Theorizing Crisis

Mondays 14:00-16:00, Seminarhaus 1.101

instructor: Brian Milstein, Ph.D.
email: brian.m.milstein@gmail.com
office: Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften
Am Wingertsberg 4, Raum N2·09
61348 Bad Homburg vor der Höhe
office hours: by appointment

The Main Idea

The concept of “crisis” has long held a central place in the modern worldview. As far back as the time of Hobbes, ideas and experiences of crisis have played a key role in shaping how we think about politics, economics, society, history, progress, and law. But what exactly is a crisis? How does the way we think about crisis inform the way we think about politics and society? More to the point, how does the way we think about crisis inform the way we understand the tasks of political and social thought? Our aim in this course will be to unpack these questions by exploring the ways people have thought about crisis from the early modern period to today. For example, many associate crisis with the imminent breakdown of social order, for which extraordinary emergency measures are needed to protect and preserve society. Others read crises as turning points, as crucial moments of decision that allow society to advance from one stage of historical progress to the next. And still others identify crises with symptoms of historical decline, or with deep-seated dysfunctions that gradually wear away at the very fabric of society.

As a participant in this seminar, you will join me and your classmates in discerning among the ways various conceptions of crisis are articulated and grappled with in modern political thought. We will begin by looking at the “Hobbesian” paradigm of crisis thinking—the idea that crises threaten a general collapse of order, and that it is the task of the state to use its power to prevent that collapse and return society to “normal.” Much of the literature surrounding this paradigm revolves around the ideas of sovereignty, law, and emergency politics, as we will find in Hobbes, Locke, Schmitt, Clinton Rossiter, Oren Gross, and Bonnie Honig. We will then turn to “Marxist” readings of crisis—the identification of contradictions and internal conflicts in the general structure of society—and their iterations in Marx himself, Gramsci, Habermas, and Hauke Brunkhorst. In the last part of the course, we will focus on various
interpretations of what Wolfgang Streeck has dubbed “the crisis of democratic capitalism,” which came to the forefront of Western consciousness after the 2008 economic crash. We will look at literature inspired by both the “Hobbesian” (Bill Scheuerman, Jonathan White) and “Marxist” (John Thompson, Streeck, Nancy Fraser) ways of thinking, as well as other perspectives (such as Janet Roitman’s).

The Strategy

We will be meeting once per week on Mondays from 16:00 to 18:00. In most cases we will begin with a lecture to stimulate the discussion, but our aim will be to generate as lively an exchange of ideas as possible. Of course, this will only work if everyone completes the weekly readings prior to class and arrives with some questions or reactions to the texts in mind. Do your best to read the weekly texts closely, with as lively an imagination as possible.

Each session will center on a set of primary readings, with a selection of supplementary readings you are encouraged to explore, both for enriching our discussion and to stimulate your own research. All of the primary readings and many of the supplementary readings will be made available electronically on OLAT.

This seminar is organized in a somewhat experimental fashion. The theme of crisis is very large: it permeates all corners of Western political and social thought and it links up with numerous other key concepts, from war and emergency to progress and revolution to pathology and decay. It follows that there are numerous ways to organize a semester-long course on crisis; it also follows that, however such a course is organized, certain authors and topics will be left out. As our conversations take shape over the semester, we may find it necessary to adjust the syllabus to align with our interests and goals.

Progress and Assessment

Everyone is responsible for attending all classes, keeping up with the weekly readings, and participating actively in our discussions.

In addition, there will be several written assignments during the semester, which will give you the opportunity to develop and flesh out your own ideas, positions, and arguments:

• **Reflection papers:** Four times during the semester, you will write a brief reflection paper of 550-650 words (about 2 pages). For each of these I will ask you to reflect on some aspect of our ongoing discussions and readings from the previous weeks. You are free in these short writings (encouraged even!) to let loose, explore, and experiment—the only requirement is that you structure your reflections around the primary and supplementary readings. *Do not just give a summary of the readings.* These reflection papers will be evaluated rather informally, as “✓+,” “✓,” or “✓−.”

• **Final paper:** At the conclusion of the semester, you will write a research paper of about 4500-5000 words (about 15 pages), which will be due no later than 31 March, 2016. You are free to write the paper on any topic you wish, so long as your topic is based on the central themes of the course. *You are strongly encouraged to
meet with me at least once to discuss your paper. When writing, you should approach your final paper as a serious piece of scholarly research, complete with citations and bibliography: you should develop a clear central thesis; you should demonstrate knowledge of your topic; you should engage the material in a critical and thoughtful manner; you should be able to back up your arguments with reasons, evidence, and examples; and you should strive to show readers what conclusions they can draw from your efforts.

Students taking this course for full credit are expected to complete all of the written assignments. Students taking the course for a “participation” grade only will be required to write the four reflection papers but are not required to do a final paper. All papers must also be double-spaced, in 12-point type, with one-inch margins, using a normalized font.

Unfortunately, I will not be able to accept assignments not written in English.

For all papers, you will be expected to adhere to proper conventions of scholarly attribution. Any work quoted or otherwise referenced must be appropriately and fully cited. Any idea, argument, information, or quotation that you might employ from an external source must likewise be accompanied by full citation. You are free to use any bibliographic citation style you wish, but you should apply it consistently. Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated.

**Week I (12 October) / Introduction**

No required reading

**Week II (19 October) / The Modern Concept of Crisis**

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- On crisis and social criticism:

- On modernity:

**Week III (26 October) / Sovereignty and the Exception**

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- Further reading by Schmitt and Koselleck:

- Secondary literature and interpretations:
Week IV (2 November) / Constitutional Dictatorship

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- NOTE: middle chapters consist of case studies of crisis governance in Germany, France, the UK, and the US up through World War II
  - NOTE: There also exists a book-length version of Posner and Vermeule’s argument, which advocates a “Schmittian” approach to emergency powers
Week V (9 November) / Extra-Legalism

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
  - NOTE: these chapters provide a more expansive account of the arguments Gross makes in the “Chaos and Rules” article

Week VI (16 November) / Beyond the Exception

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- Further reading by Honig:
Week VII (23 November) / Marxism and Crisis I

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:

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**Second reflection paper due Friday, 26 November, at 12 noon**
Theme is “Sovereignty, Law, Constitution”

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Week VIII (30 November) / Marxism and Crisis II

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
Week IX (7 December) / Organic Crisis and Crises of Authority

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:

Week X (14 December) / Legitimation Crisis

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- Related writings by Habermas:
- Secondary Literature on Habermas:
Week XI (11 January) / The Evolutions of Revolutions

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- Responses to Brunkhorst:
  - See more generally the special issues on Brunkhorst’s book in *Social & Legal Studies* (vol. 23 no. 4) and *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (vol. 41 no. 10), both of which include replies by Brunkhorst himself.

- Related:

*** Third reflection paper due Friday, 15 January, at 12 noon ***
Theme is “Marx, Modernity, and History”

Week XII (18 January) / The Crises of Democratic Capitalism I

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:

Week XIII (25 January) / The Crises of Democratic Capitalism II

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- Additional readings by Streeck:
- Habermas's response to Streeck:
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SYLLABUS


Week XIV (1 February) / The Crises of Democratic Capitalism III

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:
- Further reading by Fraser:
Week XV (8 February) / Anti-Crisis

Primary reading:

Supplementary reading:

| *** Fourth reflection paper due Friday, 12 February, at 12 noon *** |
| Theme is “Democracy and Capitalism” |

| *** Final paper due Thursday, 31 March, at 12 noon *** |