

Bringing hope to crisis: Rethinking the ‘crisis of hope’ in critical theory

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Abstract

It has become commonplace amongst many critical theorists to speak about a ‘crisis of hope’ as an actually existing social condition to be observed, described and acted upon in postmodern capitalist societies. The hypothesis is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake transformative social action because contemporary cultural practices not only disable the critical imagination of alternatives and the organization of collective action, but also produce types of human beings for whom these practices are subjectively meaningless. However, this new orthodoxy of a ‘crisis of hope’ and the concomitant turn towards utopian thought in a variety of disciplines have yet to be interpreted. Are these accurate diagnoses of a new, empirically existing form of ideologically-based determinism in post-modern capitalist societies? Are they discourses expressing class-specific critiques of a disempowered socialist resistance, straining against the hegemony of neo-liberal ‘utopias’ in a largely post-socialist world? Are new theories of hope and utopia enabled by the ‘affective turn’ in critical and cultural theory, which opens possibilities to inquire into affective phenomena such as respect, love, need, fear and desire? Or might they be interpreted as secular theodicies which seek to explain – again, still – how and why injustice, irrationality and inhumanity continue to be so legitimately executed in and by ostensibly ‘enlightened’, privileged, democratic and humane societies? This paper will seek to contextualise the current discourses of the ‘crisis of hope’ through interrogating these questions, and consider the significance of this concept for inspiring and informing critical socio-political practice.

Defining the contemporary 'crisis of hope'

[T]he waning of the utopian idea is a fundamental historical and political symptom, which deserves diagnosis in its own right—if not some new and more effective therapy.

- Frederic Jameson (2004: 36)

A symptom of the times is the decline in interest in hope as a philosophical and political concept.

- Mary Zournazi (2002: 14)

I think things are stuck. I am not so disillusioned as to think that history is finished. But I do think that what Gramsci would call the 'balance of social forces' are very powerfully against hope.

- Stuart Hall in Taylor (2006)

Throughout the past decade, there has been increasing concern that we – individuals living in late-capitalist (or postmodern capitalist, or liquid modern) societies – are experiencing a 'crisis of hope', and that this crisis is a root cause of continuing economic and political injustice throughout the world (Bauman 2004; Binde 2001; Browne 2005; Jameson 2004; Smith 2005). In the broadest sense, this is said to be experienced as a sense of subjective powerlessness in the face of larger, uncontrollable and often nebulous forces – 'natural' ones such as climate change, to be sure, but also social ones such as markets of global capital, rigid regimes of quantitative accounting in workplaces and social care, and opaque processes of political decision-making that appear unresponsive to traditional forms of democratic opposition. Perhaps most disturbingly, it is argued that we often 'experience change as a symptom of our powerless rather than as the product of our own agency' (Kompridis 2006: 247). This instantiation of the crisis of hope is a personal and emotional crisis; a sense of lost control over future possibilities, or a realisation that such control is illusory (Jacobsen and Tester 2007). It is also therefore very much a crisis of *modern* subjectivity.¹ As Mary Zournazi recently commented,

we live in a world where our belief, faith and trust in political or individual actions are increasingly being threatened, leading to despair and uncertainty. It is easy to be pessimistic with wars, ecological disasters and increasing social inequalities all around us. New technologies and global economies make our lives less real and more virtual, and lead to increasing individuation – the isolation and loneliness felt in consumerist-market-driven economies (2002: 14).

¹ In this sense there are some potentially very interesting connections which might be drawn out between discourses around crises of hope and theories of 'risk society', although these are unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.

More narrowly, therefore, the crisis of hope is understood as the depression or disabusing of expectations that genuine politico-economic alternatives to neoliberal capitalism are either possible or desirable. In this sense, the crisis is political; wrought as recognition of the irrepressible power of capitalist hegemony and as a sense of being unable to meaningfully orient socialist or humanist values and practices in a post-modern, post-socialist world. Or, as Stuart Hall recently quipped, ‘things are stuck. I am not so disillusioned as to think that history is finished, but I do think that what Gramsci would call the “balance of social forces” are very powerfully against hope’ (Hall in Taylor 2006). And while the articulation of *crisis* may be relatively new, this particular analysis of the force of anticipatory ideas in social change is not. Since the third quarter of the twentieth century, social theorists have linked the decline of traditional Left politics and the welfare state, along with the rise of the new Right, to the de-democratisation of the public sphere and privatisation of the care (Gindin and Pantich 2000; Harvey 2000); the commodification of social institutions such as education, science and medicine (Bauman 2004: 65-5; Giroux 2004); the ascendance of bureaucratic forms of power which minimize political debate (Fromm 1998; Laclau and Mouffe 1976); and the delegitimisation of utopianism as a genre and cultural practice (Jameson 2004, 2005).² The rise and fall of Soviet Communism during this period was also, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, ‘the direst of all misfortunes which the socialist utopia has suffered in the two centuries of its history’ (1976: 101). As he argued three decades ago, this mega-scale transformation of societal *modus operandi* has created the sense that that ‘there is no challenge to the basic tendencies of capitalist culture in the most powerful versions of the socialist utopia today. Not that socialism lost its teeth; but capitalism has made itself immune to much of their bite’ (Bauman 1976: 104). For the early Bauman and others, including second-generation writers in the Frankfurt School such as Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, the ‘eviction of the tradition of cultural challenge from the position of socialism’ had led to a ‘foreclosure of utopia from political practice’ (Bauman 1976), and in extreme theorisations, to the total alienation and ‘pacification’ of individuals in technically advanced capitalist societies. This understanding of the ‘crisis of hope’ is one of political strategy, mobilization and hegemony, and identifiable more historically as a feature of Left political discourse.

² ‘It is now customary, except perhaps in the page of the *Wall Street Journal*, to refer to this new and greatest gilded age – the outgrowth of the global counter-revolution against social citizenship unleashed by Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Deng Xiaopong in the early 1980s, and continued by Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, Boris Yeltsin, and Li Peng during the 1990s – as the reign of “neoliberalism”. Resurgent late capitalism, we are told, has succeeded, where all the great world religions have failed in finally unifying all of humanity in a single unitary body: the global marketplace.’ (Davis and Monk 2007: x)

Finally, at the deepest level of ontology, 'the crisis of hope' is understood as a 'period of intense difficulty or danger' for the human condition itself; a warning that the social organisation of neoliberal societies and the ways of knowing which are valued within them are damaging the human capacity to undertake future-oriented action or indeed to hope *at all*. The concern here is not only that there may be no viable alternative to *capitalism at the moment*, but that the forms of knowledge and cultural practice which dominate within both neoliberal capitalism and neoconservative governance are depreciating the value of anticipatory consciousness *in and of itself*. This is a bolder assertion that, as Paulo Freire once wrote, 'we are surrounded by a pragmatic discourse that would have us adapt to the facts of reality. Dreams, and utopia, are called not only useless, but positively impeding' (Freire 1992: 1). The crisis of hope is here not simply synonymous with disempowerment, or used to articulate tensions between Marxist theory and socialist practice. It is instead the expression of a more ultimate fear at the root of both of these more immediate concerns: the fear that capitalism and authoritarian power will alienate human beings from themselves and from one another in a permanent way, and that the resulting atomisation will make it impossible to resist other forms of social and political domination. This understanding of the 'crisis of hope' is more than the expression of a difficult moment in Left politics or democratic practice. It may be understood as a diagnosis of 'social pathology', or a general account of systematic 'misdevelopments' in individual and social character that threaten the very possibility of social change itself (Habermas 1987; Honneth 2007: 4).

Questioning the 'crisis'

If any of these arguments are correct, then it is vital that we develop better understandings of what hope is and how it works. If they are not, then we need to rethink why the sense of crisis emerges in the first place. I am going to suggest that the question of their accuracy is in fact secondary to their function as mechanisms for disclosing possibilities. Nevertheless, social thinkers and activists have begun responding to the announcement of the crisis of hope in various practical ways: by struggling against neoliberal hegemony and the conditions that are thought to breed hopelessness, 'educating' hope through alternative cultural practices, seeking out evidence of resistance and hope in the small experiences of everyday life, or working to cultivate hope against hope in more utopian ways. There is also renewed interest in anticipatory consciousness within critical social theory and a proliferation of work about the ontological nature of hope, its role in personal and social transformation, utopia's function as a catalyst for or obstacle to radical imagination, and the political economies of imagination.

Despite the ubiquity of the general concept, however, the precise meanings of both ‘crisis’ and ‘hope’ are left largely unattended. For example, the crisis-of-hope narrative draws on intellectual concepts and rhetorical forms that are rooted in Western European socialist politics (particularly German critical theory) and radical, often existentialist philosophies of human nature. In this light, it is doubtful that the ‘crisis of hope’ is an objective or spiritual condition that would be experienced by everyone living in capitalist society; more-so, by people else-where and else-when. It is also difficult to know on the face of it whether the legitimation of this discourse attests to the perceived truth-content of the claims (in other words, to the possibility that they are perceived to accurately represent people’s subjective experiences and offer adequate explanations of their causes), to the rhetorical power of crisis narratives as a way of orienting future consciousness, or to the affective force of hope itself. More work is thus required to historicise and contextualise the concepts of both crisis and hope, and to develop robust analyses of the relationship between contemporary social organisation, transformative social action, and forms of human consciousness and relationships.

In addition, the account of a crisis of hope must answer several difficult challenges from other sources which claim to be documenting a turn *towards* hopefulness and open futures in contemporary society, and those that treat the concept of hope more sceptically in ways that are deliberately dissociated from progressive politics. For example, there are growing bodies of work highlighting the spaces of hope created within social movement politics and localised forms of resistance to neoliberal globalization (Skrimshire 2006), on the one hand, and the rise of individualised, consumerist and imperialist utopias in the wake of socialist aspirations, on the other (Bauman 1976; Bourdieu 1998; Davis and Monk 2007). Cultural sociological theories now assert the importance of the ‘politics of small things’ and forms of everyday resistance which have played an important role in rescuing agency from totalizing theories of subjective domination that seemed, at one point in time, to allow little space for hope.³ New fields of bio-sociology and bio-ethics are rapidly advancing studies in the ‘sociology of expectations’ and ‘political economy of hope’, exploring ‘the relationships between new hopes and emerging disappointments’ in biomedical treatments (Brown 2003: 3, 2006). ‘Positive psychology’, which has pursued a profoundly different and often medicalised line of enquiry, assumes that hoping is an innate human capability that can be

³ Fenton, however, issues an important warning against understanding ‘resistance’ as a self-evident good: ‘We look for resistance in every form of mediation and every act of consumption to satisfy ourselves that we are not cultural dupes beholden to the edicts of the market and the state. We rarely, however, extend the identification of resistance (which is itself often contested) into the actual development and deliberation of a new politics and the world of the public political sphere.’ (Fenton 2008: 232)

rationally harnessed to improve individual health and well-being. Some even insist, given the historical continuity of violence and injustice, that radical hope/lessness or a complete disillusionment in human progress is the only responsible way to effect radical changes in consciousness about present conditions and future possibilities (Chopra 2002).⁴ Finally, attention to anticipatory consciousness also appears with notable frequency on more public registers of discourse in politics, economics, the media and education. From Barack Obama's rhetoric about the 'audacity of hope' in the current U.S. presidential election to British Conservative Party leader David Cameron's criticisms of that government's 'politics of fear'; from the neoliberal utopias of transnational economic institutions to the anti-capitalist-globalization mantra that 'another world is possible'; from the promises of 'raising aspirations' through expanding and marketising higher education to the revivification of radical and utopian pedagogies in universities; and from the 'revolt against utopia' to the emergence of new interest in deontological and utopian philosophies, the problem of anticipatory consciousness has become a visible, if somewhat nebulous, matter of intellectual and political concern.

All of this other hope activity suggests that the 'crisis of hope' articulated by critical theorists and others actually refers to a relatively specific – although potentially fundamental – mode or meaning of hope. Within this paradigm, neoliberal forms of social organisation are regarded as antithetical to particular types of hope and therefore certain kinds of critical thought and action.⁵ While in many cases it is implied that capitalism is antithetical to hope *per se*, I think that given the role of speculation, imagination and investment in capital growth – all grounded in what Darren Webb might call 'estimative hope' (2007) – as well as the strength of individualised consumerist and globally expansionist utopias, this broad generalisation cannot be easily supported. Bauman has recently argued that the present 'crisis of hope' is of a 'peculiar *variety* of hope framed at the dawn

⁴ Writers in the existentialist tradition, for example, have understood crises of hope as challenges to live meaningfully towards the future *without* an articulated hope, or indeed, to live with no hope at all. Camus, for example, did not only question the theory that hope could motivate social action; he was not even convinced that it was justifiable to hope in the face of immanently hopeless circumstances. Instead, he aimed to find 'categories by which people could collectively affirm ideas for social transformation without recourse to transcendent values', and to explain the meaning of life even where its transformation was impossible (Skrimshire 2006: 288).

⁵ Darren Webb usefully distinguishes five different 'modes of hoping' – patient, critical, estimative, resolute and utopian – each of which differs in its understanding of what hope is and how it might be defined. I suggest that the 'hope' being referred to in the crisis-of-hope discourses is either 'critical hope' (an open-ended mode of hoping which reflects a 'restless protest against present suffering' or a 'restless, future-oriented longing for that which is missing' (2007: 71), or 'utopian hope', a goal-directed form of hope that is 'socially transformative' and 'mutually efficacious' and based on the belief that one 'critically negates the present and is driven by hope to announce a better alternative' (2007: 78).

of the modern era, the time of great expectations and unbounded defeat' (2004: 64). I suggest that in addition to this 'utopian hope' (a goal-directed form of hope that is 'socially transformative' and 'mutually efficacious' and based on the belief that one 'critically negates the present and is driven by hope to announce a better alternative', see Webb 2007: 78), the crisis-of-hope discourse also invokes types of 'critical hope', an open-ended mode of hoping which reflects a 'restless protest against present suffering' or a 'restless, future-oriented longing for that which is missing' (2007: 71).

In either case, the diagnosis of a pathological 'crisis of hope' in postmodern capitalist societies, while efficacious in mobilizing reflection, begs critical engagement. This paper aims to lay out some potentially fruitful lines of inquiry towards understanding what hope means in this discourse, why it is brought into moments of 'crisis', and how this project may be related to possibilities for radical social change in the era of postmodern capital. I began writing this paper by asking three questions about the crisis-of-hope discourse itself. First, is it an accurate diagnosis of a new and actually existing form of social and political determinism in late-capitalist societies? Or is it possible that it is a class-specific critique of capitalism articulated by a disempowered socialist movement that is straining against the hegemony of neo-liberal 'utopias'? Second, to what extent is the crisis-of-hope discourse enabled by the 'affective turn' in critical and cultural theory, which opens possibilities to inquire into affective and non-rational phenomena such as respect, love, need, fear and desire? (Anderson 2006; Webb 2007: 66) And finally, can it be interpreted as a secular theodicy which seeks to explain how and why injustice, irrationality and inhumanity are perpetuated in and by ostensibly 'enlightened', privileged, democratic and humane societies? In this paper I focus on the first of these questions, with the hope that they will illuminate something about the second and third, in order to gain insight into the usefulness of the crisis-of-hope discourse for both intellectual work on hope and for social and political practice.

The question of whether there is 'really' some sort of world-historical crisis of hope in late-capitalist societies is, at least for the purposes of this paper, a rhetorical one. To begin with, the notion of 'crisis' itself is problematic. While we often think of crises as being self-evident moments of subjective experience, the concept of crisis may be understood as a heuristic device that we use to make sense of disappointment, disorientation, contradiction and failure and then to re-orient action towards the future: a device that we use to figure out 'how we go on' if we cannot go on as before (Kompridis 2006: 248; Lear 2006). As Collin Hay argued, 'all constructions of crisis, in as much as they abstract from the events they purport to explain and ascribe to them significance and meaning, are distorting' (1995: 64). This is not because they are *false*, per se, but because they move away from

purely empirical descriptions of reality – particularly in cases where either our existing categories lose their meaning or where we fail to see possibility in existing conditions – towards framing an experience in such a way that allows us both to describe a historical condition *and* to motivate a transformative response within it. In fact, it has recently been argued that ‘the success of right-wing governments and sentiments lies in reworking hope in a negative form’, or in other words, as crises of fear (Zournazi 2002: 15). The framing of contradiction and disorientation as ‘crisis’ is hence a rhetorical strategy as well as, or perhaps instead of being, a simple description of these experiences. Crises, thus understood, inevitably present opportunities for the sort of ‘radical decentring’ that may open space for transformations in consciousness (Kompridis 2006: 27, 64).⁶

Crisis narratives are thus *normative, critical, and temporal* modes of understanding and since Kant have long been central characteristics of critical social philosophy (or what Nikolas Kompridis calls ‘crisis thinking’). As Kompridis argues, the question of ‘how...we renew our cultural traditions, transform our social practices and political institutions when they break down or are challenged in such a way as to preclude going on as before’ emerges out of a sense of crisis, from ‘an awareness of things going, or having gone, terribly wrong’; it emerges out of a very ‘particular need...to begin anew’ (Kompridis 2006: 3). Framed thus, we are in a better position to reflect on how the articulation of crisis is used as a cultural resource for ‘calling’ social critique, motivating political will and mobilising transformative social action. This is important, as while the marginalised social value of hope and utopianism has been a theme within critical sociology for well over a century (having in mind, for example, Marcuse’s ‘end of utopia’ and Hamermas’ ‘exhaustion of utopian energies’), its articulation *as a crisis* requiring urgent response has only recently emerged.

To say that the crisis of hope is a construction, however, does not mean that it is not true. On the surface the ‘crisis of hope’ is plausible if we assume the first definition of crisis as a widespread experience of political and economic powerlessness or as an over-exposure to ‘risk’. As Browne argues, ‘there can be little dispute that the recent prominence of the category of hope is connected to discernable pre-theoretical needs and experiences of subjects’, particularly as concerns ‘the tension between the experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence’ in everyday life (2005: 69). It is also compelling if we assume the second definition of the crisis as an institutionalised despair about the possibilities for organised alternatives to neoliberal capitalism on any large sort of

⁶ The discussion of critical philosophy as ‘crisis thinking’ is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is important to note that Kompridis traces it to Hegel. For Hegel, the *need* for transformative thought and action emerges from ‘the consciousness of “diremption”, of division or breakdown (*Entzweiung*), that is, the consciousness of crisis’ (Kompridis 2006: 18, also 275).

scale. It seems less accurate, however, to speak of a 'crisis of hope' amongst those who profit from neo-liberalisation, or if we entertain Pierre Bourdieu's notion of neoliberal capitalism as a 'utopia of endless exploitation' (1998). It also weakens once we consider other dimensions of human life such as religious faith, medicine and health, education and technology, or if we open up definitions of 'hope' to include less politically inflected meanings. The diagnosis is also challenged by the existence of radically alternative projects and lifestyles – the Lammas community, for example, or Bridge Mill 5 in Manchester – which are not total revolutions of the system, but which testify to its contingency, to the possibility of possibilities beyond, and to the activation of utopian hope in human consciousness.⁷ In other words, I have no doubt that late-capitalist society throws up new and virulent forms of anti-freedom, and believe that hopelessness is in fact one of its most visible indicators. But I also think that we need to interrogate 'the crisis', to confine and locate it, in order to be clear about whom we are speaking, the *kind* of hope to which we are referring, and the usefulness of this diagnosis for both theory and practice.

Critical theory's reluctant appeal to hope

I would therefore like to turn to the concept of hope itself, particularly within critical social thought, where the crisis-of-hope narrative is primarily situated. The irony of the sudden concern about the impact of hopelessness on radical social action in late-capitalist society is that the concept of hope (and utopia more resolutely) has itself been marginalised within social theory as the 'bad other' of reasoned anticipatory consciousness, confined primarily to a small group of thinkers adopting subjectivist, idealist and often romanticist theories of historical process against the dominance of both positivist and realist or materialist perspectives. Both Kompridis and Nicholas Smith, for example, argue that critical theorists have had an 'aversion to hope' and utopia, regarding them as 'amateurish' and religious concepts associated with 'naïve and superficial optimism, acceptable perhaps for children and women but unbecoming for a philosopher', and as 'regressive dispositions that allow fantasy to predominate over reality' (Smith 2005: 47; see also Kompridis 2006).⁸

⁷ Or, as Skrimshire points out, anti-globalization movements are 'using utopian imagination of an "outside" as a means to undermine the self-evidence of a prevailing ideology, in order to shatter the cultural assumption that "there is no alternative"' (2006: 207).

⁸ In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, British socialist William Morris lamented that anyone criticising idealist concepts such as hope automatically had the 'upper hand' in political argumentation (Morris 1973). German sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim (1998) criticised early twentieth-century European philosophers for ignoring the 'methods of thought by means of which we arrive at our most crucial decisions, and through which we seek to diagnose and guide our political and social destiny', namely, ideology and utopia; at around the same time, V. I. Lenin criticised the political exclusion of 'dreaming' in communist ideology (see Bloch 1995: 10, Levitas 2007). In the mid-twentieth century, Ernst Bloch argued that while Karl

By the early twenty-first century, the marginality of hope within social theory was more or less taken for granted. Hence, the sympathetic shift towards particular forms of it as a legitimate category of analysis is important. It signals not only a shift towards the more-than-rational and less-than-rational in social research (Anderson 2006), but also a reopening of unresolved debates about the relationship between human consciousness, social and cultural conditions, individual and collective action and human freedom. The crisis-of-hope diagnosis draws heavily on one part of this debate, which supposes that future-oriented action⁹ is most enabled by the ideational re-cognition of the world (such as in the realisation of false consciousness through processes of *conscientization*, through practices of utopian imagination, or in moments of epistemological disruption, including 'crises') rather than by less cognitive responses to immediate political needs and desires, including struggles for resources and inter-subjective recognition.

This position itself is based on two basic assumptions. The first is that the capability to hope is inherent within human nature under 'normal' social conditions (Smith 2005: 50). Ernst Bloch, for example, defined hope as an objective human characteristic, arguing that 'hopelessness is, in itself, in a temporal and factual sense, the most unsupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs' (Bloch 1995: 5); other critical theorists have made similar statements in their work on hope and social change.¹⁰ While it is true that this philosophical-anthropological approach is 'currently out of favour amongst many philosophers and political theorists' due to scepticism about the notion of

Marx had acknowledged the utopian impulse in human action, and while the principle of hope was in fact the driving force of human history, the recognition and study of hope had been 'philosophically excluded' from serious consideration in any field (Levitas 1997: 66).⁸ Two decades later, in the 1970s, Zygmunt Bauman began his reflections on socialism with a discussion of how utopianism had 'fallen into disrepute' and why it was seen as a concept to be 'kept at a safe distance from scholarly discourse'. In the same year, Ernst Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* analysed the implications of the 'exclusion of utopia from the field of the political'. Frederic Jameson (2005) has been bolder to suggest that we are now facing an outright 'revolt against utopia' in contemporary societies, and Arjun Appadurai has been recently speaking about the repression of an 'ethics of possibility' in societies that place more faith in probabilistic and scientific forms of future-oriented knowledge.

⁹ There is some ambiguity here about the meaning of 'future-oriented action'. In one sense, all social action is oriented towards the future, even if only in order to consciously or unwittingly reproduce the present (as in theories of *habitus*). The concept of future-oriented action which I use here is more influenced by notions of *vita active*, social and political agency, deliberate projects of self and social development, etc. In this sense it is distinguished from *habitus* and custom, although the boundaries of cultural theory and practices are certainly more fluid than this.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, for example, recently argued that 'if we ever stopped hoping, we would no longer be human' and that 'as inevitably as the meeting of oxygen and hydrogen results in water, hope is conceived wherever imagination and moral sense meet' (Bauman 2004: 64). Somewhat earlier, Paulo Freire claimed that hope is an 'ontological necessity' (Freire 1992) and that 'the absence of hope is not the "normal" way to be human, it is a distortion' (Freire 2001: 69, also 1992: 2).

'human nature', such ontological questions have in fact returned to the centre of discussion in new critical theory (e.g., Honneth 2007; Kompridis 2006). The second assumption is that cognising and in some way mobilising anticipatory knowledge and emotion is a necessary, albeit generally insufficient, factor in enabling transformative social practice. Bloch continued his exposition on hope, for example, by arguing that 'expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that still has not become: this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole' (Bloch 1995: 7). Following from this is a third presumption about the educability of radical hope – a topic that I unfortunately do not have space to address in this essay, but that speaks to questions about the role of cultural movements in and for social change, radical education, etc. (Bloch 1995; Halpin 1999).

Suffice it to say that from this perspective, the 'crisis of hope' within late capitalist societies is – to borrow a phrase from Stefan Skrimshire – *immanent* rather than *imminent*; always-already present rather than temporally impending. This distinction is important, for it allows us to understand why the crisis-of-hope narrative in critical social theory is not anachronistic, but as timely now as it was in the 1970s, the 1930s and the nineteenth century. For although each articulation of crisis is historically unique (after all, who can argue that Marcuse's fear of nuclear war was any more or less grounded than our contemporary fear of global warming), there is also a sense in which crises of hope within the critical tradition are situated in *political* time, representing normative disruptions which emerge not only from material contradictions, but also by contradictions in our understandings of the ontological nature of hope, its role in transformative practice and the scope of its possibility within capitalist societies. In this sense, the crisis-of-hope discourse itself has transformative potential.

However, within critical theory the assumption that anticipatory consciousness is a factor in enabling transformative action is accompanied by a further assumption: that consciousness itself is socially conditioned (and hence, for example, the idea that capitalist society has deleterious effects on hope). This has created a paradoxical theoretical problem, which is perhaps exemplified by Herbert Marcuse's response to an interlocutor at his 1967 talk on the 'End of Utopia':

'Q. It seemed to me that the center of your paper today was the thesis that a transformation of society must be preceded by a transformation of needs. For me this implies that changed needs can only arise if we first abolish the mechanisms that have let the needs come into being as they are. It seems to me that you have shifted the accent toward enlightenment and away from revolution.

M. You have defined what is unfortunately the greatest difficulty in the matter. Your objection is that, for new, revolutionary needs to develop, the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs must be abolished. In order for the mechanisms to be abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them.' That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it.

In other words, the 'crisis' is not simply that the need or desire for radical social change is necessary for that change to take place, and that many people seem incapable of developing it. It is a fear that 'the forces that were to bring about the transformation [of capitalist society] are suppressed and appear to be defeated' (Marcuse 1989: 63) or that 'the forces of domination have rendered problematic the very possibility for critical thinking' itself (Aronowitz and Giroux 1987: 120).

Undoing the 'circle in which we are placed'

The structure of this argument is homologous to that of the 'crisis of hope', a paradoxical structure that emerges at the intersection of two deterministic theories. The first is that the transformation of anticipatory consciousness is an essential precondition for transformative social action, or more specifically, an idealist faith that individuals must develop the capacity for critical hope in order to imagine future alternatives and orient their practices accordingly. The second is a materialist theory of knowledge that anticipatory consciousness is politically inflected or even determined by forces of political and economic power. The combination of these positions – in theory, not necessarily in practice – creates a paralysis or 'crisis': the need to transform subjective interpretations of social reality is stunted because the conditions cannot themselves be transformed without cultural transformation. The theory that consciousness shapes being and being shapes consciousness (or human nature) was admittedly an attempt to break out of the one-sided determinisms of both Hegel and Marx; to make consciousness matter without inflating its autonomy. But for many critical theorists, although anticipatory consciousness holds the key to hope and hope the key to social change, it still often remains subordinated to the range of possibilities already presented. Political determinism can thus be broken in only one of two virtually impossible ways: through a sudden revolution in material conditions, or through a revolutionary transformation of social consciousness, perhaps even more unlikely on a mass scale.

This conceptualisation of the 'crisis of hope' has made some sense where 'hope' has been regarded as an object which can be emancipated or repressed, and if it can be located or contained in discernable 'change agents' (for example, viewing the working classes as repositories of hope). We can see this clearly in William Morris' work in the late nineteenth century, which characterised hope

– ‘hope of rest, hope of product and hope of pleasure’ – as the antithesis of alienated labour. For Morris, if hope was a motivating source for social change and the change-agent in nineteenth century British society was the industrial working class, then the suppression of hope amongst individual workers through the imposition of alienating labour could be regarded as a means of foreclosing revolutionary sentiment or action. For Morris, fatalism about one’s personal life conditions was a form of false consciousness, defined as the ignorance of one’s potential to effect change rather than as a belief in the legitimacy of one’s condition. He did not question individuals’ abilities to anticipate the future or argue that capitalism was permanently damaging to the hopeful character of human nature that his socialist-humanist philosophy presumed. He simply argued that the subjective experience of hope was economically conditioned, and that in being denied the possibility of self-determination, working people were also denied the means of production of hope. However, spaces of hope were imminently forthcoming, as they could be activated through political upheavals in the basic organisation of everyday life and labour.

Ernst Bloch followed a similar line of argument, conflating hope, happiness and socialism into a unifying concept of historical progress. There is no sense in Bloch’s work that capitalism or any other politico-economic system disables people from hoping *as such*; indeed, wishing, longing, hoping and desiring are essential dimensions of everyday human practice. Instead, he argued that the forms of future-oriented consciousness that dominated within capitalist societies, such as fear and nihilism, were the ‘wrong’ forms as they focused on the immediate present, assumed the future was decided, or lacked any future orientation at all. In other words, Bloch also outlined a closed circle which posits hope as an essential characteristic of human nature but suggests that it is suppressed within particular social conditions. Other critical theorists would later make even bolder claims that capitalist society repressed the emotions and drives that make radical action possible, thus reinforcing the hegemony of the system (Fromm 1968, 1976, 1998/1968); Marcuse 1964, 1969). Once capitalism was psychologised at the subjective level and alienation was assumed to ‘anchor in the instincts’ of people rather than being objectively determined, a revolution of hope through material transformations began to seem like an increasingly remote possibility.

The simultaneous belief in the primacy of consciousness and its distorted historical determination lies at the heart of contemporary formulations of the crisis of hope in late-capitalist societies. Bauman once summarised this tendency within critical theory nicely by saying that socialism would continue to be ‘caught between a suicidal adventurism on the one side and a no less suicidal compromise with “realism” on the other’ so long as it required ‘a radical departure from present

conditions, but...can be accomplished only if a proper account is taken of these conditions' and through 'factors which have already been gestated and developed within these conditions' (Bauman 1976: 65).¹¹ Indeed, if our theoretical understanding of the relationship between human consciousness and social conditions is one of mutual determination rather than open interdependence, and if anticipatory consciousness (hope, utopia) is associated only with organised socialist activity, then 'crises of hope' outside of any realised socialist utopia will be not only immanent but structurally un-resolvable. The three levels or types of crisis in the crisis-of-hope narrative (subjective/personal, political and ontological) are unproductively interrelated in this strand of critical theory. Personal powerlessness, disorientation and subjugation within late-capitalist societies are attributed to the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and decline of socialist values and institutions, and then theorised as constitutive of their perpetuation.¹² Such deterministic theories of hope, in other words, are themselves without future, and may even create permanent states of psychological and political paralysis rather than moments of possibility.

Bringing hope to crisis...critically

For me, crisis is not the leap of faith because it brings faith into crisis, but rather it is the leap of hope. And that's how I would connect the potential of crisis and hope in resistances of all kinds.

- Giyatri Spivak (2002)

I think that we can read the crisis of hope differently, even (especially) from within the critical tradition itself. The challenge is to understand the relationship between anticipatory consciousness and social change in the particular context of late-capitalist societies *without* assuming either their mutual determination or total autonomy from one another, and by expanding our understandings of hope beyond the narrowly defined theories of critical and utopian hope as articulated in Marxist theory. We can do this by developing more reflexive understandings of how the concepts of 'crisis' and 'hope' work within critical theory, and how both might be engaged to mobilise anticipatory consciousness and transformative action. This entails not only undertaking a rigorous programme of research into the nature, meaning and practice of 'hope' in struggles for human freedom in late-

¹¹ I understand 'suicidal adventurism' here to mean something like uncritical voluntarism.

¹² To phrase it somewhat differently, 'hopelessness and despair are both the consequence and the cause of inaction or immobilisation' (Freire 1992: 3).

capitalist societies – perhaps in dialogue with many of the alternative traditions of ‘hope’ research – but also working to bring hope ‘to crisis’ in more deliberate ways.¹³

I would argue that the crisis of hope which is often constructed now is not, as Spivak once argued crises might be, an ‘enabling moment’ (2002). It is more often an attempt to explain, within our existing frameworks of understanding and practice, the frustration of being unable to either make sense of society or orient our action with others towards desirable futures. It is also an expression of loss, for as David Harvey argued, while the global expansion of capitalism is not new, the ‘virtual absence of a political will to do anything about it’ certainly is (2000: 191). Framed thus, the logical response to the ‘crisis of hope’ is to attempt to *resolve* it: to educate hope or disclose it, often through the cultivation of radical and utopian imagination. This, as I have mentioned before, opens up new possibilities for cultural creativity, pedagogy and resistance in struggles for social justice, both in everyday practice and at the level of social movements. But I would like to suggest an alternative: that we reconceptualise the ‘crisis of hope’ as an invitation to critical inquiry and deliberation rather than simply as a call to political action. This places it in the context of a much more historical tradition within critical social thought, which is linked not only to the critique of political economy but to more philosophical concerns about how to deal with epistemological and political disturbances in the relationship between subjective consciousness, social action and political and economic forces, as well as in our understandings of the nature of human nature itself. Within this tradition, there is also an immanent or always-already existing sense of crisis in human experience – not because we believe we are trapped in a vicious circle of determination, but because we accept the constant anxiety of needing to begin anew in conditions that are often inexplicable (Kompridis 2006: 64). Perhaps most importantly, this more classical articulation of ‘crisis thinking’ raises questions about ‘what role philosophy can play in bringing about a new cultural and political beginning that gives new meaning and purpose to our cultural traditions, social practices and political institutions’ (Kompridis 2006: 6), which evokes above all ‘the romantic insight into the connection between consciousness of crisis and the possibility of transformation’ (ibid. 275).

Hence, by interpreting the ‘crisis of hope’ as a problematic theoretical paradigm rather than as a simple description of social reality, we may gain insight into how – to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak – critical theorists ‘bring hope to crisis’, thus giving subjective experiences of powerlessness and

¹³ The idea of ‘bringing to crisis’ comes from Gayatri Spivak’s writing on her experiences in the Subaltern Studies Collective. ‘It is the force of a crisis’, she argued, ‘that operates functional displacements in discursive fields’ (1988: 10). ‘What I mean by crisis is the moment at which you feel your presuppositions of an enterprise are disproved by the enterprise itself. These are not necessarily moments of weakness. It seems to me that this is the only serious way in which crisis can become productive...’ (Spivak 1990: 139).

fatality more 'political inflexion, and relating them to a vision of an alternative – the antithesis of this crisis' (Hay 1995: 68). This can in turn be understood as part of a larger project to develop a more fully articulated theory of the relationship – central within critical social theory – between political economy, human consciousness, subjective action, inter-subjective relationships and social change. And potentially, bringing the 'crisis of hope' to crisis could provide new space for disclosing critical hope itself.

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