Crisis and critique in Jürgen Habermas's social theory

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Abstract

At a time when ideas of crisis and critique are at the forefront of public discourse, this article seeks to understand moments of crisis vis-à-vis critique as a key feature of critical social theory. It addresses Jürgen Habermas's strong claim that this *relationship* accounts for a 'model of analysis' concerned with grasping the 'diremptions' of social life. To elaborate this reading, the article pays attention to the main problems Habermas identifies in conventional ways of understanding the concepts of 'crisis' and 'critique' in social theory. The aim is to examine the mode in which he reconsiders each of these terms and then reasserts the dialectical link between them. I reconstruct this relationship by taking as cases two of his most substantive works of social theorizing: *The Theory of Communicative Action*, and *Between Facts and Norms*. Based on this interpretation, I suggest that though Habermas contributes to resituating the practice of critique as a communicative translation of objective crisis, he does not adequately account for another key movement: when critique actually initiates, enacts and furthers the moment of crisis.

Keywords

crisis, critical social theory, critique, Habermas, social diremptions

The concepts of 'crisis' and 'critique' are deeply seated in the self-understanding of modern culture (Koselleck, 1988, 2006) and nowadays have returned to the forefront of public discourse. The capitalist financial downturn and the various forms of social criticism currently underway have together imbued the radical meaning of these notions with new heuristic force, now that the fantasy of security and unity has been shattered. This article aims to pay fresh attention to the inner connection between the experience of

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crisis and the practice of critique through a reading of the work of Jürgen Habermas. I shall assess Habermas's strong claim that the *relationship* between crisis and critique lies at the core of his analysis of the 'paradoxes of rationalization processes' in modern societies, and that crisis and critique are dialectically related terms in the study of social life (Habermas, 1988a: 213–22; 1990: 20–1; 2001: 134–7). Interestingly, Habermas has recently reasserted the significance of this link in the context of the financial crisis in the European Union:

> What worries me is the scandalous social injustice that the most vulnerable social groups will have to bear the brunt of the socialized costs for the market failure. The mass of those who are in any case not among the winners of globalization will now have to pick up the tab for the impacts on the real economy of a predictable dysfunction of the financial system. Unlike the shareholders, they will not pay in money values but in the hard currency of their daily existence ... Such tidal shifts change the parameters of public discussion and, in the process, alter the spectrum of political alternatives regarded as possible ... Today, with the end of the Bush era and the bursting of the last neoliberal rhetorical balloons, ... my hope is that the neoliberal agenda will no longer be accepted at face value but will be opened to challenge. The whole program of an unscrupulous subordination of the lifeworld to the imperatives of the market must be subjected to scrutiny. (Habermas, 2012: 102–4)

Besides the poignancy of this socio-political context, my contention in this article is that the relationship between crisis and critique has animated Habermas's social theorizing and his understanding of Critical Theory since his early writings. He shares a central claim of this tradition: that critique interrogates the norms, institutions and practices of society that generate crises and aspires to find emancipatory alternatives to the conditions that block free human existence and damage social relations.

It is from this viewpoint that he assesses Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason and criticizes what he sees as its negative impact on the project of Critical Theory: notably, 'the end of the cooperative division of labor between philosophy and social theory', which Habermas interprets as 'the uncoupling of a critical self-understanding of modernity', provided by philosophical reflection, 'from an empirical observation and descriptive account of its tendencies to social crisis', provided by sociological research (Habermas, 2001: 142). Although the attempt to reconcile the disjunction between philosophical reflection and sociological research lies at the heart of the Habermasian project, it is striking how little systematic attention this aspect of Habermas's work has received. In what follows, I seek to bring new attention to this insufficiently examined theme.[1]

Still there is a wider and more substantive reason to reassess the relationship between crisis and critique more carefully. It has to do with the uneasy position these notions currently occupy in the mainstreams of social theory, where there is growing acceptance of the idea that our global and post-metaphysical world has eroded the societal space in which to accommodate the terms 'crisis' and 'critique' in any meaningful way. For sociologists as diverse as Ulrich Beck and Jean Baudrillard, 'crisis' appears as an obsolete concept, either because it is deemed unable to account for the new realities of a 'global risk society' (Beck, 1996; Beck and Lau, 2005), or simply because it is destined to be

a cultural device in the 'simulacrum' of capitalist self-destruction (Baudrillard, 1993, 1994). Making the case for 'critique' in social theory has also become harder in a context of increasing disregard for normative concerns and predictions concerning the advent of a 'post-critical' age (Latour, 2004). These tendencies, I argue, are to be found in the work of Habermas's strongest antagonist, Niklas Luhmann, who dismisses concern over the relationship between crisis and critique as 'a complaint syndrome [that] signifies little more than the lack of a theory of society' (Luhmann, 1990: 58; see also Luhmann, 1995). Against this conceptual deflation, I propose a reading of Habermas's work which forcefully situates 'crisis' and 'critique' as fundamental notions in the language of social theory.[2] The question we are impelled to ask ourselves is why we need to address crisis through the idea of critique and vice versa, and what happens when these terms are divorced from one other both in our theoretical accounts and in social reality.

The argument of this article is that Habermas envisages a dialectical relationship between crisis and critique on the basis of two complementary goals: one to recover the *capacity of social theory* to combine 'explanatory-diagnostic' analyses and 'normative-practical' standards in addressing the contradictory processes of social reproduction in capitalist modernity; the other to raise awareness of both the socio-technical and moral-practical *capacities of society* to respond to the pathological effects that crisis-ridden processes have over social integration, intersubjective communication and autonomous human life. The point of the Habermasian argument, as I read it, is that bringing the concepts of 'crisis' and 'critique' together is a way of grasping the 'diremptions' of social life (Habermas, 2001).

To elaborate this reading, the first two sections of the article pay attention to the main problems Habermas identifies in conventional ways of understanding the concepts of 'crisis' and 'critique' in social theory. The aim is to examine the mode in which he reconsiders each of these terms and then reasserts the dialectical link between them according to his communicative theory of society. I shall reconstruct and comment on this relationship by taking as cases two of his most substantive works of social theorizing: *The Theory of Communicative Action*, in which I stress the *theoretical relationship* between crisis and critique as immanent to the modern dialectic of steering systems and life-world contexts, and *Between Facts and Norms* in which I draw attention to crisis and critique as *empirical moments* grounded in the communicative and normative structures of democratic polities. Based on this interpretation, I argue that though Habermas contributes to resituating the practice of critique as a communicative translation of objective crisis, he does not adequately account for the other movement that also constitutes this relationship: notably, when critique actually initiates, enacts and furthers the moment of crisis.

The critique of crisis

It is a well-established opinion in the literature that sociology was born out of a widespread consciousness of crisis in modern society (Heilbron, 1995; Seidman, 1983; Strydom, 2000; Wagner, 1994). This account has been very influential in shaping the self-understanding of the discipline to the extent that even Habermas (1991a) has called sociology the 'science of crisis' *par excellence*. Be that as it may, the great importance attributed to crisis as a basic concept of the sociological tradition has brought about its

own problems, not least of which is the reification of the concept of crisis itself. This is clearly the case when sociologists use it to account for any form of social conflict or historical change 'without the need to clarify exactly what is meant' (Holton, 1987: 503). This rhetorical inflation not only divests the concept of its analytical value but also leaves us blind to its contradictory operation in social and political reality. As we know, the concept of crisis can serve to justify normative claims of 'critical' opposition to the current state of society, as much as to bolster the 'conservative' desire for social stability (Habermas, 1994: 49).

Habermas's book *Legitimation Crisis* (1988b) represents a direct attempt to reflect on the adequacy of the concept of crisis as a tool for social analysis. In the light of the crisis of welfare societies of the 1970s, Habermas sought to contest and offer an alternative to conventional accounts of the crisis tendencies in advanced capitalism, notably, the Marxist and the neoconservative ones. A central proposition of this book, the way I read it, is that the analysis of the reality of crisis cannot proceed without a critique of the concept of crisis.

Habermas places the thrust of his argument in the context of the active involvement of post-war European nation-states in productive functions and the 'administrative' stabilization of the economic cycle, aiming to control economic crises and their 'politically intolerable consequences'. The distinctiveness of this post-liberal stage lies in the fact that the apparent success of the political apparatus in filling the functional gaps of the market comes about with the displacement of crisis tendencies into social spheres beyond the borders of the economic system. This means that crisis phenomena arise at different points and circulate through different social spheres, overflowing political control (Habermas, 1988b: 37–40). Within this framework, Habermas thought that neither traditional Marxist theories of economic crisis nor the neoconservative concern with the cultural crisis could properly identify the new dynamics of late capitalism and grasp its pathological consequences over social integration.

On the one hand, Habermas criticizes the Marxist concept of crisis due to its dependence on the premises of the labor theory of value. In its most orthodox version, crisis is the outcome of the materialist dialectic between capital and wage labor, manifesting itself in phenomena such as the tendential fall of the rate of profit and the decline of real wages that drive the system to its collapse. Habermas's objection to this conception has to do, in the first place, with the profound transformation of the 'empirical referents' of the theory of value, such as traditional class politics and the self-regulated market.[3] Second, he considers that the primary focus on the sphere of productive forces as a 'crisis complex' is short-sighted because it does not note that the consequences of crises do not necessarily appear in the sphere of economy and labor (Habermas, 1991b: 342). And, third, he contends that the teleological understanding of crisis overshadows the fact that social systems might develop new structures of social integration through the 'learning capacities' of its members while attempting to cope with systemic problems that threaten the reproduction of society.

On the neoconservative side, Habermas questions the anti-modernist tone that social scientists in the United States and Germany imprinted on the idea of crisis in the 1970s. In their view, the objective malfunctioning of the economy and democratic institutions was secondary to, if not a direct effect of, the problems of moral orientation created by the expansion of hedonism and desire for unlimited self-realization. This would explain

their primary focus on 'the alleged loss of authority of central institutions'—'presented suggestively with key terms like ungovernability, decline in credibility, and loss of legitimacy' (Habermas, 1994: 25). Habermas's contention is that this conception of crisis attributes explanatory primacy to the cultural degeneration of advanced Western societies while blurring the effects of the expansion of functional imperatives into the socio-cultural sphere. In doing so, it favors the strengthening of authority and the renovation of cultural meaning (e.g., religious revival or ethnic nationalism) to the detriment of the role of processes of political will-formation in solving the problems of society as a whole.

These criticisms highlight Habermas's explicit intention to advance a conceptual strategy that takes into account both problems of 'system integration' and 'social integration'. 'What is demanded [of a] social-scientific [concept of crisis]', he writes, 'is a level of analysis at which the *connection* between normative structures and steering problems becomes palpable' (Habermas, 1988b: 7). That is to say, a sociological concept capable of grasping the objective manifestations of crisis—i.e., steering problems in the economic and political spheres—as well as the subjective experience of crisis—i.e., the practical effects that functional mechanisms have on consciousness and social relations. By taking this path, Habermas argued, sociology could no longer rely on a monistic concept of crisis; it had to adopt a plural conception that differentiates the number of crisis tendencies affecting Western capitalist societies. While he identified at least four types of crisis tendencies—economic crisis, rationality crisis, legitimation crisis, and motivational crisis—the primary focus of *Legitimation Crisis* was the pivotal role of problems of legitimacy as a new point of condensation of social contradictions. The key argument is that 'the structures of advanced capitalism can be understood as reaction formations to endemic crisis' insofar as 'the continuing tendency toward disturbance of capitalist growth [is] administratively processed and transferred through the political and into the socio-cultural system'. Thus, if 'politics takes place on the basis of a processed and repressed system crisis', problems of legitimacy emerge induced by the expansion of state policies seeking to secure social integration (Habermas, 1988b: 37–40). Although Habermas recognizes here new potentials for social critique as a practical discourse that problematizes political planning, he also observes a growing de-politicization of crises by means of administrative decisions, technical knowledge, and legal procedures disengaged from democratic politics and public communication.

For now I am less interested in the applicability of Habermas's theorem of crisis in interpreting current circumstances —something no doubt worth attempting— than in understanding the implicit justification he elaborates as to why social theory cannot do without a concept of crisis and standards to critically evaluate the processes of modernization. On a meta-theoretical level, the concept of crisis appears to be necessary for a theory of society that seeks to comprehend the historical development of present social forms in terms of 'learning processes' and rationalization of communicative structures. Habermas's basic assumption is that the formation of any society depends on establishing 'principles of organization' that temporally circumscribe 'ranges of possibility' for its material reproduction and normative integration, and which may be contingently altered as a result of the open processes of societal learning mediated by language. As such, these abstract rules institutionalize domains of social interaction and, for that reason, specify the levels of structural change and conflict that a social system might

tolerate without threatening its whole existence (Habermas, 1988b: 7–17; 1991c: 120–3, 147, 153–4). This indicates that societies have the inner capacity to learn and produce new forms of social integration by mobilizing their technical knowledge and moral-practical competences.[4] In other words, society actualizes its learning capacities every time it needs to formulate solutions (i.e., institutional innovations) to situations in which expectations are disappointed, unseen problems appear, and challenges overload steering capacities.

But it would be too one-sided to rely on this structural determination between socio-cultural learning and crisis to justify the concept of crisis as such. My view is that Habermas's reconstruction of the notion of crisis was intended not only to elaborate better analyses of the problems of the societal reproduction of advanced capitalism (description), but also to retain crisis as a ground from which to criticize and challenge the subordination of the lifeworld to systemic imperatives (normativity). It is in this sense that one could derive from Habermas's theorem of crisis tendencies the important proposition that the concept of crisis is itself an act of communication with critical intentions. In essence, diagnoses and explanations of crisis phenomena are particular forms of communicative codification of the objective problems of social reproduction that seek to make visible at which level, and in what form, they damage social and individual life. In that capacity, the sociological concept of crisis and the empirical analyses derived from it are intended to make sense of the diremptions of social life, that is to say, of 'those rare moments when culture and language fail as resources' and 'we need the repair work of translators, interpreters, therapists' (Habermas, 1991b: 134). This requires, in any event, that we understand the social-scientific knowledge produced about crises as possessing the potential of practical involvement in society's reflexive production of definitions, alternatives, and courses of action to intervene upon itself in response to the problems that threaten social relations. Only then, Habermas seems to suggest, could social theory reclaim the expressive capacity of the concept of *crisis as critique*, in opposition to crisis as a discourse of pure mastery and planning. That is, the capacity to expose 'the stress limits' of our present society and so encourage 'the determination to take up the struggle against the stabilization of a natural-like social system over the heads of its citizens' (Habermas, 1988b: 143). But to recover the notion of crisis as critique, I argue, Habermas also had come to terms with the equivocations of the idea of critique itself, especially as it has been conceived in the tradition of Critical Theory.

The crisis of critique

At least since Kant, critique has been regarded as an anti-dogmatic form of rational knowledge in opposition to tradition, that is, a will to resist established opinions and practices whose validity is merely posited in the world. In this compelling capacity, the practice of critique is, however, constantly exposed to challenges that obstruct the very possibility of a critique of society. These come from anti-intellectual trends that devalue the negative and reflective form of critique in the name of either positive science or political actionism (Adorno, 2005), as much as from idealistic attempts to elevate critique to a 'cult' or 'transcendent power' that stands in absolute opposition to and divorced from social and historical reality (Marx and Engels, 1956). The original claim of the Frankfurt

School's project of Critical Theory was precisely directed to avoid such distortions, seeking 'to work over the coexistence of philosophical construction and empirical research in the theory of society' (Horkheimer, 1989: 33). That is, to advance a practically oriented critique of society that renders it necessary to raise philosophical questions about the conditions of human existence hand-in-hand with systematic analyses of the socio-cultural conditions affecting society and the life of its members.

A key task for this type of critique is to reveal the immanent limits and uncritical premises of the theoretical and practical forms of self-interpretation of capitalist society, on the one hand, and to interrogate the 'objectified' institutional forms of social relations in order to reveal the potentials for rational change and emancipation contained in the conditions of present reality, on the other (Geuss, 1991). Thus understood, 'the goal at which [critical thought] aims, namely the rational state of society, is forced upon [it] by present distress' (Horkheimer, 1982: 216–17). A critical theory of modern society is therefore compelled to attribute to the moment of crisis a significant amount of attention. It has to make *conceptual* room to analyze crisis tendencies as empirical manifestations of the contradictions and problems of the social system, for they help to reveal the structural limits of social institutions and the transitory nature of our images of society. And yet critical theory also needs to allow *normative* scope to render these crises experientially meaningful in the name of other ways of life and social transformation, insofar as they place a great burden on people's existence (Benhabib, 1986: 141–2).

Be that as it may, the conviction of the early period of Critical Theory concerning the productive cooperation between philosophical thought and sociological knowledge would later be abandoned amid the destruction of war and the collapse of the liberal culture of the Enlightenment. In his own critique of early and contemporary positivism, Habermas (1987) shared many of the misgivings that Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: xi–xiv) had raised against the scientific objectification of knowledge in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, he rejected the identification of the universalistic claim of rationality with an ideological principle of domination that cannot be transcended. What's more, Habermas objected to their decision to rule out scientific insights from philosophical reflection as the only solution to the problem of preserving critique against the subordination of social sciences to administrative power and the 'anti-critical' structure of public opinion in capitalist societies. The analytical inflation of the critique of instrumental reason, as Habermas sees it, leads to a profound 'crisis' of the idea of critique. This crisis may be summarized as manifesting on two levels. On one level, if rationalization is seen as a purely 'self-destructive process', *social theory* is divested of its capacity to conceptualize and analyze the 'ambivalence' of socio-cultural modernization, for it is unable to differentiate the 'evolutionary achievements' of modern society from its pathological deformations and contradictions. On the other, while leveling the image of a 'totally administered society', critique deprives *society* of its competence and resources to deal with problems because 'the "diremptions" produced by instrumental reason, permeating all of society, cannot be overcome from within society itself' (Habermas, 2001: 140). As a consequence, critique ends up being an epistemologically stagnated idea and a normatively futile practice.

Since Critical Theory could no longer ground its 'critique of society' in any appeal to reason within society, it had to abandon the 'dialectic of enlightenment' that Hegel had

discovered in the *Philosophy of Right*, i.e. the critical self-understanding of 'the ambiva-
lent expression of reason' in modern society and the empirical examination of 'its ten-
dencies to social crisis' (Habermas, 2001: 137, 142). Habermas recognizes here the
significance of Hegel's science of right for having developed a model of reflection tai-
lored to 'the experience of the negativity of a divided life' (Habermas, 1990: 29). This
means a style of philosophical critique intended to grasp 'both the antagonistic forms in
which social disintegration appeared, and the historical developments and mechanisms
through which the overcoming of these contrary tendencies, and the solutions of these
stubborn conflicts, became comprehensible' (Habermas, 2001: 137; see also 1990:
21–9; 1988a: 215–17). In pursuing this reading, Habermas seeks to demonstrate that
in conditions of modernity, philosophical critique cannot claim a view of the world as
a whole; it is somehow obliged to become an empirically oriented social theory.

Even so, Habermas is not satisfied with the idea of grounding his social theory and the
concept of critique in a simple methodological return to Hegelian philosophy.[5] For the
task of re-establishing a cooperative division of labor between philosophy and sociology
still faces a significant challenge, namely, to restore the critical *capacity of social theory*
to explain and normatively assess the paradoxes of modernization processes, as well as
awareness of the *capacity of society* to act upon itself in response to the problems that
threaten social integration and human life. In order to address both issues, Habermas
finds in the concept of 'communicative reason' the most suitable philosophical founda-
tion for his social theory and, consequently, for his understanding of social critique. In
The Theory of Communicative Action, the argument runs that for a theory of society to
rationally validate its claims, it has to begin from a post-metaphysical ground: the inner
rationality of communication oriented to reaching understanding that characterizes the
everyday contexts of human relations and actions, and from the conditions of decentered
understanding of the world and plural forms of life that constitute the reality of complex
modern societies. This presupposes, then, that social theory has to tailor its basic con-
cepts and methods, *philosophically*, to the universalistic and pragmatic presuppositions
of linguistic communication, and, *sociologically*, to the analysis of the historical devel-
opment of different forms of rationality in the practical organization of spheres of every-
day social action (Habermas, 1991a: 1–7).

Within this framework, the potential for critique is not placed in a source external to
society (i.e., individual consciousness) but it is conceptualized as already inscribed in
everyday communicative practices that require discursive justification. Critique is there-
fore a practical competence common to all social and individual actors involved in inter-
subjective exchanges, though the development and exercise of this competence may well
be blocked at any point due to social and historical conditions. This is a strong reason
why social theory itself requires openness to questioning the very symbolic structures
upon which it relies, so as to help unblock the potential for contesting the norms and
actions that sustain a damaging form of life (Habermas, 1991a: 400–3). The core of the
Habermasian argument is that the practice of critique becomes fully immersed in both
the architecture of social theory and the communicative structure of society right from
the beginning, for 'critical inquiry does not seek to achieve specific ends but rather to
bring about those social conditions in which its insights and proposals might be validated
or falsified by citizens themselves' (Lafont, 2008: 174).

After shedding some light in this section on Habermas's diagnosis of the so-called crisis of critique and his attempt to refashion social criticism within the contours of communicative action, and after examining in the previous section his sociological reconstruction of the concept of crisis for a diagnosis and critique of late capitalism, we are in a better condition to return to the point with which I initiated this article: Habermas's strong claim that the *relationship* between the ideas of crisis and critique accounts for a social-theoretic 'model of analysis' concerned with grasping social dir-emptions. To this end, I shall comment on this issue taking as examples two of his most substantive works of social theorizing: *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *Between Facts and Norms*.

Translating crisis into critique

One of the central aims of *The Theory of Communicative Action* is to 'make possible a conceptualization of the social-life context that is tailored to the paradoxes of modernity' (Habermas, 1991a: xlii; 1991b: 396). That is, a form of social theorizing that restores to critical theory the capacity to combine 'explanatory-diagnostic' analyses of crisis-ridden processes of societal reproduction with a 'normative-practical' interest in defending autonomous forms of life and the capacity of society to act upon itself. As is well known, Habermas's analytical strategy is based on understanding modern social life as consti-tuted by two different domains of social coordination—symbolically structured life-worlds and self-regulated systems. That is to say, the pre-theoretical knowledge and everyday experience of acting individuals, and the reality of abstract structures and insti-tutionalized norms that organize social interaction but which are not immediately grasp-able for actors. The implicit demand underlying this distinction is that the social theorist should always hold both moments together.[6] The constitutive gap between system and lifeworld allows the realization of the paradoxical fact that the unity of modern society lies precisely in the disjunction between these domains (Habermas, 1991b: 152, 155).[7] And it also opens an analytical path to observe the interference of systemic imperatives (i.e., monetization and bureaucratization) in the domains of social interaction, and permits an assessment of the extent to which they become damaging, and, therefore, an object of practical critique.

The importance of this conceptualization of society is that it leads Habermas to develop a particular approach to crisis tendencies:

> In modernized societies disturbances in the material reproduction of the lifeworld take the form of stubborn systemic disequilibria; the latter either take effect directly as crisis or they call forth pathologies in the lifeworld … These systemic disequilibria become crises only when the performances of economy and state remain manifestly below an established level of aspiration and harm symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld by calling forth conflicts and reactions of resistance there. It is the societal components of the lifeworld that are directly affected by this. Before such conflicts threaten core domains of social integration, they are pushed to the periphery. But when steering crises are successfully intercepted by having recourse to lifeworld resources, pathologies arise in the lifeworld. (Habermas, 1991b: 385)

Such a theorization of crisis situations in terms of 'lifeworld pathologies', I contend, is crucial for an understanding of the dialectics between crisis and critique within the Habermasian framework. As Seyla Benhabib (1986: 224–53) has rightly argued, it indicates two possible approaches to explaining problems of societal reproduction: 'system-objective crisis' and 'social-lived crisis'. The former describes the objective appearance of contradictions and structural-material disturbances at the systemic level of society, while the latter addresses the distortion of the subjective and social experience of individuals who suffer the effects of functional problems and channel them through their needs, demands, and dissatisfactions. The analytical difference between these types of crisis calls for both empirical analyses and critical understanding of the disruptions of the communicative fabric of social relations. In fact, this is the domain against which situations of crisis may gain public visibility and their consequences can be normatively discussed and measured.

So if the concept, experience, and consequences of crisis phenomena in capitalist societies move at the rhythm of the disjunction between system and lifeworld, as Habermas claims, it is possible to argue that the concept and practice of critique sit precisely in the space of that division. One could suppose, then, that by standing in the middle, critique becomes the arbiter of the dialectical dispute between system and lifeworld. Habermas's methodological formulation indeed makes room for such a problematic conclusion to emerge. However, he is convinced that by reconstructing critique as a practice dependent on 'the same structures that make it possible to reach an understanding', critique may lay claim to nothing more than the resources provided by everyday discourse (Habermas, 1991a: 121). Thus, within the contours of communicative action, the social potential of the practice of critique acquires a special connotation in capitalist societies due to the propensity of crises to be 'excluded from the realm of situation interpretation' by technical management and expert mechanisms of steering (Habermas, 1991b: 385). For that reason, critique may well undertake the significant task of a *discursive formulation of crisis*, in the sense of providing conceptual form, explanatory substance, and normative weight to the diremptions of social life.

Because crisis situations affect the parameters of public discussion and scrutinize power in unforeseen ways, the critical theorist becomes a 'virtual participant' in the contexts of everyday social action who can prejudge 'neither the conceptual tool for diagnosing crises nor the way of overcoming them' (Habermas, 1990: 348). Instead, critique is tied to crisis much more in the mode of an *act of translation* of the objective language of systemic problems into practical problems of social integration and the language of human suffering. Or to put it in strictly Habermasian terms, critique relates to crisis by way of alternating back and forth between a 'propositional attitude' and a 'performative attitude'. In the former case, critique relates to crisis as a second-order observer who in diagnostic terms describes and explains the abstract mechanisms of crisis tendencies in society that are not immediately graspable for individuals; in the case of the performative attitude, critique approaches crisis at the pre-theoretical level of a committed actor who is subject to the crisis and delivered up to it. By keeping some symmetry between both attitudes, observer and participant, the critical inquiry may help to perform an important role: changing the framework in which crisis is publicly discussed and thought about.[8]

It is in this sense that one could argue that for Habermas's social theory *there is no critique without crisis*: namely, that without objective situations of disturbance, of fissures unfolding in the consistency of things, the practice of critique can hardly begin; and yet without the communicative formulation of critique the experience of crisis cannot come into sight. However, one should not presume that between crisis and critique there is unbroken unity, since the translation of one term into the other can always fail; for instance, when social criticism distances itself from the perplexities of the world in pure subjectivity or moral denunciation without object (i.e., critique without crisis), or when our actual responses to crisis preclude the possibility of political argument and introduce normative considerations (i.e., crisis without critique). In contemporary capitalist societies the suspension of the trajectory from crisis to critique has too many expressions to be discussed here. Suffice it to say that the response to the discontinuity that crises introduce (especially in the economic and political spheres) is often determined by the successful absorption and stabilization of crisis as the normal condition. Within this context, critique, though accepted, is often jeopardized by a de-politicized economy of therapeutic and technocratic discourses that frame crisis in the language of 'no alternatives' and turn public debate into a de-socialized monologue. Still this should not prevent us from identifying a powerful motive for critique to combat the reification of crisis as well as the domestication of critique itself.

At any rate, if the theoretical critique of society is grounded in everyday communicative practices, as Habermas maintains, the relationship between crisis and critique cannot remain a constellation of concepts or 'model of analysis' for the social theorist only. It should also be conceived and studied as an empirical relationship that takes shape when members of society engage in problematizing latent conflicts, raise concrete normative claims and call attention to the emergent consequences of crisis-ridden processes. It is only in this way that social critique may force changes in the parameters of public discussion and expose the limits and rifts of the institutions and norms that sustain social and individual modes of life.

Turning crisis into a political problem

Earlier I argued that one of the aims underlying Habermas's attempt to theorize moments of crisis vis-à-vis critique was to restore a sense of the socio-technical and moral-practical *capacities of society* to act upon itself in response to the problems that crisis-ridden processes produce over social integration and human existence. In his book *Between Facts and Norms*, this issue gains renewed attention in relation to the institutional procedures and normative conditions that allow social criticism to penetrate the communicative operation of the political system in modern democracies. Habermas addresses this question informed by what he sees is a constitutive diremption between 'legality' and 'legitimacy', that is to say, a gap between the legal institutionalization of collective decisions and the citizens' practical involvement in shaping those norms through public deliberation. If we attend to his diagnosis of the reality of contemporary constitutional democracies, the existence of this gap is embodied in the participatory deficits of political decision-making processes that undermine the legitimacy of the normative order that sustain life in common.

The question, as Thomassen (2007) apropos asks, is whether this gap can ever be closed and, I would add, what are its implications for the purposes of our understanding of crisis and critique? Through the Habermasian lenses, the existence of this hiatus between 'legality' and 'legitimacy' is evidence of the imperfection of democracy and therefore justifies the struggle for bringing both moments together in the realization of a 'system of rights'. However, it is the very impossibility of closing this gap that assures democracy's vitality and openness as an incomplete project whose principles may be always re-enacted. After all, as Habermas recalls, 'the constitutional state does not represent a finished structure but a delicate and sensible —above all fallible and revisable— enterprise' (1997: 384). It is by recognizing this ambivalence that it is possible to grant normative and practical space for social criticism and, hence, make room to reconsider its relationship with crisis. Let me develop this interpretation further.

Habermas defends the thesis that 'in virtue of its internal relation to law, politics is responsible for problems that concern society as a whole'. Ultimately, 'it carries on the tasks of social integration at a reflexive level when other action systems are no longer up to the job' (p. 385). The issue is that this problem-solving capacity may, and often does, 'prevail at the citizens' expense ... in a manner that bypasses the communicative power of the public' (pp. 351–2). This is clearly the case of today's austerity measures designed by policy experts and implemented by governments on a global scale which aim to control the uncontrollable waves of financial excess and repair market failure. Under such pressing conditions, critique is often framed as ill-timed and a luxury good. The underlying conflict is that while the effects of this technical mode of decision-making are felt as real fissures in the flesh of our daily existence, the logic of its practical operation runs disembedded from mechanisms of will-formation and the informal networks of public opinion.

The key point of the Habermasian argument, as I read it, is that for a complex society to act upon itself in situations of crisis, it is simply insufficient to rely only on 'an executive system that can act for the whole and influence the whole'; for practical and normative reasons, it also requires 'a reflexive center, where it builds up a knowledge of itself in a process of self-understanding' (Habermas, 1990: 357). The unspecialized character of the public sphere would play precisely the role of a perceptive and reflexive 'warning system with sensors throughout society' (Habermas, 1997: 359). This is so because, by having recourse to its direct connection to the private experiences and life stories of individuals—the entry point of problems of social integration—the public sphere has the capacity to thematize crises and social conflicts in ways that give shape to 'crisis consciousness' and the construction of public opinion around the reality of these problems.

There is no point in trying to idealize the role and capacities of the public sphere. The issue is rather to maintain a realistic sense in which, even if public opinion does not have the executive capacity of political decision, it does bear the communicative power of 'influence' that might break society's conventional modes of operation and introduce renovating impulses into the system's inertial *modus operandi*, i.e. 'communicative power' becoming 'political power'. On this point, Habermas writes:

> [I]n periods of mobilization, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance between civil society and the political system

then shifts ... In a perceived crisis situation, the actors in civil society thus far neglected in our scenario can assume a surprisingly active and momentous role. In spite of a lesser organized complexity and a weaker capacity of action ... at the critical moments of an accelerated history, these actors get the chance to reverse the normal circuits of communication in the political system and the public sphere. In this way they can shift the entire system's mode of problem solving. (Habermas, 1997: 379–81)

This could allow us to advance the argument that if in democratic societies the experience of crisis comes potentially impaired with the practice of critique, it is not by means of the dialectical skills of the social philosopher. Rather, it occurs as the contingent result of the citizens' engagement in challenging established constellations of power and reversing the normal circuits of communication in the public arena through public deliberation, social movements, and acts of civil disobedience. The fact that the relationship between crisis and critique is not a purely theoretical business is demonstrated when the subterranean communicative power of social criticism is able to transform crisis into a politically relevant problem. That is to say, when the practical discourse of critique becomes involved in the struggle of making crisis situations visible as lived experiences, but also in the process of demanding public justifications of the norms, policies and institutional practices that sustain a 'hegemonic form of life' and which are seen to be concomitant with the systemic problems revealed by the crisis in the first place (White and Farr, 2012: 44). Henceforth critique becomes instrumental in changing the parameters of public discussion and political decision-making, and in displacing the horizon of what is commonly accepted as desirable and conceivable as possible.

At this point, it begins to become clear that, from the perspective of Habermas's discursive approach to democratic politics, the experience of crisis cannot unfold before the objective conditions distressing social life acquire some kind of intelligible expression in language in a reflective manner. Put in this way, critique may become a practice that, in the mode of a performative effect, introduces crisis into the realm of the social by means of suspending the validity claims of forms of representation and justification that sustain the conditions of the present. However, his social-theoretic reconstruction of the dialectical relationship between these terms falls short of addressing this issue adequately. To be sure, Habermas stresses that critique operates in the field of crisis, namely, that critique is the communicative translation of a crisis rather than simply its indexical representation. Still, he does privilege a one-sided view of critique as a temporal predicate of crisis, namely, a subjective response boosted by objective crisis.

What I intend to argue here is that the dialectical relationship between the experience of crisis and the practice of critique should not be reduced to a flow that moves in one direction only, from crisis to critique, for crisis is not the fixed grammar which dictates the rhythm of social critique. In a subtle manner, critique too manages to rearrange this grammar so as to use it 'to bring about a real state of emergency' (Benjamin, 1992: 248). This is why we should also need to consider the inverse movement from critique to crisis. In this case, the issue is that critique does not seek to overcome crisis but actually produces and preserves crisis as the moment of its own realization: it initiates, enacts and furthers this moment.[9] Understood in this way, the practice of critique does not simply translate the abstract language of systemic problems into the language of intersubjective

experience and reveal human suffering. It also assists in the task of transgressing the frozen images, silent behaviors, and accepted practices that sustain the state of the present by means of producing a gap in the crust of social and political reality. Critique thus performs the hermeneutic work of unfolding an actual fissure which may encourage the entry of 'other' forms of subjectivity and the opportunity for concrete transformations. To make this clear, my argument is that critique may well be a reflexive practice encouraged by the real conflicts and sufferings disclosed by crisis situations, but it cannot be reduced to a reactive position. The 'power of critique' (Forst, 2011) has also to do with raising normative claims that, while putting into question the truth claims of practices, discourses and institutions, may bring crisis about and create space for imagining new possibilities. It is in this sense that I would maintain that critique also occurs in the mode of crisis (de Man, 1983).

This capacity of critique to dislocate present social and cultural arrangements, however, is not restricted to the form of a rational discourse aiming truth. It is in fact deeply entangled with aesthetic language and expressive forms of action whose core is the assemblage of qualitatively different ways of speaking, alternative modes of living and acting, and plural forms of understanding. And ultimately this supposes one bears in mind critique's inner connection with time. This is not simply about the temporal proximity between critique and crisis, or the differential duration, speed and rhythm of one and the other, but rather about the fact that this relationship does take place in and through the form of a temporal disjunction. For indeed critique has the capacity to disrupt lineal temporal experience by making intelligible in the present the non-contemporaneous of the contemporaneous condition.

Conclusion

Although the concepts of crisis and critique are ubiquitous in public speech, they are hardly ever the object of serious consideration by sociologists in order to find out what these notions mean and how we have come to think about what they really are. Allusion to these concepts is rather linked to attitudes of rhetorical inflation as well as of analytical deflation, which treat crisis and critique as absolute notions divorced from social and political reality. This article has attempted to address this problematic trying to elucidate Habermas's strong claim that these are inescapable and dialectically related terms in the study of modern social life. The point, however, has not been about attributing any transcendental value to these concepts but instead reconstructing them as fields of semantic struggles that both register and embody real social-historical conflicts and transformations.

At the heart of the need to comprehend moments of crisis vis-à-vis critique, there is the commitment of Habermas's social theory to investigate the actual fissures that constitute the institutions, norms and practices that sustain our forms of life. This translates into the task of grasping the forms in which 'social diremptions' produced by capitalist modernity appear alongside the socio-historical mechanisms and normative resources through which these tendencies may be explained, evaluated and transcended from within society.

Certainly, crises may reveal the systemic limits of social and political institutions and so work as accelerators of critique, which, in turn, may become a communicative formulation of the experience of objective crisis and its lifeworld consequences. What emerges from this reading of Habermas's social theory is an understanding of the practice of critique as a mode of 'crisis diagnosis' that renders these events experientially meaningful. In doing so, critique may shape public discourse, contributing to transform crises into politically relevant problems. Yet we must bear in mind that crises are also relevant in that they might halt critique when dislodged from the realm of interpretation and contexts of everyday social action through technical mechanisms of management, or even because the subjective freedom of critique detaches itself from the objectivity of crisis problems in reckless optimism or despair. Seen in this light, our understanding of the relationship between crisis and critique cannot remain a constellation of *theoretical concepts* for the social theorist only, it should also be conceived and studied as *empirical moments* grounded in the communicative and normative structures of democratic polities.

The complexity of this relation though is lost if we restrict critique to a mere subjective response to objective crisis. The relationship between crisis and critique does not move in one direction only, for critique also has the productive competence to initiate crisis when it calls into question the very symbolic, temporal and normative orders upon which it draws. Should the connection between crisis and critique be formulated in this way, we may be able to interpret the relationship not as a causal determination but as a series of displacements in which each term may register, bring about, and turn into the other. And this approach, I contend, is an important, but often missed, addition to the politics of critique that Habermas seeks to theorize and comprehend. The fact that Habermas does not give enough attention to this second movement (from critique to crisis) makes highly debatable how politically effective is the 'talking cure' which he optimistically advocates (Cook, 2001). And yet, to put things in perspective, it is certain at least in one substantive respect, namely, that free communication remains a 'force of production' in democratic societies and a fertile normative basis for a critical social theory.

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Notes

1. As far as I am aware of, the most systematic account to date on the relationship between crisis and critique in Critical Theory is Seyla Benhabib's book *Critique, Norm and Utopia* (1986). For occasional and instructive commentary on crisis and critique in social theory, see Brown (2005), Brunkhorst (2011), Delanty (2011), Eder (1993), Kompridis (2006), Strydom (2000), and Wagner (2010).

2. Arguably, in the French tradition of critical sociology, Pierre Bourdieu's work could also be read as providing conceptual and empirical insights for understanding the relationship between crisis and critique; see Bourdieu (1977: 167–71). In a different vein, Wagner (2010) has recently read Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of critique as a novel approach to the connection between these terms. For an attempt to read Habermas's and Bourdieu's social theories together, see Susen (2007).

3. Among other factors, Habermas highlights transformations in the relations of production due to the pacification of class antagonism through welfare-state policies and the capitalist expansion of material wealth (Habermas 1988a: 195–6; 1988b: 37–9, 55; 1991b: 348–55).

4. The introduction of a theory of evolutionary learning was Habermas's original solution to the methodological limits imposed by historical materialism as the framework for a theory of society. The introduction of 'learning processes' was intended to overcome the monistic concern with the expansion of productive-technical forces, which relegated the rationalization of normative structures and the development of moral-practical capacities mediated by language to secondary place. For critical assessments of Habermas's solution, see Eder (1999) and Strydom (1987).

5. Despite Habermas's reconsideration of Hegel's model of critique and crisis, he strongly criticizes it for favoring a mystical image of anticipated reconciliation in which social diremptions are rationalized into the logic of a total and complete world-historical spirit that lurches forward, leaving critique in the awkward position of a contemplative second-order practice (i.e., the philosopher as therapist), divorced from the concrete intersubjective experience of social actors, and without normative power to contest a world that negates human freedom and dignity (Habermas, 1988a: 216–17).

6. The debate about the 'quasi-transcendental' character of the distinction of system/lifeworld in Habermas's theory has been immense and it is not my intention to discuss it here. For early criticisms of this distinction, see Honneth and Joas (1991). For an instructive overview of the controversy, see Outhwaite (2009: 106–17).

7. Habermas's thesis of the ambivalence of modernization processes consists of the idea that while the growing complexity of society does involve the formation of autonomous domains of coordination according to purposive rationality and functional imperatives (e.g., market exchange), this does not generate *ipso facto* reification and domination effects in individual consciousness or social life as a whole. Indeed, he maintains that modern rationalization also consists in the cultural differentiation of domains of knowledge, moral norms, and expressive practices that expand the range of options and learning capacities that individuals and collectives have for everyday action (Habermas, 1991a: 372–99; 1991b: 382–3).

8. At the basis of this communicative capacity of critique lies the priority Habermas gives to the argumentative use of language (oriented to mutual and rational understanding) over other forms such as poetic, aesthetic or symbolic language. In doing so, he fails to account for the capacity of critique to invoke aesthetic-expressive forms of action that articulate new perspectives and disclose previously unknown possibilities (Cooke, 2012; White and Farr, 2012). This has important implications for the understanding of the relationship between critique and crisis as I will suggest later.

9. The capacity of critique to produce crisis is a thread that runs through Reinhart Koselleck's classic study on the rise of the modern world, *Kritik und Krise*. The main thesis is that the critique the bourgeoisie practiced against the Absolutist State brought about the very crisis that

marked the revolutionary birth of political modernity, and yet the reality of the link between these moments remained hidden behind images of historical progress. Despite the conservative tone of Koselleck's deconstruction of Enlightenment utopianism, he shares Habermas's concern about the moralization of critique and the de-politicization of crisis as threats to public life. The fact that today's neo-conservatives seek to capitalize on the critique–crisis relationship — as their critique of existing institutional arrangements is hooked on the idea of creating a sense of real crisis propitious for their own agenda (Klein, 2008)— demonstrates that the rather delicate nature of this relation remains a troubling question for us.

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