Bringing hope 'to crisis':

Crisis thinking, ethical action and social change

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Introduction

The spectre of crisis now casts an urgent but oddly bearable shadow on everyday life. It appears through documentaries on the science of climate change and video footage of melting ice; we manage it with recycling bins and reusable bags. The spectre of the economic crisis also permeates social consciousness via graphs of capitalist class decline that, while they feel like our own, remain weirdly disconnected from the human 'calamities of capitalism' (Lichtman, 2009, p. 20). And then there is the steady stream of notifications about more peripheral crises, all in need of urgent resolution: flashpoints in conflict situations, social welfare, migration, diplomacy, and health. The erstwhile extraordinary experience of being in crisis punctuates everyday public discourse as something very ordinary indeed (Krznaric 2008).[1]

And yet, many political activists and critical theorists still regard crisis as the basis for critique and as a precondition for radical social change—or at least a situation in which it might be made possible. These 'crisis thinkers', many of whom follow a line of thinking that stretches back to Hegel, claim that the experience of crisis is both an objective form of immanent critique and a subjective source of motivation for action.[2] For, it is argued, if people can feel the social contradictions and inequalities that are visible through rational analysis, they will be spontaneously motivated to act upon them. But what does it mean when

they do not? Under what conditions do threats of ecological, economic or personal crisis <u>not</u> function as mobilizing forms of social critique? And when might crisis thinking shift from being a progressive politics of hope into a reactionary politics of fear?

Although the problem of climate change puts these questions into a difficult new context, and I will argue later even into crisis, they are not peculiar to our time or place. Philosophers, perplexed by any lack of critical moral consciousness in the face of insufferable experiences of alienation, exploitation and injustice, have long sought to identify the conditions that motivate emancipatory action. For some time, it was assumed that material, existential crisis was the one universal experience that could 'point to the contradictions of the present and…encourage the emergence of needs, patterns of interaction, and struggle which point the way towards a new society' (Benhabib, 1986, p. ix). However, by the early twentieth century and particularly in the work of Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School theorists, it was clear that the systemic inequalities of capitalism 'no longer articulated themselves as social crisis' and that this was due 'not to economics alone, but transformations in culture as well' (Benhabib, 1986, p. 176). A new crisis emerged in crisis thinking: the crisis of the negation, suppression or incorporation of crisis itself.

This paper departs from this point to consider whether and how crisis thinking contributes to practices of affirmative critique and transformative social action in late-capitalist societies. I argue that different deployments of crisis thinking have different 'affect-effects' and consequences for ethical and political practice.[3] Some work to mobilize political action through articulating a politics of fear, assuming that people take most responsibility for the future when they fear the alternatives. Other forms of crisis thinking work to heighten critical awareness by disrupting existential certainty, asserting an 'ethics of ambiguity' which assumes that the continuous production of uncertain futures is a fundamental part of the human condition (de Beauvoir, 2000). In this paper, I hope to illustrate that the first

deployment of crisis thinking can easily justify the closing down of political debate, discouraging radical experimentation and critique for the sake of resolving problems in a timely and decisive way. The second approach to crisis thinking, on the other hand, has greater potential to enable intellectual and political alterity in everyday life—but one that poses considerable challenges for our understandings of and responses to climate change.

I thus begin by considering how crisis thinking is deployed in political campaigns to change social attitudes and behaviours towards global climate change, as the frequent use of apocalyptic narratives in this context highlights the distinctions between these different types of crisis thinking. I focus in particular on the proposition that there could one day be a 'world without us' (Weisman, 2007) to explore the different kinds of critique and future imaginaries that this form of crisis thinking might engender. Finally, I consider how practices of 'disclosing critique' (Honneth, 2007; Kompridis, 2006) and 'bringing things to crisis' (Spivak, 1988, 1990) can help inform a critical pedagogy of crisis in everyday life.

The 'crisis of hope' and environmental (in)action

There are two prominent narratives of crisis in contemporary environmental politics. One is rooted in fears of ecological catastrophe, and the other in a sort of anthropological pessimism that human beings lack the will or capacity to prevent it. The problem of global climate change is often articulated as an apocalyptic narrative of species self-destruction; a 'ticking time bomb' discourse of catastrophic ecological crisis which can—perhaps—only be averted through revolutionary cultural, political and economic change. James Speth, for example, writes that 'it is now an underestimation to say we are running out of time. For such crucial issues as climate change, deforestation and loss of biodiversity, we ran out of time quite a while ago' (2008, p. 19). The website for Al Gore's (2006) film An Inconvenient Truth asserts boldly that 'we have just ten years to avert a major catastrophe that could send our

planet into a tail-spin of epic destruction'. And the UK Crisis Forum (2008) explains there is a 'high probability that unless we drastically change our global political and economic practice, the human species may not survive into the foreseeable future'.

Crisis is deployed here as an affective and cognitive call for revolutionary change. Interestingly, however, it is also situated against a concern that neoliberal society has become so radically dehumanising that the forms of 'human nature' which would make such change possible are already suppressed.[4] For many critical theorists, this is an impasse to the development of an emancipatory politics; some even suggest that it constitutes a 'crisis of hope' (Bauman, 2004; Binde, 2001; Browne, 2005; Davis and Monk, 2007; Jameson, 2004; Kompridis, 2006: 245; Smith, 2005). The crisis of hope is twofold. For social theorists, it implies that systemic changes in economy, politics and culture are closing down spaces for radical freedom. In everyday life, however, it is experienced more symptomatically as a sense of individual powerlessness in the face of uncontrollable and often nebulous forces including climate change, irrational markets of global capital, spiritless regimes of new bureaucratic management, and opaque processes of political decision-making that appear unresponsive to traditional forms of democratic opposition. It is argued that many people living in neoliberal societies now 'experience change as a symptom of our powerlessness rather than as the product of our own agency' (Kompridis, 2006, p. 247), or in other words, that the experience of history and world-making has become one of neither crisis nor purposeful direction, but rather one of disempowered 'drift' (Sennett, 1998).

The stripping of opportunities for social self-determination is of course not unique to neoliberal space and time. Powerlessness, loneliness and hopelessness have long been tragic realities for all but the privileged in every society. Now, however, it is the levelling of these experiences and the increasing sense of despair that anything can be done to alleviate them that is of particular concern. This new expression of social despair has a deep, ontological

dimension, which presumes there is something peculiar about the cultural and affective organization of neoliberal societies that damages human feeling and imagination, muffles and distorts compassionate relationships, stunts capacities of self-reflection, and devalues future ethics. In other words, there is a concern that the totality of our prevailing social practices negates the human desire for both transcendence and connection. There is a suspicion that we may be losing or have lost, not only as Theodor Adorno once put it 'the capacity to imagine the totality as something entirely different' (quoted in Daniel and Moylan, 1997: vii), but in some cases the deeper desire to do so—and where reality seems really intractable, the will to even try.

It is important to understand that this is not just a generalized critique of neoliberalism, but one that follows a very particular form of theorizing as well. Critical theorists refer to such explanations as diagnoses of 'social pathology'; accounts of systematic 'misdevelopments' or crises in individual character and social structure which are believed to undermine the very foundations of ethical will formation and social change (Habermas, 1987; Honneth, 2007: 4). In certain situations—climate change being an obvious, but not the only example—these 'misdevelopments' are regarded as potentially lethal rather than simply as undesirable. This type of crisis thinking can be illustrated with a classical example that is sometimes evoked in contemporary climate change discourse: Erich Fromm's critique of the 'paralysis of criticism' in advanced industrial societies. In his writing on the topic of nuclear armament during the mid-twentieth century, Fromm communicated an acute sense of desperation about what he considered to be widespread political apathy towards the threat of nuclear violence. 'The unbelievable fact', he wrote, was that

no serious effort is made to avert what looks like a final decree of fate. While in our private life nobody except a mad person would remain passive in the view of a

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threat to his total existence, those who are in charge of public affairs do practically

nothing, and those who have entrusted their fate to them let them continue to do

nothing. How is it possible that the strongest of all possible instincts, that for

survival, seems to have ceased to motivate us? (Fromm, 1978, p. 19)

For Fromm, the 'peaceful production of the means of destruction' was an example of

irrational economic and technological development, historical myopia and the arrogant

complacency of the privileged and powerful; it was a social problem. The 'pathological'

contradictions that made this into a crisis, however, were affective and ontological in

nature: could radical social change be possible if people were not moved even by, as

Fromm saw it, the actual threat of death?[5] If the experience of crisis is necessary to alert

people to the wrongness of present conditions, what happens when it becomes effectively

managed, contained, suppressed or eliminated? How can alternative futures be imagined if

the future itself is not a matter of care and concern?

There are important parallels between Fromm's theory of the necessity of crisis

and some contemporary discourses on environmental attitudes. Critical ecologists, policy

makers and environmental activists often criticize 'blasé attitudes' towards what they

consider to be the self-evident crisis of climate change, and are demoralized by the lack of

a spontaneous compulsion towards collective response.[6] For example, Joel Kovel has

argued that

irresistible [economic] growth, and the evident fact that this growth destabilizes

and breaks down the natural ground necessary for human existence, means...that

we are doomed under the present social order, and that we had better change it as

soon as possible if we are to survive. One wants to scream out this brutal and plain

truth, which should be on the masthead of every newspaper...but it is nothing of the kind. Yes, endless attention is paid to the crisis, a great deal of it useful, some of it trivial, and some plainly harmful. But where is the serious, systemic reflection of the brutal truth—that humanity is in the hands of a suicidal regime, which scarcely anyone thinks is either possible or desirable to fundamentally change? (Kovel, 2002, p. 5)

Kovel's consciousness of crisis is acute, but not shared or acted upon—at least at the same intensity—by anything resembling a critical mass. The interpretive gap between what he acknowledges to be an 'obdurate set of facts' about discrete environmental events, on the one hand, and the subjective judgement that would enable an individual to interpret them as constituting a holistic, life-threatening ecological crisis, on the other, gives rise to a crisis of hope in the human capacity for change itself. 'Something', concludes Kovel, must have 'gone terribly wrong in the relation between humanity and nature' for this type of alienation to be possible (2002, p. 12).

He is not alone in drawing this conclusion. It has long been argued that the reconstruction of human–nature relationships can only be accomplished 'in the context of...the rise of a new consciousness [...] major cultural change and a reorientation of what society values and prizes most highly' (Speth, 2008, p. 199). In the late 1970s, philosopher Hans Jonas even argued that the rise of the technological society had already altered the nature of human action so considerably that a complete reworking of human ethics was required (Jonas, 1984). However, when the objective failures of environmental and human degradation are combined with a fear that we lack an adequate ethos for addressing them, the rhetoric of crisis can become a 'discourse of catastrophe' that produces a paralyzing sense of imminent peril. Some critics have thus argued that instead of being a catalyst for

mobilization, this kind of crisis thinking is 'in danger of tipping society into a negative, depressive and reactionary trajectory' (Hulme, 2006).

For social scientists and activists alike, this raises a number of important questions. Can crisis be a catalyst for psychological and cultural revolutions? Are they within the human remit to create, or must they emerge through the convergence of historical forces? What practices or conditions, what experiences or sensibilities, might 'tip' moral and political consciousness from despair to hope, from imaginaries of 'presents' and 'ends' to visions of alternative futures, and from the depression of powerlessness to the hope of collective empowerment? Can crisis thinking actually be a form of affirmative critique; one that is intimately connected with, but not reducible to, human action?

Crisis thinking as 'involuntary enlightenment'

One answer to these questions is that we are only effectively mobilized by the corporeal experience of catastrophe itself. According to Ulrich Beck, phenomena such as extreme weather events, mass extinctions, economic collapse and acts of extreme violence can function as moments of 'involuntary enlightenment', which, if they fail to destroy, are 'wake-up calls' that compel the reordering of priorities and beliefs (Beck, 2006; Speth, 2008: 211). Indeed, the possibility that we can imagine what it would be like to have experienced something catastrophic and thus be motivated to try to alter this course of coming events seems to be what many narratives of ecological crisis seek to evoke.[7] This is one version of the theory that crisis is most transformative when it is materially 'lived', or when, in the words of critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, people 'experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened' (cited in Benhabib, 1988, p. 232).

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Experiences of 'involuntary enlightenment' are certainly pedagogical, in so far as they shape subjectivities. But for those who seek to create a critical consciousness of crisis—we might even say to cultivate a habit of attuning oneself to latent tendencies of crisis in everyday life—this exploitation of crisis to motivate unreflective action is precisely the problem. It is an unlikely road to political hope, for instead of exposing the indeterminacy of futures this approach recommends a sort of materialist fatalism in which catastrophic phenomena are regarded as naturally occurring, with predictable and uniform effects on an undifferentiated mass of subjects. There is no room here for a theory of political time, of a temporality which assumes the openness of the future, reconstruction of the past, or power of human and nonhuman intervention to shape the world (Brown, 2005).

Relying on 'involuntary enlightenment' to mobilize transformative action more significantly reduces people to immanent, one-dimensional beings who are ultimately motivated either by extreme and proximal suffering, or by the need to protect material and corporeal self-interest. While this may not be an entirely post-human imaginary, it is certainly one that abandons hope in the possibility of human agency. And in the context of political movements to transform environmental attitudes and actions, the question is not how to capitalize most effectively on others' catastrophic experiences, but how to imagine them *in absentia* and cultivate new ways of <u>being in</u> crisis in everyday life.

Crisis thinking as theoretical 'translation'
The problem of educating critical sensibility has thus been a longstanding preoccupation for political and cultural activists, particularly those who believe that transformations of consciousness can be accomplished by 'translating' the objective, structural crises of capitalist societies into subjective feelings of alienation, domination and exploitation. In more practical terms, many anti-capitalist and environmental struggles hinge on the belief that

while the system is ultimately untenable in the long term, the worst forms of suffering can be averted if people learn to interpret their personal problems as consequences of structural injustice. In the critical philosophies that often inform these activities, there is a deep hope in the transformative power of crisis which is grounded in, as Simon Clarke explains it, an 'emphasis on the <u>necessity</u> of crisis as an essential and ineradicable feature of the capitalist mode of production, that defines the objective limits of capitalism and the necessity of socialism' (1994, p. 7).

However, this theory is itself prone to continual crisis, for unless we *feel* the effects of social and economic contradictions we are unlikely to experience them as 'crises', and unless we experience crisis we will remain unmoved to address the structural contradictions of our lives. It has even been argued that 'in periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent upon avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all kinds of approaches to [the social], but there can be no [insurgency]' (de Man cited in Spivak, 1987, p. 197). If there is a disjuncture between 'systemic' crises and 'lived' experiences—as I argue is almost inevitable for complex problems like climate change and capitalism—energy is focused on finding ways to mediate the 'contradictions, malfunctioning and disturbances of social systems' with the 'experienced needs, demands, feelings and dissatisfactions that the social structure generates in individuals', on the other (Benhabib, 1986, p. 12). This, in the classical tradition of critical theory, is the role of critique.[8]

However, this form of crisis theory has spawned a number of paralyzing tautologies in which a dysfunctional system produces both its own contradictions <u>and</u> its own anti-venom against their poisonous effects. From Werner Sombart's inquiry into 'why there was no socialism in the United States' (1906/1976) to Marcuse's 'society without opposition' (1964) and the disappointments of the European Left in the 1970s (Clarke, 1994, p. 8), theoretical

faith in the transformative potential of crisis is often compromised by the realization that this promise can be lost in translation.

Crisis thinking as counter-hegemony

The practice of translating systemic crises into lived ones, of helping people 'read the world' through their own experiences, has thus become regarded as something of a political art. The creation of compelling crisis narratives is in fact often considered a fundamental element of effective political mobilization; the concern being to

> mobiliz[e] perceptions of the crisis that will find and construct resonance with individuals' fragmented experiences and individuated exposure to the symptoms of state and economic failure, thereby unifying them, giving them political inflection and relating them to a vision of the alternative (Hay, 1995, p. 74).

The production of crisis narratives in popular culture can therefore be viewed as a way to frame problems, ideological resolutions and instructions for action in order to mobilize and coordinate mass levels of social activity (Hay, 1999, p. 333). It is consciousness-raising, but of an ideological sort that does not require—and indeed, may obscure—a deep understanding of existing social conditions. In fact, within this framework, attempts to produce a <u>sense</u> of crisis may be disarticulated from existing material conditions, and any set of failures and contradictions can become a 'context providing the material conditions capable of sustaining a variety of conflicting constructions or "narratives" of crisis' (Hay, 1995, pp. 64, 77). The interpretation and explanation of climate change through geological, theological, Gaia, indigenous, technological, teleological, and cyclical narratives is a particularly illustrative example of this.[9] Popularizing such crisis narratives, therefore, is a way to evoke emotive

political responses from a mass of individuals and 'topple the counter-stories in one's culture' that contribute to political division, fragmentation and resignation (Garner in Speth, 2008, p. 213).[10] Crisis thinking here functions less as a practice of critique and more as a discursive strategy in a cultural war of position (Gramsci, 1988). As Gramsci argued, 'crisis forms the context within which the ideological struggle to impose a new trajectory (a transformatory unity) on the structures of the state takes place' (cited in Hay, 1995, p. 74).

However, this counter-hegemonic form of crisis theory bears uncomfortable resemblance to various expressions of the populist politics of fear. For example, it was the creation of 'a coherent and simple discourse of crisis capable of finding and constructing resonance with individuals' experiences...of the economic and political context'—not some sort of radical transformation of social consciousness—which empowered the British New Right during the late 1980s (1995, p. 65). More recently, it has been argued that 'the success of right-wing governments and sentiments lies in reworking hope in a negative form', or in other words, in their capacity to articulate narratives of crisis which evoke fear (Zournazi, 2002, p. 15; see also Ahmed, 2004; Davis and Bertrand Monk, 2007). This is possible because crisis is affectively double-edged: radical rupture may be both liberating and terrifying at the same time. Crisis narratives can be specifically formulated to exploit the desire for certainty that emerges from experiences of ambiguity and insecurity, reducing the experience of crisis to a rhetorical catalyst for social reaction by posing what Henry Giroux has called the 'false choice between being safe or being free' (205, p. 3).

This sort of crisis thinking may be particularly likely in the context of climate change, where the balance of emotion is often tipped far more in the direction of powerlessness or uncertainty than towards agency and confidence. According to Colin Hay, for example, a counter-hegemonic crisis narrative is most effective under three conditions: first, that it concerns something people assume can be acted upon; second, that they are in a position to

act upon it; and third, that the conceptual construction of crisis resonates somehow with their lived experiences (1995, p. 64). In the case of climate change, instead of the threat of conceivable suffering, we encounter—often from incongruous situations of comfort and security and in highly mediated ways—the unfathomable possibility of collective nonexistence, wrought by a confluence of human and non-human factors, unfolding somewhere out of our control, and happening in an unspecified future. This is a different species of 'crisis' altogether: not individualised, material and lived, but inter-subjective, ethical and imagined. 'Translating' such structural phenomena into personal concerns becomes problematic; it requires a rethinking of crisis thinking altogether.

The 'involuntary enlightenment', 'translation' and 'counter-hegemony' models of crisis thinking illustrate how the experience of crisis has been variously theorized as a catalyst for action by critical theorists and political activists alike (Honneth, 2007; Kompridis, 2006; Spivak, 1990a). However, these examples also demonstrate that there is nothing intrinsically transformative or ethical about crisis thinking; that like pure 'thought', pure 'action' is not a value *sui generis*. And while activist versions of crisis thinking are often presented as being the most socially progressive—'doing nothing' is precisely the problem— we must also ask whether these practices sometimes have the counterintuitive effect of closing down spaces of possibility by fetishizing action and devaluing the practices of reflection, analysis and imagination that can emerge in periods of critical ambiguity. Beyond simply asking <u>whether</u> crisis narratives 'influence' people's attitudes and actions, therefore, we must ask what <u>kinds</u> of ideas and actions are enabled by different forms of crisis thinking.

What's in a crisis?

But is it possible to distinguish between these different forms of crisis thinking in normative terms? The answer to this question does not lie in the definition of the term 'crisis' itself,

which has been characterized as 'illusive, vague, imprecise, malleable, open-ended and generally unspecified' (Hay, 1996, p. 421). This ambiguity is a good thing; it means we can make crisis mean something other than what it often seems to be. In everyday talk, crises are often understood as autopoietic moments of 'intense difficulty or danger' or times 'when a difficult or important decision must be made'. This is particularly clear in medical contexts, where a crisis is 'the turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating recovery or death' (OED, 2005). The objectivism and activism in these definitions is striking, particularly as the term *crisis* was originally associated, through its Greek root *krisis*, with cultural practices of critique, judgement and deliberation (Benhabib, 1986; Brown, 2005; Kompridis, 2006). In illness, for example, a person's condition was not considered 'critical' simply because it could go either way, but because the direction of any change depended upon the impact of judicious human intervention (Brown, 2005, p. 6). Crisis was not a matter of fate, but the name for a moment at which those involved in a situation come to understand they cannot go on as they have before.

The medical definition of crisis is not wholly appropriate for theorizing social experience; there are few instances in which a form of social life could be presumed to 'live' or 'die' in totality. Its importance is rather that it defines crisis phenomenologically, referring less to an objective moment of decision into which we are thrown and more to a subjective realization that we must make new sense of our circumstances and possibilities. In this view, dangers, difficulties, decisions and changes are not objectively existing things that we can simply recognize through observation and then make rational judgements about. Our distinctions between 'intense' and 'relaxed' moments, or 'difficult' and 'easy' decisions are themselves the results of processes of critical, inter-subjective judgement. They are narrated through cultural explanations, mediated through emotional rules, and situated within a complex frame of social, political and psychological conditions. Our experience of emotions

of joy and pain 'involves the attribution of meaning through experience' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 23), and even our 'intentional action is linguistically mediated' through a web of cultural meaning (Benhabib, 1986, p. 135). Crisis narratives do not simply allow us to <u>identify</u> or <u>communicate</u> structural crises, but to <u>define</u> complex social situations as critical moments of possibility, and to articulate the necessity of alternatives within a normative critique of existing conditions. They are ways of explaining 'how we go on' once we decide that we cannot go on as before (Benhabib, 1986; Hay, 1995; Kompridis, 2006: 248; Lear, 2006; Spivak, 1988). And, in the case of climate change, where the establishment of thresholds and tipping points is particularly political, they are also ways of <u>asserting</u> that we cannot.

Crisis thinking must therefore be understood as a cultural and emotional practice as well as a subjective experience or objective condition. A critical consciousness of crisis can create an intensified engagement with space and time in which we feel particularly responsible for reflecting critically on how we reproduce, reject or transform the cultural practices that shape our world. When crisis can be experienced in this way, it provides openings for critique, for a reflective practice that not only allows us to consider 'the proportion of continuity and discontinuity in the forms of life we pass on', but that also frames this reflection as an ethical and political responsibility (Habermas cited in Kompridis, 2006, p. 11). Kompridis thus makes a clear distinction between thinking of crisis as a moment of decision that resolves a conflict and seeing it as a moment of decentring which produces or discloses one. On the one hand, we may read crisis as an urgent call to decisive action; a moment of truth in which we fatefully intervene (or not) to alter the course of history. On the other hand, we can understand crisis as a space of reflexive self-critique in situations where 'you feel that your presuppositions of an enterprise are disproved by the enterprise itself' (Spivak, 1990b).[11] In this latter view, the political value of a crisis experience is not that it allows us to impose order onto uncertainty by expediently cutting out the elements that create

contradiction. The value is that it brings these elements to the centre of consciousness, making it necessary for us to question the rules of order themselves, and the limitations and possibilities of our own agency, according to these alternative logics.

The transformative potential of crisis in this approach emerges from the experience of being disrupted or 'decentred' in ways we neither choose nor control; they are unpredictable, spontaneous and surprising. Feeling out of place, uncomfortable, unrecognisable, regarded as a threat to sacred normalities—or as Nietzsche once wrote, the 'bad conscience' of one's own time and society (cited in Kompridis, 2006, p. 5)—can provoke a state of heightened reflexivity in which we realize that our bodies, truths and ways of being do not fit the contours of a dominant reality (Ahmed, 2004, p. 152). It exposes, in Kompridis' terms, 'breaks and punctuations' in everyday life that 'open up spaces for reflection and critique, and that give meaning and shape to everyday life' (Kompridis, 2006, p. 114). The experience of crisis is thus ultimately a moment in which possibility is made possible, 'when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 184). However, contrary to the 'translation' and 'counter-hegemonic' theories of crisis, this experience cannot be deliberately produced <u>for</u> oneself or others; 'discomfort is not simply a choice or decision...but an effect of bodies [or ideas and practices] inhabiting spaces that do not take or "extend" their shape' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 152, my words in brackets). This being-outsideness, which is a condition of crisis experience, cannot be communicated linguistically from one person to another through rational argumentation. Rather, it must be disclosed through encounters with radically disruptive realities and imaginations that expose our own as partial and situated.

But given that people deal with the experience of crisis in different ways, often by seeking to avoid or abort it, to what extent can crisis thinking be offered as an 'inducement to thought' in practice? (Kompridis, 2006, p. 3; Spivak, 1988, p. 197). Within critical theory,

there is sometimes an implicit suggestion that it should be possible to live in contradiction to everything and everyone, and to make one's own 'consciousness of crisis' into a moral virtue. But individual pre-orientations to crisis are as contingent as the experience of crisis itself. Crisis may be experienced as fear or hope, and even the ostensibly radical position of 'productive unease' (Spivak, 1990a) is not necessarily affirmative in a psychological sense. Ulrich Beck (2006) has pointed out that in risky situations people do often engage in transformative action, but they also enter into states of denial or withdraw altogether. So what are the affective and ethical conditions of bringing things to productive crisis in the first place? What makes it possible for a person to experience situations of ambiguity, insecurity and uncertainty as spaces where they can engage in difficult processes of self-transformation and world-making? Are such situations <u>necessarily</u> transformative, and—thinking particularly about the nature and scale of climate change—do individuals or collectivities always have the capacity to influence their trajectories? And is it possible for us to <u>cultivate</u> such a sensibility, rather than either seeking to impose it or abandoning the project to individualized choice and experience?

Crisis thinking as critical pedagogy

It is possible to argue, of course, that we are continually cultivating our political and ethical sensibilities, our ideas and beliefs and relationships, in one direction or another. In other words, life is always–already pedagogical: even non-action teaches us something about our relationship to the world, and our educational experiences implicate us in both hegemony and resistance (Giroux, 2000). The question is perhaps thus not whether we can or should try to cultivate a more critical sensibility of crisis, but what this might mean in practice.

We have already seen that crisis theory has well-developed pedagogical arms. In socialist and environmentalist politics, theories of crisis offer a framework for translating

systemic crises (such as global climate change and/or capitalist injustice) into lived

experiences, in order to instruct people in how they can most effectively transform or create

the circumstances in which they live. There are many versions of this, from the instrumental

manipulation of crisis narratives as studied by Colin Hay (1996, 1999) to the establishment of

communities aimed at creating alternative environments rather than seeking to simply

capitalize on the emotional volition of crisis experience (see, for example, Himmelweit, 2009,

on the new Transition Towns). In one sense, however, these disparate engagements with

crisis can be considered part of what Hegel once referred to as an 'ancient vision of moral

education, according to which political activity was the cultivation and education of virtuous

human characteristics' (cited in Benhabib, 1986, p. 26). Although Hegel's philosophy of

education is beyond the scope of this paper, it is this faith in the pedagogical role of crisis that

matters here. As Allen Wood has pointed out, Hegel conceived of *Bildung* as a 'process of

liberation achieved only by means of initial frustration, struggle and an altered conception of

oneself' (1998, p. 304). This belief, which is itself a specified expression of crisis thinking,

filters through different traditions of critical education. Early American pragmatists, for

example, argued that learning is only accomplished through cognitive crisis and struggle (for

an interesting look at how this was applied to educational practice, see Weeks 1914). Paulo

Freire's (1970) revolutionary popular education relied heavily on the value of collectively

struggling through the cognitive and ultimately social transformation of 'limit situations'.

More recently, work in 'border pedagogy' and 'liminal education' have re asserted the

importance of what we might call crisis experience as site of transformative learning

(Fassbinder, 2006; Giroux, 2005).

From these pedagogical perspectives, crisis provides a space for being able to learn

and for alterity as much as it creates a need for particular ideas and acts. The transformative

power that is often ascribed to crisis is here rooted in the political sensibilities that the

experience is assumed to generate or necessitate. Openness to the future. A critical relation to time. Awareness of material limitations and possibilities. Sensitivity to the contraction and expansion of possibility. Recognition of one's being in the world, and of being with and for others. Empathy. Existential responsibility. Tolerance of ambiguity. Hope. If crisis has a role in mobilizing political consciousness, therefore, the problem is not whether we can evoke extraordinary crisis experiences, but whether we can learn to experience crisis in this way in our everyday lives, and to create environments in which this might be possible.

It is here that Kompridis' theory of crisis offers some practical direction. For while he defines crisis as an 'extraordinary' experience in philosophical terms, he also sees it as ubiquitous in everyday life. Working from the argument that crisis is 'normal' in late-capitalist societies, he suggests that we must therefore 'account for the degree to which modern individuals are saddled by the obligation to criticise <u>and</u> innovate if they are to ensure the continuity and renewal of their cultural traditions' (2006, p. 30). Crisis need not only refer to an extraordinarily difficult moment of decision or to 'life-and-death' in the literal or even rhetorical sense. It can also name experience of needing to make decisions about how to imagine and act towards uncertain and undetermined futures. Being-in-crisis, for Kompridis, is thus an <u>ethical</u> and <u>political</u> condition rather than an existential act; a practice of framing experience in ways that enable us to more consciously reproduce, reject or transform the cultural practices that shape our world (Kompridis, 2006, p. 30). It is a pedagogical activity, an 'inducement to thought' through which we may explore, reflect on and create new ways of being.

The emphasis on learning is significant in situations where social change seems so urgently overdue and unlikely that thinking, particularly open-ended processes of reflection, is dismissed as inefficient, irresponsible, or—in the words of Wendy Brown—'untimely' (2005). Theodor Adorno once argued that in situations where the possibility of effecting

radical change is very circumscribed or uncertain—and climate change may be an example *par excellence*—it is possible that 'one clings to action because of the impossibility of action' (1991, p. 199). In other words, action becomes valuable in and of itself simply because it keeps open the possibility of future action. I disagree with Adorno that such action is therefore illusory, an example of 'misguided spontaneity' or self-serving 'pseudo-action'. But even this brash and oversimplified critique of activism makes the important point that 'repressive intolerance toward a thought not immediately accompanied by instructions for action is founded in fear' (Adorno, 1991, p. 200). We need not conclude from this that urgent problems of climate change should be framed in 'sweet and patient' tones, or that 'thinking them through' is enough (Moser and Dilly, 2004, p. 37). But nor must we conclude that their urgency means theorizing them cannot also be a kind of political action, or that people <u>must</u> experience them <u>as</u> a crisis in order to engage. For, following Adorno, 'when the doors are barricaded, it is doubly important that thought not be interrupted' (1991, p. 200).

The association of crisis with critical thought as well as critical action recommends a different form of crisis thinking and definition of activism, one that emphasizes the radical possibilities of <u>being in</u> crisis as well as <u>responding to</u> it, and that places the radical transformation of self, others and environments at the centre of this experience. By seeking new ways to go on where we cannot as before, we remake ourselves; for '"problem solving" fully involves and affects not only our rationality but also our sensibility, our subjectivity' (Kompridis, 2006, p. 174). This notion of problem solving is pedagogical rather than technocratic; focused less intently on when we will solve the problems of climate change and more on attuning ourselves to the new understandings and possibilities that might emerge in the struggles—perhaps even the unsuccessful ones—to do so. In other words, 'as a reflective process of self-clarification, getting ourselves "right" involves a learning process that

demands a complex cognitive and affective engagement with our forms of life and cultural traditions' (Kompridis, 2006, p. 8).

This shifts the pedagogical orientation of crisis thinking from a didactic model of learning in which people are instructed in the dangers of a particular crisis and the methods of its appropriate resolution, towards a dialogical model in which it is 'brought to crisis' in the everyday (Spivak, 1988, 1990b). The traditional aim of 'mediating' between lived and structural crisis presumes that people must learn to 'feel' functional contradictions or 'rationalize' their experiences of emotional disruption. Bringing something to crisis, on the other hand, evokes discomfort not in order to change <u>what</u> people think, but rather <u>how</u>; it is a 'calculated attempt to change the preconditions under which a society conducts evaluative discourse on the ends of common action' (Habermas in Honneth, 2007, p. 58; Kompridis, 2006, p. 261). In addition to trying to 'make climate change hot', for example, there must also be ways of talking about whether we care if it is or not, and why (Moser and Dilly, 2004). These projects may be neither one and the same, nor comparable in political importance. This form of crisis thinking disrupts the dichotomous view of systemic and lived crises: they are not separate kinds of crisis but different modes of knowing the social world (Benhabib 1986, p. 123).

The value of this kind of crisis thinking lies in the fact that it requires both a radical openness to ambiguity and a critical affection for messiness, awkwardness and contradiction in everyday life. However, it is precisely this quality that brings climate change and critical philosophy into crisis with one another. Can 'untimely critique' be justified even in the face of environmental catastrophe; is it ethically responsible to experience climate change as *that* sort of crisis? In a world that seems to celebrate both Marcuse's nightmare of a 'society without opposition' and the populist politics of fear, should we be cultivating a kind of crisis thinking that privileges critical reflection as much as rapid response? I argue that we should.

In her book *Edgework*, Wendy Brown (2005) makes a compelling argument that the closing down of crisis through reformist problem-solving, supposedly for the greater good, often works to mask deeper injustices and contradictions. As she argues, 'critical theory is essential in dark times not for the sake of sustaining utopian hopes, making flamboyant interventions, or staging irreverent protests, but rather to contest the very senses of time invoked to declare critique untimely' (2005, p. 4).

The challenge for critical theorists and political activists alike is that crisis narratives of climate change—like the nuclear threat before it, and on a lesser scale like the spectre of global terrorism—can be easily deployed to justify this sort of closing down. In this essay, I have argued that creating simplistic narratives of complex problems that aim to mobilize a mass of atomized individuals through either rational argumentation or emotional panic are neither straightforwardly effective nor transformative. I have also argued that, in addition to theories of crisis which place faith in the possibility that fear, the personalization of abstract forces or hegemonic power will first evoke and then resolve the painful disruptions of crisis experience, there is an alternative theory of crisis that celebrates them as spaces of freedom. The political hope of crisis thinking need not lie only in the power of crisis experience to mobilize transformative action; indeed, this is to hope for too much and too little all at once. The hope of crisis thinking may rather lie in the more humble possibility that it disrupts the flow of historical time and consciousness enough to make space for criticism, encounter and alternative imaginaries. These imaginaries, of course, cannot be ours to determine. They may be fearful or hopeful, enervating or energizing. The critical pedagogy of crisis, therefore, cannot simply be a matter of learning to recognize crises in everyday life or to extrapolate them in more abstract terms. Rather, it is a matter of creating environments where we can cultivate an ethics of ambiguity that will enable us to engage with experiences of crisis in more critical ways.

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[1] For more on the concept of the 'extraordinary ordinary', see Kompridis (2006).

[2] Proponents include Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Seyla Benhabib, Ernst Bloch, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Reinhart Koslleck, Axel Honneth, and Nikolas Kompridis—although none would necessarily categorize themselves as 'crisis thinkers' (Kompridis 2006: pp. 27, 64). The discussion of critical philosophy as 'crisis thinking' is beyond the scope of this paper; Kompridis traces it to Hegel, for whom the need for transformative thought and action emerges from 'the consciousness of "diremption", of division or breakdown (<u>Entzweiung</u>), that is, the consciousness of crisis' (Kompridis 2006, p. 18, also p. 275). Although Hegel did not theorize the relationship between crisis experience, thought and action in the ways discussed here, his belief that such experiences necessitate the

development of a philosophy that can envisage the ultimate reunification of dialectically

conflicting tendencies has provided fertile ground for others to theorize the role of crisis and

crisis thinking. Benhabib, for example, has argued that 'whereas for Hegel the purpose of

critique is to further the integration of the autonomous individual into an ethical community,

Marx views critique as crisis theory, the main function of which is to point to the

contradictions of the present and to encourage the emergence of needs, patterns of

interaction, and struggle which point the way toward a new society' (1986, p. ix).

[3] The term 'affect-effect' is borrowed from Jane Bennett, who uses it to explain how feelings

and sensory experiences can work to *effect* the world, and to explore how psychological,

material and social conditions shape transgressive experiences as either enchanting or scary

(Bennett 2001, p. 30).

[4] 'Neoliberalism' is a highly contested and flexible concept (Nonini 2008). Beyond naming a

certain ideal-type of 'post-Fordist, "disorganized", transnational' capitalism (Fraser 2009, p.

98), it also evokes the decline of organized collective action, the stripping away of basic

social security, the rise of new-right politics and cultures, the de-democratization of the

public sphere (Gindin and Pantich 2000; Harvey 2000), the marketization of social

institutions such as education, science and medicine (Bauman 2004, pp. 65-5; Giroux 2004),

the ascendance of bureaucratic forms of power which minimize public deliberation and

debate (Fromm 1998; Laclau and Mouffe 1976), and the delegitimization of utopianism as a

cultural practice (Jameson 2004, 2005).

[5] For further comparison of the 'motivational crises' of the Cold War and contemporary

climate change, see Speth (2008, p. 17-18). The comparison suggests that the failure of

apocalyptic discourses, many of which 'appear to do little to bring about a sense of moral transformation or re-awakening', is not a recent phenomenon (Skrimshire 2008). This raises questions less about why the impact of apocalyptic and utopian imaginaries has declined, and more about the conditions under which they become meaningful in the first place.

[6] The 'blasé attitude' is a concept used by Georg Simmel to characterize a condition of alienation produced through affective and sensory overstimulation and/or by the commodification of things. 'Whereas the cynic', he argued, 'is still moved to a reaction by the sphere of value, even if in the perverse sense that he considers the downward movement of values part of the attraction of life, the blasé person—although the concept of such a person is rarely fully realized—has completely lost the feeling for value differences. He experiences all things as being of an equally dull and grey hue, as not worth getting excited about, particularly where the will is concerned. The decisive moment here—and one that is denied to the blasé—is not the devaluation of things as such, but indifference to their specific qualities from which the whole liveliness of feeling and volition originates' (Simmel 1982, p. 256).

[7] This sort of anticipatory consciousness is framed in the future anterior tense; a looking-back-from-the-future-in-the-present. Both Bloch's (1995) and Lacan's (1981) work are useful for understanding the political role of future-anterior-tense narration.

[8] As Benhabib argues, 'social critique must show crises not only to be objectively necessary but experientially relevant as well. In the final analysis, it is the success of the theory in translating the functional language of crisis into the experiential language of suffering,

humiliation, oppression, struggle and resistance, which bestows upon it the name of "critical theory"' (1986, p. 142).

[9] Many thanks to Stefan Skrimshire for this observation.

[10] From the perspective of William Connolly's recent work on 'body/brain processes', this can also be understood as a 'technology of collective mobilization' that works on non-conscious levels of experience (2006, p. 74). While intriguing, the development of this idea is beyond the scope of this paper.

[11] Kompridis offers an insightful illustration of how these two interpretations overlap in the Heideggerian concept of 'resoluteness' (Entschlossenheit), which is generally translated as 'decisiveness'. However, it can actually be interpreted in two ways. If the emphasis is on the first part of the word (Entscheidung) it translates into 'decision'; the sort of decision in which one uncloses a sword from a sheath in a moment of swift and decisive action. If the second half of the word is emphasized, however, (Erschlossenheit) the meaning changes to 'disclosure', which means to open up or reveal something that is hidden or not yet existing (Kompridis 2006, p. 58). This nuanced translation points to potentially deep connections between these radically different ways of understanding the concept of crisis.