

# On the Reflexivity of Crises: Lessons from Critical Theory and Systems Theory

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## **Abstract**

Our main goal in this paper is to offer a sociological concept of crisis that, defined as the expected yet non-linear outcome of the internal dynamics of modern societies, builds on the synergies between critical theory and systems theory. We contend that, notwithstanding important differences, both traditions concur in addressing crises as a *form of self-reproduction* of social systems as much as a *form of engagement* with the complexities and effects of such processes of reproduction. In order to make our comparison exhaustive, we explore critical and systems theories' notions of crisis at three levels: their *conceptual* delimitation of crises, their *methodological* proposals to empirically observe crises, and their *normative* attempts to contribute to their resolution. As crises remain a distinctive structural feature of the social world and a rich source of knowledge about it, *reflexivity* must be seen as a crucial form of engagement with the negative expressions of social life itself.

## **Keywords:**

Crisis, Critical Theory, Systems Theory, Contradictions, Paradoxes, Reflexivity

## **Introduction**

After the events of the financial crisis of 2008, social and political theorists have sought to reinvigorate the theorizing of crisis phenomena in contemporary world society (Cordero, 2017; Fraser, 2014; Jessop, Young & Scherrer, 2015; Kjaer, Teubner and Febbrajo, 2011; Kjaer and Olsen, 2016; Mascareño, Goles and Ruz, 2016; Mckenzie, 2011; Milstein, 2015; Walby, 2015). Despite customary criticisms on the ubiquity of the concept of crisis in public debate and on the historicist commitments of crisis narratives in social analysis (Roitman, 2014), we contend that crises remain a distinctive structural feature of modern societies as much as a rich source of knowledge of the dynamics of social life. Indeed, if anything, these reflections acquire momentum and become even more necessary in the context of the UK's recent decision to leave the European Union.

In this context, this paper seeks to reconstruct and compare the contributions to our understandings of crises made by two sociological traditions: critical theory and systems theory. Our main argument is that, notwithstanding important differences,

both traditions concur in developing *conceptual, methodological* and *normative* resources for an approach that addresses crises as a *form of self-reproduction* of social systems as much as a *form of engagement* with the complexities and effects of such processes of reproduction.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, critical theorists emphasize crisis tendencies as manifestations of the *structural contradictions* of capitalist development and its “imperative of accumulation”, whose abstract logic overflows both technical and democratic control. Here crisis is an object of concern not only due to the negative impact that systemic problems have on everyday experience, but also because normative responses themselves may trigger social-cultural pathologies and the normalization of their consequences (Cordero, 2014). On the other hand, systems theorists understand crises as a consequence of *self-referential excesses* of social systems and their “imperative of connectivity”, which may lead to the non-reflexive reproduction of previously successful activities. Here crisis is an object of concern insofar as the repetition and expansion of “more of the same” prevents social communication from variation and instead produces indifference towards its wider societal effects (Mascareño, Goles and Ruz, 2016).

Even if the competing social ontologies that underpin critical theory (human intersubjectivity) and system theory (social complexity) underscore the difficulties of trying to create a theoretical synthesis between these two traditions (Fischer-Lescano, 2012, 2013; Mascareño and Chernilo, 2007): cross fertilization is justified by the fact that both theories conceptualize societal dynamics in terms of *contradictions and paradoxes that eventually lead to crisis situations*. Within this general framework, we argue that both *human reflexivity* and *systemic reflexivity* can be understood as complementary social mechanisms of dealing with crises in a dual sense: on the one hand, they are a means to account for the self-destructive tendencies of social dynamics; on the other hand, they are a strategy for designing responses that seek to set limits over autonomized social processes. The notion of crisis here depends on a conceptualization of society as a domain of relations whose unity is never achieved through a coherent or stable principle. Instead, contradictory imperatives and structural inconsistencies remain in a state of latency in the working of social institutions: differently put, social life reproduces itself on condition of the impossibility of achieving a definite state of perfect harmony (Cordero, 2017). Crises are neither a mechanical effect of predetermined conditions nor the definitive cause of further developments; rather, they offer an exceptional, contradictory and paradoxical opportunity for both human subjects and social systems to reflexively come to terms with the social products of past and current human practices and systemic operations.

Our article is organized in three parts. The first two reconstruct the concept of crisis in critical theory and systems theory respectively. The goal of this reconstruction is to show that for either tradition crisis situations call for reflexive mechanisms in a threefold sense. Firstly, conceptually, crises are the *mode of appearance* of structural contradictions and paradoxes: they allow us to reflect on the unobserved condition of excess through which a social system produces its own existence by also challenging, damaging social life and destructing some of its preconditions. Secondly, methodologically, crisis is a means by which society turns itself into an *object of reflection*, thereby requiring a thoughtful observation of the objective conditions of crises in combination with actors’ experiences in a social situation. Thirdly,

normatively, crisis is a condition that stimulates *social interventions* as a way of dealing with obstacles and complex expectations about lived experience; it forces actors *and* systems to manage temporary solutions that eventually will reinstate disappointed expectations and reproduce social order under new forms.

The last section brings these levels of analysis together. It builds on the synergies between critical theory and systems theory by focusing explicitly on the role of reflexivity and, in so doing, we place our discussion of crises in relation to the more recent “reflexive turn” in contemporary sociology. We finish by arguing for a de-centered understanding of crisis phenomena that treats them as *structural* dynamics of self-reproduction and open-ended processes of *normative* self-transformation.

### **Crisis in Critical Theory**

In the post-Hegelian tradition of critical theory, crises play a fundamental role in the ‘diagnosis’ of systemic problems and the critical self-understanding of capitalist modernity. Despite the important differences that exist between authors who may be identified under this label (i.e., Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, among others), most of them coincide in that ‘the goal at which [critical theory] aims, namely the rational state of society, is forced upon [it] by present distress’ (Horkheimer, 1982: 216-17). Put differently, this means that the empirical observation of social crises is a fundamental condition for both the conceptual explanation of processes of societal reproduction and the normative assessment of the social conditions that block and enable human autonomy and dignity.

Conceptually, crises are understood as immanent to the unruly tendencies in a society organized around market principles and which transform all social relations into commodity-exchange relations: the capitalist mode of production inevitably leads to the compulsive expansion of productive forces through increase of labor power, division of labor, changes in regulations, technological innovations, etc. (Clark, 1994; Polanyi, 2001). Crises are thus *structural features*, rather than cyclical ‘accidents’ in the otherwise normal operation of the capitalist mode of production: crises are neither caused by the moral wickedness of single individuals (e.g., the greed of bankers in a financial crisis) nor can they be definitively overcome by the administrative means of State policy measures (Brunkhorst, 2011; Marx, 1969; Habermas, 1988). Crisis tendencies are inscribed in the very way social relations are systemically organized and, crucially, they remain invisible until the crisis breaks.

For critical social theory, crises are the *de facto* modus operandi of a society in which commodity relations prevail. First, because the capitalist logic of endless expansion leads to systemic excesses that destabilize the accumulation cycle and induce crises on a regular basis; second, because this logic entails extra-economic mechanisms (i.e., dispossession, exploitation and class divisions) that trigger a compulsive movement of transgression of capitalism’s own normative principles (i.e., free, equal and fair exchange) and of all social and moral limits that may jeopardize the process of accumulation (Marx, 1976: 209, 341-4). This is why the capitalist mode of production is driven to stabilize these mechanisms in various institutional forms (i.e., the State, the educational system, legal frameworks), as much as to find creative alternatives to overstep what limits accumulation while reconfiguring the grammars of social life. In so doing, capitalist society is able to survive not despite but by virtue of what tears it apart (Adorno, 2008).

If this is the case, then crises become a critical moment for theoretical research, for in these moments we are in a better position to grasp the ‘stuff’ of which the social world is made of, how its differences and relations are created, and how it actually works. Their outbreak would bring into sight the ‘real movement’ of capitalist development, by both *revealing* the conflicts and *magnifying* the lines of tension that exist within capitalist society. The conceptual challenge for critical theory, therefore, is dual: producing knowledge that clarifies the internal connection between capitalist accumulation (self-production of value) and crisis (disruption of the accumulation cycle) and then exploring the structural limits that capitalism transgresses in every crisis. In doing this, reflexivity becomes crucial. Since critical theory has to connect the knowledge on the objective dimension of crises with the concrete experiences of actors (the social-lived crisis), it relies on the possibility of *reflexive learning*; namely the discourse through ‘which we thematize practical validity claims that have become problematic or have been rendered problematic through institutionalized doubt, and redeem or dismiss them on the basis of arguments’ (Habermas, 1988: 15). As long as crises expose the fundamental rifts of society, they are a privileged evolutionary moment for reflexive learning that is discursively organized and is able to set new limits to the autonomous functioning of social systems. Crises thus elicit moments of social criticism —i.e., reflexive negation— of the self-affirmative operation of the capitalist logic of expansion and its extra-economic mechanisms of justification. This negativity not only exposes the inherent fragility of the pillars of capitalist exchange but also ‘enables reflection and deliberation: the *dissociation*, *dissolution*, *deconstruction* and *differentiation* of concrete recognition and perception’ (Brunkhorst, 2014: 18). It is from this critical condition that a reflexive reconstruction of societal problems may actually emerge.

Crucially, crises are not an unequivocal sign towards the imminent collapse of capitalism. The concept refers instead to ‘a particular situation of condensation of contradictions’, with its own ‘rhythm’ and whose outcomes cannot be a priori determined but have to be historically observed (Poulantzas, 2008: 299-300). In our view, they also have to be reflexively confronted by dealing with its double-sided structure: crises are a conflictual product of immanent contradictions of capitalism *and* an opportunity for transforming the nature of institutions, practices, and norms that produce social domination. In fact, Marx himself rejected the idea of formulating a general theory of social crisis and was much more interested in elucidating the *complexity* of crisis phenomena in modern societies —when ‘everything seems pregnant with its contrary’ (Marx, 2000: 368). We may even argue that Marx’s concept of crisis does not refer to a single event but focuses instead on a threefold movement that a critical theory of society has to differentiate in social reality itself: (i) crisis as the mode of appearance of structural contradictions (i.e. the conflictual form of social relations) that reveal themselves when the accumulation cycle is severely disrupted, (ii) crisis as the mean to achieve temporary solutions to social contradictions and restore normal cycles of accumulation, and (iii) crisis as the mechanism through which capitalism reinstates ‘the terms of the contradictions that gave rise to the crisis in the first place’ (Osborne, 2010: 20). Crises are *not* fate, they are rather a *reflexive moment* for social actors to be able to put into question the norms and institutions that govern the present organization of society *because* those very conditions produce human suffering and become increasingly intolerable. This is why the *objective* manifestation

of social crises should not be divorced from the *subjective* claims of justification and transformations raised by concrete individuals and groups. Ultimately, crises are not only theoretically relevant as a means to explore the conflicts immanent in processes of social reproduction but are also normatively demanding as a means to come to terms with destructive tendencies in the capitalist form of social life.

At stake for critical theory, therefore, is the need to advance a way of visualizing the in-built crisis tendencies in contemporary capitalist society, the pathological dynamics these events trigger and reproduce in our forms of life, and the potentials for social transformation that crises reveal but also repress. In other words, the challenge is to reaffirm the structural value of crises but without reducing the concept to a single, all-pervasive logic of social-systemic contradictions (class-based conflicts); to determine the plurality of distinct but interrelated crisis phenomena which circulate through different spheres with differential effects over social relations; and to explore the reflexive mechanisms that enable society and actors to mobilize resources to respond to crisis situations and manage their destructive consequences (Brunkhorst, 2014; Fraser, 2014).

Methodologically, these challenges can only be met by trying to give an empirical account of crisis tendencies themselves. At least from the early 1970s, crisis theories advanced by critical theorists became questionable as the neo-conservative and neo-liberal literature on crisis management took the lead (Eder, 1993; Offe, 1984; Foucault, 2008). It was as patent then, as it seems today, that orthodox Marxist theories of economic crises were unable to account for the scale and variety of crisis tendencies in contemporary world society. With the progressive dissolution of traditional class politics, crisis theories lost their empirical referent and focus: the capitalist expansion of material wealth coincided with the development of new forms of systemic integration and legitimation that pacified but did not eliminate social contradictions (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). In this vein, according to Habermas, it becomes palpable the connection between steering problems at the systemic level and problems of social integration, which not only threaten the stability and legitimacy of the political system (crisis of legitimacy) but also put considerable pressure on the cultural traditions and normative resources (Habermas, 1988: 37-40; Brunkhorst, 2006).

In this context, the empirical observation of crisis phenomena is also undermined by the assumption that processes of social reproduction in capitalist modernity are lineally correlated to the rationalization and expansion of productive-technical forces. The material constitution of systemic mechanisms has always been an object of concern for critical theorists because the extension of instrumental rationality and functional imperatives (e.g., monetization and bureaucratization) is seen as concomitant with the objectification of social relations and ideological distortions of meaningful human action. Still, as Habermas rightly argues, the expansion of markets does not generate *ipso facto* reification and domination effects in individual consciousness or social life as a whole; there are some societal spaces that remain immune to systemic colonization. As the rationalization of capitalist societies also consists in the cultural differentiation of domains of knowledge, moral norms, and expressive practices, there is a wider range of options and learning capacities available for individuals and collectives in everyday action (Habermas, 1991a: 372-99, 1991b: 382-3). In this vein, human and collective reflexivity are crucial for bringing these

potentialities into practice: reflexivity entails the ability of becoming aware of the social relations surrounding and constituting the self, it is a condition of possibility for overcoming the one-dimensional dynamics of systemic excess in crisis situations. Through reflexivity, subjects and institutions can consider the present as one possibility among others and can consequently reflect and learn as to how current crises might be transformed into other, also possible, options. This implies that social systems are not closed to a single operational pattern but might develop institutional innovations (new structures of social integration) through the 'learning capacities' their members put at work when reflexively attempting to cope with systemic crises that threaten the reproduction of society (Habermas, 1991c: 120-123, 1991d: 147, 153-154). Once the crisis breaks out, reflexivity becomes a mechanism that can counterbalance the fact that crises 'endanger the fund of human capacities available to create and maintain social bonds' (Fraser, 2013: 228).

A critical theory of crises must develop an empirical account that makes intelligible those abstract mechanisms that organize social life but which escape immediate understanding, on the one hand, and it has to internally connect this knowledge with the concrete experience of acting individuals and their intersubjective relations, on the other. Arguably, this is captured by the methodological distinction between 'system-objective crisis' and 'social-lived crisis' (Benhabib, 1986: 224-53), where the challenge is to translate the objective manifestations of crisis at the systemic level into the experiences of those groups and individuals who suffer the effects of functional problems and channel them through their needs, demands and dissatisfactions. If one aspect is isolated from the other, we are left with a one-dimensional view that loses the complexity that makes crisis phenomena what they are. We become unable to understand that the objective appearance and circulation of the crisis is mediated by the ways in which social actors try to make sense of the problems these moments reveal, not to mention the conflicts that emerge between the structural reality of crises and their dominant representations in public discourses. After all, crisis is a publicly available idea for actors who, in defining an object or situation as crisis, not only describe a problematic state of affairs but also give it a normative meaning which, in turn, may inform, orient and legitimize their claims and concrete actions (Habermas, 1988; Koselleck, 2006; Milstein, 2015).

The methodological distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of crises allows critical theory to perform a double task: first, to *observe* problems of social reproduction while making clear at which level and in what form they damage social relations, limit individual autonomy and produce human suffering; second, to *participate* in society's reflexive production of definitions and courses of action while challenging the dominant framework in which a particular crisis is publicly discussed. For critical theory, crises are not simply a concept intended to diagnose socio-structural problems; they must also act as a communicative translation with critical intentions; that is, as practical discourse in the struggle for making the objective contradictions revealed by crisis situations visible as *lived experiences* and *political problems* (Cordero, 2014).

Normatively, therefore, the fact that crises are 'normal' events in modern societies does not mean that one has to accept the stabilization of their negative consequences as a necessary outcome. Insofar as these phenomena produce dislocations that place a great burden on people's everyday existence, understanding

crisis situations becomes instrumental not only in exposing the 'stress limits' of social and political institutions but also in finding potentials for the rational change of the systemic conditions that are revealed by the crisis in the first place (Habermas, 1988: 143). This is why critical theory has to maintain confidence in the image of a better social condition while accepting the radical contingency of historical processes and human action. Crises are normatively relevant phenomena because they reduce social reality to a one-dimensional present, the *present* crisis, thereby preventing social actors and institutions from exerting their reflexivity as they look for other forms of life. Crises may actually bring collective learning to a halt (e.g. precluding political debate and normative considerations), reverse towards new forms of oppression that enhance power, justify dogmatic views of a well-ordered society, or even inspire destructive and violent passions that threaten the realm of social relations altogether. As Marx put it in the preface to *Capital*, crises 'do not signify that tomorrow a miracle will occur'; rather, they demonstrate 'that the present *society is not solid crystal*, but an organism capable of change, constantly engaged in a process of change' and whose direction we can neither predict nor govern at will (Marx, 1976: 93; emphasis added). For critical theory, crises call for the reflexive attitude of imagining normative alternatives that allow actors themselves to regain some control over autonomized processes of functional differentiation; they help raise awareness of both the socio-technical and moral-practical *capacities of society* to respond to the pathological effects of structural dynamics. Thus, we need to grasp the forms in which crises produced by capitalist modernity appear alongside the normative resources through which these tendencies may be explained, evaluated and transcended from within the conditions of present society.

In the context of a growing de-politicization of society, in which crises are mostly seen through the lenses of professional problem solvers (e.g., therapists, policy-makers, crisis managers and the like), critical theory seeks to retain the capacity of democratic politics to address problems that concern society as a whole (Habermas, 1997: 351-2). For this to happen, the formation of a 'crisis consciousness' through social criticism is a necessary mean for citizens to challenge established constellations of political power, reverse the normal circuits of communication in the public arena and explore the possibilities of concrete transformations of the conditions that create systemic crises and produce social suffering (Habermas, 1997: 379–81). For without putting into question institutional arrangements, decision-making processes and introducing new inputs of normative communication into social systems, the horizon of expectations of what is seen as possible and desirable remains unaffected. This is precisely the sense in which crises can trigger critique and reflexive processes of collective learning that transform functional difficulties into politically relevant problems, which, in turn, may trigger dynamics of normative self-limitation that lead to institutional restructuring and political innovation. Hence, the argument is not that politics works as an executive power that can centrally act on behalf of society at large in order to solve all its problems. Instead, politics must create room *for society* to build knowledge about itself –i.e., reflexive knowledge– that thematizes the reality of social conflicts, and *for actors* to open new territories of meaning –i.e., reflexive learning– that disclose transformative potentials.

The normative challenge that comes from these considerations does not consist, at least not primarily, in the imperative to provide normative foundations.

Against the logic of closure of meaning and action that drives forms of social domination, for critical theory the actualization of 'our normative commitment to freedom' cannot but begin by 'opening up [these very] normative commitments to radical questioning' (Allen 2015: 205). This work of problematization is our best option to challenge the reduction of social life to a fixed foundation or historical telos.

### **Crisis in Systems Theory**

While critical theory has been constructed around the concept of crisis, this notion has played a rather peripheral role in systems theory. Yet we contend that, notwithstanding their differences, a systemic concept of crisis can be reconstructed within this tradition from the theorizations of such authors as Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann, Helmut Willke, and Gunter Teubner. They all share the fundamental assumption that crises are an expected outcome of the internal dynamics of social systems. As systems accomplish their functions, they give rise to self-organized patterns of action and communication whose autonomous processes bring about operational redundancies and semantic self-descriptions that, after a critical threshold, are no longer met by standard processing mechanisms. This surplus of non-processed possibilities creates a gap between social expectations and factual operations that increasingly overload systems beyond their structural limits, thereby originating the communication of *crises*. Different categories have been used to conceptualize this phenomenon: inflation/deflation of symbolic media (Parsons and Platt, 1973; Luhmann, 2012), reckless overextendedness (Parsons, 1963a), negative self-description and neglect (Luhmann, 1984; 1997a), compulsive growth of systemic communication (Teubner, 2011). In all cases, crises are a result of the self-organized character of the systemic functioning.

Conceptually, a seminal contribution to a theory of crises in the systemic tradition was made by Talcott Parsons (1963a, 1963b, 1968) once he specified the symbolic medium of the economic system (money) as a model for the analysis of all symbolic media in the social system: power (for the political system), influence (for the societal community), and value-commitments (for the fiduciary system) (cf. Chernilo, 2002). Like money, all symbolic media undergo inflationary and deflationary processes as well. In politics, to mention just the most salient example of Parsons' theory, the activation of binding obligations motivates the inflation of power but the lack of a correspondent organizational basis to fulfill these expectations undermines pluralism within the political system and increases the reliance on coercive sanctions and naked physical force (Parsons, 1963a). Producing 'more' of any particular media (inflation) means to increase the potential for connectivity of communication; however, its acceptance entails risks that cannot be fully managed within the symbolic media these offers emerge from (deflation). Systemic crises are thus endogenously self-produced in different system; they are built into systemic operations themselves.

Luhmann (2012: 230) incorporates the difference inflation/deflation into his theory of symbolic media, but he turns to the concept of trust to conceive of a more general problem: "Inflation occurs when communication overdraws its line of trust, when it assumes it has more trust at its disposal than it can generate. Deflation occurs in the reverse case, when the possibilities of gaining trust are not exploited". Accordingly, Luhmann speaks of 'borderline cases' of inflation and deflation that are critical for the continuation of communication: for example, when inflationary

corrective measures do not work and money-based communication begins to be systematically refused. To that extent, crises are, *operatively*, an imminent danger of stopping communication. They are not a deviation from an imaginary state of equilibrium.

Luhmann (1984) considers the idea of crisis as a *negative self-description* of world society that arises from the fact that society as a whole can no longer be described on the basis of local experiences or actions; society has become 'too complex to be immediately understandable' (Luhmann, 1984: 59). This reveals, he continues, a 'cleavage between interactional and societal levels of system-building' (Luhmann 1984: 60) that can be fulfilled by the negative semantics of 'alarm' that suggest both urgency and speed. Considering crises as semantics does not mean, however, to underrate their relevance, for the communication that socially *constructs* the negative self-description of crisis is, in turn, part of the operation of social systems themselves (Stäheli, 2011). In other words, as individuals communicatively interpret their experiences in the semantics of crisis, they *reintroduce the operation of crisis into the social situation that they are going through*. The factual operation of systems may not affect them directly, but as they communicate about the possibility of the crisis affecting them (negative self-description), they not only become caught up in a *semantic contagion* of crisis but also enhance it *as if* they were factually affected.

Without directly speaking of 'crisis', in several publications Luhmann (1984, 1997a, 2005, 2012) stresses the crisis-prone, *dystopic character* (Willke, 2002) of functional differentiation: negative self-descriptions, systemic neglect regarding environmental concerns, avalanches of exclusion in different regions of world society, and the breakdown of the modernization promises that systems would constantly support each other. The dynamics of autonomy, self-organization, and interdependency of social systems that characterizes functional differentiation lies at the basis of these conflictive situations and, as a consequence of this scenario, argues Luhmann (1984: 64): 'we even have to expect more or less permanent crises in some of the subsystems'. In these critical moments, the semantics of crisis as a negative self-description introduces reflection, it elicits questions about the fundamental structure of society, about the costs of developing institutions on unreliable grounds, about the risks of de-differentiations and time pressure, and about the need for systemic restructuring (Luhmann, 1984).

Another contribution to the theorization of crises in systems analysis has been put forward by Helmut Willke (2002). Here, the concept of crisis signals the change from the era of the state-organized industrial society to a knowledge-based world society. This evolutionary change of structures is characterized, sociologically, by the transition from a material to a symbolic steering of the social world. This brings about dysfunctionalities and discontinuities regarding the original structures of functional systems – a *dystopic society*, particularly for the economy and politics. Knowledge becomes the most crucial resource in this new social constellation, and the central problem to solve now is how to deal with non-knowledge; that is, with the inevitably complex and unforeseen repercussions of others' decisions. The crisis in the economy thus consists in ignorance about complexly networked financial transactions, and in the case of politics it refers to the non-reducible uncertainty of world systems of governance. If politics is meant to react to this situation, it has to abandon the inclination for unity and order by increasing the internal contingency of governance

structures according to the 'different quality of external requests and external dynamics' (Willke, 2014: 72). In the face of systemic crises, therefore, strategies of contextual steering that foster systemic resilience come into consideration.

The 2008 financial crisis provided new impetus for a systemic theory of crises. This time the conceptualization introduces the distinction between the normal and the pathological as a difference between 'necessary growth-dynamics and pathological growth excesses' (Teubner, 2011: 7). Since the imperative of social systems is not self-preservation but the *connectivity of communication*, autopoietic communication depends to such a degree on the logic of growth that it harbors its own tendency to self-destruction. Social processes such as monetization, politicization, juridification and medialization reproduce the same underlying dynamics of growth, thereby leading to different versions of self-produced crises. Teubner's analysis engages with both the argument on inflation/deflation and the self-produced character of systemic crises. In other words, growth spirals are not restricted to economic phenomena; they are instead generalizable to *all* social systems. Teubner then introduces normative possibilities of dealing with crises as he regards near-to-catastrophe events as *constitutional* moments for social systems (Teubner, 2011). Yet the reintroduction of the normal/pathological distinction turns crises into an *anomaly* of system dynamics. This is problematic because, from a systemic point of view, crises should be considered as devices for self-immunity rather than for self-destruction: they are about the optimization of the system against the hypertrophy that is produced by the implosion of systemic reflexivity into pure self-reference without other-reference.

A crucial theoretical point to further reconstruct a concept of crisis in systemic terms relates with the self-produced indeterminacy of social systems (that is, the re-entry into the system of the distinction system/environment): the system operates upon a past that cannot be remembered in full and yet, on that very basis, it has to anticipate possible future states (Luhmann, 1997b). In order to deal with this paradox, the system temporalizes the situation by introducing a difference between past and future in which the so-called memory function (forgetting and remembering) is concerned with the past and the oscillator function (use of indications) with the future. By combining memory and oscillation, the system selects a communicative state to connect it with further communicative operations and thereby avoiding both unreflectingly repeating the past and orienting itself to the future 'as a constant deviation from its own state' (i.e. utopias) (Luhmann, 1997b: 364).

In dealing with their own indeterminacy and intransparency, systems bring about emergent communicative patterns that motivate further communications in a self-referential manner. This *imperative of connectivity* of social systems (Teubner, 2011) is the main engine of system dynamics but, at the same time, it hides the risk of infinite regression of all self-referential processes. The system then construes an asymmetry for this unresolvable problem – it unfolds the paradox – by distinguishing between self-reference and other-reference. Through other-reference, the system considers relevant environmental events and the operations can temporally oscillate between different topics, select from contingent events, and produce new information. Social systems are, therefore, *reflexive* and, as such, they unfold its constitutive paradox and can 'guide and control themselves' (Luhmann, 1995: 455).

However, if the system engages in an *overproduction* of previously successful selections whose very success *in the present* is explained by the fact that they were so

*in the past*, then memory suppresses oscillation and the past invades the future. Systemic crises now arise because the difference self- and other-reference collapses into pure self-reference (memory without oscillation, past without future) and systems can no longer reintroduce both the distinction system/environment and past/future into themselves; put differently, systemic crises can be conceived of as the implosion of reflexivity. This non-reflexive reiteration of the past leads the system to a borderline case of self-referentiality that we call *singularity*; namely, the production of self-referential redundancies *without* other-referential indications (Author 2 et al). The system repeats selections unreflectingly and becomes involved in an hypertrophic dynamics of excesses, thereby preventing alternative options of connectivity from the possibility of being selected. A systemic crisis is the result of this non-reflexive singularity: an inflation of political commitments that triggers institutional distrust when they are not fulfilled; an excess of transactions beyond genuine demand; the compulsion of fundamentalism (religious, political or cultural) that prevents individuals from constructing and instantiating personal projects in a pluralistic social world. Systemic crises are self-produced by self-producing systems: as they function to resolve social problems, systems may fall into spirals of blindness.

Methodologically, the self-producing character of systemic crises imposes major challenges to their empirical examination. Given their complexity, crises are inherently ill-structured; once they break out, they exceed their frames of reference and are driven by strange attractors (Topper and Lagadec, 2013; Liska, Petrun, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2012). Crises place significant problems to conventional methodologies and resist systematic classifications or typologies. To be sure, archetypical distinctions such as natural, technological, and social crises, or local, regional, and global crises, are methodologically useful. However, in situations of crisis, partial problems become *wicked problems* (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Natural disasters, like earthquakes or tsunamis, affect technical systems of energy, transport, and communication, and disturb social relations at multiple levels in the short, mid, and long-term (De Smet, Lagadec and Leysen, 2012).

The reasons why both analysts and regulating agents are usually taken by surprise by the escalating paths of complex crises depend on systems being able to grow beyond the limits they have set for themselves in previous crises. Crucially, *typologies that are drawn from the last crisis tend to be unable to account for future ones*. The time lag between the factuality of the crisis and the suitability of classifications reinforces the methodological challenges of dealing with crises. Further, the simultaneity of problems arising in different contexts and leading to inconsistencies, incompatibilities, and meaning collapses (Stäheli, 2000; Wagner, 2013), stresses the methodological importance of transitions (Dodds and Watts, 2005), off-scale dynamics (Topper and Lagadec, 2013), de-differentiations (Mascareño, 2012), and sand-pile effects (Markovic and Gros, 2014). This focus on operations and dynamics is certainly a more adequate approach than the elaboration of a priori classifications to reconstruct a systemic concept of crisis.

Normatively, systems theory emphasizes the contingent and social (i.e. non-natural) character of norms (Luhmann, 2012: 813), on the one hand, and the unintended consequences and contradictory impacts of normative actions, on the other (Luhmann, 2008). Systems theory does not aim to discourage normatively based interventions *per se* but, as a second-order observer of modern society, it does draw

attention to their limitations and, above all, their unpredictability. But despite this position as a second-order observer, we argue that systems theory can offer a *normatively significant* (Amstutz, 2013) type of observation of social crises. This observation builds on the notion that contingency does not mean accepting the world as it is or as the best of all possible worlds. Since the social world is contingent, the selections that have actually been made are ‘neither necessary nor impossible’ (Luhmann, 1992: 96). This means that the implosion of systemic reflexivity that characterizes the crisis situations we mentioned above (reiteration of the past without future orientation, memory without oscillation, self-reference without other-reference), threatens to freeze society into its actual state, thereby eliminating sources of contingency and producing totalizing tendencies.

To be sure, reducing contingency is a fundamental mechanism of dealing with complexity. Since the environment is more complex than the system, the system cannot but reduce environmental complexity by means of its own resources (Luhmann, 1990). Yet reduction of complexity does not mean shrinking meaning-production to the point of singularity where there is no oscillation and other-reference. On the contrary, in reducing complexity the system does oscillate and refer to others, it builds expectations of other’s expectations, “for only in this way can the regulative principle of the other’s freedom be incorporated into my expectation structure” (Luhmann, 1990: 45). The experience of a contingent world is thus the experience of ‘self-diversity’ (Luhmann, 1992: 103); namely, the experience of the otherness of others and of the multiple meanings of apparently self-evident, univocal facts.

Systemic crises affect this self-diversity both internally (system) and externally (environment). Internally, the excess of non-reflexive redundancies shrinks ‘meaning production’ (Kjaer, 2014: 107f) and limits selection possibilities to a self-replicating communication. No political diversity is allowed under a dictatorship; on the contrary, there is imposition of necessities, prescription of impossibilities and factual elimination of sources of contingency (as a cost in human lives). Once diversity breaks down, the system becomes more and more homogeneous and monothematic (propaganda, repression, exile, hierarchical control). This can be also illustrated with the case of the financial crisis in 2008: ‘excessive homogeneity within a financial system – all the banks doing the same thing – can minimize risk for each individual bank, but maximize the probability of the entire system collapsing’ (Haldane and May, 2011: 353). Therefore, one alternative to deal with internal homogeneity is to increase the contingency of the system (Willke, 2014). In the case of a global financial system, this means the provision of ‘regulatory incentives to promote diversity’ in the governance structure (Haldane and May, 2011: 355). Or, in our example of a dictatorship, it means to reintroduce negativity; namely, dissidence, resistance, opposition or even rebellion allow for the normative expectation of reestablishing contingency. Protest movements act in this way as they seek to increase contingency where blind singularity prevails.

Externally, the dynamics of excess in crisis situations also push towards de-differentiation problems; namely, the interference in other systemic operations as a consequence of an overloaded imperative of connectivity. Luhmann (1999) himself argues along these lines as he analyzes the function of fundamental rights in modern societies: fundamental rights, he contends, pay special attention ‘to the dangers of de-differentiation, friction, and structural fusion that reduce the general potential for

differentiation of the social order’ (Luhmann, 1999: 23). Fundamental rights prevent society from being aligned with the goals of state bureaucracy; otherwise, de-differentiation would constrain institutional autonomy and undermine communication opportunities. As with internal singularities, the external dissemination of excesses also requires strategies of preserving contingency in the social realm. More recently, Teubner (2012: 31) applies this argument to expansive monetization trends into primarily non-economic social spheres: ‘A genuine equivalent of fundamental rights would be rules against the commodification of science, art, medicine, culture, and education’. In Teubner’s view (2011), a self-limitative dimension of social systems through *sectorial constitutional discourses* may be able to counteract alternative totalizing tendencies.

Contingency is a constitutive feature of social life as a whole and crises are inherent to its operation. While crises produce systemic excesses and de-differentiations, contingency (as opposite to both necessity and impossibility) prevents internal communication to become a case of singularity and external co-ordinations to become totalizing.

### **Crisis and Reflexivity**

Our main goal in this paper has been to offer a sociological concept of crisis that, defined as the expected yet non-linear outcome of the internal dynamics of modern societies, builds on the synergies between critical theory and systems theory. In order to make our position plausible, we have followed a dual path. First, we unpacked the main arguments either tradition makes on crises and tried to remain faithful to their terminological specificities —e.g., contradictions and learning processes in critical theory, paradoxes and self-referentiality in systems theory. Second, we reconstructed the moments in which crisis situations become objects of concern for actors *and* systems in terms of conceptualization, methodological observation, and normative responses. The main substantive result of our discussion points to the idea of *reflexivity* as a form of engagement with the negative manifestations and destructive effects of processes of reproduction of social systems. In summary fashion, the main findings of our discussion are introduced in the table below:

**Table 1**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Critical theory</b>	<b>Systems theory</b>	<b>Cross-fertilization</b>
Conceptual	Manifestation of structural contradictions of capitalist society	Manifestation of self-referential excesses in the operation of functional differentiation	<i>Social reproduction</i> : conflicting imperatives enable and block society’s self-reproduction
Methodological	Dialectics between objective configuration and subjective experience of crises	Disparity between factual operation and frameworks for the theoretical reconstruction of crises processes	<i>Social description</i> : decentralized interpretations force to trace relations between functional and normative constrains
Normative	Critique of technical management and defense of democratic-political control	Critique of de-differentiation and defense of sectorial autonomy	<i>Social intervention</i> : courses of action opened to examination, critique and self-correction

In this short final section, we will address more directly the possibility of cross-fertilization between critical theory and systems theory leading to a reflexive understanding of social crises. This attempt can be located within the much wider reflexive turn that sociology has experienced over the past two decades (Alveson and Skoldberg, 2009; Archer, 2007; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; May and Perry, 2011). Within this context, reflexivity has become a key term to describe processes of de-traditionalization that expand society's reflexive capabilities for institutional self-transformation, as much as to account for the human ability to translate our personal concerns into projects that can make a difference in the world.

The fact that reflexivity has become an increasing and ever more demanding feature of our current historical constellation creates challenges for social research on crises. Most importantly, it speaks to the need to combine a de-centred observation of the conflicting imperatives that both enable and block society's self-reproduction, on the one hand, with the immanent evaluation of the actors' own descriptions and responses to non-reflexive social processes that trigger situations of crisis, on the other.

In terms of our reconstructive reading of critical and systems theory, this challenge can be met, firstly, by *making conceptually reflexive* the unobserved contradictions and paradoxes that drive the structural dynamics of contemporary world society. Both theoretical approaches share the presupposition that societies know of no center; that there isn't a single and core dimension of social life that has the ability to steer, let alone control, the functioning of other domains or society as a whole. Our reconstruction of the notion of crisis in both theoretical traditions unpacks this argument further: crises may commence in any sector of society and the ways in which they then expand cannot be anticipated. Even if crisis itself is seen as the mode through which conflicting imperatives immanent to social reproduction come into sight and thus become object of cognitive reflection and public communication, this does not mean that crises are simply epiphenomena of underlying mechanisms or a constant factor that causally explains further developments. In our view, crisis is a form of self-understanding that underscores society's existing conflicts whilst, at the same time, it is a generative mechanism through which society enacts the conditions of its own legitimacy by transforming its *modus operandi* and previous structures.

Secondly, our ability to deal with social crises is intimately related to the possibility of their empirical observation. From a methodological point of view, therefore, crises are far from transparent phenomena. When a crisis breaks out, it exceeds standard interpretative frameworks and established practices; it opens a breach full of contingency and questions that we cannot simply bypass. A crisis calls for awareness of the abstract dynamics that are part of society's systemic operations and for the thematization of the concrete experiences of actors dealing with the excesses and destructive effects of such dynamics. Our claim is that without a description of what is *not* working in the expected way, no system can reflexively put into motion mechanisms of self-correction; yet without the objective configuration and autonomous operation of social systems, actors cannot meaningfully construe their own experiences and relations as part of the crisis. Here, reflexivity matters as the ability to observe the gaps between factual operations and concrete experiences that shape the course of events; and it matters also as the ongoing process of negotiation of meaning through which crises are enacted in unpredictable ways. Seen in this way,

critical theory and systems theory both suggest a *methodologically reflexive attitude* to the experience of otherness that the plurality of distinct but interrelated crisis phenomena brings about in modern social life; an experience, moreover, that actors themselves embody when trying to come to terms with the immediate consequences of crises.

Last but not least, there is the inner normative imperative to respond and intervene that crisis situations mobilize. Critical and systems theory both address the relation between the *need* of introducing inputs of normative communication into social systems (i.e., setting of contention limits on autonomized social processes) and the *impossibility* of giving normative closure to the social world (i.e., acceptance of the contingency of institutional innovations and social transformations). A possible solution to this riddle lies in reestablishing the connection between norms and contingency instead of treating them as mere opposites. In other words, this means that, in order to deal with social crises, we must be able to produce *normatively reflexive interventions*: that is, interventions that not only ought to be responsive to contextual forms of regulations but also engage with democratic forms of decision making. This proposition is significant because it rejects, albeit does not prevent, attempts at giving closure to the social world through the non-reflexive repetition of a frozen past or a non-reflexive openness to an utopian future. In complex societies, normatively reflexive interventions must work hard to keep widening the horizons of expectation but without divorcing them from experience.

A further implication of this argument is that, when it comes to the reflexivity of crises, functional outputs and normative values stand in close proximity. When major modern institutions such as the press, police forces, national parliaments, the Catholic church, or banks are described as undergoing various crises, the characterization of their troubles implies that they are failing to deliver on the protection and promotion of those *values* that are central to their *functional* contribution: independent and trustworthy information, civil protection, representation and decision-making, moral guidance, safeguarding our private assets. Their depiction as crises entails both *the functional operations and outcomes* of these institutions and the *normative duties* they are expected to fulfill for the rest of society. Sociological engagements with crises require that we are able to analyze the functional and the normative in their own right, but we need also to understand their interrelations. And this is perhaps one key contribution of this cross-fertilization between critical and systems theory: crises in modern society can be seen as such if and when we witness how normative and functional factors mutually reinforce each other.

The temptation remains, of course, to argue that this is just a question of connecting the *structural* failings of institutions with the actions and practices of specific *individuals* (media editors, members of parliament, police officers, priests and traders) in a way that may resemble the perennial debate between structure and agency in sociology (Archer 1995, Mouzelis, 1995). For our purposes, however, the specificity of social crises refers less to this problematic and more to the ways in which the systematic disappointment of normative expectations becomes itself a functional problem (Chernilo, 2014).

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Further justification for the use of these three levels in comparing different traditions in social theory can be found in (Chernilo, 2007).