Crisis and Critique
On the Fragile Foundations of Social Life

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Introduction

When the World Becomes a Problem

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

Without such moments that provoke questions, I contend, social life becomes a dangerous abstraction; it consolidates the appearance of being a reality without question. This strong assumption is the running thread of the book and the basis of its concern with exploring the relationship between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique in modern societies. The main argument is that crisis and critique are both concepts deeply intertwined with moments of rupture. Such moments are sociologically significant insofar as we can get a grasp of the stuff of which the social world is made and how its differences are produced, but also
because we are confronted with what threatens to tear social life from within.
They remind us that the unity of society is never attained once and for all in a
definitive manner. What underlies the notions of crisis and critique in the lan-
guage of modern social theory, this book argues, is a claim to grasp the condition
of fragility that comes into sight in moments of social rupture. In other words,
crisis and critique are both signs of the irremediable fragility that inhabits the
foundations of social life. Now, even if we accept that these concepts have a
similar appeal, they are not the same and we should keep a sense of difference
between them: whilst crisis designates an objective experience or situation, cri-
tique refers to a practice performed by subjects. Then, the question is how what
is subjective in the practice of critique touches on what is objective in the experi-
ence of crisis.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Society Is Not Solid Crystal**

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

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

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

The use of the image of crystal in this passage is intended to depict the fragile condition of capitalist society, in accord with an epochal diagnosis of its inner conflicts and far-reaching transformations at the end of the nineteenth century. Literally, it appeals to the transformation of society into a crystal palace, like a conservatory for commodity exchange and an exhibition piece of capitalist excess.
This image, of course, is in direct connection with the expansion of glass architecture as emblem of modernity; in particular, Marx had in mind the iron-glass structure that housed the Great Exhibition which opened in London in 1851, known as the Crystal Palace. The monumental structure and visual attraction of the building were, in his view, nothing but the most revealing signs of the inner fissures of the capitalist mode of life. Marx expresses it in the following way:

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

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

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

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

The definition of society as a form of relation then suggests that the social is a mode of coexistence whose unity is constituted in the absence of unity. Therefore, it lacks a substantial foundation, original identity or absolute destiny. In fact, the social means a relentless opening of existence toward the other and,
therefore, the always-present possibility of estrangement, fissure and divorce.\(^{13}\)

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

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

**Digression on Sociological Abstractions**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In close dialog with these considerations, Chapter 2 discusses the other side the story. It examines some of the main objections that social theorists have directed at the promises of social criticism and the prospects of a critical theory of society. It addresses, more precisely, the so-called “crisis of critique” frequently proclaimed in some streams of contemporary thought. It argues that the current
inhospitality to critique in social theory coincides with a domestication of critique’s disruptive potential in social life. For in a world where the worth of things primarily depends on utility and potential use, critique is repeatedly urged to offer positive answers and constructive alternatives. It is drawn to assimilate to the enchanting power of the positive. Interestingly enough, rather than rebelling against such dominant assimilation, contemporary social thought has embraced it through the anti-dialectical celebration of the crisis of negativity. Drawing on Hegel and Adorno, the chapter analyzes the disconnection between critique and negativity, so as to challenge its main result: sociological approaches that turn the practice of critique away from the experience of crisis, and political attempts at giving normative closure to social life. Both conspire against our capacities to crack open society’s fragile foundations.

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

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

The third part of the book, “Fragile Foundations/Political Struggles,” puts at work elements discussed in previous sections in order explore the relationship between crisis and critique in relation to two phenomena that shaped the social-political landscape of the twentieth century: the rise of totalitarianism and the rise of neoliberalism. Chapter 5 examines the stakes involved in Hannah Arendt’s phenomenological interpretation of the totalitarian experience as “the crisis of our century.” For totalitarianism not only radicalizes the experience of
crisis as a principle of rule, it also shatters the very elements that sustain the common world. The problem then is how to respond to a movement of destructive critique of everything that seems objective and human. The chapter discusses Arendt’s unconventional answer, namely, that in times of political emergency the power of critique lies in its “modesty” rather than in its radicalism. Chapter 6 engages with Foucault’s genealogy of liberalism as a political rationality and a therapeutic ethos. Even if crisis seems a minor topic in his work, the chapter shows how crisis emerges out of a new economy of power directed to the liberal government of the social, within which it is rationalized as an object of knowledge and a domain of political interventions. This reading aims to underlie the ways in which neoliberalism mobilizes crisis as a means to reprogramming social life in the lure to produce more freedom, but also it aims to assert Foucault’s unspoken attempt to extricate the concept of crisis from the neoliberal governmental matrix and restore to critique the ability to make truth and power more fragile.

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

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

Notes

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17 Warnings about this trend are frequent in the history of sociology, such as Marx’s critique of “idealism,” C. Wright Mill’s indictment of “grand theory” or Luhmann’s discredit of the study of the “classics.”
5 The Fragile World In-Between
Totalitarian Destruction and the Modesty of Critical Thinking—Hannah Arendt

Introduction

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

After knowing the first reports on Hitler’s Final Solution in 1943 and 1944, Arendt was reluctant to believe like many of her fellow contemporaries the horrors of the concentration camps. The images of industrial fabrication of corpses exceeded the most untreatable pathologies of liberal democracy and even the wildest dreams of modern instrumental rationality; they testified to human actions that could not “be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives.” Therefore, it was not easy to come to terms with a destructive force that seemed unrecognizable for human understanding and even alien to our modern world, yet she insisted that totalitarianism had occurred “in the midst of human society” and not elsewhere. As Arendt commented to her friend and mentor, Karl Jaspers, the struggle to comprehend totalitarian domination lies in the radical logic of terror it unleashes. In comparison with traditional forms of revolutionary violence, which predicate the political destruction of the city upon the utopian founding of new institutions and forms of belonging, totalitarian violence obliterates any concern with the durability of the common world. For it is not simply a form of excessive violence aimed to injure and annihilate people...
framed as dangerous enemies according to normative conceptions of the world (as dictatorships often do), it is actually a form of government that can only survive through nihilistically dissolving the plurality of human texture that makes meaningful social relations and free political action possible in the first place. Totalitarianism is, literally, “an organized attempt to eradicate the concept of the human being.” That is, a political attempt to separate “human life” from its concrete human form by means of reducing it to its biological determination as “naked life,” a life without concept and therefore a “thing” deprived of political-juridical protection and potentials of becoming a form of being with others. For Arendt this is precisely what yields “the crisis of our century,” the fact that the practical disintegration of political institutions (i.e., nation-states, parties, constitutional government) becomes deeply entangled with the ideological shattering of the concept of humanity tout court.

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

In what follows I shall address these concerns by considering Arendt’s phenomenological approach to crisis events in modernity. For her crisis phenomena are relevant as reminders of the fragile condition of social life, as they bring to the surface of our everyday existence the fact that the world we have in common is not an essential whole but a delicate web of words and things, an “in-between” space whose durability does not depend on single-transcendental principles but on the plurality and unpredictability of human action. But what makes a crisis a crisis? Arendt’s response is fairly conventional, namely, crisis is the epoché that puts into question and denaturalizes the sense of order upon which we ordinarily rely to move through and orient ourselves in the world with others. What is less obvious is her particular emphasis on the direct link between crisis and world, insofar as what is at stake “in every crisis” is the possibility that “a piece of the world, something common to all of us, is destroyed.” A minimum criterion for
recognizing such destruction, at least in political matters, is not the immediate appearance of systemic failures—despite their important functional effects—but the more elusive and complex “failure of common sense.” That is, the disappearance of the realm of meaning that allows subjects to experience reality from different perspectives while preventing them from falling into the loneliness of their inner subjectivity.

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

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

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

In order to capture the phenomenological meaning of Arendt’s claim that totalitarianism is “the crisis of our century,” we need to draw attention to her topological understanding of the human world as an “in-between” space. In her view the ultimate object of the “hidden mechanics” of totalitarian terror is precisely dismantling the structure of this space. Insomuch as terror works against the texture of “all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world,” it dissolves them “into a conglomeration where everything seems to have lost specific value, and has become unrecognizable for human comprehension [i.e., meaning], unusable for human purpose [i.e., action].”
In many of her writings, Arendt describes the common world as an interstitial space, the “in-between” (Zwischen). To begin tracing the meaning of this central yet elusive term, we can direct our attention to some of Arendt’s texts from the 1950s, the period immediately after the writing of The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) and before the publication of On Revolution (1963). In December 1952, Arendt writes in her thought diary (Denktagebuch):

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

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

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

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

As Arendt describes it in The Human Condition, the “in-between” is far from being reducible to an empirical, physical space. To be sure, material things give
the world its distinct “objectivity” and “durability” as they generate “specific worldly interests” which lie “between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.”

Without the “stabilizing” function of this world of material things and human artifacts, there would be only the “eternal movement” of nature but neither objectivity nor remembrance. However, this material constitution does not exhaust the meaning of the world “in-between,” it is actually “overgrown with an altogether different in-between [that] owes its origin exclusively to men’s acting and speaking directly to one another.”

This “in-between” configures what Arendt calls the ‘web’ of human relationships,” which “for all its intangibility, is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common.”

We can see in these remarks that the “in-between” is a category that designates a world of relationships constituted by the presence of others rather than by a substantive identity that draws us back to an original unity and forth to a common destiny. It entails a radical social ontology in which our individual existence is, right from the beginning, co-existence and sociation with other individuals capable of speech and action. The “in-between,” therefore, names the constitutive distance between individuals where a specifically human life can begin and where life in society becomes worth living. Insofar as the world appears different to every person according to their position in it, there is room for symbolization, meaning making and judgment, that is to say, for words to be heard, deeds to be seen, and events to be discussed and remembered. So the “in-between” indicates that the world is an open space of “perspectives” in which it becomes possible to recognize that “both you and I are human.”

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

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

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

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

Now, despite the stabilizing quality that Arendt finds in the practice of promising and law-making, she is well aware of the intrinsically fragile nature of the relational structure of the common world. The reason is that “the laws and all ‘lasting institutions’ are inevitably exposed to the contingency of human action and therefore may break down not only under the onslaught of elemental evil but under the impact of absolute innocence as well.” Totalitarianism makes of this possibility a founding principle and factual reality insomuch as it uses the means
of law to sweep away the normativity that stabilizes communication between people and to deprive individuals of legal protection to the point of making them superfluous beings. According to Arendt, the destruction of the worldly space “in-between” is the essential telos of totalitarian politics: “by pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them. . . . It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion, which cannot exist without space.”

In doing so, totalitarianism not only dismantles the only sphere where human beings have “the right to expect miracles,” but also institutes a whole new tradition of political destruction sustained by a restless attack on all human boundaries.

Understanding Radical Destruction: The Totalitarian Logic of Conceptual Change

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

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

There exists a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right “to define his terms.” Yet does not this curious right . . . already indicate that such terms as “tyranny,” “authority,” and “totalitarianism” have simply lost their common meaning, or that we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaning, so that . . . we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of
meaning, and demand only that each other of us remain consistent within his own private terminology?34

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

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

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

Thus, rather than apply predefined conceptual tools, or even prescribe novel and more consistent definitions, Arendt proposes that we engage with the “elementary structure” of totalitarian power and the logic of conceptual change it produces. This is the running thread through the three books that compose The Origins of Totalitarianism.40 Indeed, totalitarian movements owe their radicalism not to their often-explicit aim at the revolutionary and ruthless transmutation of society, but to a much more complex process of transformation of the concept of humanity and human nature itself.41 Such a process involves more than the mere oppression and killing of large groups of the population, it is intertwined with a whole reconfiguration of the grammar that structures political life. Behind
the bureaucratic surface of totalitarian regimes there is “hidden an entirely new and unprecedented concept of power, just as behind their Realpolitik lies an entirely new and unprecedented concept of reality.” That is, a concept of power divested of utilitarian motives and grounded in a lawless mode of government, and a concept of reality loaded with images of a fictitious world and grounded in the premise that “everything is possible.”

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

(i) The first mechanism consists of the production of a “state of permanent instability” and “rootlessness.” Arendt’s exploration of the experience of Nazi and Bolshevist regimes points out that a key feature of totalitarian rule consists of using the façade of a normal bureaucratic state—holding out promises of a new form of political stability—in order to subvert state power. This is manifested in the existence of a number of secret institutions that respond to the so-called “movement” (incarnated in the ruling party) rather than to the rule of law. Accordingly, the political primacy of the “movement” over the state is the product of a “planned shapelessness” of governmental power, which is not only strategically consistent with the consideration that “total domination needs the most extreme flexibility” but also ideologically attuned to a view of the human world as governed by the natural law of pure movement. The challenge of totalitarian rule is to establish and validate the principle of movement “as a tangible working reality of everyday life” and, at the same time, “prevent this new world from developing a new stability; for a stabilization of its laws and institutions would surely liquidate the movement itself.” The consequence of this destructive logic is that insomuch totalitarianism cannot root its power in any stable political structure; it must politically transform the world itself into a rootless place by violently attacking anything that is objective and permanent. This leaves no other option than transforming terror into a foundation of the body politic and fear into a catalyst of action.

(ii) The second mechanism consists of the production of a sense of “unreality” and “wordlessness.” It is true that Arendt attributed to all crisis situations the capacity to introduce epistemic and hermeneutic uncertainty into established criteria of truth and meanings that give a sense of consistency to reality. But the “basic experience” of totalitarianism, the belief that “everything is possible,” goes beyond simply tearing the façades of our concepts, for indeed it defies all categories and definitions at the foundation of our political traditions. The rule of total domination, Arendt stresses, operates upon the production of an “atmosphere of unreality” created by the apparent lack of instrumental purpose and a propaganda machinery through which “all facts can be changed and all lies can be made true” according to an ideology and in the pursuit of power. Under such circumstances, factual reality becomes “a conglomeration of ever changing events and slogans” and “mere opinion” turns out to be the only reliable criteria of truth.
relativity about facts and truth is what allows totalitarian power to maintain
the logical consistency of its fictitious sense of reality, while making the
world of things that a plurality of individuals arguably have in common col-
lapse. Without sharing any tangible realm, they are condemned to experi-
ence the world from one single perspective. Now, this sense of unreality and
wordlessness has its most ruthless materialization in the politics of concentra-
tion camps. As the camps were carefully kept out of public sight, reports
about the real horrors and senseless suffering within these laboratories of
human extermination were assailed by a “peculiar unreality and lack of
credibility.” In a way, the very revelation of the madness of camps pro-
duces a counterfactual effect: it empties concepts of their traditional content
(e.g., crime, death, labor, humanity, power) and leaves the reality of terror
nameless outside the realm of human speech, beyond imagination and com-
prehension. This is why Arendt eloquently asks “what meaning has the
concept of murder, when we are confronted with the mass production of
corpses?”

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

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

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

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

In her own writings, Arendt sought to confront this dilemma by bringing about the normative value of describing events and experiences that are actually incomprehensible. To do so, she had special recourse to two literary means very much at odds with the abstract impartiality of traditional methods of social and historical sciences; metaphoric descriptions and exemplary stories. I cannot address these issues in detail here but a few words might be instructive.56 With regard to her sustained use of metaphoric thought-images for reflecting on the crises of our time, the most common metaphors she used were “sandstorms in the desert,” “border situations,” “shipwreck,” “dark times.” Such metaphors had the nonconceptual faculty to illuminate phenomena which the concepts at hand were unable to describe in their distinct aspects. The “gift of condensation” of metaphors, she wrote, gains us unique access to what “cannot be seen but can be said.”57 This “poetic intelligence” is ultimately what Arendt considered of significance beyond any literary mannerism inasmuch as “the problem of style is [also] a problem of adequacy and of response.”58 It is for this reason that Arendt
defends the claim that to describe the concentration camps as “Hell on earth” is more adequate to the essential features of the phenomenon than positivist descriptions that end up condoning their reality. And yet Arendt thought that metaphors could not stand by themselves. They require the support of exemplary stories in order to reveal the full import of our accounts of the ruptures that traverse social life. In her writings examples were not annotations on the side, subsidiary to the logic of theoretical reasoning. They had their own argumentative force as examples store the memory of previous responses to “incidents of living experience,” and, in that condition, are the necessary “guideposts” out of which thinking “takes its bearings.”

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

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

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

As I have discussed so far, Arendt identified totalitarian ideology as a destructive movement that radicalizes the experience of crisis to the point of destroying the common world of human relations. Hence, for her the fundamental task of understanding the “constitutive elements” of such radical destruction was also a fundamental way of recovering the critical spirit of modernity so as to continue challenging the legacy of totalitarianism in our society. Be that as it may, the
problem that appeared evident to Arendt is that any such critique that claims to be just as radical as its object would find itself without moral and political efficacy. For totalitarianism appropriates the so-called critical spirit so as to take it to a whole new level: a movement that, following “the logic of an idea,” attacks anything that is objective and permanent in the world, the sheer negativity of destruction. Thus, without a standpoint for a meaningful description of the world and no perspective for a compelling critique of society, totalitarian destruction leaves individuals with little options other than to embrace absolute negativity or become passive observers of destruction.

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

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

On the Critique of Political Escapism

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

Still, one may say that this doubt regarding the “attitude toward the world” is also the underlying premise that runs through Arendt’s recurrent observations on the anti-political attitudes that populate modern political life: namely, appeals to politics made in terms of material needs, strategic interests, sovereign power or violence. Such claims are attractive precisely because they protect individuals against the most disturbing fact of political life: that there is no “political substance” or ultimate “ground” to which they may hold on. Under this protective umbrella, the uncertainties of human action and the perplexities involved in instituting a political space for freedom are more easily discharged. Among the many manifestations of political escapism, Arendt pays special attention to some archetypical figures to whom she referred as “professional thinkers,” “professional revolutionaries,” and “professional problem-solvers.”

The adjectival form “professional” she uses to describe these characters is of course deliberately critical. It aims to fasten on the tacit “arrogance” of expertise that subsumes particular political problems beneath the dictates of pre-established standards of judgment and the authority of systematic knowledge.

The case of “professional thinkers” is well known and the most recurrent in Arendt’s writings as it reflects her view of the conflictive relation between philosophy and politics in the history of Western thought, as well as her more general concern about the place thinking has in political matters. She rejects in principle that the activity of thinking is a privilege of specialists devoted to the pleasures of *vita contemplativa*; she writes, thinking is an exercise that “we must be able to demand” from every sane person. This may seem a common sense attribution, however, Arendt’s reflection is indeed motivated by the lack of common sense demonstrated by Nazi perpetrators such as Adolf Eichmann, and therefore by the astonishing consequences that the lack of thinking may have in political life. Now, Arendt seems to have been even more astonished by the extent to which the thoughtfulness of her fellow philosophers, professional thinkers par excellence, coexisted with their peculiar silence before the moral and political challenges posed by totalitarian terror. The ethical issue at stake for Arendt is that in times of emergency “one cannot be simply a bystander.”

To be sure, the activity of thinking requires a certain distance and even withdrawal from the realm of political action, yet what troubled Arendt about most philosophers was the way they carry out the “bracketing of reality” in favor of the pure experiences of the “thinking ego.” In her view, the failure of the professional thinker is to elevate intercourse with himself to a solipsistic model of relating to the world. From this perspective, crisis situations have nothing to do with the world and, therefore, can only be referred back to mental phenomena or spiritual diseases.

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

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

At this point, we may say that, despite their differences, there is a common thread running through these Arendtian ideal-types of political escapism, namely, a certain disdain for the texture of factual reality that is instrumental in the reification of the experience of crisis. Whilst the solipsism of professional thinkers invisibilizes crisis, the actionism of professional revolutionaries over-politicizes it, and the decisionism of professional problem-solvers neutralizes it
technically. If a crisis calls into question our edifice of certainties and practices, affecting our principles of response, to persevere with unreflective actions and predetermined judgments is simply a way of increasing our “estrangement from the world.” The elusive responses to the crises of our time represented, in Arendt’s opinion, powerful reminders of the need to reconsider our attitude toward the world. It is in line with this discussion that I shall now situate Arendt’s interpretation of “critical thinking”: an anti-dogmatic attitude and form of reflection that “ceases to be a political marginal activity” whenever one begins to reflect on phenomena that transcend the limits of the present and force us to take account of the past, “judging it,” and the future, “forming projects of the will.” “And such reflections will inevitably arise in political emergencies.”

**On the Political “Modesty” of Critical Thinking**

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

The position Arendt defends, then, consists of understanding “critical thinking” as an anti-dogmatic way of addressing reality; that is, a way of refusing to bind thinking itself to pre-fabricated categories, fixed standards or expected results. Unlike dogmatic thought, “critical thought is in principle anti-authoritarian,” it questions and dissolves the solidity of “frozen thoughts,” “normal concepts,” and “accepted opinions.” Taken in this sense, critical thinking is a “resultless enterprise” for it has an inner aversion against the normalization of its own results. This is why Arendt considered that critical thinking is somehow “self-destructive,” since its existence primarily depends upon encouraging sustained reflection and permanently breaking the crust of conventions. On
this point she went even further, saying that “what we call nihilism is actually a 
danger in the thinking activity itself. There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking 
itself is dangerous.” 80 Awareness of the boundlessness of critical thinking is of 
great importance for Arendt as it means bearing in mind that critical thinking 
opens the door to its own perplexities. It “can at every moment turn against 
itself, as it were, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare these as ‘new 
values.’” 81 This reversal of critical thinking into new forms of dogmatism is 
especially prominent in totalitarian politics. For totalitarian movements, in 
essence, inspire a hateful and relentless critique of the pathologies of liberal 
society that places itself as absolute.

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

At one point in her Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Arendt discusses 
this issue somewhat elusively by opposing the figures of the “skeptic” and the 
“dogmatic.” It may be the case that in everyday life we all start out and behave 
as dogmatists attached to beliefs held as solid truths; against such imposing atti-
dude skepticism claims the arbitrary nature of such beliefs and truth itself. At the 
height of crisis situations the tension between these positions becomes particu-
larly pronounced: due to sound truths begin to crumble and everyday prejudices 
are no longer reliable, while skepticism regarding the validity of conventions and 
general norms gains terrain. From the skeptic’s point of view, this situation 
reveals the indefinability of truth and the very limit of our capacity to judge 
without standards; from the dogmatist’s point of view, it reveals the inevitability 
of truth and the impulse to lay down new principles or reshuffle old ones. In 
Arendt’s account both positions represent equally doctrinaire forms of distanc-
ing oneself from reality that invalidate one another. So she says that “it would be 
a great error to believe that critical thinking stands somewhere between dogma-
tism and skepticism. It is actually the way to leave these alternatives behind.” 85
Now, it is impossible not to mention here the way in which totalitarian politics addresses the conflict: it gets rid of the antagonism by way of a synthesis that turns the skeptic into an ideologue of destruction and the dogmatist into a destructive ideologue. Both become one and the same.

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

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

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

But this expectation should be borne with considerable precaution. Arendt understood that the space created by critical thinking in no way resembles a smooth topography, much less an empirical space. It reminds us of Kafka’s parable cited by Arendt in the preface to Between Past and Future, where an individual is confronted with antagonist forces: “the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead.” By bringing this image to the fore, Arendt is trying to draw attention to how difficult it is to maintain a position somewhere in the middle without either jumping out of the “fighting line” or choosing
one side.\textsuperscript{91} The issue is that, without the assurance of standards or traditions that provide orientation, critical thinking should also remain alert to prevent the excesses of its own subjectivism when isolated in the comfortable shelter of pure thought.

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

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

\textbf{Concluding Remarks}

The world is an “in-between” space that both separates and binds us together, and which must be sustained and renewed since human life in common is threatened wherever this gap no longer exists. The “in-between” therefore configures the existential condition and the basic relational structure of the world as a space of plurality. In the absence of a principle of unity or a proper foundation, it is permanently exposed to attempts at closure and is therefore a fragile domain that requires human effort to be maintained open and alive. Drawing on this formulation, I
approached Arendt’s reflections on the destructive nature of totalitarianism. Her phenomenological depiction of “the crisis of our century” challenges us to see that what is at stake in totalitarian politics is more than the excesses of state violence in the lust for power; it is actually an organized attempt to destroy the roots that make possible human and worldly forms of life. In a sense, totalitarianism consists of a movement of restless and destructive criticism that radicalizes the experience of crisis in a twofold way: by making crisis a permanent state of things and by shattering the categories of understanding and standards of judgment.

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

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

I think this is the intention that ultimately underlies Arendt’s writings. For they contain an expressive call to reconsider our attitude toward the world and to struggle against contemporary forms of escapism. In a way, this also implies a demand to reinstate the link between thinking and politics that totalitarianism had destroyed. Namely, restoring to politics the humanity of thinking and restoring to thinking the humanity of the political condition of acting and living.
together. This means that we cannot renounce reflecting on what limits and exceeds our current ways of life, yet we cannot infinitely push this questioning in the face of reality either. The forgetfulness of this aporia is the signature and triumph of the totalitarian predicament.

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

Notes

3 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, xxvii.
7 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, xxvi.
8 Arendt’s topological understanding of the world and human existence has been widely discussed in reference to the public realm or space and the phenomenon of world alienation in modernity, see Seyla Benhabib, The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Michael Janover, “Politics and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” in Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt, eds. Anna Yeatman, Charles Barbour, Philip Hansen and Magadalena Zolkos (New York: Continuum, 2011), 25–38; Dana Villa, Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). In recent discussions, the Heideggerian roots of this worldly spatiality have been highlighted with regard to the experience of appearance and the question of the place of thinking, see Peg Birmingham, “Heidegger and Arendt: The Lawful Space of Worldly Appearance,” in The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger, eds. Francoise Raffoul and Eric Nelson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 157–163. However, a more detailed and systematic investigation into the status of the notion of the “in-between” itself is yet to be carried out; see Rodrigo Cordero, “It Happens In-Between: On the Spatial Birth of Politics in Arendt’s On Revolution,” European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology 1, no. 3 (2014): 249–265. Such enquiry into the “in-between” as the human production of a common world may prove relevant to Arendt’s relationship to sociology. In the best tradition of Simmel, for instance, the
social understood as sociation and as an emergent domain seems to be precisely the kind of general ontology that Arendt’s notion of the “in-between” seeks to capture. For a discussion of Simmel’s sociology of the “in-between,” see Olli Pyyhtinen, “Being-With: Georg Simmel’s Sociology of Association,” Theory, Culture and Society 26 no. 5 (2009): 108–128.


12 Ibid., 182.

13 Ibid., 137.

14 Ibid., 182.

15 Ibid., 183.


17 See Peter Baehr, Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Dana Villa, “The ‘Autonomy of the Political’ Reconsidered,” in Public Freedom (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 338–354; Philip Walsh, “Hannah Arendt, Sociology and Political Modernity,” Journal of Classical Sociology 8, no. 3 (2011): 344–366. Arendt’s indictment of the social sciences, especially sociology, is mostly directed at their attempt to produce accurate social scientific explanations based on well-crafted theoretical models, ideal types and conceptual analogies divorced from the normative texture of human reality. In her view, these analytical tools deny human freedom the moment they reduce human action to predictable behavior and transform the contingency of history into a chain of necessary causes. This critique, however reductive in its view of sociology as a positivist discipline akin to social engineering and decision-making, does not put Arendt at odds with sociology as a whole. It actually brings her closer to a long tradition of a philosophically informed form of sociology that we can trace to Marx and Simmel via Adorno, Habermas, Joas and Archer. See Daniel Chernilo, “The Idea of Philosophical Sociology,” British Journal of Sociology, 65 no. 2 (2014): 338–357.


21 Ibid., 31.

22 Arendt, Diario Filosófico, 171.


25 Arendt, On Revolution, 175.

26 Ibid.


29 Arendt, On Revolution, 84.

30 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 600.


35 Ibid., 96.
41 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 591.
42 Ibid., 540.
43 Ibid., 509–510.
44 Ibid., 550.
45 Ibid., 509.
49 Ibid.
50 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 566.
51 Ibid., 568.
52 Ibid., 591.
53 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 175.
54 Ibid., 171.
55 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, xxvii.
59 Ibid.
60 Arendt, “Preface to Between Past and Future,” 14. For instance, to give an account of the modern “crisis of authority,” Arendt discussed the crisis of the American education system. To demonstrate the existence of a “crisis of tradition,” she looked at the genealogies of the main Western political concepts (e.g., revolution, freedom, history). To understand the “crisis of humanity,” she rendered visible the unprecedented politics of de-humanization in Nazi extermination camps. To estimate the consequences of the “crisis of the European nation-state” in the midst of its apparent rise, she studied the expansion of capitalist economy and imperial politics. To come to terms with the “crisis of constitutional democracy,” she drew elements from American politics in the 1960s.


Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 177.


Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 36.

Ibid., 32.

Ibid., 33.

Ibid., 43.

Ibid.
91 Ibid., 10; see Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 203–210.
92 Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 188.
Introduction

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

Linked to the historical proliferation of crisis discourses and theories in capitalist societies, we find a number of practices, forms of living and institutions that constitute, organize and operate through and in relation to things that are said to be in a state of crisis: the family, the individual, the nation-state, educational institutions, democracy, nature, markets and technological infrastructures. What’s more, the language of crisis serves the purposes to describe and make sense of phenomena as diverse as the effects of the abstract logic of financial markets, the concrete human suffering in political emergencies and environmental catastrophes, or the legitimacy problems of democratic institutions and political authorities. In this chapter, I intend to explore some Foucaultian insights to interpret the emergence of crisis as a more or less appropriate way of thinking and speaking about problems concerning society as a whole. To be sure, the way we speak of crisis today is not exactly the same as in the nineteenth or the twentieth century. Still, the proposition I hereby seek to advance is that there is a common thread to the many contemporary uses of crisis, which is related to the expansion, from the eighteenth century onwards, of modern regimes of power concerned with the management of problems related to “population.” Crisis becomes the actual horizon of justification of a number of practices that seek to produce corrective and therapeutic effects when social processes are threatened.
by rupture, failure or illness, which, as a consequence, mobilize, produce and assert truth discourses that claim to possess a real force of cure. The expansion of this “therapeutic spirit” is particularly noticeable in the case of neoliberalism as a political rationality that seeks to exert a positive influence on social life (enhancing its freedom, health, wealth, competition, security, etc.), but for which crisis is a vital source of knowledge and focal point of experience of governmental interventions and management of social problems.

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

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

The Work of the Concept of Crisis

The starting point for this reflection is a minor but revealing remark that Foucault made in one of his lectures on the birth of biopolitics at the Collège de France (1978–1979). In the fifth lecture, Foucault is trying to reconstruct the intellectual foundations of German ordoliberalism, as a key to understand the genealogy of neoliberalism as a modern political rationality. He takes as a case a book titled The Social Crisis of Our Time, published in 1945 by the German political economist Wilhelm Röpke, which according to Foucault became “a kind of bible of neoliberalism.” What seems to call his attention is not simply Röpke’s particular influence in post-war debates on the “crisis of liberalism” and the definition of a new “liberal art of government,” but a more general transformation that this book epitomizes: namely, the status economists attain as new physicians and the
authority of economics as specialized knowledge with scientific purchase as well as normative-therapeutic power on social life. The first line of Röpke’s book is eloquent: “this book is the result of the reflections of an economist on the sickness of our civilization and on the manner of its cure.” While commenting on the book’s apparent reference to Edmund Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences*, published almost a decade earlier, Foucault mentions in passing that this kind of literature shows in a nutshell the “sad fate” of the concept of crisis in political vocabulary and social thought. Besides this general remark, Foucault leaves the issue unexplored and says nothing about what the “sad fate” of crisis may actually mean.

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

*On the Life of Concepts*

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

This way of proceeding implies putting attention to those moments of discontinuity that “create cracks not only in the geology of history” but also in our discursive practices. This is not to say that the emergence of a new concept is tantamount to a radical break that in one stroke divides two periods as “a sort of great drift that carries with it all discursive formations at once,” let alone to suggest a view of history with no structural continuities. Foucault prefers to speak of the occurrence of a “discursive event.” By using this term, he refers to those often-tiny and unexpected moments that mark the sudden beginning of a
new discursive regularity that enables a number of things to be said, known, transformed or even forgotten according to certain rules and parameters that have to be conceptually specified and empirically described. Thus, a discursive event is a “mode of appropriation of (political-juridical) discourse” that creates a sort of epistemic scission. In essence, it establishes a discontinuity that suspends the semblance of continuity of a given domain of knowledge and practices, while revealing how such continuity has been actually achieved through moments of “transformation that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations.” Accordingly, the archeological approach to concepts should follow at least two criteria: to focus on the very existence of continuity as an object of historical reflection and produce “a pure description of discursive events.” Both criteria in combination imply that a concept is constituted right from the beginning as a heterogeneous and conflictive terrain of “continuous discontinuity.”

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

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

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

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

These preliminary indications are relevant in order to apprehend, at least partially, the meaning of the “sad fate” remark that Foucault makes in his lecture regarding the concept of crisis. What seems to be so sad about this semantic signature of the experience of modernity is the transformation of crisis into an abstract universal in contemporary discourse. The familiarity of the notion tends to subsume the constitutive heterogeneity of concrete social phenomena under a totalizing, ready-made and essential entity: a single moment of break. The underlying suggestion of Foucault’s remark, the way I read it, is that we should not take such a universal as the starting point of analysis but instead the very question of how a series of practices, institutions and forms of knowledge organize around and through something that is supposed to be a crisis or being in a state of crisis. Thus, the “sad fate” remark is not simply about the canonical use of a vocabulary that then becomes a fetish of scientific and political language alike. It refers to the very forgetfulness of the complex ways in which such a concept expands itself as a discursive grid that gathers a population of diverse events, objects, repertoires of action, modes of enunciation and theoretical structures. This implies that crisis can no longer be conceived as the place of discovery of any truth about social life that is given in advance, hidden for a long time or distorted by illusion. It is actually closer to what Foucault calls a “discursive event.”
If considered along these archaeological lines, crisis stops being an indivisible unity and starts becoming a heterogeneous set of practices around which a type of discourse of truth is formed. It involves the constitution of a domain of objects (including subjectivities) to which this discourse is addressed and the articulation of forms of knowledge that examine, measure, register, encode, display and enact statements upon which one can recognize and describe a problematic state of affairs. In other words, crisis is a moment of “discursive production” (which administers and produces silences too), of “production of power” (which creates spaces for action and prohibitions), and of “propagation of knowledge” (which may put into circulation “mistaken beliefs,” “misconceptions,” etc.). It is a discursive event insofar as it is both a site of inscription of truth and a mechanism of formation of truth, and therefore a field opened to multiple social and political struggles. In this sense, one may suggest that from a Foucaultian perspective, crisis is neither a word nor a concept in the conventional sense but rather a field of discourses and practices concerning things that are said to be in a state of crisis.

**Crisis as Therapeutics of Truth**

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

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

To be sure, for Foucault philosophy was a way of reflecting about our relationship to truth rather than establishing the foundations of what is truth. It is only in this sense that he accepted and defended the locus of his research to be described as philosophical. Still, Foucault also felt close to medicine even to the extent to suggest that his work was akin to the medical practice: “I’m neither [a philosopher] nor [a historian], I’m a doctor, let’s say I’m a diagnostician and my work consists in revealing, through the incision of writing, something that might be the truth of what is dead.” Interestingly, even if this proximity to medicine
may be attributed to Foucault’s family context—his father was a surgeon and his
grandfather was a physician—he does apply this description to himself in order
to invoke his closeness to the “paternal figure” of Nietzsche, to whom “philoso-
phy was above all else a diagnosis, it had to do with man to the extent that he
was sick. For him, it was both a diagnosis and a kind of violent therapy for the
diseases of culture.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Broadly understood, the therapeutics involved in the practice of parrēsia consists of taking the risk of revealing truth about something or somebody in the attempt to intervene and modify the conditions of a problematic situation with a singular curative intent. However important this case is for Foucault’s interest in a philosophical practice concerned with the emergence of truth discourses and an ethics of truth-telling, he does not intent to find here a normative model one can fix and then set against to denounce modern types of therapeutic rationality as intrinsically tyrannical, ideological or instrumental. The point is rather to understand the changing character of the relationship between truth and power,
so as to be able to problematize the growing authority of therapeutic expertise in
the wide range of technologies of government in modern societies. What inter-
ests me in this regard is the possibility of tracing more clearly the connection
between crisis and therapeutic practices. A way of proceeding is by paying atten-
tion to Foucault’s remarks on the changing epistemic status of medical know-
ledge in modernity and the appearance of the idea of social therapeutics in
political discourse.

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

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

the physician isn’t someone who speaks, he’s someone who listens. He
listen to other people’s words, not because he takes them seriously, not to
understand what they say, but to track down through them the signs of a
serious disease…. The physician listens, but does so to cut through the
speech of the other and reach the silent truth of the body . . . The only words he utters are those of diagnosis and therapy. The physician speaks only to utter the truth, briefly, and prescribe medicine.\textsuperscript{44}

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

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

\textbf{Governing by Crisis: The Therapeutic Imperative of Liberalism}

As I showed in Chapter 4, Koselleck’s classic study of the conceptual history of crisis shows abundant evidence of the semantic displacements of the legal,
theological and medical meanings of the term in social and political language after the French Revolution. Although Foucault’s account of this process bears some similarities, his focus is put less on the semantic articulation of a new consciousness of time than in how the concept of crisis is linked to a new economy of power that emerges out of the practices and discourses that seek to deal with the government of a new political subject, the constitution of society and its population. That is, it has to do with the emergence of liberalism as a new art of government of social life.

**The Liberal Government of the Social**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If the science of man appeared as an extension of the science of life, it is because it was medically, as well as biologically based: by transference, importation, and, often, metaphor, the science of man no doubt used concepts formed by biologists; but the very subjects that it devoted itself (man, his behavior, his individual and social realizations) therefore opened up a field that was divided up according to the principles of the normal and the pathological. Hence the unique character of the science of man, which cannot be detached from the negative aspects in which it first appeared, but which is also linked with the positive role that it implicitly occupies as norm.63
Within this epistemic framework the management of populations finds its rationality, and also it is where a notion and consciousness of crisis can be scientifically and political formulated. By taking this approach, one could affirm that to the extent the phenomenon of crisis faces us with the question of what is to be done in those situations when life is threatening (e.g., a body, a city, a market, a society), the notion of crisis makes its political appearance, more than in the form of failure, in the form of a productive moment of governmentality through the invention, operation, opposition and application of different practices of knowledge and strategies of power. Thus, if one reconstructs Foucault’s reasoning in this way, the constitution of crisis into a permanent object of scientific enquiry (for instance, in nineteenth-century political economy and sociology) would only make sense when seen in correlation with the constitution of a broader field of political intervention and technologies of power oriented to the management of populations and their problems. In other words, the constitution of social therapeutics, or therapeutic rationality, which traverses different domains of collective life and operates through two interrelated claims: the claim to know society and the constitutive fragility of its processes and the claim to secure society’s ideal state and establish the nomos that organizes and regulates relations. Thus, for the liberal art of government crisis becomes a novel mechanism of formation of truth as well as an innovative mean of regulation and re-programing of social life.

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

The rationality of the transition to this new political stage of liberal governmentality is something that Karl Polanyi, 64 years before Foucault’s lectures, addressed in The Great Transformation. In this book, first published in 1944, Polanyi demonstrates the political foundations and human consequences of a world interpreted and organized in market-financial terms. His main thesis is that the almost religious effort to establish self-regulated markets as the principle of social life is the basis of the crisis that led to the collapse of the liberal state. This is so because the liberal project is based on the utopian but ultimately destructive belief that the economy can operate disembedded from society. It is utopian because the very idea that the economic system operates with independence of
the human texture of social relations lies in a historical fiction: that the development of self-regulated markets was the result of the natural laws of evolution of economic life. And this belief is also destructive because in order for the self-regulated market to exist and function at all, conditions should be created for the institutional liberation of markets: that is, government requires to intervene in the motivational structure of human action to introduce the profit motif and reprogram the space of social life to subordinate it to the logic of commodity exchange. It is this combination of utopian naturalism of economic theories and creative destruction of political regulation that, according to Polanyi, sustains the normative force of the economization of society that nineteenth-century liberal capitalism brings about. But it is also the factor that debilitates the economic principle of self-regulation the moment its compulsive expansion threatens the destruction of society and increases the need of governmental intervention to domesticate the perverse effects of the immanent tendency to crisis of a marketized society.

**The Neoliberal Disorder of Things**

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

In essence, Foucault argues, neoliberalism is a critical response to the deep “crisis of liberalism” that unfolded with the Great Depression of 1929 and World War II. He draws specifically upon post-war German and American debates to suggest that this “crisis manifests itself in a number of re-evaluations, reappraisals, and new projects in the art of government.” In fact, books such as Wilhelm Röpke’s *The Crisis of Society*, which I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, became “a kind of bible” in debates on the future of liberalism and the transformation of the government of society. To be sure, neoliberalism shares the classical concern over how to regulate state intervention in the economy and society, however, it abandons the traditional idea that the juridical protection of laissez-faire and the reinforcement of the autonomy of market relations are effective means to secure the progress of economic and individual freedom. The new predicament of the neoliberal program consists of the most radical extension and incorporation of market principles, particularly “competition,” into a universal model for the foundation, regulation and overall exercise of legitimate political power.
The formalization of this orientation into new economic theories and its mobilization through policy interventions brought about a revalorization of the political and epistemological role of economic knowledge in public life, which materialized in the status economists attain as new physicians, and the authority of economics as specialized knowledge with scientific purchase as well as normative-therapeutic power on society. But it also meant a complete turn of classical sociological conceptions of society based on forms of solidarity and moral ties between actors as well as systemic mechanisms of functional differentiation and coordination. Here the idea of social collectives is severely criticized and replaced with a form of rationalism that grounds the value of human action in the individual capacity to make choices according to economic principles of competition. Still, to produce social coordination out of individual competition neoliberal thought requires producing a further inversion, namely to introduce a process of societal dedifferentiation between economics and politics: “Instead of accepting a free market defined by the state and kept as it were under state supervision, [it has to] completely turn the formula around and adopt the free market as organizing and regulating principle of the state.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Foucault saw in Kant’s conception of the Enlightenment a great innovation, consisting fundamentally in “the insertion of critique in the historical process of Aufklärung,” namely the introduction of “the present” as a philosophical problem and, for that matter, the field to which philosophy belongs, must relate to, and reflect upon in order to move beyond the conditions of “self-incurred tutelage” that limit without rational justification the capacity to constitute ourselves as free agents. It is according to this interpretation of the Enlightenment as a critical ethos that Foucault justified his intention to displace the center of gravity of critical philosophy from the traditional examination of the universal conditions of
legitimacy of knowledge, “analytics of truth,” toward the practice of interrogating the conditions that sustain and have given form to our historical present, “ontology of the present.” But what are the implications of this philosophical-historical displacement and how does it affect the position of the practice of critique in relation to neoliberal governmentality and the social therapeutics it enacts?

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

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

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

In order to assert this right to make things more fragile, critique cannot simply disavow and accept “the sad fate” of the concept of crisis; it has to restore to crisis the force of critique and redeploy it as one of its constitutive moments, very much in the sense of classical medicine to which I referred earlier: an experimental “test” in the struggle of truth to encourage the entry of other forms of life and subjectivity into history. For like a physician who cuts and surveys the body of others trying to reveal the site of the lesion and pain, a genealogically driven critique raises questions and problems to “incite new reactions, and induce a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions.”

This attribution of critique’s ability to introduce and enact crisis, however, does not comport with a predictable or lineal effect. It rather consists in producing a “virtual fracture which opens up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, that is, of possible transformation.”

In the search to enhance our capacities of self-government, critique’s “historical sense has more in common with medicine than philosophy.” This is so neither because critique calls on the past to diagnose problems of the present nor because it uses history to substantiate what is to be done like a doctor prescribes one’s diet or a political advisor instructs on strategy. Instead, we should confer therapeutic credit to the practice of critique because it is a reflective “work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings,” an activity of “orientation in thinking” through examples that help us re-experience the present.

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

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

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

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

Notes

7 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 104.
9 Ibid., 193.
11 Ibid.
12 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 6.
13 Ibid., 29.
15 Foucault, Lectures on the Will to Know, 194.
18 Ibid. [emphasis added].
20 Ibid., 24.
21 Ibid., 187.
22 Ibid., 153.
30 These lectures refer to Foucault’s courses at The Collège de France, respectively published as: *On The Government of the Living (1979–1980), The Hermeneutics of the Subject (1981–1982), The Government of Self and Others (1982–1983), and The Courage of Truth (1983–1984).* There are also the lectures he gave at Berkeley in 1983, later published under the title *Fearless Speech*. In these lectures he examined in great detail the different variations and domains in which the notion of parrēsia and the practice of truth-telling was inserted in ancient literature. For instance, in the 1982–1983 course Foucault discusses truth-telling in Ancient Greek literature in relation to practices of spiritual direction (Plato’s *Alcibiades*), the revelation of a truth and the reproach to power for an injustice and its political consequences (Euripides’ play *Ion*), and the conditions for exercising true discourse in order to have ascendency over other individuals in a democratic politeia (Polybius’s *The Histories*, Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Isocrates’ *On the Peace*).
32 Ibid., 183–184.
34 Ibid., 215.
36 Ibid., 232.
37 Ibid., 233.
Ibid., 331.

Foucault, “Interview between Michel Foucault and Claude Bonnefoy, 1968,” 35.

Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 188–204.


Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 56. The argument about the influence of capitalism in the transformation of technologies and rationality of government is present throughout Foucault’s work. The main suggestion is that the expansion of industrial capitalism would have been impossible without the articulation of new technologies of disciplinary power and biopower. See Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin, 2004), 35; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 140–141.

This is clear, for instance, in Foucault’s thesis that the period from 1750 to 1850 epitomizes an epistemic threshold in Western thought as new forms of knowledge (e.g., human sciences) and regimes of power (e.g., medical institutions) were taking shape. In a similar way, Koselleck emphasizes the transitional aspect of this period (saddle period), which accompanies the rise of the bourgeois culture and materializes in a major reorientation of the conceptions of historical time and temporality across European languages; see Chapter 4 in this volume.


A case in point is the example Foucault elaborates on about the expansion of the mechanism of security to manage epidemic diseases in urban areas during the eighteenth century, such as the control of smallpox, around which a new set of notions were introduced into the political language, such as danger, risk and, in particular, crisis. See Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 57–62.


61 Foucault, Abnormal, 41.

62 Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 38.

63 Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, 41.


65 Ibid., 262–263.

66 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 69–70.

67 Ibid., 69.

68 Ibid., 131.


70 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 116.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., 68–69.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 146.

75 Ibid., 147.


79 The classic book Policing the Crisis provides a great account of this process of conservative-neoliberal construction and mobilization of crisis as a domain of government, which in Britain especially targeted the poor and racial minorities, see Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, eds., Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978).


This is the case of the critique of “pastoral power” brought about at the end of the Middle Ages by the Reformation movement and Luther’s “revolt” against the confessional practices and dogma that sustained the ecclesiastical rule of Christianity; see Foucault, Security, Territory, Population, 191–216; Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 295–296. Another case is the critique of “sovereign power” that crystallized in the second half of the eighteenth century and whose challenge to the legitimacy of state power was the effect of revolutionary discourses about “natural rights;” see Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 133–135, 189–212, 215–216; Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 39–40. Equally important are Foucault’s references to the critique of “disciplinary power” that disrupted with “astonishing efficacy” the post-war conformism of the affluent capitalist societies of the West at the end of the 1960s; see Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 329–332. In this last case, Foucault highlights the capacity of social movements to expand the “criticizability” of things, practices and institutions, and multiply the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” that began to raise questions with regard to women, sexuality, minorities, the environment and disciplinary institutions; see Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 6–9.


Ibid., 47.


Foucault, On the Government of the Living, 77.

Ibid., 78.


Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” 453.

Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 232.