Thinking Politically about Crisis:
A Pragmatist Perspective

Brian Milstein (brian.m.milstein@gmail.com)

"Crisis" is a key concept in our political lexicon. Since the beginning of the modern age, it has arguably been, as much as anything, the *experience of crisis* that has calibrated the aims of both politics and political theory. But as central as crisis experiences have been for the shaping of our political imaginary, the concept itself has proven difficult to incorporate into the political theory enterprise. In this article, I argue that we can think politically about crisis by taking up a "pragmatist" perspective that focuses on how we deploy crisis as a conceptual tool for guiding judgments and coordinating actions. I argue that crisis is a fundamentally *reflexive* concept that bridges our traditional distinctions between *objective phenomena* and *normative experience*, and whose very usage implies the active *participation* of those involved in it. Only by examining these crucial aspects of the crisis concept can we begin to grasp its normative political content, as well as how it may be deployed in the service of political action and social change.

"Crisis" is a prominent feature of our social and political reality. However, the term "crisis," pervasive as it is in discussions about politics, society, and history, is rarely defined or grappled with explicitly. As the conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck once observed, "From the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision."[1] Nearly a half-century after Koselleck made this statement, very little has changed. We talk of particular crises; we talk of things that are alleged to be "in crisis," but there is comparatively little discussion about "crisis" *as such*. This is especially the case in political theory, where the bulk of normative energies tend to be expended on questions relating to ideal conditions in an otherwise

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[1] Reinhart Koselleck (2006) 'Crisis,' trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67: 397-400. I thank Rainer Forst, Regina Kreide, Rahel Jaeggi, and their colloquium participants, as well as Nancy Fraser, Ethan Zane Miller, Katrin Flikschuh, Stefanie Wöhl, Ayelet Banai, Luce deLire, Bastian Ronge, Petra Gümplová, Ardevan Yaghoubi, Kiran Banerjee, and Malte Frøslee Ibsen their feedback on earlier versions of this article.

stable society. Yet however else we might think to characterize crisis—be it as a time of radical disruption, a moment of epochal transition, the detonation of systemic societal contradictions, or a state of emergency, and be it of the state, the economy, the environment, or the international sphere—a crisis is always in the last instance a *political* phenomenon.

My purpose here is to rethink the concept of crisis as a concept of political theory. More specifically, I am interested in how the "grammar" of crisis might inform the way we think about political action and social change. In doing so, I seek to broach a number of foundational questions about the nature of the concept of crisis and the place it occupies in our political repertoire: What are we doing when we say there is a crisis? What function does the concept serve? What assumptions are we putting into play when we use the term crisis?

Since the beginning of the modern age, crisis experiences have played a key role in calibrating the aims of politics and the central questions of political theory. The primary point of reference for modern political thought—the sovereign state—was forged out of the manifold political crises of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jon Elster observes that "new constitutions almost always are written in the wake of a crisis or exceptional circumstance of some sort."[2] Many of our social welfare institutions came into being in the wake of recurrent economic crises, and it is also out of these same experiences that the idea of socioeconomic justice has found its way into the mainstream of contemporary political thought. Many of our most important international institutions, as well as the bulk of international humanitarian law, were forged out of experiences of international and humanitarian crisis, and so, too, have our current debates about human rights and international or global justice.

At the same time, crises are not exactly phenomena we welcome. They wreak havoc on society, destroying lives and livelihoods, and they are just as likely to leave society in a worse state instead of a better one. Moreover, crises harbor political dangers as well as opportunities, and the opportunities they do present may just as well be

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[2] Jon Elster (1995) 'Forces and Mechanisms in the Constitution-Making Process,' *Duke Law Review* 45: 370-1.

opportunities for exploitation by elites as for emancipatory movement by the masses. It is no surprise that much of the recent literature dealing with crises, particularly in the realm of legal and constitutional scholarship after 9/11, has put its emphasis on precisely this potential for exploitation.[3] But, as I will argue in what follows, even this potential for elites or rulers to manipulate crises is parasitic on a more fundamental set of functions that the concept of crisis fulfills in the modern social imaginary.

Philosophies of history, especially those influenced by the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, often identify crisis not only with disruption and cataclysm but with opportunities for transformation or even transcendence: crises can be indicative of deeper pathologies in the structure of society, and they can bring into the open power relations or conflicts that remained otherwise hidden.[4] To be sure, oversimplified associations of crisis with revolutionary praxis have been rightly criticized on both philosophical and empirical grounds as flawed, naïve, and even dangerous.[5] But this need not rule out the possibility of a more subtle, methodical, and pragmatic investigation into the relation of crisis experiences to the creation of historical meaning,

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[3] For an overview of how this literature has played out in the US context, see William E. Scheuerman (2006) 'Emergency Powers and the Rule of Law after 9/11,' *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14: 61-84, and (2012) 'Emergencies, Executive Power, and the Uncertain Future of US Presidential Democracy,' *Law & Social Inquiry* 37: 743-67. See also Ian Zuckerman (2006), "One Law for War And Peace? Judicial Review and Emergency Powers between the Norm and the Exception," *Constellations* 13: 522-45; Oren Gross and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin (2006) *Law in Times of Crisis: Emergency Powers in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; (2008) 'A Skeptical View of Deference to the Executive in Times of Crisis,' *Israel Law Review* 41(3): 545-61; Eric Posner and Adrian Vermeule (2009) 'Crisis Governance in the Administrative State,' *Chicago Law Review* 76: 1613-81; (2010) *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic*, New York: Oxford University Press. The classic study of this problem in comparative perspective remains that of Clinton L. Rossiter (1948) *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in Modern Democracies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. For more general theoretical statements, see, e.g., Giorgio Agamben (2005) *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Luc Boltanski (2011) *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Cambridge: Polity: 129-36.

[4] Antonio Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York: International Publishers: esp. 210-8, 275-6; Jürgen Habermas (1971) *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel, Boston: Beacon: 212-35; (1976) *Legitimation Crisis* trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press; Antonio Negri (1999) *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Andreas Kalyvas (2008) *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008: 119.

[5] Koselleck (1988) *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Habermas (1971, n. 4): 235-52; Seyla Benhabib (1986) *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, New York: Columbia University Press: 123-43; Axel Honneth (2007) *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Polity: 3-48.

transformations of solidarity, and consciousness of justice and injustice. Even if we can no longer abide a simple identification of crisis with emancipation, this does not negate the possibility that crises *can* be occasions for contesting social structures, transforming solidarities, and pursuing political change.

In this article I will offer a "pragmatist" approach to thinking about crisis. My argument is, if we want to think about crisis as a political concept, we need to think through how the concept is used in modern societies—that is, by thinking and speaking actors who experience and act upon crises. Pragmatists from C.S. Peirce to Wittgenstein to Jürgen Habermas and Robert Brandom have argued that, in order to grasp a concept, we need first to examine how it serves the practice of reasoning, how it helps us make inferences about the world, what prior understandings and judgments it presupposes, how it fits in with other related concepts, and how it informs our repertoires of action. In what follows, I will show that the concept of crisis indeed rests on some powerful assumptions. Crisis belies the traditional distinctions between empirical science and normative philosophy: it is an objective event, but it is one whose urgency demands a normative commitment on the part of those involved in it. It is an inherently *reflexive* concept, one that blurs the usual dichotomies between fact and value, observer and participant, and theory and practice, and it presupposes our ability to critically observe and take responsibility for our social world. As such, the modern concept of crisis is an essentially *participatory* concept, whose very invocation calls not just for observation and critical judgment but *action*.

I will begin with a look back at how the concept of crisis has emerged and developed as a central concept in modernity, a reflexive concept participants use to make sense of their increasingly complex relationship to their social world. In the following section, I will show how the modern concept of crisis rests on certain pragmatic assumptions, which will allow us to see how crises can be understood as a function of the publicly discursive production of "crisis consciousness." As we will see in the third section, it is the public way in which actors speak about, act upon, and contest each other's consciousness of crisis that makes crisis into a thoroughly political phenomenon, susceptible to contestation, struggle, and even resistance. I will conclude

by arguing that it is precisely this discursive and contested aspect of the crisis concept that can make it appear fuzzy, diluted, or subject to abuse, but this is all the more reason to strive to make the concept explicit in political theory.

Crisis in Modernity

The word "crisis" originates in antiquity. As Koselleck explains in his encyclopedia of *Historical Basic Concepts* (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*), "Κρίσις [*krisis*] has its roots in the Greek verb κρίνω (*krinō*): to 'separate' (part, divorce), to 'choose,' to 'judge,' to 'decide'; as a means of 'measuring oneself,' to 'quarrel,' or to 'fight.'"[6] The term appears throughout Greek writings in a variety of contexts that involve some kind of struggle, contest, judgment, or decision. In Aristotle's *Politics*, the term appears mostly in reference to the process of litigating a dispute or rendering a verdict. In *The Hippocratic Corpus*, it means the high point of an illness "in which it is decided whether the self-healing powers of the organism are sufficient for recovery."[7] Or, as one editor of an early English translation of the *Corpus* put it, crisis is "the determination of the disease as by a judicial verdict."[8] In drama, it referred to the internal struggle of the protagonist with the powers of fate, and in early Christianity, it signified divine judgment—particularly the Last Judgment at the end of days.[9] Several of these meanings have provided metaphorical templates for how we think about social and political crisis today: it could mean a moment of forced decision for the polity, the high point of a "disease" in the social body, or a time of struggle or judgment in the face of history. None of these metaphorical meanings would be possible, however, if crisis were not also endowed with a set of distinctly *modern* conceptual assumptions that permit its extension from individual instances of judgment (as we find in the Greek usage) to judgment about the social world at large.

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[6] Koselleck (n. 1): 358.

[7] Habermas (1973) 'What Does a Crisis Mean Today? Legitimation Problems in Late Capitalism,' *Social Research* 40: 643.

[8] E. Withington (1920) 'The Meaning of ΚΡΙΣΙΣ as a Medical Term,' *The Classical Review* 34: 65.

[9] Habermas (n. 7): 644; Koselleck (n. 1): 360.

Koselleck records the first use of crisis in a political context in seventeenth-century England, when tensions escalated between king and parliament. The poet-politician Benjamin Rudyerd, using the medical meaning of the word, diagnosed the situation by writing, "This is the Chrysis of Parliaments; we shal know by this if Parliaments life or die."[10] The notion of a social "body" has its own history, for example, in early and medieval Christendom, as the *corpus mysticum* embodied within the community of true believers that takes part in the sacraments.[11] But the entry of the concept of crisis into the political lexicon, as a diagnosis no longer of the individual body but of the body politic as a whole, correlates with a profound turning point in seventeenth century society and its attitudes toward itself. Europe was transforming from a politically decentered network of feudal, ecclesiastical, and trading associations into increasingly distinct "societies," within which a centralized state organ emerges as an institution that is both representative of and distinct from the rest of the social body.[12] The representation of the state as the central organ of the body politic finds perhaps no better expression than in the iconic frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, where the multitude of individual citizens coalesce into the body of that "artificial man" who wields sovereign power. Although Hobbes himself never uses the term "crisis" to describe the decay of the commonwealth into a state of war, his attempt to formulate a "science" of politics can still be read as the first modern crisis theory. The emergence of the idea of a general political crisis serves to invest the imaginary of the body politic with greater reality: no longer a mere metaphor, the body politic may be diagnosed a healthy or sick body by a citizenry empowered collectively to play at once doctor and patient to its own condition.

We already see in the Hobbesian paradigm the *reflexivity* that accompanies modern crisis consciousness: crisis emerges alongside the problematic of a society whose

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[10] Quoted in Koselleck (n. 1): 362.

[11] Sheldon Wolin (2004) *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, exp. ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press: 118ff.

[12] Henrdrik Spruyt (1994) *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis,' in Robert O. Keohane (ed.) (1986) *Neorealism and Its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press: 131-57.

internal order can no longer be exogenously guaranteed through appeals to sacred doctrine or tradition, but which must be achieved in light of the "rules" which participants must discover and to which they must bind themselves. It emerges in the form we know it today around the same time, and to the same degree, that modern society casts off its reliance on "traditional authority" and begins to take a reflexive attitude toward itself and its social and political environment.[13] But the Hobbesian critique of crisis is essentially "defensive": restricted to the guideposts of a "healthy" or "sick" commonwealth, the political imagination of the Leviathan remained limited to the oppositions between peace and war, stability and chaos, perseverance and decay. It was not until a century later that the concept of crisis took on a more radical tenor, one suited to a self-conception of society as a historical community capable of achieving continual *progress*. No simple moment of societal disorder or decomposition, crises come to be viewed as moments of epochal transition: a moment of historical decision, a tipping point, an imminent break, an apocalyptic coming to judgment.[14] It is with this set of connotations that crisis is sometimes linked with "revolution" and the possibility of "emancipation," as we find in writers such as Rousseau and Thomas Paine.[15] By the early nineteenth century, the term found its way into economics, as political economists such as Simonde de Sismondi, Charles Dunoyer, and Karl Marx struggled to understand the fluctuations and convulsions of the emerging capitalist system.[16] While Dunoyer, a disciple of Say's classical liberalism, sought to "normalize" Sismondi's thesis that recurring economic crises were endemic to capitalist society, Marx fused it to the

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[13] See Habermas (1987) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: ch. I; S.N. Eisenstandt (2000) 'Multiple Modernities,' *Deadalus* 129: 1-29. See also Max Weber, 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions,' in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (trans and ed) (1946) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press: 267-301, esp. 295ff.

[14] Koselleck (n. 1): 371-2.

[15] Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1979) *Emile, or: On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books: 194; Thomas Paine (1776) *The Crisis* (accessed online 11 April, 2013 at http://www.ushistory.org/paine/crisis/c-01.htm).

[16] Simonde de Sismondi (1847 [1819]) *Political Economy and the Philosophy of Government*, trans. and ed. M. Mignet, London: John Chapman: 118-9, 242-4; Ross E. Stewart (1984) 'Sismondi's Forgotten Ethical Critique of Early Capitalism,' *Journal of Business Ethics* 3: 227-34; Rabah Benkemoune (2009) 'Charles Dunoyer and the Emergence of the Idea of an Economic Cycle,' *History of Political Economy* 41: 271-95.

emancipatory conception of crisis, constructing a vision of deep contradictions in the structure of capitalist society that will ultimately detonate into revolutionary upheaval.[17]

Unlike more defensive readings of crisis—which, in Clinton Rossiter's words, aim "to overcome the peril and restore normal conditions"—emancipatory readings seek not to *pull back* from crises but to *push through* them to the next stage of historical progress.[18] But if more defensive readings risk valorizing the imperatives of "order" and "necessity" at the expense of normative aspiration, revolutionary readings risk a somewhat different error of valorizing utopian possibilities over the realities of social cooperation and organization. Precisely because it valorizes future change over present stability, the revolutionary reading of crisis cannot find its bearings in principles of social order. It must invest elsewhere, for example, by claiming epistemic access to the "authentic" liberated being or, alternatively, to the overarching telos of world history.[19] It was precisely this epistemic overconfidence that Koselleck castigated in his conceptual history of the Enlightenment, *Critique and Crisis*. For Koselleck, the rise of a revolutionary crisis consciousness during the eighteenth century was above all a tale of tragedy, the tale of an overzealous Enlightenment too ensconced in its utopian sense of self-purpose to appreciate the tensions that lay between the ideal of complete emancipation and the messy realities of politics.[20]

Today, "crisis" is taken to signify many things in modern society—danger, calamity, contradiction, struggle, revelation, opportunity—yet its significance as a concept for political theory has proven difficult to pin down. It is simplistic to assume that crises will, as a teleological matter of course, reveal hidden truths about the social world or usher in new opportunities for progress. But it is no more adequate to reduce crises to simple "times of peril" that are to be contrasted to some other condition that is supposed to count as "normal." Oren Gross and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin have stressed how problematic it can be to distinguish what is normal from what is exceptional to begin

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[17] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1978) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 291-2, 443-65, 478ff; Sismondi (n. 16); see also Stewart (n. 16).

[18] Rossiter (n. 3): 5.

[19] Honneth (n. 5): 13-6, 37-9.

[20] Koselleck (n. 5): esp. 158-86.

with.[21] More fundamentally, however, such a view implicitly advantages the status quo ante and narrows the theoretical space for forward-oriented reflection, let alone "emancipatory" movement. It is from the purview of these kinds of ambiguities that it would be worthwhile to reconsider the role the concept of crisis plays in modern social and political consciousness and the function that it plays for modern, crisis-conscious actors.

Crisis serves to reflect the ongoing tensions encountered by a society that strives to be self-determining even as it finds itself subject to the fluctuations and upheavals of historical contingency and social complexity. It points to the fundamentally dual character of modern society: something that can be *acted upon by* its members, which can be made transparent and shaped according to their own collective will and reason; yet also something that *acts upon* them, that remains external and opaque to everyday life, carrying its own objective force to which the self-understanding of participants must bend. This dual character of modern society is familiar to sociological theory, which various thinkers have tried to thematize through such distinctions as "labor" versus "capital," "social integration" versus "system integration," or "agency" versus "structure."[22]

It is the location of crisis as a reflective point within the dual character of modern society that gives it its likewise dual character as both an *objective phenomenon* and a *normative experience*. It is long customary in modern thought to distinguish sharply between theoretical and practical reason—between that which is objective, empirical, or factual and that which is normative, prescriptive, or ideational—yet the concept of crisis straddles *both* of these domains simultaneously. A crisis is, indeed, an event, with real effects and real causality, lending itself to empirical analysis; at the same time, the status of an event *as a crisis* is immanently and inextricably bound up with a variety of normative

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[21] Gross and Ní Aoláin (2006, n. 3): 171-243.

[22] Marx (1976) *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin Books; David Lockwood (1992) 'Social Integration and System Integration,' in *Solidarity and Schism: "The Problem of Disorder" in Durkheimian and Marxist Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 399-412; Habermas (1984-7) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon; Anthony Giddens (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing; Ian Craib (1992) *Modern Social Theory: From Parsons to Habermas*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

presuppositions and expectations. To call something a "crisis" denotes a plea for action—an *urgency*—which, if unheeded, would lead to something catastrophic. Crises occur when the objective force of history comes crashing back the self-understanding of its participants, pressing upon them to make a decision on their own fate; at stake is nothing less than whether it will be we who "make" history or visa versa.

It follows from this constellation that the concept of crisis stands as more than a referent for a certain state of affairs. Fashioned with a reflexive character that binds the objective force of causality to a normatively charged urgency, the concept of crisis entails a call for *participation* on the part of those who apply the term. It is in the course of meeting this demand for participation that actors are enjoined to reflect on their relation to the social whole: its structures, its purposes, and how it coheres as a totality. Those called to participate can only do so on the basis of their own self-understood relations to society, their expectations of how society is supposed to function, and what society should *be*. Thus the participatory aspect of crisis consists in more than the necessity to intervene in or "fix" the crisis, but in a call to *take responsibility* for the crisis as if the crisis itself were somehow of their own making. Only through participation does it become possible to bring the objective causes and effects of crisis reflexively back into the realm of possible normative control, and so to bring about a reconciliation between the idea of society as external reality and the idea of society as a product of collective will. But if crisis is a participatory process, and if it is as normative in its stakes as it is objectively real in its consequences, then it also has a politics.

The Pragmatic Logic of Crisis

To say that crisis is a modern concept is not to say that there were no crises before the modern period. The modernity of the concept consists in that, despite the fact that any *particular* crisis tends to catch us off-guard or unprepared, the *general* phenomenon of crisis is sufficiently entrenched in our worldview that it has become part of our conceptual repertoire: we have in a certain way "standardized" the notion of crises by assigning them a general term. But more than a general referent for a certain state of

affairs, the invocation of the term "crisis" invokes a certain range of actions that are understood to correspond to it. What we might call the "pragmatic force" of the concept of crisis consists not merely in the notion that something in the social world has gone urgently and inexplicably awry, but that some kind of action *can and must* be taken in response to this situation. This is what distinguishes crises from other phenomena (e.g., "disasters," "tragedies") that we can only passively adapt to or cope with. The attempt to act may of course fail, but it is a crucial feature of the reflexive character of crisis that those caught up in a crisis act on the presupposition that it is possible (even if only in principle) to regain some level of reflexive control over the process. But if this is the case, then it means that the participants in a crisis—those who would be acting—constitute a key part of the definition of a crisis *as* a crisis. The concept of crisis in modern society is dependent on a certain capacity for *crisis consciousness*, i.e., a capacity to identify a crisis and take action.

Crises are generally defined to describe situations of profound urgency and uncertainty that threaten to outstrip existing resources for solving problems.[23] The *concept* of crisis, however, becomes effective only when it is used by crisis-conscious actors as a conceptual tool for making judgments about one's relationship to one's social environment. To declare a crisis is to bring into discursive play a range of claims, commitments, and attitudes regarding our relation as a collective "us" to a "not-us around us" upon which our everyday life depends—things like the state, the economy, or the natural environment—and over which we feel we *should* have some control.[24] Our task here is to make explicit what those claims, commitments, and attitudes entail—to think through the question, "*What are we doing* when we name something as being in crisis?"[25]

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[23] See, for example, Habermas (1976, n. 4): 2-5; Wesley W. Widmaier, Mark Blyth, and Leonard Seabrooke (2007) 'Exogenous Shocks or Endogenous Constructions? The Meanings of Wars and Crises,' *International Studies Quarterly* 51: 748; Arjen Boin and Mark Rhinard (2008) 'Managing Transboundary Crises: What Role for the European Union?,' *International Studies Review* 10: 1-25; Jakob Norberg (2011) 'Arendt in Crisis: Political Thought between Past and Future,' *College Literature* 38: 131-49.

[24] Robert Brandom (1994) *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: xii, 46, 168-72.

[25] See Brandom (n. 24): 172-3; (2001) *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 173; Thomas Fossen (2013) 'Taking Stances, Contesting Commitments: Political Legitimacy and the Pragmatic Turn,' *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21: 428.

(1)   To begin, if applying the concept of crisis requires one to make a judgment about the social world, or at least a part of it, it follows that one can only speak of a crisis *of* something; there is no such thing as a crisis that simply exists "of itself." The speaker must assume that there exists something in the world that may be taken as an *object*, an object that can be made explicit, represented, thought about, and reflected upon, to which the judgment of being in crisis may be attributed. Second, and more important, the speaker making the claim that said object is in crisis must assume *addressees*. She must implicitly assume participatory membership in a *community* of sorts, and she must assume that the other members of this community share a concern for this object and therewith a stake in the outcome of the crisis. It is from here that crisis derives its political character: crisis is first and foremost a *public* concept, spoken by members of a public to other members of a public about a publicly constituted object. "Crisis" enters the definition of a situation when a speaker *declares* and her addressees *affirm* the existence of an object that is in crisis, and, in so doing, they accept a *mutual commitment* to recognize the crisis and take (or possibly delegate) action in response to it.[26]

To be sure, similar claims can be made about other matters in the social world: one of the implications of pragmatist approaches is that anything and everything is in principle open to discursive problematization.[27] What makes the declaration of crisis distinctive is the way it brings the inherently problematic and contested character of social practices to the surface of actors' consciousness. Crisis language can most immediately be distinguished from other normative as well as descriptive language in that the very declaration of crisis evokes a demand for immediate action in its very description of the situation. In this respect, a crisis can be understood as a kind of "emergency." But, as Arjen Boin and Mark Rhinard have noted, crises can be distinguished further, since one who is subject to an emergency can often at least provisionally trust in the existence of more or less standard routines aimed to resolve it. Droughts, floods, shortages, mild economic downturns, disputed elections, terrorist

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[26] Habermas (n. 22): 1:278; (1996) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 119-20, 147. See also Brandom (n. 24): 159-66.

[27] Fossen (2011) 'Politicizing Brandom's Pragmatism: Normativity and the Agonal Character of Social Practice,' *European Journal Of Philosophy* doi:10.1111/j.1468-0378.2011.00504.x.

attacks, and the like are sure to bring their own measures of contingency, but modern societies generally have some routinized capacity to deal with them.[28] One can always criticize the way a routine is handled, or even the routines themselves, but the assumption that they exist provides a base level of epistemic security that is lacking in a full-blown crisis. What makes a crisis a crisis is precisely the consciousness that the known means for doing things will no longer do, that whatever is to be tried must be tried experimentally (At best, the participant can trust in authority, in the possibility that somebody else "knows what they are doing" simply by virtue of their status as an official or expert). Put another way, while strategies for a addressing a standard emergency are *potentially* contested—that is, one could question them if one so chooses—strategies for addressing a crisis are *presumptively* contested—that is, actions are attempted with the understanding that their justifications and potential effectiveness are controversial.

We can say that a situation is more amenable to being diagnosed a "crisis" the more the practical urgency of the dysfunction is accompanied by a kind of radical doubt: the urgency for action at the practical level is coupled to a loss of foundation at the doxastic level.[29] This is why a pragmatist take is well suited to thinking about the political logic of crisis: pragmatism in general permits that most anything *can be* made explicit for reflection and thereby problematized; applying the judgment of crisis entails a call to actually *do so* and take action. Hence the speaker who declares and the addressees who affirm the existence of a crisis are granting each other "license" to a certain degree of freedom from the established social order. This is wherein crisis consciousness acquires its potential for creative action and even "emancipatory" thinking; but it is also where crisis consciousness can prove dangerous. Charismatic

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[28] Boin and Rhinard, (n. 23): 3; cf. Sanford Levinson and Jack M. Balkin (2009) 'Constitutional Crises,' *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 157: 707-53.

[29] It is not uncommon to hear of crises spoken about using "existential" language. In *Legitimation Crisis*, for example, Habermas describes crises in terms "when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened" (1976, n. 4: 3). While crises certainly contain an existential dimension, it is the *practical-epistemic* dimension, conceived in pragmatist terms, that is decisive for action—not so much "What is our society?" as "How does it work?," for it is the latter that more directly assists the question, "What are we to do?" It is also for this reason that features of society said to be in crisis may be better defined functionally, by what they *do*, rather than ontologically, by what they *are* (see below).

figures, self-interested parties, and other strategically-oriented actors can and often do attempt to exploit the license of crisis language to circumvent established procedures to pursue ambitious ends, either by conjuring an idea of a crisis outright or manipulating the public's perceptions of the options available (for example, by appealing to so-called "TINA" logic).

(2) Let us assume however that a crisis claim has, as it were, "objective" standing. The community must be able to designate an object, an aspect of social life that is functioning radically out of synch with the community's expectations. The crisis object is a socially constructed object—such as the state, the economy, or the environment— which represents to the community the fulcrum of the crisis. Now, to say that the object is "socially constructed" does not mean that it lacks reality.[30] On the contrary, its salience as an object arises precisely out of the objective reality of the crisis itself: if the crisis can be said to produce real effects, then the successful critique of crisis must be able to address those effects. In short, the crisis object is "real" insofar as it guides our ability to form a coherent understanding of the crisis and develop effective responses to it.[31]

At the same time, crisis objects tend to be abstract: social entities like states and economies have no "appearance" or presence like a physical object. We know officials, we read laws, and we locate offices, but no one can "see" the state as such; we see goods, bills, transactions, and so on, but no one has ever "seen" an economy; we perceive trees, water, animals, and air, but no one can "see" the natural environment. The object is defined not in the first instance ontologically—in terms of what it *is*—but functionally, in terms of what it *does* in relation to everyday social life. It falls on participants to ascertain the "rules" by which the effects of the crisis are propagated and to give an account of how such effects may be managed. The satisfactory resolution to the crisis

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[30] See E. Diaz-Leon (2013) 'What Is Social Construction?,' *European Journal of Philosophy* doi:10.1111/ejop.12033.

[31] This specific point can be justified further by means of Brandom's highly complex and detailed argument for a "social route from reasoning to representing" which occupies the bulk of Part Two (esp. Chapter 8) of Brandom (n. 24) and can be found in summary form in Brandom (n. 24): 123-83.

effectively becomes a question of how to constitute (or *re*-constitute) the object in a way that better accords with the expectations of those whose lives are involved with it.

C.S. Peirce's conception of "Secondness" still offers a vivid account of objectivity from a pragmatist point of view.[32] Standing between "Firstness," or the mere "suchness" of things, and "Thirdness," the attribution of substantive rules and concepts to describe things, "Secondness" refers to the moment of raw struggle, resistance, and constraint that runs head-on against what we already think we know. The direct experience of crisis emulates just this kind of raw constraint: the schemes, practices, and rules through which we collectively navigated everyday life are no longer operative; what was once taken for granted is now radically problematic. It is at this level that crises can be said to test our capacities to achieve reflexive control over our social world, on pain of being wholly at its mercy. Peirce likens the moment of struggle to the act of pushing against a half-open door.[33] So long as the person pushing and the door resisting are of equal force, there is no pragmatic difference between agent and patient. Who is the agent acting and who is the patient acted upon is only decided when one of the parties succeeds.

In the process of addressing particular symptoms of crisis, participants often come to understand their social world in a new way by redefining and reconstituting the objects composing it. The religious and civil wars of the seventeenth century led to the reconstitution of monarchies as "sovereign states"; the Great Depression led to the idea of a "macroeconomy"; the horrors of the Second World War facilitated the institution of an idea of "humanity" as an international legal concept. But even though these constructed objects were constructed to address real experiences of social shock and resistance, there is little in the objective experience of crisis *as such* that reveals any particular epistemic content. As Richard Bernstein notes, there is nothing in the sheer brute constraint of the event that points directly to any particular epistemic warrant.

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[32] See Richard Bernstein (2010) *The Pragmatic Turn*, Cambridge: Polity: 46-52, 129-36; Cheryl Misak (2004) *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 70-9.

[33] Charles Sanders Peirce, 'The Categories' in Susan Haack and Robert Lane (eds) (2006) *Pragmatism, Old & New: Selected Writings*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books: 181.

That something has happened can be understood objectively; *what* that something is must be addressed discursively.[34]

(3) In its simplest terms, the objective success of critique depends on the "satisfactory" resolution of the crisis. This does not necessarily mean learning the "truth" of the crisis, but only that its causes have been discovered and rectified to a satisfactory degree. But this is a complex issue. For insofar as the crisis object is a social object, one that is construed on the basis of how it relates to the everyday lives of those affected by it, it is defined not merely by its causal mechanics but by what it is *expected to do*. The successful critique of crisis rest as much on normative as objective criteria.

A number of theories of crisis, particularly those descended from the Marxist tradition, emphasize the logic of "systemic contradiction" as a means of anchoring the social reality of crisis tendencies. Hence Marx's famous thesis on the "tendential fall in the rate of profit" is meant to highlight a contradiction in the capitalist mode of production itself, whereby the profit-driven need to reinvest surplus-value in strategies for greater productivity alters the organic composition of capital in such a way that paradoxically *reduces* the long-term creation of surplus-value in proportion to total capital investment.[35] In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas argues that increasing regulatory needs of the state create an accompanying demand for greater levels of legitimation, but the very expansion of bureaucratic regulation into more and more domains of social life erodes the resources of social and cultural meaning necessary for society to generate legitimation in the first place.[36] Yet, as Brandom points out, even contradictions rest in the end on normative concepts, not causal ones. Contradictions do not exist in nature; they are an idea *we bring* to the world on the basis of our own judgments and the rules of reason we employ to sort and evaluate these judgments.[37] Marx and Habermas can diagnose the capitalist economy and the democratic welfare state as contradictory only

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[34] Bernstein (n. 32), 135-6.

[35] Marx (1991) *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach, London: Penguin Books: 317-38, 349-76; 'Crisis Theory' in Marx and Engels (n. 17): 443-65.

[36] Habermas (1976, n. 4): 68-75.

[37] Brandom (n. 24): 12.

because *we* place normative expectations on capital investment to foster profits and the state to remain legitimate—and to do so indefinitely.[38] Contradictions are features exclusive to *social* systems, and they obtain only by virtue of the normative expectations we place on them. When we say there is a "contradiction" in a public object, we mean that it is objectively unable to fulfill a set of normative expectations except at the expense of other normative expectations that have equal or higher priority.

The objectivity through which the crisis object is engaged is thus never a disinterested objectivity. The experience of crisis begins with real effects, and with the attribution of these effects to the idea that something in the social world is functioning radically out of synch with expectations. But how these effects are understood, and the necessary courses of action, depend heavily on what those expectations are, and the normative orientations that motivate them. The upshot is that neither a crisis, an object of crisis, nor a successful response to crisis can be made intelligible without reference to expectations and understandings of those for whom the crisis is pressing.

(4) As already mentioned, judgments about crises require not only that there be an object in the social world that is said to be in crisis, but also a community. The crisis concept, insofar as it can be applied and channeled into action, is dependent on crisis *consciousness*, and crisis consciousness depends on the ability of people to make claims about the crisis and having those claims mutually recognized by others involved in the process of diagnosing and responding to the crisis. We can speak here—at first in a somewhat idealized, counterfactual sense—of a *crisis community*, which comprises those people who experience the effects of the crisis and who therefore might claim a stake in its outcome.

A distinguishing feature of the crisis community is it does not necessarily correspond to any already existing community, nor can it be reliably be derived directly from existing forms of social and political organization. To be sure, already existing communities may already have officers and experts charged with handling crisis

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[38] I owe this point to Rahel Jaeggi (2012) '*Was (wenn überhaupt etwas) ist falsch am Kapitalismus? Drei Wege der Kapitalismuskritik*' (working paper presented at 'Crisis, Critique, Capitalism: A Workshop with Nancy Fraser and the Jena Kolleg "Postwachstumsgesellschaften,"' Humboldt-Universität Berlin, 24 November).

situations, but there is no guarantee that the reach of the crisis will correspond to any predetermined jurisdiction or even that the authorities of such a jurisdiction would be adequately equipped to handle it; these determinations can only be made *in the course* of responding to crisis. As we saw above, the defining characteristic of crises is the way they disrupt and throw into question the assumed procedures for organizing social life. Crises may cross any number of conventional divides and boundaries that structure social relations, including social classes, status differences, roles, groups, and (increasingly) national borders. Because no one can tell in advance who will be affected by a crisis, the constitution of the crisis community depends on the ability and willingness of affected persons to reciprocally recognize each other and their claims. The crisis community is a *self-generating*, *self-selecting* community.

This self-generating quality stems from the fact that crisis is a conceptual tool, not only of judgment, but of action. The composition of the crisis community arises on the basis of the claims that participants make to recognize one another and be recognized as agents with a stake in the crisis. In ideal terms, we can describe it as an exercise in what Habermas and Klaus Günther have called "communicative freedom," which "exists only between actors who, adopting a performative attitude, want to reach an understanding with one another about something and expect one another to take positions on reciprocally raised validity claims."[39] In the course of declaring the crisis and entitling each other to commitments about the nature of the crisis—the participants are implicitly making and reciprocally acknowledging a claim that they themselves have a certain *authority* to speak about and intervene in the crisis object. This authority corresponds to the "license" mentioned above, whereby actors asserting the existence of crisis attribute to each other a certain degree of freedom from the established order.

In a way, this basis for a crisis community echoes some of the ideas proposed by John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*. While not discussing crises per se, Dewey argued that we should not reduce democratic politics to any given institutional order; instead, we should begin with the formation of "publics" that self-generate around the

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[39] Habermas (n. 26): 119.

axes of new issues as they arise on the social horizon. [40] On this view, public consciousness does not restrict itself to any set of predrawn community boundaries but may coalesce around any matter that may "affect large numbers outside of itself," and this may encompass any number of possibilities within and across localities and even across national boundaries. [41] But Dewey is not very clear on how the scope of such a public is to be determined, who is to be included, and on what basis. [42] He does not really explain how such "new" publics interact with or run up against already existing institutional arrangements. Most importantly, he does not consider the potentials for *conflict* that may arise between the new publics and the old or even within the publics themselves. As I will show, the composition of the crisis community and its relation to existing communities is necessarily problematic, and it is on this point that crises may become sources of political controversy and contestation.

The Politics of the Crisis Community

One of the central themes of Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis*, recently picked up on by John Thompson, is how crises that originate in one sphere of social life can spill over into other spheres. [43] Of particular interest are crises that begin as economic crises or administrative crises but which transform or "metamorphose" into overtly *political* crises. [44] While Habermas originally outlined this process using a systems-functionalist logic of explanation, we can give it a more normative-political reading by looking more closely into the model sketched above.

We saw early on that crisis is an inherently reflexive concept, native to modernity, which presupposes the ability of those who deploy it to look upon their own social

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[40] Dewey (1954 [1927]) *The Public and Its Problems*, Athens, OH: Swallow Press: 15-6, 30-1.

[41] Dewey (n. 40): 27-8, 126-31.

[42] Cf. Robert B. Westbrook (1991) *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 305-6, 315-6; Honneth (n. 5): 230.

[43] Habermas (1976, n. 4); John B. Thompson (2012) 'The Metamorphosis of a Crisis,' in Manuel Castells, João Caraça, and Gustavo Cardoso (eds) (2012) *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 59-81.

[44] Thompson (n. 43): 64-5.

environment as something over which they should be in principle able to (re)gain some level of control. As such, crisis consciousness presupposes not only an urgent need but also the capacity (however fallible) to take action in response to a crisis that is perceived to in some way outstrip the existing capacities of the normal order. The act of declaring and affirming crisis claims thus amounts to a discursive deployment of crisis consciousness that consists in the reciprocal recognition of participating actors' respective stakes in the crisis and commitments to taking action. The concept of a crisis community introduced above can function here as a regulative model that links the successful response to crisis to the general and reciprocal recognition of actors' claims to a stake in the object of crisis.[45] These claims often cut across existing social categories and divides, just as the crisis itself cuts across existing categories and divides. But the crisis community harbors as much potential for conflict as for cooperation. Being a self-generating, self-selecting community that often cuts across social categories, divides, and other basic structures of society, the effectiveness of the crisis community's response to the crisis depends on how actors navigate these structures, exploit them, or endeavor to work across them.

The regulative role of crisis community is simultaneously epistemic and normative. Epistemically, it invokes something like Peirce's "community of inquirers," tasked with investigating the causes of crisis and bringing their various experiences of the crisis to bear in negotiating what satisfactory resolution would look like.[46] Normatively, the pragmatic assumptions upon which the crisis community comes together hint at a "democratic" structure that rests on reciprocal and general recognition of each other's stakes in the object of crisis and authority to make claims and take action. But full and formal democratic decision-making is often difficult in actual crises, particularly in ones that require fast action. In addition, crisis experiences, precisely because they disrupt the normal societal order, can strain the existing social bonds

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[45] For this criterion of "reciprocal and general" forms of justification, see Rainer Forst (2012) *Right to Justification: Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, trans. Jeffrey Flynn, New York: Columbia University Press.

[46] See C.S. Peirce, 'Some Consequences of the Four Incapacities' and 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear,' in Haack and Lane (n. 33): 99-101, 146-8; Misak (n. 32).

between actors at the very time when solidarity is needed. In this light, the immediate capacity of a crisis community to "act in concert" can be quite weak in the near-term. Instead, actual action is often taken by those institutions and segments of society best able to function in the midst of the crisis—often the executive of a government, military leaders, an elite social class, or (if the crisis is transnational in scope) one or a couple of major powers. In other words, while the effects of a crisis may be experienced across any number of divides and boundaries that structure social relations, including social classes, status differences, roles, groups, and state borders, *how* decisions are actually made in response to the crisis is still constrained by the basic structure of social relations as it already exists.

This problem is exacerbated by the self-selecting character of the would-be crisis community itself, as claims to inclusion can quickly run up hard against structures, boundaries, institutions, and rules that tend to slow or inhibit opportunities for general and reciprocal participation.[47] A simple third-person application of an "all-affected principle" will not necessarily do, as the questions of *who* is significantly affected and by *what* are precisely what is at issue in formulating a response to crisis that is effective at both the objective and normative levels.[48] Thus the constitution of the crisis community relies, in the end, on the first- and second-person claims and affirmations of the participants themselves. Participants must contend urgently with restrictive features of the social landscape that may have previously been viewed as tacitly bearable (e.g, "mild" prejudices), acceptable (e.g., some forms of inequality), or even welcome (e.g., national boundaries).

One can certainly imagine a situation in which participants reach across extant social divides and boundaries to collectively reconstruct the object of crisis in a way that reflects the required expanded iteration of community. After about 150 years of recurrent economic crises that wreaked havoc on the less advantaged classes of industrial societies, the "welfare state compromise" reflected a view of economic reality that

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[47] Forst (n. 45): 209-10.

[48] Nancy Fraser (2009) *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, New York: Columbia University Press.

accompanied just an expanded sense of community. Something similar can be said about the restructuring of international relations after World War II, the creation of the United Nations, and the passage of various genocide and human rights conventions.

But it is also possible, and indeed likely, for participants in the crisis community to use extant divides and boundaries strategically to privilege the voices of some over others, forcing the latter to experience the crisis through the lens of social domination. For those who find themselves alienated by social divides and boundaries from the crisis community, the denial of voice in the crisis becomes a constituent part of the crisis experience itself. At best, those denied due voice or recognition are treated paternalistically, becoming "objects of charity or benevolence" otherwise deprived of agency.[49] From their purview, the object of crisis is *extended* to include not just the "original" source of crisis but also those very structures through which they are denied inclusion. Recalling Peirce's example, the divides that segment social life become so many "jammed doors" that marginalized actors must push through to have their voices heard. For them, the situation transforms into *an altogether different kind of crisis*, which be might call a "secondary crisis," which combines the consciousness of the primary crisis with the consciousness of structures of marginalization that prevent them from adequately addressing the source of the crisis. Accordingly, the marginalized group can be said to constitute its own, "secondary" crisis community, wherein the public object comprises the very structures responsible for their disempowerment. However "tolerable" the social divides and boundaries in question may have been prior to the crisis, they now assume the center of attention: the urgency of the crisis shifts the threshold of acceptability and issues in a renewed demand for justification.[50]

It is here that we might still locate some of the "emancipatory" potential sought from the crisis concept by the radical thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: it points at least the possibility of a metamorphosis of a crisis, which, even if it did not originate in the political sphere, transforms into critical questions about the basic structure of society that produce new claims for legitimation, new standards of

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[49] Fraser (n. 48): 19-20; see also Forst (n. 45): 4.

[50] Forst (n. 45): 209-10, 213-14.

justification, and even new conceptions of justice. Such a situation, of course, does not by itself mean that there *will* be active resistance, only that the legitimacy of the prevailing order of things now stands exposed relative to usual. Whether or not as well as what kind of action secondary crisis communities pursue are empirical matters that depend on additional factors, such as mobilization capacities and resources.[51] Moreover, it follows that secondary crisis communities face all the same issues as other crisis communities.

Theorizing Crisis

Although crisis as we know it today is a thoroughly modern concept, there is at least one sense in which it may still be worth noting its Greek heritage. As Koselleck notes, the Greek word "*krisis*" is originally associated with the idea of judgment and decision; in the ancient polis, it referred to the process of bringing to trial, litigating, or deciding a verdict. According to Koselleck, crisis in this sense lay at the center of the constitutional order of the ancient polis.[52] It was the site of the *practice* of justice, as Aristotle states in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "justice decides [*krisis*] between the just and the unjust" ("*dikē krisis tou dikaiou kai tou adikou*").[53] Aristotle associated *krisis*, as the faculty of just judgment, with *archē* as a defining mark of political community. For him it was the ability of one to participate in "judgment and office" (*kriseos kai archēs*) that qualified an individual to be considered a true citizen.[54] This suggests a meaning that is not merely juridical but political, to the extent that *archē*, as a mark of citizenship, signifies not simply "officialdom" or the right to make judgments as a ruler, but the right

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[51] See Sidney Tarrow (2011) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (2001) *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[52] Koselleck (n. 1): 358-60.

[53] Aristotle (n.d.) *Nichomachean Ethics*, ed. (in Greek) J. Bywater and trans. H. Rackham (accessed 14 March, 2012 at http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg010.perseus-grc1): 1134a.

[54] Aristotle (1998) *The Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company: 66 [1275^{a}22].

to initiate actions.[55] Crisis is not just something that incurs suddenly upon our everyday normative experience; it is constituted within it. It is not just something we reference; it is something we litigate.[56] One who deploys the concept of crisis, in other words, is already effectively assuming for oneself the role of a *citizen* authorized to participate in a political public and lay claim to the public object of crisis.

We have argued that the concept of crisis is a conceptual tool for converting reflexive consciousness of our social world into *action*, and it was via this route of thinking that we sought a broadly pragmatist approach to thinking politically about crisis and its underlying presuppositions. A key implication of the argument presented here is that crisis, as a concept to be applied in modern society, is dependent on the discursive deployment of crisis consciousness. This does not mean that the objective conditions of a would-be crisis do not "exist" until someone names it a crisis; but it does mean that they cannot be *acted upon as a crisis* until those affected by these conditions achieve and express consciousness of it. In order for participants to interpret something wrong in the world as a "crisis," they must undertake certain assumptions about their situation and the event facing them. Crisis presupposes that the dysfunction arises from within a social environment over which participants suppose themselves to possess some degree of reflexive control, and it is from this supposition that participants can diagnose an event as a crisis on which they must and can take action. In the end, it is the supposed ability to take action that distinguishes a crisis from some other misfortune that actors must more or less passively weather; it is what distinguishes crisis from divine punishment, random tragedy, or "stuff happens." But this dependence of crisis on crisis consciousness betrays a catch, in that the dependence of crisis on the discursive production, attribution, and contestation of crisis consciousness also opens wide space for controversial claims about crises, what they are, and how they should be handled. It allows for the "false" declaration of crises, for the failure to recognize "real" crises, for

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[55] Patchen Markell (2006) 'The Rule of the People: Arendt, *Archê*, and Democracy,' the *American Political Science Review* 100: 1-14; Kalyvas (n. 4): 247-9.

[56] Cf. Habermas (1971, n. 4): 214.

the abuse and overuse of the crisis concept, and—as Koselleck feared—for the dilution of its effectiveness as a concept.[57]

The point can be made with regard to the way crisis consciousness is exploited by privileged parties interested in consolidating power.[58] One common tactic is to claim a need to curtail certain liberties, democratic procedures, and demands for legitimation in the name of restoring order and security. This distinction between the demands of stability and the demands of legitimacy has a long pedigree in modern political thought. On this, broadly "Hobbesian" account, a good society is first and foremost an *orderly and stable* society: normative aspirations toward a "good" or "just" society are dependent on the *prior* acquisition of a certain level of order and stability that must be secured by sovereign state institutions. This assumption, while it has some merit to it, can it can also be misleading if it promotes the assumption that order and stability are not just worthy values to be pursued in society but necessary preconditions for all other values. This problem has been the focus of substantial debate over the prerogatives, legitimacy, and legal limits of "emergency powers" in constitutional democracies.[59] While there are indeed crisis situations that require, on *technical* grounds, the delegation of decision-making authority to an actor the resources and authority to act with agility, we must be wary of reifying this requirement into a conceptual distinction between the requirements of order and stability, on one hand, and those of justice, deliberation, and legitimacy, on the other, wherein the latter must answer to the former.[60] From here, it is hardly a large step to the claim that the norms of democratic deliberation depend on there being some extra-deliberative authority "who decides on the exception."[61]

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[57] Koselleck (n. 1), 397-400.

[58] Posner and Vermeule (2009, n. 3) and (2010, n. 3); Boltanski (n. 3), 129-36; Agamben (n. 3).

[59] See note 3, above.

[60] While many legal scholars use "crisis" and "emergency" interchangeably, Levinson and Balkin distinguish the two on precisely this point in their analysis of "constitutional crises." For them, an emergency is a moment of urgency that may require extraordinary measures; only when there arises an actual conflict over legitimate use of power does the situation become a crisis. See (n. 28): 714-7.

[61] Carl Schmitt (1985 [1934]), *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 5; Gross and Ní Aoláin (2006, n. 3): 162-70.

On the other hand, if it is the case that crisis consciousness develops *through* the reciprocal claims and mutual recognition that are constitutive of a deliberating public, then this order of prioritization cannot hold. To be fair, there are few political theorists today who would outright endorse such a distinction. John Rawls, for example, stresses that stability in society must always be "stability for the right reasons."[62] Yet the fact that he says little about what is to be done when faced with stability for the "wrong" reasons, let alone when stability is not even an option, lends a kind of quietist credence to the idea that when stability is not already achieved, principles of justice and deliberation are of secondary importance. As a basic concept (*Grundbegriff*) of modernity, the power of the crisis concept consists precisely in the way it is used by communicative actors to stimulate collective reflection and action with regard to the way we live together in a society. This means crisis consciousness, as well as the doxastic and practical commitments it undertakes, arises in the last instance *from the bottom up*, even at those times when it must be provisionally administered from the top down. One who posits that crisis is a time of necessity *in contrast* to a time of deliberative reflection is, intentionally or not, concealing this foundation.

This provides all the more reason to make the concept of crisis explicit from the point of view of political theory. Even if we can no longer abide a simple identification of crisis with emancipation, this does not negate the possibility that crises *can* be occasions for contesting social structures, transforming solidarities, and pursuing political change. Crises challenge our assumptions about the social world and the premises upon which we organize our lives in cooperation with one another, and our reflexive consciousness of crises in general compels us to wonder about the ways in which our normative conceptions of ourselves, as participants in political communities, are based on fallible and incomplete knowledge of our evermore complex social environment. Our modern political condition is defined by little if not the awareness that those things we take to be given today may yet prove contingent and problematic, and it is this knowledge that drives us as citizens, social scientists, and political theorists to reflect on the conditions of social cooperation in the first place.

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[62] John Rawls (1993) *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press: 140-4, 390-2.