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Journal article

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published as:

Gilbert, A. S., Busbridge, R. and Osbaldiston, N. (2022). 'Living in crisis' : Introduction to a special section. *Thesis Eleven*, 170(1), pp. 3-8.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136221103687>

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‘Living in crisis’: introduction to a special section

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This special section began to take shape sometime in mid-2020. Much of Australia was then in lockdown, we were working from home, national borders were closed, and it was looking increasingly likely that the annual conference for The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) would not go ahead. At the time, the spread of COVID-19 within Australia was very limited, especially compared to much of the rest of the world. Yet the pandemic had nonetheless brought unprecedented disruption to our everyday lives.

Sociology has often been characterised as a ‘science of crisis’ (Strasser 1976, p. 4). This is owed to its roots in the (primarily European) 19th century. The early pioneers of the discipline attempted to make sense of the collapse of pre-modern social order and the acceleration of economic, cultural, and political change. ‘Crisis’, in this sense, became one of the foremost conceptual objects of sociological inquiry, with a state of crisis often forming the foundational assumption of many sociological theories (Roitman 2014; Esposito 2017). Of course, different traditions within the sociological discipline have always understood the significance of ‘crisis’ in markedly different ways. Herbert Marcuse (1941) famously distinguished between the radical/emancipatory and conservative/integrative traditions in sociological thought. For radicals, crises represented a disruption of old orders and old institutions, which can pave the way for newer, more emancipated, ways of living (see also Schinkel 2015). Conservatives, on the other hand, have been historically more prone to associate crises with terror rather than hope. For them, modernity was characterised by a breakdown in authority, tradition, or religious faith, which threatened to tear at the social fabric and leave behind disintegration and dread.

As Habermas once remarked (1975), ‘crisis’ is simultaneously an objectifying and subjectivistic concept (Cordero 2014). It is objectifying insofar as the entry of the concept of crisis into modern thought largely came by way of its established use in medicine, and then applied to other fields such as history, politics, and the social sciences (Koselleck 2006; Verovšek 2019; Shank 2008). Crisis refers here to a pivotal point in a disease trajectory, when corporeal risks are most profound and the intervention of a physician is required for survival and recovery. In this sense, the concept of crisis privileges the position and knowledge of technical experts, with their ability to diagnose and act upon a situation offering the crucial distinction from a future that is *fait accompli*. For much its history, sociology has attempted to legitimate its expertise via diagnoses of disciplinary meta-objects, such as ‘society’, ‘the public sphere’, ‘community’ and so on (Luhmann 1984). However, at the same time, there is also a strong sense that crises need to be experienced rather than simply observed if their true significance is to be appreciated. Hence the idea of crisis is often strongly associated with the subject position of whoever is caught up in it. Crises occur *for us* when we are

somehow robbed of our ordinary means or capacities and may have to resort to novel forms of thought/action to transcend the situation and/or achieve normalcy (Milstein 2015). This may call for critical disposition to see the world in new ways, to break out of old assumptions and habits, to realise new modes of 'going on' (Kompridis 2006).

With these ideas in mind, we wanted to pose the question of how sociology might go about making sense of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic; the 'crisis' of our current time. This seemed especially pertinent given that, in a sociological sense, the pandemic represented far more than just a virus (Stratton 2021). Viral pandemics have been a frequent occurrence throughout the breadth of human history. Yet the 21st century is characterised by unprecedented material and communicative interconnectedness, coupled with advanced technological organisation, making COVID-19 a novel event in many respects. Our social landscapes have changed dramatically, and since early 2020 we have been in unfamiliar territory.

The pandemic has further been accompanied by a number of associated 'crises' relating to political polarisation, new forms of inequality and disparity, a heightened consciousness of risk, extreme vulnerability, and deepening tensions between technocratic and democratic governance. The political fault-lines between the left and right have been reconfigured in novel ways, most notably as an ostensible contest between 'science' and 'freedom' (Brubaker 2020). There have been new mobilisations of social movements, most obviously those – broadly associated with the political right but featuring a mishmash of different ideological actors – taking issue with public health measures such as lockdowns and vaccine mandates. Furthermore, the social, economic, and emotional pressures of the pandemic undoubtedly augmented the size and strength of protest movements, such as the stimulus given to Black Lives Matter as a result of the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. Here in Australia, thousands of protestors across the country gathered to support of the Black Lives Matter movement and bring attention to the ongoing issue of Indigenous deaths in custody, navigating and in some instances violating public health restrictions on freedom of movement. More recently, the invasion of the Ukraine by Russia which has increased tensions between old lines of political and ideological differences, has constructed widespread concern about potential for war once again in Europe. Combine this with the ongoing economic, territorial and political soft power disputes between China and the west, the world is facing for the first time in years, a serious crisis of confidence in peace.

Contributions

It was with the above in mind that the TASA Social Theory thematic group and *Thesis Eleven* collaborated to host an online workshop called 'Living in Crisis' in November 2020. We invited attendees to think about the relationship between social theory and crisis in two ways. First, how can social theory be utilised to unpack what is happening in the world today? Second, do social theorists offer legitimate ways of understanding and responding to this crisis? We heard keynote speeches from Deborah Lupton, Craig Calhoun, Peter Vale, and Peter Beilharz. Drawing on her background in public health, Deborah talked about the role of sociologist during the pandemic and the ways in which it has highlighted the importance of new ways of theorising human-non-human relationships. Craig, Peter, and Peter discussed the new challenges and possibilities portended by the pandemic, reflecting on the diverse set of theoretical preoccupations engaged in the collection of short articles they – along with Sian Supski, Andrew Gilbert, and Tim Andrews – commissioned for the *Thesis Eleven* (2020) website. This enormous diversity of preoccupations and perspectives was reflected at our event, where the contributions to this special issue began as panel papers. Some are very focused on examining the social implications of COVID-19, while others use the pandemic as a springboard to consider a host of broader social theoretical themes. All of them, however, advance our understanding of what it means to 'live in crisis' as we navigate the ongoing pandemic.

In his article, Sam Han (2022) interrogates the ways tragedy has been used in popular discourse to frame events during the COVID-19 pandemic. This leads to a much broader consideration of the meaning of the tragic and its implications for sociological thought. In a contemporary world where ideas of Enlightenment and progress have supposedly rendered God redundant, what meaning can be seen in suffering? The late modern response to suffering is to attempt technological mastery of it, whether through medicine, engineering or socio-political organization. Alternatively, the response is to attribute blame, either to the sufferer themselves for enabling the conditions of their own suffering, or to another responsible party. The tragic vision helps us move beyond these flawed responses to crises and to suffering, to recognise the limits of human mastery and the arbitrariness of casting individualised blame.

Angela Leahy (2022) examines the responsibilities of modern states in ensuring their subjects' safety. She draws on the work of Hannah Arendt to argue that human rights are only as valid as they can be safeguarded. Drawing on Hobbes, Leahy argues that it is the sovereign duty of states to protect their citizens' rights, which leaves those who are stateless in a situation of 'mere humanity' and without any guarantee of rights. Instituting social restrictions during the pandemic, such as lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and border closures are evidence of the state enacting its sovereign duty to protect citizens' right to safety. Through fulfilling this duty, the state legitimises its existence. By contrast, the insufficiency with which governments have addressed anthropogenic global warming represents a failure of the social contract and is therefore legitimate grounds for protest and civil disobedience.

In many parts of the world, government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have overwhelming prioritised national interests. Jae-Eun Noh (2022) takes us to South Korea to examine the impact of the pandemic on political culture and shifting perceptions of migrants within Korean society. Prior to the pandemic, Korea had gradually been becoming a more cosmopolitan nation with an increasingly inclusive attitude towards migration. However, as Noh argues, this relied on collective emotions such as empathy and compassion that were enabled by the broader socio-economic successes of 21st Korean modernity. The pandemic has triggered something of a reversal of course, as the emotional tenor of Korean society has shifted from optimism to fears of contamination and national protectionism. This, Noh argues, is evident in an upswing of anti-migrant sentiments and a reduced commitment to foreign aid in Korea since the pandemic began.

Sara Motta (2022) applies the concept of crisis more broadly to interrogate the inclusions and exclusions of dominant modes of apprehending the world. Her article argues that the pandemic underscores the need for a broadened social theory that can recognise feminist decoloniality and indigenous knowledges. She illustrates this through the metaphor of mangroves. These may seem impenetrable and labyrinthine for an outsider, certainly a long way from the ideal of a crystalline order that characterises Enlightenment modernity. However, to those who occupy the spaces of the mangrove swamp, they represent a deeply relational and layered geography, interwoven by a dense network of stories that will always resist any topological reduction. The paper is therefore an invitation to social scientists to rethink their conceptualisation and appropriation of the colonised other in their research, and to form new horizontal forms of collaborating and relating.

Finally, Ben Manning and Craig Browne (2022) make the case for drawing upon Karl Polanyi's concept of 'moral economies' as an analysis of how cultures react to crises. They argue that different countries' responses to COVID-19 can in many respects be understood as reflections of their respective moral economies, which form the background expectations of how reciprocity, exchange, and redistribution should be institutionalised. In this vein, they take us to the experience of prisoners of war in Japanese camps during World War Two. Their argument is that the distinct national moral economies of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia can each be read from the way these different cohorts of prisoners self-organised within the crisis conditions of the camps. These logics are then connected to how each of these countries differently responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. From this, Manning and Browne argue that political responses to crises tend

to accord with prevailing moral economies because these are what national cultures habitually draw upon to resolve conflicts and institute social relations.

With this special section, we hope to contribute to the diverse ways sociologists and social theorists have cast light on recent events associated with the pandemic. We also hope this continues the long tradition of sociology's engagement with crisis and upheaval, not just as objects of our interest, but also as invitations for new ways of practising our craft.

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