the Eurozone to prevent any risk of a new European catastrophe in a re-run of German state power of the 1930s. However, the anticipation of crisis resulted in the unintended consequence of what Beck (2013) calls 'German Europe' based on economic logic not military logic. Along with other social theorists, Beck argues that a Europe founded on fear of catastrophe, rather than the free association of citizens, will not survive crisis-ridden globalisation.

As the unintended effects of globalisation are felt and conflicts over expert knowledge become apparent, say over climate change, population, health, or finance, ontological crises are induced that need to be further regulated by disciplined self-reflexivity. Yet this has the character of a never-ending Sisyphean labour in what Beck (1992) calls 'reflexive modernisation' as a heightened discourse of 'world risk society', and Bauman (2000a) calls 'fluid' or 'liquid' modernity where consumer capitalism results in more uncertain and fragile social bonds. Beck refers to the unintended effects in the present of the automatic logic of autonomous modernisation processes of 'industrial society' of the past. As an ideology of economic, technological and scientific progress, modernity feeding upon modernity – not 'post-modernity'– is overrunning all pre-modern hierarchical institutions, like the family, that previously militated some of the worst excesses of modernity. As wealth is pursued more recklessly, greater risks result, such as global warning, nuclear disasters, and energy depletion (Giddens, 2013).

Risk is not the same thing as catastrophe (Beck, 2009). Risk anticipates catastrophe and tries to avert it or at least manage its imagined consequences.

Catastrophe occurs when perceived risk becomes an actual event. Risk imagines or 'stages' catastrophe in order to avert it. At the same time, imagined risk feels more real. In this sense, risk is a 'self-refuting prophecy' because it wants to prevent what it predicts as possible. For instance, the global 'staging' of the threat of terrorist actions by the media and security industries curtail the civil rights and freedoms that they purport to protect. And the star terrorist is brought onto the world stage by the global anticipation of risk in the so-called 'war against terror'.

Every aspect of society – economy, politics, intimacy, family, science, education – finds itself at a decisive turning point. As industrial modernity imposed order and control on people and nature, the more insistently that uncertainty and insecurity returned. Beck (2009) argues that 'crisis' is both the correct and the incorrect term for the ambivalences of the new risk consciousness. 'Crisis' is the wrong term if by that is meant the end of modernity or its supercession by 'post-modernity':

> All the 'crisis phenomena' with which countries of the West are struggling – reform of the welfare state, falling birth rates, ageing societies, loss of definition of national societies, mass unemployment, not to mention the self-doubts of science and expert rationality, economic globalization and advances in individualization that undermine the foundations of marriage, the family and politics, and, finally, the environmental crisis which calls for a revision of industrial society's exploitative conception of nature – can be understood in terms of the distinction as transformations of basic institutions in which the basic principles of modernity retain their validity. (Beck, 2009: 231)

It is the global dominance of industrial modernity, not its failure, that undermines taken-for-granted institutional certainties. The continuing force of the principles of 'more-modernity' – ambiguity, loss of certainty, and increased personal reflexivity – leads to discontinuities in the institutions of the industrial forms of modernity – family, politics, economies, and nations. Crisis rightly focuses attention on the dissolution of the taken-for-granted certainties of the first, *industrial* modernity and the new inequalities that are threatened by the second, *reflexive* modernity. With the rampant disorientation and uncertainty that crisis produces, anti-modern forces are encouraged that threaten science, liberty and democracy.

Beck calls this 'reflexive modernisation'. Triumphant modernity can only refer back to itself since there are no longer any pre-modern institutions that it still needs to overcome (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). There is nowhere that exists outside reflexive modernity that might function as a fixed point of orientation, theoretically, socially or politically. All justifications and legitimations must come from within the resources of modernity itself. Beck goes back to the seventeenth-century political theorist Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) to establish a grounding principle with which to resist the threat of self-annihilation posed by the staging of the ecological crisis. Hobbes argued that people have the right to challenge powerful institutions like the state wherever they threaten the conditions of life. Beck (2009) translates this into the principle that the life-threatening risks confronting humanity can be averted by political action on behalf of endangered humanity against the limitations of the state form. Only the perceived anticipation of catastrophe will be able to galvanise a fully cosmopolitan human community.

Science, not class, becomes the new site of social struggles. Paradoxically, Beck argues, as science and technology become more completely globalised the more that the authority of expert systems is challenged by lay knowledge. Until recently, Beck assumed that welfare states had replaced material poverty and acute class inequalities with individualised claims based on identity and status. Class domination has not gone away but its effects are experienced at an individual level. This requires personalised plans to rationalise and manage global risk, not collective organisations like trade unions. More recently, recession and austerity have tempered some of the claims about reflexive individualisation and material abundance, and forcibly returned the structuring role of class relations to the concerns of sociology.

FROM CAPITALIST CRISIS TO IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS

A social theory of crisis has been traditionally associated with various strands of Marxism, starting with Marx (1818–1883)himself, through to critical theory, notably Jurgen Habermas' and Claus Offe's theories of the crisis of state legitimation in the 1970s and 1980s. Marx developed the first social theory of system-wide crisis. This inverted the philosophy of Hegel that viewed crisis as, in essence, a crisis of ideas into a crisis of social and material conditions. In the Hegelian philosophical system, crisis results from a contradiction between thesis and antithesis that is reconciled in a new, higher synthesis. For Marx crisis consists of unresolved contradictions of social and economic structures, especially the conflict between social knowledge embodied in the forces of production and its private appropriation in the form of wealth by unequal social relations of production. People experience crises in the threat that private appropriation of social labour in the form of wealth or weapons poses to their social and material survival.

Marx derived from his philosophical milieu, the Young Hegelians, a critique of the gap between dominant representations of reality – freedom, equality, justice, cooperation, public good, love of humanity – and reality itself, where the representations were found to be inverted – servitude, extreme inequality, injustice, self-interest, inhumanity. In this gap, social, economic and political crisis festered. Marx saw economic crisis in terms of a structural logic that operates in defiance of the wishful thinking of the bourgeoisie that capitalism represents the best of all possible worlds. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, the bourgeoisie conjures up forces beyond its control – the collective means of production. The accumulated social knowledge stored in the forces of production 'revolts' against private ownership in periodic crises: successive crises 'put on trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire bourgeois society' (Marx and Engels, 1998: 41). Society is suddenly thrown back into a state of 'momentary barbarism', creating misery and fear on a large scale.

Disorder defines bourgeois society and threatens its survival. Every crisis is a crisis of over-production. Too much is produced, not too little, for the market to

absorb at the going rate of profit and to allocate the social product proportion-ately between autonomous units of production, distribution and consumption. Large amounts of the productive forces therefore need to be destroyed, creating larger, more centralised and concentrated units of capital among the survivors. These units become so large and integrated that their destruction threatens the social conditions of survival, as today when the largest banks are said to be 'too big to fail'. By failing to eliminate less productive activities like finance, the way is paved 'for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented' (Marx and Engels, 1998: 42). As workers are made unemployed or real wages decline the bourgeoisie are further unable to sell their goods for a profit. Here Marx marries an economic theory with a theory of revolution. In the absence of revolution, crisis became a staple of social theory. Collapse is not automatic since Marx's 'pure model' of capitalism neglects the many countervailing tendencies that may serve to moderate crisis today, above all, state intervention.

A more recent emphasis in social theory on the crisis of belief in authority marks a departure from Marx's systemic theory of crisis. To illustrate this shift, Jurgen Habermas (1976: 17–24) describes the different tendencies of various societies (see Table 1.2). First, 'primitive social formations' are relatively undifferentiated and so do not enter crisis as a result of internal problems but only as a result of external causes like war, conquest or exchange leading to demographic inter-ethnic change. Second, 'traditional social formations' based on political domination enter crisis owing to internal contradictions of rising exploitation coupled with weakening ideological legitimation producing class struggle and revolutionary change. Third, the crisis of 'liberal-capitalist social formations' expresses the impersonal relations of capital and wage labour in the autonomous economic cycle of boom, crisis and recession. Problems of competitive accumulation affect the entire system, not merely individual states.

Table 1.2   *Habermas' typology of crisis (1976: 24)*

Social formations	Principles of organisation	Social and system integration	Type of crisis
Primitive	Kinship relations: primary roles (age, sex)	No differentiation between social and system integration	Externally induced identity crisis
Traditional	Political class rule: state power and socio-economic classes	Functional differentiation between social and system integration	Internally determined identity crisis
Liberal-capitalist	Unpolitical	System integrative	System crisis
	Class rule: wage labour and capital	Economic system also takes over socially integrative tasks	

From its roots in 'economic steering problems', the crisis of system integration in liberal capitalism threatens to engulf social integration of the lifeworld. To begin with, the middle class are integrated by the market. Legitimation is founded on an economic ideology of equal exchange. Institutionalised by the labour market, class relations are taken out of the sphere of formal political competition. Political dependency is replaced by wage dependency. Wage labour has the double charac- ter analysed by Marx. On the production side, private exchange value is created at the same time as social use value. On the market side, social labour is allocated by the private medium of money exchange at the same time as the power balance between labour and capital is institutionalised.

   Marx's social theory analysed both the steering principle of a market economy and the ideology of class society. Marx exposes the ideology of bourgeois political economy by demonstrating that equivalents are not exchanged. Instead of equal exchange between agents in the market, civil law secures the private appropriation of the surplus social product. Periodic crises are a result of transforming the con- tradiction of class interests into a contradiction of system imperatives. Crises are endemic to a market society because cyclical difficulties of economic growth endanger social integration.

> With the persistent instability of accelerated social change, periodically recurring, socially disintegrating steering problems produce the objective foundation for a crisis consciousness in the bourgeois class and for revolutionary hopes among wage labor- ers. No previous social formation lived so much in fear and expectation of a sudden system change, even though the idea of a temporally condensed transformation – that is, of a revolutionary leap – is oddly in contrast to the form of motion of system crisis as a permanent crisis. (Habermas, 1976: 25)

So long as class contradictions go unrecognised by its members, ideology helps to justify asymmetrical relations of power. Any open conflict between classes is explained ideologically in terms of the hostile intentions of the subjects rather than the struc- tural contradiction of social interests. Where conflicts are understood in terms of ordinary language as immediately empirical then they have no relation to 'truth' as such. Habermas restricts 'truth' to the conceptual language of communications theory since only it can reveal an 'immanent relation to logical categories' (1976: 28). In this situation of the non-truth of ordinary common sense, social theory acquires a special value for bringing to light the deep logic of crises, or at least the relationship between logical categories that reveal the underlying roots of crisis. Paradoxically, theoretical 'truth' is available to the theorist but not the subjects taking meaningful action.

'POST-STRUCTURALISM' AND CRISIS

Theorists labelled as 'post-structuralist' like Michel Foucault, but also structuralist theorists like Louis Althusser, take a different approach from Habermas and Beck. For them crisis is productive since it exposes the limitations of knowledge and

power. In such accounts crisis presses the arbitrariness of norms and regulation to the discursive limits of truth, prompting further critique. Foucault (1997) called this critique 'a limit-attitude' to the crisis. Criticism is not transcendental or universal but, in Foucault's terms, 'archaeological' in its methodical concentration on a specific history and 'genealogical' in the efforts of theory to work from the contingencies that have selectively made us what we have become and what we can no longer be. Critique attempts to 'cross over' the limits of crisis:

> In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form a possible crossing-over [*franchissement*]. (1997: 315)

Global critiques, Foucault argues, must be replaced with specific, local and practical critiques, for instance of sexuality, insanity, authority, or illness, if the mutual development of individuals are not to be dominated by the 'technologies of power'. What Foucault proposes is less a theory as such than a concrete problematisation of history, ethics and ontology.

Epistemological crises arise when theory acquires an objectivist mask and forgets its origins in non-theory. Foucault describes the decision of the institutional knowledge of psychiatry and medicine to segregate the socially useless and transform them into objects of knowledge. Only with modernity does madness become a crisis, because of an inability to work, requiring special powers of confinement and segregation. Medicine, psychiatry, penal justice and criminology enter into crisis when they are forced out of a self-referential system of knowledge that validates itself, essentially by turning subjects into objects, and being made to confront what Foucault calls the 'power-knowledge' nexus.

What were purely epistemological questions of truth and classification are always for Foucault simultaneously social, political, and economic issues of power. With the liberal critique of too much state interference, externally imposed discipline is displaced by 'governmentality' or self-regulation of conduct. Neoliberalism adapts the technology of self-governance more completely to market compulsion as a coming to power of economic will. By restricting the space for state support for the economy through social policies (housing, health, education, social insurance) neoliberalism aims to extend 'the rationality of the market, the schemes of analysis it proposes, and the decision-making criteria it suggests to areas that are not exclusively or not primarily economic' (1997: 79).

Sharing some affinity with post-structuralism, in her book *Anti-Crisis* Janet Roitman (2014) argues that crisis is a post-hoc term, mobilised after the fact to organise disparate events. In the absence of firm beliefs in religion or reason, crisis serves as a 'transcendental placeholder' by signifying contingency and the possibility that things could be 'otherwise'. This narrative function assumes that crisis is history's way to bring justice to the world. Crisis is a judgement that defines reality in a certain way while obscuring other definitions. In the absence of any absolute grounds for knowledge, for 'post-structuralist' theory, Roitman

refers to Foucault and Judith Butler, crisis exposes the limits to what is known. More than that, it also invites critique by speaking about what has not been heard until now: 'crisis is productive; it is the means to transgress and is necessary for change or transformation' (2014: 35).

For Roitman (2014), glossing Niklas Luhmann, crisis is not an empirical concept available to 'first-order observation' but a 'second-order' logical observation. In other words, crisis is a distinction that confers meaning. Concepts, in this approach, cannot be true or false since they constitute 'self-referential systems' that empirical investigation is premised upon. Crisis cannot be explicated in itself since it is always a crisis of something else: capitalism, finance, politics, culture, society, subjectivity, identity. Social movements that emerge to contest crises will never establish an alternative to crisis and anti-crisis narratives because they already operate on and are constituted by the terrain of crisis and anti-crisis. Systemic, structural, and moral failures are claimed to typify crisis. These are the hidden possibilities that are made manifest by crisis.

Roitman (2014: 24) takes issue with Koselleck's account of the crisis of modernity for making too many absolute distinctions, between the modern and pre-modern, politics and morality, theology and history. Koselleck's account of crisis does not depend on what Roitman calls 'a truth correspondence theory of history'. Only weakly empirical, Koselleck primarily provides a thematic account of private morality as the site of critique rather than the public interest where, for instance, Habermas grounds critique.

On the contrary, Roitman (2014: 93) argues, crisis is purely contingent, a convenient way to repackage debt from something positive to something toxic, but not something 'intrinsic to a system'. It fulfils a 'hope' that 'we can perceive a dissonance between historical events and representations of those events' (2014: 65). Narratives of crisis fail to take into account specific networks and forms of technical expertise, crucially, the technical assemblage supporting the financial instruments blamed for the current crisis. Although light on primary empirical materials and relying in places on conjecture and counter-factual 'what ifs', Roitman is similarly disposed to find the dissonance of crisis between events and representations. As a second-order category, 'crisis' is ambiguously perched by post-structuralism somewhere between systemic contradiction, the sociology of error, the unintended consequences of local decisions, and political, moral, and ideological failure.

THE FUTURE OF CRISIS

Social theory cannot take the measure of itself from both a future that is not yet known and knowledge that is determined by the past. While it cannot gamble recklessly on prophecies, theoretical perspectives that once seemed utopian or irrelevant can acquire a new salience in changed conditions of crisis. Marx was plucked from the margins of social theory in the 1970s where he had been derisively consigned or turned into a monolith by Cold War ideologies. That he became relevant to students

and scholars alike is not unconnected to the social and political crises of the 1960s. In the context of an emerging neoliberal political consensus in the 1980s, Marxism fell just as quickly out of intellectual fashion. On the other hand, some of its key ideas like alienation and ideology had been assimilated by the 'cultural turn' while others like class seemed less promising in a situation of apparent class decomposition. Perhaps the Marxist concept of class may (or may not) become a central concern of social theory in the future while today's exciting discourses about fluidity or risk or identity may seem like old hat that obstruct the future development of sociology. It is difficult for social theory to exercise foresight even about itself with any precision. This is especially the case when seismic shifts are taking place in the tectonic plates of social relations. If it is to exercise control over the satisfactions of theory-baiting that underlies much of the recurring crises in social theory, then account needs to be taken of the longer-term patterning of the theoretical field.