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# Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth, (Eds.), "Crisis Under Critique: How People Assess, Transform, and Respond to Critical Situations"

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**Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth, eds.** *Crisis Under Critique: How People Assess, Transform, and Respond to Critical Situations*. Columbia University Press 2022. 456 pp. \$160.00 (Hardcover 9780231204323) \$40.00 (Paperback 9780231204330)

The juxtaposition of critique and crisis in philosophical analysis has become a leitmotif since Reinhart Koselleck's 1959 *Kritik und Krise* and his important article on 'crisis' in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* lexicon project. Especially within critical theory, the intertwined nature of historical and cognitive rupture has generated its own literature. At times this theme can be overworked, but ideally it acts as an inspiration for interventions into current situations that require judgment of status quo, ideological, or otherwise unreflective responses.

*Crisis Under Critique* achieves these purposes admirably. An edited volume from Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth built from a seminar at the Institute for Advanced Study on the theme, *Crisis Under Critique* avoids a diagnostic stance and instead proposes a 'heuristic of crises,' which asks, 'what sort of critique people produce in crisis situations—and these people can be workers, peasants, students, refugees, technocrats, intellectuals, scientists, or the general public' (2). The work of these collected chapters, then, is largely grounded in the narratives and data of acute situations. There is no unifying objective or philosophical problem for these studies, but its heuristic of crises works surprisingly well in lending heft to the individual entries. In addition to an introduction by the editors, the final three essays offer more removed reflection on the critical stance that sums up the mood of the book. Two of these concluding essays are written by each of the editors, and a third is written by Michael Walzer, whose work features regularly in the footnotes of the other chapters.

The book is divided into four sections. 'Social Movements' discusses distinct actions of a critical nature within socio-political and economic crises. 'Intellectual Engagements' looks at scholarly, literary, and institutionalized responses to crisis. 'Affected Communities' considers population-level responsiveness, and the final section of 'Reflexive Perspectives' offers more self-consciously social scientific accounts of critical engagement within crisis. Most of the essays discuss Cold War and contemporary situations, although a few are historical (including Clara Elisabetta Mattei's opening chapter on interwar British worker movements and two fascinating comparative essays respectively discussing W.E.B. Du Bois and Sayyid Quṭb, and Henry David Thoreau and Ta-Nehisi Coates). Every chapter is strong, a goal which is not often achieved in edited collections. I will discuss a few of the contributions that give a sense of the whole.

Several chapters helpfully focus on how crises are identified, made explicit, and responded to by agents affected by them. Gregor Dobler's chapter, 'Becoming Anti-Colonial in Northern Namibia,' lays out five stages for social recognition of a crisis situation that demonstrate the closely intertwined nature of the compartmentalizing effects of crisis and the need to generalize from these personal effects toward the social whole. Aldo Marchesi's chapter looks at neoliberal and technocratic modes of response to two periods of economic crisis in Uruguay, in the 1950s and 1982. Marchesi distinguishes between structural and pragmatic responses that arise depending on conceptions of the social world and existing political possibilities.

Some chapters open new conceptual opportunities. Greta Wagner's 'Helping Refugees in Rural



Germany,’ for instance, introduces the response of compassion to crisis narratives as a motivation for approaches of care. Compassion, however, is usually determined by the immediate expectations of those who receive refugees into their communities, and a more disconnected philanthropy that can wear off over time. In this case, responses to crisis are complex and themselves face crises as exceptional situations embed themselves in ‘normal’ life.

Hae Yeon Choo’s chapter ‘Layoffs Are Murder, but They Are Also Everyday Life’ similarly addresses the interplay between crisis and normalcy that affects individual responses. Workers at Ssangyong Motors who were laid off in the early 2000s as company ownership passed through Shanghai Motors to the Mahindra Group, and through various legal actions, public demonstrations, and protest sought to reinstate their positions. Through this process, which was intermittently successful in its nominal goal, questions arose about the normalcy of work under capitalism: ‘I reflect on the usefulness of crisis as a heuristic,’ she writes, ‘in particular, on how it illustrates the paradox that a crisis is an extraordinary moment of rupture that is also embedded in the ordinary and normal order. While calling something a crisis is a political act that questions conditions and demands immediate actions for repair, it runs a risk of becoming a romantic call to return to the normal order, even when the state of normalcy gave rise to the problem in the first place’ (77).

*Crisis Under Critique* offers significant material for theory, but the book as a whole is sobering in how it identifies the current global situation, and what remains left to do in establishing a critical stance within crisis. The closing chapters by Honneth and Fassin offers a subdued conclusion about crisis as a philosophically interesting phenomenon. Axel Honneth asserts that ‘since [Studs] Terkel conducted his interviews, working conditions in the highly developed countries of the capitalist West have drastically worsened’ (387). In response to this broad assessment applying to a wide variety of sectors and economies, a typology of largely invisible ‘microlevel resistance’ by workers is offered. Didier Fassin’s chapter looks at a more focused situation of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa and conspiratorial thinking that arises from it, a topic that remains relevant in the current global COVID-19 pandemic. Between an invisible response to crisis and the quite visible exacerbation of crisis through conspiracy theories, the volume editors point us to a rather bleak situation. Crises, despite their acuity, also evolve and create new social circumstances that circumscribe the range of popular responses. Sometimes this deepens crises, or transforms them, but in most cases it means that crisis shapes our reasons and critique such that critique is constantly under crisis, as much as crisis can be set under critique.

The most helpful aspect of this book for philosophers and social theorists is the way that it highlights how crisis situations function in relation to agents – whether individual or institutional – and how they produce ‘critical situations,’ that is, situations that in and of themselves transform critique. The volume is also valuable in that it is not beholden to a particular methodology or theory of crisis. Each chapter retains a unique voice that nonetheless mutually builds on other sections of the text.

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