

TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF CRISIS CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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My thesis begins by acknowledging the fact that our time is marked by crisis. Although this seems, to most, undeniable, I argue that because we lack the criterion for legitimating this claim, appeals to crisis are always susceptible to ideological appropriation and misuse. Hence, the thesis strives to articulate a space of critical reflection in which the legitimate diagnosis of crises may be possible. To this end, I turn to the tradition of continental philosophy, appraising the efforts of Karl Marx, Jürgen Habermas, and Jacques Derrida. While each of these thinkers offers a unique critique of crisis, I argue that they nevertheless succumb to what I call “crisis consciousness” – a condition in which the perception of crisis is inseparable from that of powerlessness.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We belong to a time of crisis. Everywhere it is invoked and everywhere it is confirmed. From the threat of global climate change, of impending acts of terror, of the shock waves still to come of world market collapse, it is clear that the world to which we belong rests precariously on the edge of a very real and fragile precipice.¹ Equally evident is the fact that the fate of our time depends on the decisions and interventions for which we, as a generation, will have been responsible. In other words, our time is marked by the urgency of decision. And yet, in a critical time, this sense of urgency is often sapped by the perception of powerlessness.

Reflections emerging from a time of crisis are often concerned with questions as to the empirical factors which have elicited specific crises. Consider, for instance, how the discussion surrounding the global financial crisis of the late 2000's has, by and large, been dominated by questions concerning its causes. Yet, in an age claimed by successive and apparently unrelated crises, these reflections seem to be, of themselves, insufficient. In a time suffused with an acute awareness of crisis, then, it befits us to inquire into the phenomenon of crisis itself. By investigating its historical origins and reconstructing some of the alterations that this concept has undergone, perhaps this will bear upon crisis

¹ This is, of course, only to mention a few of the most widely acknowledged of crises that we face today.

consciousness in such a way that it will change the way we hear the term, and in turn, how we may respond to a critical time. In *Legitimation Crisis*, Jürgen Habermas recalls the medical origins of the concept of crisis, what he identifies as a definitive moment in the history of the concept:

Prior to its employment as a social-scientific term, the concept of crisis was familiar to us from its medical usage. In that context it refers to the phase of an illness in which it is decided whether or not the organism's self-healing powers are sufficient for recovery. The critical process, the illness, appears as something objective. A contagious disease, for example, is contracted through *external* influences on the organism. . . The patient's consciousness plays no role in this; how he feels, how he experiences his illness, is at most a symptom of a process that he himself can scarcely influence at all.²

Today we speak of the health of our time – its fitness for survival. To the extent, however, that we remain bound to this time, a significant distinction lies in the fact that this identification remains, of necessity, a self-diagnosis; that in a time marked by crisis, one must, at once, play both doctor and patient. What bearing could this insight have upon the time in which we find ourselves today? What could this mean that we find ourselves, our identity, claimed by crisis?

To be claimed by crisis, it seems, is to find one's identity *in* crisis. The medical model describes the critical phase as the time in which the health of the body depends solely on its own powers of auto-immunization, that is, on its ability to sustain itself over and against external efforts of intervention. In this way, the subject is implicated as one who is responsible for acting in order to preserve itself through the crisis. A critical time may disclose the urgency of action to those who are in crisis, but, inasmuch as, according to the medical model, this diagnosis may only be legitimately made by an external observer for

² Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 1

whom the time of intervention has just past, in a time of crisis in which there is no more a doctor than a patient, no more an outside than inside, the prospect of decision itself seems impracticable. This perspective which entails a double-bind between the necessity and impossibility of intervention not only threatens the efficacy of decision making processes; it considers the undecideability between the inside and outside opened in a critical time to pose a palpable problem for any effective diagnosis. With this, one sees how crisis consciousness tends to transform a time of urgency and potential change into a period stricken with paralysis.

As Habermas goes on to explain, the medical model fails to fully appreciate the irreducibility of the patient's experience: "The crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it."³ Because the medical model of crisis gives rise to a distinction between subject and object, inside and outside, irrespective of the experience of the subject who finds her identity at risk, and is therefore inappropriate to the critical time in which we find ourselves, this model must be superseded. Habermas offers acute insight into the character of crisis consciousness in his analysis of the medical origins of the concept; however, at least in this portion of his work, he does not yet provide the means for overcoming the antinomy he presents.

The prevailing understanding is that our present age is unique in its awareness of crisis. Referring to the ubiquity of crisis consciousness, Habermas remarked in 1973 that: "No previous social formation lived so much in fear and expectation of a sudden system

³ Idem. This is why Habermas does not consider the medical notion of crisis "social-scientifically useful." Nevertheless, even his own concept of crisis remains, to a large extent, bound to the medical framework.

change.”⁴ Yet it was precisely this combination of fear and expectation of imminent change more than a century earlier which allowed Karl Marx to locate an opportunity in crisis. Marx did not let crisis consciousness remain indefinite and, hence, immobilizing, but in reflecting on the possibilities it opened, translated it into an injunction for action:

While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible...it is our interest and our task to *make the revolution permanent*, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, until the proletariat has conquered state power...⁵

If the proletariat, as a revolutionary subject, could “criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course,”⁶ they would be able to maintain a space free from the congelation of tradition from which they could perpetually dissolve the development of regressive ideology. In attempting to cultivate crisis consciousness in the proletariat, however, Marx also found that capitalism itself was such a subject. “All that is solid melts into air,”⁷ Marx declares in the “Communist Manifesto” of the conditions in which alone capitalism can sustain itself – capitalism preserves itself only in appropriating and consuming all other traditions and institutions.

In his analysis of the propensity for crisis in capitalist economy, it became clear to Marx that capitalism not only sustained itself by constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, but that through periodic crisis capitalism recreated the conditions for its own

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 25

⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York, Norton, 1978), 505, my emphasis

⁶ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York, Norton, 1978), 597

⁷ Karl Marx, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York, Norton, 1978), 476

reproduction. In other words, Marx found that crisis consciousness could be manipulated in order to preserve tradition, but also to break with it – an insight not without relevance to our time in which invocations of crisis span the entire breadth of the political spectrum. Although Marx’s writings provide, to my mind, the first sustained reflection on the phenomenon of crisis consciousness, far from resolving this problematic, they have contributed to a strain within the philosophical tradition, composed of thinkers who have similarly understood themselves to be reflecting on a critical time.

As with Marx, one can find in *Knowledge and Human Interests* and *Legitimation Crisis*, two early yet significant works by Jürgen Habermas, distinct efforts to think the nature of crisis. In the former work, Habermas diagnoses a “crisis of the critique of knowledge.” Within the movement of the philosophical tradition, particularly in Marx and Hegel’s inheritance of the Kantian critical project, philosophy has, according to Habermas, dislodged itself from the space from which it could reliably ground epistemological claims, and ceded to positivistic philosophy of science. In reconstructing this sequence, making his way through missed opportunities and “abandoned stages of reflection,”⁸ Habermas seeks to recover a critical space once open to Kant and Fichte from which to establish the interrelation of knowledge and human interests, demonstrating that “a radical critique of knowledge is possible only as social theory.”⁹ In short, by returning epistemology to its roots in communicative action and critical self-reflection, Habermas wants to locate in the dialogic relation what he calls the “emancipatory interest of reason” – the same critical-revolutionary dimension that Marx sought to cultivate in the proletariat – a perspective from which “the dogmatic character of

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), vii

⁹ Idem

surpassed forms of domination and ideologies are dispelled. . . the organization of society is linked to decision-making processes on the basis of discussion free from domination.”¹⁰ And yet, if Habermas is able to recover this space of critical inheritance in *Knowledge and Human Interests* only by invoking the “crisis of the critique of knowledge,” it is precisely this dimension which he puts at risk in *Legitimation Crisis*. In the latter work he asks: “how could we distinguish. . . crisis ideologies from valid experiences of crisis if social crises could be determined only on the basis of conscious phenomena?”¹¹ In requiring that crises permit of legitimation, but not himself providing the precise criteria by which such legitimation could be undertaken, Habermas risks both reintroducing in his own project the diagnostic problem of the medical model of crisis and repeating the unclear gesture that the invocation of crisis was for Marx. In this way, he inadvertently allows his project to be overwhelmed by crisis consciousness. Nevertheless, in contemporary continental philosophy, Habermas is only one among several who have inherited this problem.

Within the philosophical discourse, the problem that “the crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it,”¹² that crisis occasions a sort of undecideability between inside and outside, resurfaces. “Night is falling,”¹³ Heidegger writes in his essay “*Wozu Dichter?*,” warning that the world has fallen upon “destitute times.” What makes the time destitute is not merely the fact that beings, in forgetting the question of Being, have drifted away from the ground; the time is destitute because “the traces leading to

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 55

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 4

¹² *Ibid*, 1

¹³ Martin Heidegger, trans. Albert Hofstadter, “What Are Poets For?,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 89

that lost track are well-nigh obliterated;”¹⁴ because we have forgotten that we have forgotten, and in forgetting have lost the ability to recognize the age’s destitution. Within contemporary philosophy, this concern is not unfamiliar. Variations on this theme can be seen in the work of Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Francis Fukuyama and still others. In a time of crisis, philosophy has become preoccupied with its end and its ability to diagnose a critical point beyond which intervention is impossible. To the degree, however, that the philosophical tradition has taken as its concern the preservation of a space of critical diagnosis it too has become penetrated by crisis consciousness, subject to its inherent ambiguities.¹⁵ To paraphrase Jacques Derrida, to speak *of* crisis is always to speak *in* crisis.¹⁶

In an interview conducted shortly after the September 11 attacks, Derrida insists that our “impression” of this crisis is virtually inseparable from the system which gave it form. Accordingly, he undertakes in his essay “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides” to lay bare those structures conditioning our experience of trauma. Derrida goes on to suggest here that the crisis of 9/11 can be considered symptomatic of an “autoimmunitary” disorder – “that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy

¹⁴ Ibid, 92

¹⁵ Though I am not willing to generalize from these cases and claim that in the twentieth century, philosophy has definitively succumbed to crisis consciousness, I will say that these cases indicate a pattern one can trace through key figures in nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, trans. John Leavey Jr., “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)

its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity.”¹⁷ But because, for Derrida, the time is always already “out of joint,” always already *in* crisis, his account all but liquidates the specificity of this event. In another essay, “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” Derrida, in addressing the way in which philosophy has become immersed in a mood of quasi-eschatological speculation, continues his deconstruction of crisis – this time exclusively with respect to the language critical appeals employ. Recognizing that, by virtue of their linguistic structure, apocalyptic invocations are always vulnerable to exploitation, Derrida calls for a critique of crisis; and yet, due to his construal of the “subject of crisis,” his injunctions remain only faintly audible.

In what way, then, do appeals to crisis enable something like a space of critical diagnosis that the above authors desired, and, to what extent do they simply feed into a mood which is potentially politically paralyzing? And, moreover, can there be found any valid criterion by which this space may be legitimated and, thus, successively maintained, despite the fact that, as Habermas notes, “the media of tradition and the forms of consciousness of historical continuity themselves change historically?”¹⁸ That is, even though the identity of the philosophical tradition which has been preoccupied with crisis, is also susceptible to rupture? If today the recognition that our identity is *in* crisis entails the antinomy between the necessity and impossibility of intervention, I would like, in reconstructing the philosophical inheritance of crisis consciousness, to try to change the way we hear crisis.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 94

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 4

CHAPTER II
RETHINKING MARX'S CRISIS THEORY

*But where there is danger the saving powers also grow. - Friedrich Hölderlin*¹⁹

Most critics locate what is often called Marx's 'crisis theory' within the notebooks entitled *Theories of Surplus-Value* and volume three of *Capital*. Indeed, it is within these two works that Marx most comprehensively addresses the form of economic crisis and its precipitating causes within capitalist economy. And yet, if there is a consistent theory of crisis to be found within Marx's corpus, it cannot be situated entirely within the economic realm: it is my contention that a theory of crisis could only be said to emerge after considering Marx's economic *as well as* his historical writings. Because it is hardly possible to differentiate the economic from the historical in Marx's writings with any rigor (was it not, perhaps, Marx's greatest contribution to systematically demonstrate the unity of these two domains?), these terms will be employed here somewhat loosely, to refer, respectively, to those texts like *Capital*, focusing primarily on the more explicit economic aspects of the capitalist mode of production, and to others, like *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, engaged in historical analyses, but lacking immediate reference to economics in the common parlance. If, as readers of Marx, we are confronted with the inability to distinguish between the economic and the historical with any precision, it behooves us to extend the inquiry into

¹⁹ Friedrich Hölderlin, trans. Michael Hamburger, "Patmos," in *Hölderlin: Selected Verse*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), 193

his concept of crisis to an analysis of other critical tropes within his work. Beyond economic and financial crises, we must look elsewhere. Even though Marx himself does not explicitly align the historical rupture effected by revolution with economic crisis,²⁰ an examination of the two will lay emphasis on a striking likeness they share. This affinity will not, however, bring about a unified, consistent theory of crisis. On the contrary, our examination will reveal that there lies a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of Marx's reflections on critical time.

§1 Crises Impossible, Possible, and Necessary

Denying Crisis

In *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Marx distinguishes himself from previous economists by attempting to give an appropriate account of crisis in capitalist economy. In the first instance, he opposes himself to economists who are blind to the reality of economic crises. In this context, Marx addresses the phenomenon of crisis as it is manifest in the form of over-production. He cites Ricardo: "Too much of a particular commodity may be produced, of which there may be such a glut in the market, as not to repay the capital expended on it; *but this cannot be the case with [...] all commodities.*"²¹ Only a brief consideration, says Marx, of the relations underlying the capitalist mode of production is sufficient to dispel such confused

²⁰ He does, however, claim the following: "A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis. It is, however, just as certain as this crisis." Karl Marx, "The Class Struggles in France," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 593

²¹ David Ricardo, cited in Karl Marx, trans. S. Ryazanskaya, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 499, Marx's emphasis

claims. Marx points out that Ricardo's contention²² rests on the problematic assertion that "products are exchanged against products... that demand is determined only by production, or also that demand and supply are identical."²³ As he goes on to show, however, within capitalist economy, the relations of production and reproduction are manifestly otherwise: indeed, I will suggest here that the inability to comprehend the element of surplus-value reflects the failure of previous economists to consider the *time* of crisis.²⁴

Capitalist production, for Marx, is inherently projective. It would be misleading to say that production is driven by consumer demand, for capitalism itself creates the conditions for such demands. In other words, capitalist production is at once its own reproduction: in addition to the production of commodities, *it must also and ahead of time produce the conditions for its own activity*. To employ a somewhat simplistic example, an industrial capitalist must attempt to ensure that she will not only receive an equitable return on her investment (constant-capital), but also that she will receive *more than enough* capital to set the process going once again, *after* she has received this return.²⁵ As it turns out, however, much is at stake in the temporality of this *after*: namely, that it never simply arrives. Rather, in the capitalist mode of production, this return never ceases to arrive.²⁶ It is this predictive, excess capital that Marx calls *surplus-value*, and it is precisely within the anticipatory structure that

²² Marx is quick to point out that Ricardo inherits this perspective from James Mill by way of Jean-Baptiste Say.

²³ Ibid, 493

²⁴ Due to the aim and scope of this project, my analysis of crisis in Marx's writings will only obliquely touch on the intricacies involved in his exposition of the capitalist mode of production. Nor will it be possible for me here to comprehensively recapitulate Marx's analysis of crisis in capitalist economy. Rather, I will focus on the form of crisis that Marx's economic writings provide and the temporal framework these give rise to. For a detailed study of economic crisis in Marx, see Paul Mattick's *Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory*.

²⁵ The capital which does return, Marx demonstrates, is never merely spent on the payment of wages.

²⁶ As I will later explain, economic crisis does not halt, but is rather complicit in this process.

this element reveals that he locates the possibility of crisis in capitalist economy. Marx summarizes:

But the whole process of accumulation in the first place resolves itself into *production on an expanding scale*, which on the one hand corresponds to the natural growth of the population, and on the other hand, forms an inherent basis for the phenomena which appear during *crises*.²⁷

As I have briefly suggested, the element of time, in a process driven by expansion, is indispensable to Marx's demonstration of the possibility of over-production, and hence, to the general "glut in the market;" and yet, there is a way in which this element also conceals the possibility of crisis.

In supposing that "products are exchanged against products... that demand and supply are identical,"²⁸ economists such as Ricardo and Say fail to recognize the metamorphoses that these same products undergo, and in this way, are unable to appreciate the stakes of the temporality of capitalist production. The supposition of the identity of products of exchange and the unity of supply and demand belies a conception of production as a seamless process, and it is precisely the projective nature of capitalism that lends credence to this notion. In anticipating the result of the whole process of production, including the capital necessary to repeat this process, the capitalist assumes that circulation will proceed flawlessly. Indeed, this faith in the market promotes the kind of speculation which can, at times, beget astronomical profit. Focusing upon the result of the projected process of circulation, instead of what permits this very projection to take place, however, is what blinds capitalism to the possibility of crisis which speculation simultaneously augments.

²⁷ Ibid, 492, Marx's emphasis

²⁸ Ibid, 493

To locate the possibility of crisis in capitalist production, one must scrutinize its component parts (e.g. capital, the commodity, the money form), but one must do so in such a way as to take into account their relation to this process – that is, their metamorphoses.

Against Ricardo and Say, Marx argues: “The general nature of the metamorphosis of commodities – which includes the *separation* of purchase and sale just as it does their unity – instead of excluding the possibility of a general glut, on the contrary, contains the possibility of a general glut.”²⁹ The metamorphosis that Marx has in mind here is the process he describes at length in *Das Kapital*: the conversion the commodity undergoes from expressing itself primarily in terms of use-value, into exchange-value, and back again into use-value. What economists like Say miss in this process is the fact that, insofar as this metamorphosis is time-bound, the commodity’s value is always susceptible to variation, and even to destruction. As Marx explains:

...since the circulation process of capital is not completed in one day but extends over a fairly long period until the capital returns to its original form, since this period coincides with the period within which market-prices equalize cost prices, and great upheavals and changes take place in the *market* in the course of this period, since great changes take place in the productivity of labor and therefore also in the *real value* of commodities, it is quite clear, that between the starting-point, the prerequisite capital, and the time of its return at the end of one of these periods, great catastrophes must occur and elements of crisis must have gathered and developed, and these cannot in any way be dismissed by the pitiful proposition that products exchange for products.³⁰

There is a time in which commodities appear exchangeable – a time in which the two moments of purchase and sale are manifestly unified; rarely, however, does this take place

²⁹ Ibid, 504, my emphasis

³⁰ Ibid, 495

within the capitalist process of circulation. Rather, as I have suggested, to the degree that this process is inherently projective, it literally *capitalizes*, for Marx, on the temporal separation of production and consumption, even as it increases the possibility of crisis. Next, I will show in greater detail how temporal separation and rupture are foundational for the way in which Marx understands the form of crisis in capitalist economy.

On the Form of Crisis

The account of the form of crisis that Marx puts forth in *Theories of Surplus-Value* can be seen as an attempt to enrich the critical discourse on two fronts. First, in offering a somewhat metaphysical description of crisis, in abstraction from the concrete elements at work in economic crises, he appears to be formulating a theory of the form in which crises as such become manifest. And secondly, in mapping specific economic elements onto this form, he endeavors to give an effective description of the way in which crisis, or the possibility thereof, is always latent in the very structure of the capitalist mode of production. If crisis is possible, for Marx it is always possible. Therefore, I would like, before proceeding to Marx's conclusion that crises are, in fact, necessary for capitalism to sustain itself, and hence, inevitable within capitalist economy, to pause to examine what is at stake, for Marx, in the transition from possibility to necessity – namely, how this reflects the way in which he understands the identity of the subject in crisis.

“Crisis,” Marx writes, “is the forcible establishment of unity between elements that have become independent and the enforced separation from one another of elements which

are essentially one.”³¹ Even from this vague and preliminary description, it is evident that the crisis is inseparable from the temporality of its occurrence. As the “forcible” reunification of elements which have drifted apart, crisis is here characterized as the revelation of a prior state of unity. The elements, Marx says, that belong together have *become* independent, separate. This separation has occurred over time, but also, as Marx clarifies, the very character of this independence is principally temporal. The crisis endeavors to close the temporal gap which has opened up between these elements, restoring their prior intimacy. In forcibly asserting this intimacy, the crisis reveals the temporal instability of a previously unified identity. In other words, it is the momentary unveiling of a sort of contradiction, pointing back to the metamorphoses that the elements have undergone. The contradiction made apparent here in the critical moment is the separation of what seems to have belonged together, and yet there is another side to the contradiction at work in crisis. Also, and at once, the crisis is, as Marx says, “the enforced separation from one another of elements which are essentially one.”³² Not only does the crisis reveal the separation of what was one through forcefully re-fusing these elements: the crisis is also the dismantling of what has *become* one by virtue of that separation. There is then, a two-fold inversion in the time of crisis: all elements constitutive of the identity in crisis are unsettled. As the elements through which the identity coheres are shaken, the subject in crisis experiences contradiction, becoming radically unstable.

It is unclear precisely which elements or phases of the capitalist mode of production Marx had in mind while formulating this account of the form of crisis – in this context, he

³¹ Karl Marx, trans. S. Ryazanskaya, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 513

³² Idem

discusses the separation of purchase and sale, the falling asunder of production and consumption, and still others – presumably, however, all of these elements are in play in crises of various sorts. Nevertheless, as was previously noted in connection with the possibility of the “general glut” in the market, Marx understands the metamorphosis of the commodity to exemplify the form of economic crisis. He writes:

The *most abstract form of crisis* (and therefore the formal possibility of crisis) is thus the *metamorphosis of the commodity* itself; the contradiction of exchange-value and use-value, and furthermore of money and commodity, comprised within the unity of the commodity, exists in metamorphosis only as an involved movement.³³

In the metamorphosis of the commodity, the article hitherto expressed quantitatively in terms of its use-value, takes on another kind of value, exchange-value. The latter functions as “a social hieroglyphic:” a way for the article to express its worth in terms common to all other commodities. And yet, according to Marx’s account, exchange-value and use-value cannot peaceably coexist within the commodity – each, as a distinct measure of value, is irreducible to the other. Inasmuch as the commodity becomes such only in the assumption of irreconcilable elements, it is a site of contradiction. It is because the commodity is composed of the unity of two opposite movements that Marx considers its metamorphosis to contain the formal possibility of crisis.

As opposed to this formal possibility, the eruption of economic crisis itself can be seen in Marx’s description of the antagonism between production and consumption – a separation which I had earlier indicated to be intrinsic to the very activity of capitalism. Because capitalist apologetics “consist in ...clinging to the concept of unity in the face of

³³ Ibid, 509

contradiction,”³⁴ apologists, like Ricardo and Say, are generally blind to the non-identity of supply and demand which is dramatically revealed in economic crises. Returning to the example of the industrial capitalist I earlier invoked, attempting to ensure an adequate return on her investment, she takes an anticipatory relation to the process of reproduction. In doing so, she supposes that what is consumed will remain in proportion to what is produced, and that the reproductive process will proceed uninterrupted.³⁵ As I previously suggested, the projective structure of capitalist production prevents her from acknowledging the potential rupture which the separation of production from consumption could give rise to. That is to say, the capitalist asserts the unity of supply and demand even as she “banks on” their separability. Not only does the anticipatory nature of capitalist production conceal the possibility of crisis, but as I earlier intimated, it attempts to expand surplus-value (profit essentially gained from unpaid labor) by stretching apart the elements of production and consumption to the breaking point. It is precisely when the unity of these two processes is severed, Marx contends, that the crisis emerges. He writes:

There occurs a stoppage in reproduction, and thus in the flow of circulation. Purchase and sale get bogged down and unemployed capital appears in the form of idle money. The same phenomenon can appear when the additional capital is produced at a very rapid rate and its reconversion into productive capital increases the demand for all the elements of the latter to such an extent, that actual production cannot keep pace with it; this brings about a

³⁴ Ibid, 500

³⁵ In volume three of *Capital*, Marx claims that the belief in the unity of supply and demand goes hand in hand with the “pious wish” for capitalism to proceed on a limited scale: “All the ideas of a common, all-embracing and far-sighted control over the production of raw materials – a control that is in fact incompatible, by and large, with the laws of capitalist production, and hence remains forever a pious wish, or is at most confined to exceptional common steps in moments of great and pressing danger and perplexity – all such ideas give way to the belief that supply and demand will mutually regulate one another.” Karl Marx, trans. David Fernbach, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Three*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 215

rise in the prices of all commodities, which enter into the formation of capital.³⁶ On such occasions, the capitalist is confronted with both the imperative to sell her products and the impossibility of doing so: in the time of crisis, the capitalist experiences the contradiction of having to act, even as action is, for her, unfeasible. It is within this contradictory experience that the violent reunification of crisis is manifest. As the anticipatory process of circulation is interrupted, the two elements of production and consumption are returned to their former, that is, pre-capitalist, temporal proximity. The crisis, in reestablishing this prior unity, indicates the contradictions that have developed with the capitalist mode of production, and which have elicited the critical rupture, however, the crisis discloses something altogether different to those for whom the time is critical. If the capitalist mode of production is in crisis, its identity at risk, I would like to add here that those who would find themselves claimed by the gravity of the situation are simultaneously claimed by a conservative injunction.

Though, as I will soon show, to the extent that they reveal the contradictions inherent to capitalist production, Marx considers crises to be, in fact, opportune; still, for all those who would be significantly affected by these, these ruptures disclose the task of preserving that which is at risk: the capitalist mode of production itself. It is evident that in economic crisis there appears a conservative invocation – to keep whole what risks falling apart – for in such crises, the livelihood of all those dependent upon the capitalist system is threatened. What is revealed in the time of crisis is the fact that this very livelihood rests upon the preservation of the perpetually deferred after of surplus-value, and yet, what is at once concealed is that, within the capitalist mode of production, the activity of preservation

³⁶ Karl Marx, trans. S. Ryazanskaya, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 494

is not itself inconsistent with the occurrence of crises. Indeed, in distinguishing himself from previous economists by claiming that crises are not only possible, but inevitable within capitalism, Marx reformulates the way in which capitalism can be considered a subject of crisis. Crisis is not, for capitalism, an external factor threatening to destroy its unity; rather, as a critical subject, *the very identity of capitalism is constituted by crisis.*

Crises Inevitable

To catch sight of the way in which capitalism depends upon the recurrence of crises, it is first necessary to look to what is effected through such ruptures, namely, to examine how they disrupt the capitalist mode of production. In *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Marx explains that crises can be destructive in two ways: first, through the destruction of use-value, on account of the inability to sell overproduced commodities, and secondly, in destroying accumulated exchange-values. It is the latter effect of crisis that I will be concerned with here, for it is the equalization and dispersal of exchange-value which occur in times of crisis that become, in Marx's estimation, an indispensable phase in the development of capitalist economy.

With respect to the destruction of capital brought about in economic crises, Marx writes:

A large part of the nominal capital of the society, i.e., of the *exchange-value* of the existing capital, is once for all destroyed, although this very destruction, since it does not affect the use-value, *may very much expedite the new reproduction.* ...As regards the fall in the purely nominal capital, State bonds, shares etc. . . it amounts only to the transfer of wealth from one hand to another and will, on the whole, *act favorably upon reproduction*, since the parvenus into whose

hands these stocks or shares fall cheaply, are mostly more enterprising than their former owners.³⁷

In other words, the violent reunification of the hitherto separate elements of purchase and sale effected through crises makes it impossible for the owner to sell her product at the price required to sustain production on the same scale, if indeed she can sell at all. In suppressing the conditions necessary for reproduction to continue, that is, the expansion of capital, the crisis makes possible the transfer of wealth. Although the crisis makes it so that the previous owner may not be able to continue to produce, for those less directly affected by the crisis, there arises an opportunity to cheaply procure the instruments of production, and in this way, profit even more than their predecessors.³⁸ The kernel of Marx's hypothesis of the propensity for crisis in capitalist economy lies in this sentiment: "What one loses, the other gains;"³⁹ nevertheless, this is not merely because crises happen to benefit some opportunistic capitalists, but, more fundamentally, that the actions of such opportunists reflect what preserves capitalist production.

Periodic crises not only create the opportunity for new capitalists to make exorbitant amounts of profit: paradoxically, they provide the only conditions under which capitalism may sustain its own activity. Marx advances this provocative thesis with respect to crises of overproduction in the "Manifesto of the Communist Party:"

³⁷ Ibid, 496, my emphasis

³⁸ As Marx notes in *Capital*: "...large enterprises often flourish only under their second owners, after the first have gone bankrupt. The second owner, buying them cheaply, starts production with a smaller outlay of capital." Karl Marx, trans. David Fernbach, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Three*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 209

³⁹ Karl Marx, trans. S. Ryazanskaya, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 496

It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put on its trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire bourgeois society. In these crises a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises there breaks out an *epidemic* that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity – the epidemic of over-production... The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of old ones. *That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.*⁴⁰

Because the conditions of bourgeois production are generally “too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them,” that is, because they are too narrow to contain the surplus-value produced through perpetual competition and unfettered expansion, crises emerge as conditions supplemental to capitalist production. The crises which periodically erupt in bourgeois society endeavor, on the one hand, to raze the very barriers within which the capitalist mode of production is inscribed. And yet, on the other hand, because they do not actually put a halt to production, but on the contrary, encourage its continuation through redistributing productive forces among enterprising capitalists, these crises must themselves be considered the conditions under which the preservation of bourgeois society may be ensured. Moreover, because they tend to “act favorably upon reproduction,” capitalism has an interest both in honing crises in order to bolster new markets, and in reproducing the form of crisis as a condition of the reproductive process.⁴¹ The crisis is, for Marx, “precisely

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 478, my emphasis. Let the reader also note that Marx reinforces the medical resonances of crisis here in referring to overproduction as an “epidemic.”

⁴¹ For contemporary examples of how capitalism has made the exploitation of crises axiomatic to the mode of production, see Naomi Klein’s excellent exposition of the destructive nature of neo-conservatism in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.

the phase of disturbance and interruption of the process of reproduction,”⁴² but, insofar as it produces the conditions under which, on an expanding scale, capital can actualize itself, it is also an integral part to that process.

It is not incidental that the previous quote, in which Marx explicitly aligns crisis with the identity of bourgeois society, was drawn from the “Manifesto of the Communist Party;” for this text addresses precisely the same sentiment that I have been concerned with, albeit within a more general framework. In the same text, Marx claims that “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.”⁴³ Neither, therefore, can capitalism exist without constantly throwing itself into crisis. Before drawing this section to a close, I would like to briefly indicate what Marx considers to be the upshot of crises. As Marx himself puts it, “in the crises of the world market, the contradictions and antagonisms of bourgeois production are strikingly revealed.”⁴⁴ If, then, the crisis presents an opportunity to dispel bourgeois ideology, it comes also with an injunction for revolutionary action. Marx recognizes within the identification of crises, the capitalist mode of production calling for its own supersession; nevertheless, the potentially emancipatory prospect such crises open up is again obscured by the fact that the identity of capitalism appears inseparable from its propensity for periodic rupture. Indeed, in the following section I will

⁴² Karl Marx, trans. S. Ryazanskaya, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 503

⁴³ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 476. In a discussion leading up to this section, Marx claims on the previous page that the “modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.” In other words, the modern bourgeoisie produced itself through crises.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, trans. S. Ryazanskaya, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 500

demonstrate that the kind of revolutionary praxis that Marx called for in breaking from bourgeois society may not be inconsistent with the very activity through which capitalism is maintained.

§2 The Revolution in Permanence

An Epoch of Revolutionary Crisis

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, an essay ostensibly engaged in a materialist history of Louis Bonaparte's inexplicable rise to power, Marx appears to be primarily concerned with the prospect of revolution: namely, that in the nineteenth century, the possibility for successful revolution, as demonstrated by the failure of the bourgeois revolutions of 1848, may be severely damaged. At the opening of the text, Marx famously formulates this concern: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."⁴⁵ Although it is manifest that each and every generation is burdened by the task of inheriting a past that is not their own, but to which they are nevertheless in thrall, Marx seems to consider this condition as particularly onerous to those living in the nineteenth century. This has less to do, however, with the human task of becoming historical, than it does with the material conditions into which, in the nineteenth century, the human is thrown. "Does it require deep intuition," Marx asks in the "Manifesto of the Communist Party," "to comprehend that man's ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word, man's

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 595

consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?”⁴⁶ In other words, what Marx is concerned with here is how the material economic conditions in which the human finds herself in nineteenth century Europe, namely, those necessitated by the capitalist mode of production, affect the way in which one comes to identify herself vis-à-vis those very conditions.

If it was possible for previous generations “to make their own history,” that is, to take up the material conditions in which they found themselves, and transform their social reality through revolutionary means, according to Marx, in the nineteenth century, this possibility appears particularly dubious. Marx continues:

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such *epochs of revolutionary crisis* they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.⁴⁷

When, in prior instances of “revolutionary crisis,” revolutionaries had invoked specters from the past, they apparently enjoyed some measure of success; such appeals “served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles.”⁴⁸ For example, Marx explains that Oliver Cromwell’s ‘glorious revolution’ in England summoned up names and imagery from the Hebrew Bible to “magnify the given tasks in imagination.”⁴⁹ This practice is longer plausible in bourgeois

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 489

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 595, my emphasis

⁴⁸ Ibid, 596

⁴⁹ Idem

society – indeed, the capitalist mode of production has so thoroughly appropriated the traditional that, rather than augmenting the prospect of historical emancipation, invocations such as these only further entrench the human within her bourgeois existence. Marx does not here elaborate on the way in which, as a reflection of the material conditions of bourgeois society, invocations of “the spirits of the past” preclude the possibility for successful revolution. It is only clear that, in line with the basic tenet of historical materialism, that “intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed,”⁵⁰ before society can break with its present conditions, it must be able to free itself from the weight of tradition. The necessity of superseding these phrases, nevertheless, becomes clearer with Marx’s analysis of the failure of the 1848 revolutions.

Failing to resurrect the revolutionary spirit, the bourgeois revolutions of 1848 only succeeded in parading around the dead bodies of those they called up. In attempting to authenticate their cause by drawing from past revolutions, however, they inadvertently absorbed their content. He writes:

On December 2 the February Revolution is conjured away by a card-sharper’s trick, and what seems overthrown is no longer the monarchy; it is the liberal concessions that were wrung from it by century-long struggles. Instead of *society* having conquered a new content for itself, the *state* only appears to have returned to its oldest form, to the shamelessly simple domination of the sabre and the cowl.⁵¹

Having called up revolutionary slogans of old, the February Revolution, Marx says, failed to conquer “a new content for itself;” rather, in doing so, it condemned itself to the repetition

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 489

⁵¹ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 597

of an antiquated political form. In other words, not only does material production directly influence intellectual and cultural production, but Marx here affirms the converse. Just as material economic conditions delimit the horizon of thought, the phrases and slogans invoked in times of revolutionary crisis are determinant, for Marx, of the possibility for transforming material conditions. Louis Althusser's writings on ideology are helpful on this point. "We know that the State apparatus may survive," he writes, "as is proved by the bourgeois 'revolutions' in nineteenth-century France, by *coups d'état*, by collapses of the State... without the State apparatus being affected or modified: it may survive political events which affect the possession of state power."⁵² Intellectual production, or ideology, not only accompanies the material conditions of production: because ideology is itself material for Althusser, by virtue of the fact that it comprises certain apparatuses and practices, it preserves the dominant social reality within which it is found.

If material and intellectual production are reciprocally determining, as Althusser suggests, Marx's concern over the efficacy of revolution within the nineteenth century seem all the more serious. Because the material economic conditions of the nineteenth century, namely, those necessitated by the capitalist system, thrive off of the appropriation of the traditional, and on account of the fact that this mode of production is inextricable from its ideological composition, the invocation of proto-capitalist ideological phrases will not provide the means for overcoming the conditions within which capitalism emerged. Rather,

⁵² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *On Ideology*, (New York: Verso Books, 2008), 14

by “anxiously conjur(ing) up the spirits of the past”⁵³ in times of revolutionary crisis, revolutionary activity is reinscribed within the bourgeois framework within which capitalism became culturally sedimented. It is for these reasons that Marx concludes that “the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, the activity Marx prescribes in his revolutionary writings, for breaking with the capitalist system appears akin to the process through which capitalism sustains itself.

Another Critical Subject

In claiming that, as opposed to bourgeois society, “in Communist society, the present dominates the past,”⁵⁵ Marx implicitly defines the task of revolutionary praxis. Speaking figuratively of the stance which the revolutionary of the nineteenth century must cultivate toward the past in order to bring about enduring systemic change, Marx writes:

the beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can produce freely in it only when he moves in it without remembering the old and forgets in it his ancestral tongue.⁵⁶

The proletarian revolution, for Marx, requires that the past is, to a great extent, forgotten. Not until the age has forgotten its historical parentage, can it begin entirely anew, and create its own independent content. Only under this condition does it seem that revolution has a

⁵³ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 595

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 597

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 485

⁵⁶ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 595

chance of success. And yet, it does not seem as if Marx is suggesting that an entire epoch forget its own historically shaped conditions. Not only would such an endeavor be clearly undesirable in its inherent violence, without a selective memory of the past, there would be nothing to ensure that the same contradictory historical conditions are not repeated after the revolution. Soon after likening the task of historical emancipation to a kind of active forgetting, Marx further articulates what such an undertaking would involve. The revolution, he says,

...cannot begin with itself, before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead. There the phrase went beyond the content: here the content goes beyond the phrase.⁵⁷

What must be forgotten before the revolution may begin is not the memory of bygone generations, but rather the “superstitious,” regressive ideologies these generations may have bestowed upon the living.⁵⁸ Because the repetition of traditional ideologies was responsible, in Marx’s estimation, to the failure of the bourgeois revolutions, because these phrases could not be invoked without at once affecting the content of these, the proletarian revolution may assimilate the spirit of the new only in striving to keep itself free from any ideological appropriation. Even so, Marx does not provide any criteria to identify the “superstitious” elements which the revolution must endeavor to repel. For this reason, Marx prescribes especially severe measures for revolutionary praxis.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 597

⁵⁸ Although I do not think that Marx is here suggesting that the memory of the past be liquidated *en masse*, I recognize that there is something undeniably violent about his injunction to “let the dead bury the dead.”

If the proletariat is to inherit, not the dead weight of tradition, but the “spirit of revolution,”⁵⁹ it must engage in the activity of perpetual self-criticism. Marx explicitly articulates this requirement in differentiating the proletarian revolution, the revolution to come, from the failed bourgeois revolutions of the past. Here he writes:

Proletarian revolutions...like those of the nineteenth century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again more gigantic before them, recoil ever and anon from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until the situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*⁶⁰

To be successful, the proletarian revolution must endeavor to create for itself a space free from the congelation of tradition – a space within which criticism is kept unaffected by the drift of ideology and, in this way, impervious to bourgeois appropriation. In order to secure such an inviolable dimension, the revolution must constantly interrupt its own activity; it must, in a word, perpetually keep the task to forget in mind. And yet, if revolutionary praxis can be broadly construed as a disruption of the dominant social reality undertaken from within, Marx seems to be advocating here that the proletarian revolution secure for itself its own independent content through continual *self*-disruption. In encountering such an injunction, though, a question arises as to the identity of this subject: what kind of *self* inheres even through perpetual self-destabilization? And, moreover, where could such a pure space of critique be found for this subject to maintain?

⁵⁹ Ibid, 596

⁶⁰ Ibid, 597-598

Within the context of his historical writings, Marx identifies this subject as the proletariat. Nevertheless, it seems that in describing the proletarian revolutionary task in just this way, as a class whose identity is preserved through revolutionary times only in the continual disruption of any stable identity, Marx comes upon *another critical subject*. The proletariat, as the “only revolutionary class,” is to protect its identity from any ideology which might compromise its revolutionary content through the activity of constant self-scrutiny. As it turns out though, this very identity, the content of the revolution, is projected – recall that “the social revolution of the nineteenth century,” for Marx, “cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.”⁶¹ In other words, the content of the proletarian revolution is perpetually deferred in the revolutionary activity of ongoing destabilization. If, as Marx intimates at the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, one always already find herself within historical conditions and social relations which she has inherited from the past, if, as Althusser suggests, drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, identity is itself only possible within an ideological framework, in times of revolutionary crisis, the very identity of the proletariat is *in* crisis. In other words, the revolutionary program that Marx designates for the proletariat is the undertaking of continual crisis. “Above all things,” he writes in the “Address to the Communist League:”

the worker must counteract, as much as at all possible, during the conflict and immediately after the struggle, the bourgeois endeavors to allay the storm... Their actions must be so aimed as to prevent the direct

⁶¹ Ibid, 597

revolutionary excitement from being suppressed again immediately after the victory. On the contrary, *they must keep it alive as long as possible.*⁶²

As opposed to the bourgeoisie, the proletariat must strive to keep the time critical. Only in drawing out the critical phase of the age, cultivating historical rupture, is a leap out of the capitalist system even thinkable for Marx. It is strange, however, that Marx uses revolutionary activity here as a distinguishing factor between the proletariat from the bourgeoisie; for, as Marx claims in the “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly *revolutionizing* the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.”⁶³ As a construct of the capitalist mode of production which, as I have indicated, preserves itself in making the inevitability of recurrent crises a condition of the reproductive process, bourgeois identity is itself *in crisis*.

Inheriting Crisis

Although it is unclear whether it is possible to assimilate the kind of crisis I have just identified within Marx’s description of proletarian revolt to the form of crisis examined earlier in this chapter, it appears that in both his economic and his historical writings, Marx has come upon a critical subject – a subject whose identity is constitutive of crisis. In looking to his account of capitalism’s propensity for crisis, it was revealed that capitalist production relies upon periodic crises to facilitate the ongoing expansion of surplus-value. In this way, I suggested that crises could be invoked in order to preserve the dominant social reality –

⁶² Karl Marx, “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 507. The critical phase, the moment of decision in the medical model, rather than being brought to an end quickly, must be extended “as long as possible.”

⁶³ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 476, my emphasis

bourgeois society. And, after examining the program Marx identifies as the only feasible option left for revolutionary change in the nineteenth century – the proletarian task of unrelenting self-interruption – it appeared that this critical space could not be inhabited without keeping the identity of the revolution in perpetual crisis. In short, Marx's writings demonstrate that crises can be honed in order to maintain the conservative social relations and material conditions which inhere in capitalist society, but also that they are indispensable to the possibility of emancipation from such conditions.

Not only, though, does Marx leave his readers with a tension in his reflections on crisis: to the extent that, in both cases – in his account of the progression of capitalism and the activity of revolution – crisis was seen as the only prospect the one had of staving off the other, he left a definite problem in his wake. How, then, does one proceed as an inheritor of Marx? Does the apparent impasse raised by his crisis theory call into question the efficacy of Marxist ideology critique, or his analysis of the interworking of capitalist economy? Moreover, what bearing do Marx's reflections on crisis have on we who diagnose the current epoch as absolutely critical? I leave these questions open for the time being. If it is indeed the case that something like a *space of critical reflection* that Marx attempted to inherit for the proletariat is opened up in the time of crisis, that the Marxist tradition of breaking with the traditional is capable of being maintained without itself becoming susceptible to conservative appropriation, in looking to the way in which Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, two would-be beneficiaries of the Marxist legacy, approach the subject of crisis, I would like to examine where this leaves us today.

CHAPTER III

CRISES UNDENIABLE, IDEOLOGICAL

In his 1968 essay “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology,’”⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas develops in outline the ways in which, in advanced capitalism, an effective critical social theory must depart from the Marxian framework. In evaluating Herbert Marcuse’s claim⁶⁵ that technology and science have increasingly served ideological, legitimating roles in the course of capitalist expansion, he identifies two “developmental tendencies” absolutely critical to the analysis of modern society: (1) “an increase in state intervention in order to secure the system’s stability,” and (2) “a growing interdependence of research and technology, which has turned the sciences into the leading productive force.”⁶⁶ On the one hand, the state has ceded its political function of legitimating economic activity, in favor of the technical role of system maintenance, that is, of “steering” the economic system away from impending crises.⁶⁷ For Habermas, this represents an epistemic shift away from politics as the “the *realization of practical goals*” to a system geared “toward the *solution of technical*

⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, in *Toward a Rational Society*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1971)

⁶⁵ Habermas mostly focuses on how Marcuse develops this thesis in *One-Dimensional Man*.

⁶⁶ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, in *Toward a Rational Society*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1971), 100

⁶⁷ “The permanent regulation of the economic process by means of state intervention arose as a defense mechanism against the dysfunctional tendencies, which threaten the system, *that capitalism generates when left to itself.*” Ibid, 101

problems.”⁶⁸ In an apparent inversion, the economic system, according to Habermas, becomes the state’s source of legitimation. On the other hand, the profusion of government-contracted technological research has reached the critical point at which it has outstripped the role of “simple,” human labor to provide the economic base. Not only does this mean that the proletariat has lost its revolutionary potential:

What seems... more important is that it [technological advancement] can also become a background ideology that penetrates into the consciousness of the depoliticized mass of the population, where it can take on a legitimating power.⁶⁹

In short, the very space in which the congelation of ideology may be effectively resisted – for Habermas, communication in ordinary language – is beginning to come under the sway of “technocratic consciousness.” As a result of these developments, Habermas argues that “capitalist society has changed to the point where two key categories of Marxian theory, namely class struggle and ideology, can no longer be employed as they stand.”⁷⁰ In his subsequent efforts to reground critical social theory through offering a comprehensive theory of rationality – of which ‘instrumental action’ (the impulse toward technical control) and ‘communicative action’ (action oriented to mutual understanding) are two corresponding components – Habermas attempts to come to grips with the new problems of advanced capitalism.

It in his 1971 work, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, that he first undertakes this systematic regrounding of social theory. In retracing the process by which epistemology “has

⁶⁸ Ibid, 103

⁶⁹ Ibid, 105

⁷⁰ Ibid, 107

been undermined by the movement of philosophical thought itself,”⁷¹ leaving positivistic philosophy of science in its position, Habermas endeavors to restore a dimension of self-reflection once open to Kant, in which philosophy could maintain the distinction between scientific knowledge and knowledge as such – what I called in the last chapter, the *space of critical reflection* that Marx sought to cultivate for the proletariat. He strives, in this way, to revive epistemology, articulating a ground for the sciences which does not ultimately restrict their activity to the paradigm of technical rationality. Although it is undoubtedly true that critical social theory must be reformulated in order to account for the vicissitudes of advanced capitalism, and moreover, that such a reformulation ought to take its lead from a comprehensive critique of rationality, as many critics have pointed out, Habermas’ own efforts in *Knowledge and Human Interests* toward the reciprocal regrounding of the critique of knowledge and social theory are not without crucial problems. He situates these efforts as a response to what he calls “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” – in a word, that modern science has lost contact with its roots in human activity, and has in this way disavowed the task of legitimation through critical self-reflection. In approaching the specific epistemological problems emerging with the advancement of capitalism through the lens of “the crisis of the critique of knowledge,” a crisis which fails to meet his own requirement to permit of justification,⁷² Habermas’ efforts of ‘crisis management’ in *Knowledge and Human Interests* appear not unlike that of the technician working to maintain the stability of the

⁷¹ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 4

⁷² As we shall see, this is introduced in *Legitimation Crisis*.

system – a system, moreover, which capitalism has an interest in successively maintaining.⁷³ On his own terms then, the former stands as a theoretical false start. Not only this, but also, in contributing in this way to the development of ‘crisis consciousness’ as the mode in which we relate to the world, he submits to the ideological “technicization of the life-world.”

§1 The Crisis of the Critique of Knowledge

Broadly construed, “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” is the record of a chain of events that has culminated in science ‘forgetting’ its embeddedness within the “objective self-formative process (*Bildungsprozess*) of the human species,”⁷⁴ and its subsequent abandonment to the detached, pure methodology of modern science. Habermas situates his claim historically: “Since Kant science has no longer been seriously comprehended by philosophy.”⁷⁵ This repression, he goes on to explain, cannot be traced to a single traumatic event. Rather, in the movement of philosophical thought itself, namely, in the inheritance of Kantian reflection by Hegel and Marx, the memory of philosophy’s former relation to science has drifted into obscurity. “Philosophy was dislodged... by philosophy,”⁷⁶ and the philosophical approach to science has, in this way, regressed to a pre-Kantian stage, effectively relinquishing its legitimatory function.

⁷³ This seems to be, to some extent, due to the fact, already suggested in “Technology and Science as Ideology,” that in advanced capitalism, critical labor receives legitimation from economically justified research; however, I wonder if Habermas does enough, at least at this point in his work, to demonstrate how ‘communicative action’ and the ‘emancipatory interest of reason’ works counter to the interests in maintaining the global economic system.

⁷⁴ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 5

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 4

⁷⁶ *Idem*

Although epistemology has been supplanted by philosophy of science through the movement of thought,⁷⁷ this has nevertheless occurred, according to Habermas, within the orbit of a single question: “how is reliable knowledge possible?”⁷⁸ In his critical project, Kant sought to answer this question by inquiring into the subjective conditions of human cognition. In this way, he endeavored to purify knowing of all metaphysical presuppositions, and thus secure for human knowledge a reliable, that is, legitimate, foundation. Habermas argues that from this position an opportunity arose in which Kant could have elaborated an epistemological concept of science on the basis of human interests, and thus held open a space in which scientific knowledge could be enduringly legitimated. With Hegel’s metacritique of Kant, however, this dimension was foreclosed. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Habermas contends, Hegel, in critiquing Kantian epistemology, radicalizes the intention of critical philosophy: namely, to eradicate reflectively the presuppositions which determine how the subject of knowledge knows. Hegel turns the critical project on itself. By asking how the subject can have access to the conditions of possible knowledge prior to knowing – subjecting Kantian critique itself to the requirement of self-reflection – in demanding, therefore, that critical philosophy itself possess a presuppositionless beginning, Hegel entangles epistemology within a circle. Habermas writes:

For the circle in which epistemology inevitably ensnares itself is a reminder that the critique of knowledge does not possess the spontaneity of an origin.

⁷⁷ It is striking, given Habermas’ work, for instance in *Toward a Rational Society*, where he elaborates the economic interests motivating the formation of technological ideology, that here he identifies “the movement of thought” as responsible for the growth of the technical paradigm he associates with positivism.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 3

As reflection it is instead dependent on something prior and given, which it takes as its object while simultaneously originating in it.⁷⁹

In exposing reflection as always already mediated in the very activity of mediation, Hegel outlines the basic standpoint of phenomenology. The phenomenologist finds herself, in the beginning of inquiry, already at her goal. If she seeks to determine what occurs in knowing, she will find herself as a knower, already standing in relation to that knowledge she desires. The problem that Habermas identifies with this approach, and which he attributes to the influence of Schelling's identity philosophy on Hegel, is that it presupposes precisely what it would have to prove in order to dissolve epistemology while meeting its own criteria – the absolute relation of subject and object. In this way, achieving not determinate but, *abstract* negation of the role of reflection in the critique of knowledge, Hegel “destroys the secure foundation of transcendental consciousness, from which the a priori demarcation between transcendental and empirical determinations, between genesis and validity, seemed certain,”⁸⁰ and leaves philosophy with an unclarified relation to scientific knowledge.

According to Habermas, “the crisis of the critique of knowledge,” initiated by the Hegelian uptake of Kant, is solidified with Marx's materialist inheritance of Hegel's metacritique. By reducing the process of reflection instituted by Kant to the paradigm of production and appropriation, Marx finally closes off the dimension of self-reflection in which philosophy could maintain the distinction between scientific knowledge and knowledge as such. As Garbis Kortian writes in *Metacritique*:

⁷⁹ Ibid, 8

⁸⁰ Ibid, 19

This reduction, as is clear in Marx's metacritical appropriation of the *Phenomenology*, ends up by abandoning the concept of self-reflection because it understands the transcendental concept of reflection in terms of the model of production. . . .this reduction of the cognitive dimension leads to a capitulation before positivism.⁸¹

That is to say, although Marx's materialist interpretation of synthesis, within which his conception of reflection is situated, is not without significant epistemological import, Marx himself, on Habermas' reading, does not recognize the implications of his own claims. Marx, following Hegel, understands reality to be dialectically determined by the *Bildungsprozess* of a subject, and yet, unlike Hegel, he equivocates on the implications of this activity. "On the one hand," Habermas writes, "Marx conceives of [this] activity as a transcendental accomplishment; it has its counterpart in the construction of a world in which reality appears subject to conditions of the objectivity of possible objects of experience"⁸² – his conception of the synthesis of humanity and 'objective nature' bears upon the field of subjective human experience – and, "On the other hand he sees this transcendental accomplishment as rooted in real labor processes"⁸³ – the objectivity of human experience is first constituted in concrete human labor.⁸⁴

In comprising the field of human experience and the structures which form human life, labor represents for Marx, "not only a fundamental category of human existence but

⁸¹ Garbis Kortian, trans. John Raffan, *Metacritique: The Philosophical Argument of Jürgen Habermas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 93

⁸² Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 27

⁸³ Idem

⁸⁴ For an example of this, one could point to the multiple levels upon which Marx's critical discourse operates: crises appear to fit the quasi-metaphysical form that Marx developed in *Theories of Surplus-Value* while emerging at the same time from material historical processes dependent on human labor.

also an epistemological category... a schema for action *and* of apprehending the world...”⁸⁵ By locating the formation of classes in concrete labor and not in the transcendental consciousness, Habermas argues, Marx relegates the synthetic activity of the human to instrumental action, and in so doing, closes off the dimension of self-reflection, the very space in which “critical-revolutionary activity” must move. If human self-formation is thought fundamentally in terms of the paradigm of production, the reflective ability to identify and critique congealed social relations will be compromised.⁸⁶ His inability to distinguish between the two levels on which his discourse operates permits Marx, according to Habermas, to overlook the logical distinction between the status of critique and that of the natural sciences, leading him to call for their unity in one single, universal science. From here, positivism could inaugurate the absolutism of scientific method in a space evacuated of reflection. Habermas concludes: “Materialist scientism only reconfirms what absolute idealism had already accomplished: the elimination of epistemology in favor of unchained universal ‘scientific knowledge’ – but this time of scientific materialism instead of absolute knowledge.”⁸⁷ Although Marx’s philosophy of labor marks a significant advance, in thinking Hegelian recognition in terms of class antagonism and linking social formation to material processes, in reducing the reflection of the self-formative subject to the paradigm of

⁸⁵ Ibid, 28

⁸⁶ This is because, on Habermas’ reading, although Marx’s social theory “does not eliminate from practice the structure of symbolic interaction and the role of cultural tradition, which are the only basis on which power (*Herrschaft*) and ideology can be comprehended...this aspect of practice is not made part of the philosophical frame of reference.” Ibid, 42

⁸⁷ Ibid, 63

production, on Habermas' view, his thought indicates a corresponding regression, sealing off the opportunity opened up by Kant to found a reflective theory of knowledge.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” is not merely a lament for prospects lost in the movement of tradition: it is an assessment of the damages sustained by the foundation of the sciences in this injury, a *diagnosis* of what consequences would follow if these damages were to go unnoticed, and implicitly, a program for recovery.⁸⁹ While trying to evade the dangers of scholastic dogmatism, that is, the risk of founding epistemology upon unquestioned metaphysical presuppositions, the theory of knowledge unwittingly yielded to another form of dogmatism – the dogma of scientism espoused by logical positivism. Habermas writes: “Positivism stands and falls with the principle of scientism, that is that the meaning of knowledge is defined by what the sciences do and can thus be adequately explicated through the methodological analysis of the scientific procedures.”⁹⁰ In taking up residence upon the collapsed space of reflection, positivistic philosophy of science finds itself in defiance of the call to reflect upon its own activity. It is precisely this dogmatic disavowal of reflection and corresponding unquestioned belief in the pure methodology of modern science which Habermas designates as “pre-Kantian.”

⁸⁸ Habermas later goes on to say that Nietzsche, in radically calling into question the activity of reflection on the basis of Hegel's metacritique of Kant, finally dissolves the dimension of reflection. Yet, because he does not identify any additional consequences this might have on the foundations of modern science in his narrative of the “crisis of the critique of knowledge,” it is unclear how Nietzsche figures into this account.

⁸⁹ These latter elements of “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” can be compared to what Seyla Benhabib called the “explanatory-diagnostic” aspect of critique. Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), 226-227

⁹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 67

What cannot be gathered by way of scientific inquiry, what transcends the confines of the rules to which it is bound, including even the attempt to justify the validity of scientific knowledge, is regarded by the philosophy of science as meaningless, metaphysical abstraction. In this way, replacing transcendental conditions of inquiry with rules of procedure, the philosophy of science renounces the task of identifying the meaning of knowledge, detaching it from the knowing subject. As Habermas puts it: “For an epistemology restricted to methodology, the subjects who proceed according to these rules lose their significance. Their deeds and destinies belong at best to the psychology of the empirical persons to whom the subjects of knowledge have been reduced.”⁹¹ Once the knowing subject has been dislocated from the process of knowing and rejected from the position of one through whom a world is constituted in coming to grips with ‘objective nature’ (and thus, as one for whom scientific knowledge would have any purchase), one can no longer speak of a ‘theory of knowledge,’ but only a ‘methodology of research.’ Although this may sound like an insignificant semantic distinction, this denominative shift captures much of what is at stake for Habermas in his account of “the crisis of the critique of knowledge.”

A ‘theory of knowledge,’ is a mode of inquiry which takes its way of knowing – *and the legitimacy of such knowing* – as its foremost concern, attempting in this way to preserve a site from which it can reflect upon its own activity. ‘Methodology,’ on the other hand, is a specific procedure by which a field of study engenders knowledge. Questions as to the legitimacy of a particular method tend to lie outside of the framework of methodological inquiry. If, as Habermas suggests, “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” entails that

⁹¹ Ibid, 68

epistemology is replaced by a ‘methodology of research’ advocated by positivist philosophy of science, and if the accession to power of the latter effects the exile of the knowing subject from the cognitive process, an opportunity arises in which the autochthonous modern sciences could develop unchecked. What ultimately concerns Habermas about the dominance of the positivistic self-understanding of the sciences can, to some degree, be viewed as analogous to what Marx predicts in the *Grundrisse* with respect to capital:

Fixed capital, as an animated monster, objectifies scientific thought and is in fact the encompassing aspect. It does not relate to the individual worker as an instrument. Instead he exists as an animated individual detail, a living isolated accessory to the machinery.⁹²

Nevertheless, to the degree that, on his diagnosis of late capitalism, technological research entrenched within the framework of positivist science becomes the leading force of production, the relationship Habermas envisions here between capital and technology is not merely an analogous one. Indeed, why “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” is absolutely critical, is because it discloses the possibility of a point beyond which any effective critique of technological ideology is conceivable.

Positivism, in cutting off the sciences from the only dimension in which they could possibly find justification and maintain the validity of their findings, gains complete control over scientific self-understanding, and restricts the latter to technical rationality. As Thomas McCarthy argues, “The real problem is not technical reason as such but its expansion ‘to the

⁹² Karl Marx, trans. Martin Nicolaus, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 470

proportions of a life form, of the ‘historical totality’ of a life world.”⁹³ This totalizing self-understanding as technical progress, Habermas explains, precludes self-reflection and so lapses into dogmatism in covering over the embeddedness of knowledge in the interests of the knowing subject.

In his analysis of Peirce and Dilthey, Habermas identifies moments in which the dogmatic “illusion of objectivism” could have been overcome and a self-reflective theory of the sciences founded, however, he also finds within each, hidden positivist tendencies preventing them from doing so. Nevertheless, it is Habermas’ identification of the knowledge-constitutive interests driving the pursuit of knowledge, exposed in his readings of Peirce, Dilthey,⁹⁴ and Freud that finally allow him to articulate what is called for in superseding the “crisis of the critique of knowledge.” McCarthy summarizes: “Technological rationality must be assigned its legitimate, if limited, place within a comprehensive theory of rationality. It is for this task that the theory of cognitive interests is designed.”⁹⁵ Before the growing mound of discarded knowing subjects and missed opportunities, “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” identifies not only the possibility of the irrevocable repression of the interrelation of knowledge and human interests, but within this identification it delineates a program to make whole what has been broken.

Habermas wants to return to the dimension opened by Kant and Fichte in which, over and against the knowledge-constitutive interests he identifies in the natural and cultural

⁹³ Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1985), 67

⁹⁴ Although Habermas’ analysis of Peirce and Dilthey is essential in the development of the book, due to the scope of this discussion, I will only treat them here obliquely.

⁹⁵ *Idem*

sciences with Peirce and Dilthey (respectively, the technical and practical interests),⁹⁶ he identifies an emancipatory interest on the basis of the experience of reflection. Habermas writes: “Methodically it [the emancipatory interest of reason] leads to a standpoint from which the identity of reason with the will to reason freely arises. In self-reflection, knowledge for the sake of knowledge comes to coincide with the interest in autonomy and responsibility.”⁹⁷ In the experience of reflection developed by Fichte, Habermas locates a site from which the confluence of knowledge and interest could be elaborated methodologically. He realizes, however, that this dimension cannot be recovered in the “mere return” to an opportunity available before the positivistic colonization of epistemology: “On the basis of positivism, an unmediated return to this... would have to appear as a regression to metaphysics.”⁹⁸ For this reason, Habermas turns to Freudian psychoanalysis, a mode of inquiry which understands itself as empirical science, in order to show how the interest of reason – the “critical-revolutionary” dimension of reflection – reemerges from out of “the crisis of the critique of knowledge,” providing an opportunity to restore the damaged relationship between philosophy and science.

Habermas identifies psychoanalysis as an example of the way in which science in its very activity self-consciously moves in the space of self-reflection, albeit the *only* example. I would like, therefore, to suggest that the method that Habermas develops throughout the

⁹⁶ “Thus we speak of a technical or practical knowledge-constitutive interest insofar as the life structures of instrumental action and symbolic interaction perform the meaning of the validity of possible statements via the logic of inquiry in such a manner that, to the extent that these statements are cognitions, they have a function only in these life structures: that is to the extent that they are technically exploited or practically efficacious.” Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 195-196

⁹⁷ Ibid, 197-198

⁹⁸ Ibid, 197

course of *Knowledge and Human Interests* can be understood as an application of a version of Freud's method of analytic reconstruction through general interpretation; an application, nevertheless, which turns out to be ultimately problematic. As opposed to the hermeneutics of the cultural sciences,

Psychoanalytic interpretation... is not directed at meaning structures in the dimension of what is consciously intended. ...The omissions and distortions that it [psychoanalytic labor] rectifies have a systematic role and function. ...The mutilations have meaning as such.⁹⁹

Freudian psychoanalysis posits a dimension subtending the conscious level of the patient's discourse: the unconscious. In the unconscious is preserved rejected memories and unmet desires – fragments of a life history abandoned. Evidence of what the subject has been unable to face or fulfill is belied by the manifestation of symptoms; the return of the repressed. The omissions and distortions present in the analysand's speech testify to the analyst "places where an interpretation has forcibly prevailed that is ego-alien even though it is produced by the self."¹⁰⁰ The task of the analyst then is to release the analysand from the entanglement of self-alienation through self-reflection.

In contrast to the monological model of interpretation employed in the cultural sciences, psychoanalytic general interpretation proceeds through the formation of mutual understanding between two partners in a communicative situation. As Habermas puts it: "This disturbance of communication does not require an interpreter who mediates between partners of divergent languages but rather one who teaches one and the same subject to

⁹⁹ Ibid, 217

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 227

comprehend his own language.”¹⁰¹ The general interpretation of the analyst enables the analysand to pursue her own emancipation by leading her to reflection. The analyst accomplishes the former by way of *reconstruction*, that is, by attempting to establish continuity in the analysand’s life history by supposing a sort of logic to function behind her distorted communication. *The success of this reconstruction, according to Habermas, can be determined by the extent to which the analysand not only accepts the interpretation of the analyst, but only insofar as the reconstruction returns to her fragments of her life history, releasing her to the continuation of self-reflection.* Habermas summarizes:

The analyst instructs the patient in reading his own texts, which he himself has mutilated and distorted, and in translating symbols from a mode of expression deformed as a private language into the mode of expression of public communication. This translation reveals the genetically important phases of life history to a memory that was previously blocked, and brings to consciousness the person’s own self-formative process.¹⁰²

It is in the translation performed in general interpretation that Habermas locates the confluence of knowledge and interest. The self-reflection that psychoanalysis engenders is both enlightenment *and* emancipation. General interpretation, in releasing the analysand to her self-formative process, accomplishes the reunification of the subject with her alienated identity, and so restores her communication through communicative action. In this way, Habermas understands psychoanalysis to function self-consciously as “at once both theory and therapy.”¹⁰³ He thus locates within the psychoanalytic model a site from which to

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 228

¹⁰² Idem

¹⁰³ Ibid, 287

critically intervene upon “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” through the discovery of the emancipatory interest of reason.

The analytic method of reconstruction that Habermas attributes to Freud has striking affinities with Habermas’ own method which he employs in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. In Habermas’ *diagnosis* of “the crisis of the critique of knowledge,” one can clearly detect a therapeutic address: Philosophy has repressed the dimension of self-reflection in which it nevertheless moves. In order for it to rehabilitate its self-alienation (embodied by philosophy of science’s compulsive fixation within the paradigm of instrumental action and its correlative inability to understand its knowledge claims within the context of communicative action) within the narrative of its self-constitution, it must recall and work through what effected this repression. This, in turn, is accomplished by means of Habermas’ method of rational reconstruction. Like the physician who “confronts the process that he is to reconstruct not as a historical matter but as a power operating in the present,”¹⁰⁴ Habermas considers his activity of reconstruction capable of undoing the hold that the crisis retains over the present. As Habermas himself identifies in his interpretation of psychoanalytic method, however, successful reconstruction can only be rendered legitimate by the patient. Within *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas, through his reconstruction of the movement of philosophy from Kant through Freud “takes the scattered elements of a mutilated and distorted text and fills them out to make a comprehensible pattern;”¹⁰⁵ and yet, without the accord of the *subject in crisis*, at best, his interpretations remain hypotheses, his interventions tentative, and at worst, mere monological correctives. Before further

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 231

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 230

explicating how Habermas' own explicit engagement with the concept of crisis elsewhere renders his project in *Knowledge and Human Interests* to reground critical social theory, problematic, I would like to underscore that in developing "the crisis of the critique of knowledge" through the psychoanalytic paradigm, he seems to have reverted to the medical roots of crisis.

§2 Legitimizing Crisis

In the opening of his 1973 work, *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas situates his contributions to crisis theory vis-à-vis Marx's previous efforts:

Marx developed, for the first time, a social-scientific concept of system crisis; it is against this background that we speak today of social or economic crises. When, for instance, we mention the great economic crisis of the early thirties, the Marxian overtones are unmistakable. But I do not wish to add to the history of Marxian dogmatics yet another elucidation of his crisis theory. My aim is rather to introduce systematically a social-scientifically useful concept of crisis.¹⁰⁶

Although the Marxian schematic has been invaluable to the critique of capitalist political economy in developing the theoretical resources for analyzing the structural significance of the periodic recurrence of economic crisis, Habermas suggests that, with the widespread, systemic transformation effected by advanced capitalism, Marx's thesis of the inevitability of crisis may have lost its coherency. *Legitimation Crisis* thus sets out to answer the following question: "Is the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist social formation effective in the same way under the forms of appearance of organized capitalism, or *has the logic of crisis changed?*"¹⁰⁷ In accord with his conclusions in "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" here

¹⁰⁶ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 2

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 31, my emphasis

Habermas finds that certain developmental tendencies of advanced capitalism present new difficulties for critical social theory. Nonetheless, if ‘the logic of crisis’ has changed, *Legitimation Crisis* does not provide adequate means for re-conceptualizing this phenomenon. Rather, in abandoning crisis to the lacuna between two asymptotic theoretical approaches, Habermas leaves us with a concept that resists all efforts of legitimation.

With the radical reconfiguration of the relationship of the economy and the state effected by advanced capitalism, several factors crucial to Marx’s crisis theory are altered. Thomas McCarthy identifies two of these:

(1) Governmental activity has altered the form of the production of surplus value; by filling functional gaps in the market, the state intervenes in the process of capital accumulation. It heightens the productivity of labor through the production of “collective commodities” (material and immaterial infrastructure) and through organizing the educational system in general, and scientific-technical progress in particular. . . (2) In certain large sectors of the economy the mechanism of the market has been replaced by “quasi-political compromise” between business and unions in determining the cost of labor power. Since the cost of labor power is the unit of measure in the Marxian calculation of value, this introduces a political dimension into the very foundations of value theory.¹⁰⁸

As we saw in the previous chapter, it was only within the time of surplus-value that economic crisis was possible for Marx: with the augmentation of surplus-value came an increased crisis potential. Now, however, as the state takes on the function of regulating the accumulation of capital, transformations in the dissemination of surplus-value have transposed its structural significance. Moreover, if as Habermas suggests, shifts in the capitalist “principle of organization” have permitted the repoliticization of the relations of production, it is no longer clear that crisis tendencies can be analyzed solely through an

¹⁰⁸ Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1985), 363-364

economic lens.¹⁰⁹ Not only though, do these developments disclose for Habermas the obsolescence of Marxian crisis theory; in his estimation, the metamorphosis of the politico-economic couple characteristic of advanced capitalism leads to the possibility of entirely new crisis phenomena – among these, crises of legitimation, rationality, and motivation.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, rather than offering a descriptive account of the crisis tendencies Habermas identifies within the development of advanced capitalism, I would like to examine from a methodological perspective the way in which he attempts to rethink the nature of crisis.

Habermas recognizes that within the social sciences the systems-theoretic concept of crisis is among the most widely used. Accordingly, in evaluating this approach, he indicates some crucial factors which he thinks this paradigm has neglected. He explains, quite schematically, that crises arise in systems theory “when the structure of a social system allows fewer possibilities for problem solving than are necessary to the continued existence of the system. In this sense, crises are seen as persistent disturbances of *system integration*.”¹¹¹ Because this paradigm considers social groups as fundamentally auto-regulatory, the possibility of crisis – that which threatens the very regulation through which the system sustains itself – emerges necessarily beyond the system’s constitutive logic. For systems

¹⁰⁹ Habermas offers a list of some of the various ways that the state intervenes on the economy and affects the accumulation of capital: “–through ‘strengthening the competitive capability of the nation’ by organizing supranational economic blocks, securing international stratification by imperialist means; –through unproductive government consumption (for example, armaments and space exploration; –through guiding, in accord with structural policy, the flow of capital into sectors neglected by an autonomous market;...” Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 35

¹¹⁰ Although Habermas’ formulation of these systems crises lies beyond the scope of this chapter, I would like to suggest here that it is possible to classify “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” found in *Knowledge and Human Interests* as one of socio-cultural legitimation. For my part, I wish to indicate that these “possible crisis tendencies” seem to remain firmly within the systems-theoretic paradigm. For Habermas’ own articulation of these, see *Legitimation Crisis*, especially 45-94.

¹¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 2

theory, crises *come from without*, and yet it is evident that they bear upon the social system's internal cohesion. Thus, crisis is thought here as the inability to preserve identity in encountering resistant heterogeneity. It is precisely, however, this notion of identity that Habermas contends renders the systems-theoretic approach social-scientifically ineffective: systems theory is unable to think the 'internal causes' of crises,¹¹² indispensable in considering the *sociality* of the system. He writes:

Structurally inherent contradictions can, of course, be identified only when we are able to specify structures important for continued existence. Such essential structures must be distinguishable from other system elements, which can change without the system's losing its identity. The difficulty of thus clearly determining the boundaries and persistence of social systems in the language of systems theory raises fundamental doubts about the usefulness of a systems-theoretic concept of social crisis.¹¹³

Systems theory, in a word, cannot adequately distinguish the limits upon which its crisis theorems nevertheless rely. Social systems may encounter elements foreign to the composition of system integration, problems which question the identity of these systems without risking fragmentation; indeed, as Habermas points out, social evolution (the process in which the external is progressively assimilated) can be essential to system maintenance.¹¹⁴ If systems theory equivocates on the way in which social identity is comprised, for Habermas, this belies a further inability to think the appropriate *subject of crisis*. He concludes his analysis of the limitations of the systems-theoretical concept of crisis with the following:

¹¹² We could count among the internal crisis factors the systems-theoretical approach cannot sufficiently account for the Marxian notion of class antagonism.

¹¹³ Ibid, 2-3

¹¹⁴ Some of the 'external constituents' Habermas considers to be "universal properties of social systems include "outer nature, or the resources of the non-human environment" and "the other social systems with which the society is in contact." Ibid, 9

The range of tolerance within which the goal values of a social system can vary without critically endangering its continued existence or losing identity obviously cannot be grasped from the objectivistic viewpoint of systems theory. Systems are not presented as subjects; but, according to the pre-technical usage, *only* subjects can be involved in crises. *Thus, only when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened can we speak of crisis.*¹¹⁵

Parallel to Habermas' critique of positivistic philosophy of science in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, because systems theory disavows the perspective of the human subject, it falls short of presenting a "social-scientifically useful concept of crisis." It is for this reason that he takes recourse to the insights of the phenomenological tradition.

Whereas systems theory may be helpful in examining a social system in terms of the "steering problems" it may encounter in performing its auto-regulatory function, in insisting that "the crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it,"¹¹⁶ Habermas argues that the critical diagnosis offered by the former approach must be supplemented by one which is capable of addressing the "life-world" within which crisis is experienced. "Societies are *also* systems," he writes

but their mode of development does not follow solely the logic of the expansion of system autonomy (power); social evolution transpires rather within the bounds of a logic of the life-world, the structures of which are determined by linguistically produced intersubjectivity and are based on criticizable validity claims.¹¹⁷

Though the "steering mechanisms" necessary for "system integration" can be tracked with the systems-theoretic paradigm, to the degree that such controls (and the problems to which they are intended to negotiate) move within the symbolic sphere of communication, the

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 3, my emphasis

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 1

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 14

latter appears conceptually inappropriate. Accordingly, Habermas suggests that a social-scientific concept of crisis should be able to reflect the phenomenological dimension of sociality, such as that proposed by Alfred Schütz. The latter, drawing from Husserl, locates intersubjectivity as the fundament of “lived experience.” If our basic way of being in the world is a social-being involving communication in ordinary language, an account of the composition of social identity cannot dispense with the intersubjectively structured standpoint of the social subject. Habermas thus considers the “logic of the life-world” absolutely essential for crisis theory. And yet, systems theory is not the only paradigm which will ultimately run into problems attempting to present an appropriate account of crisis. “A contemporary consciousness of crisis,” he writes

often turns out afterwards to have been misleading. A society does not plunge into crisis when, *and only when*, its members so identify the situation. How could we distinguish such crisis ideologies from valid experiences of crisis if social crises could be determined only on the basis of conscious phenomena?¹¹⁸

Though Habermas directs these comments to the method of historiography, they clearly have implications for the phenomenological paradigm. Here his assertion that “the crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it,”¹¹⁹ comes back to haunt him: if it is the case that the “lived experience” of the *subject of crisis* is irreducible for any critical diagnosis, and yet, if it is also clear that some of these diagnoses are ideological (think, for instance, of the 2009 outbreak of “swine flu” in North America), a concept of crisis based solely upon “conscious phenomena” appears less than rigorous. Furthermore, as

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 4, my emphasis

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 1

I indicated above, crisis has been encumbered with diagnostic problems ever since its medical employment:

The critical process, the illness, appears as something objective. A contagious disease, for example, is contracted through *external* influences on the organism. . . . The patient's consciousness plays no role in this; how he feels, how he experiences his illness, is at most a symptom of a process that he himself can scarcely influence at all. Nevertheless, we would not speak of a crisis, when it is medically a question of life and death, if it were only a matter of an objective process viewed from the outside.¹²⁰

The crisis is manifestly objective – an external force disrupting the subject's autonomy; however, inasmuch as it puts at risk the very ability to maintain a *normative* state of health – a stable identity – the crisis inheres on the side of the subject. Moreover, because the terminus of crisis is linked to the “liberation of the subject caught up in it,” the reclamation of her personal sovereignty, the diagnosis of crisis remains auto-diagnostic. In its subjectivism, the “life-world” perspective resists the demand for objective validation; but additionally, as with systems theory, it also fails to yield the possibility of collectively legitimating crises. As I suggested previously, within the medical framework, crises can be legitimately diagnosed only from without – that is, by one whose identity is not already claimed by that crisis she is to diagnose. Unless a crisis concept can wrest itself from the diagnostic problems posed by the medical model, that is, if such a concept is unable to rigorously delimit the normative boundaries which the crisis unsettles, its utility will remain questionable.

Recognizing the apparent shortcomings of both models, Habermas nevertheless reaches the conclusion that a useful concept of crisis should be sought in combining the two approaches. “A social-scientifically appropriate crisis concept,” he writes “must grasp the

¹²⁰ Idem

connection between system integration and social integration. The two expressions ‘social integration’ and ‘system integration’ derive from different theoretical traditions.... Both paradigms, life-world and system, are important. The problem is to demonstrate their interconnection.”¹²¹ In failing to demonstrate this interconnection, however, Habermas leaves us with an empty concept of crisis. Even if he were able to synthesize the insights of systems theory and social phenomenology, he would still need to demonstrate how combining the two approaches would allow one to overcome the diagnostic problem they both inherit from the medical model. If it is impossible to define within each of the two paradigms the boundaries of the *subject of crisis*, it seems unlikely that the fusing of these would amount to much more than further obfuscation. By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect these methodological concerns back upon Habermas’ diagnosis of “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” in *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

Though the concept of crisis in *Knowledge and Human Interests* appears “pre-technical,” this fact will not redeem the legitimacy of his project. Rather, his *proto-technical* treatment of crisis demonstrates the way in which, all efforts to the contrary withstanding, his endeavors serve to reinforce crisis consciousness. Above, I invoked an affinity between Habermas’ method of rational reconstruction in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, and what he calls in the same work, analytic reconstruction through “general interpretation.” This, in turn, led to the conclusion that the likeness betrayed a methodological commitment to the medical model of crisis. I would now like to suggest that, if we consider Habermas’ critical intervention in that

¹²¹ Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 4

work, as an instance of what would later become the “life-world” perspective,¹²² then (1) the latter appears not quite as resistant to technicization as he might have supposed, and (2), his diagnosis of and intervention upon “the crisis of the critique of knowledge,” through which he attempted to reground critical social theory, seem not only theoretically suspect, but indeed, ideologically regressive.

I would have the reader recall what, in his reading of Freud, Habermas took to be a potential advance for the “theory of knowledge:” in the psychoanalytic situation, the subject’s liberation is effected through the activity of critical self-reflection elicited in an intersubjective, communicative context. Here crisis phenomena tied to subjective consciousness is averted by communicative action. If, as Habermas contends, out of the psychoanalytic paradigm emerges the dimension of critical self-reflection which could allow philosophy to reestablish its position vis-à-vis the sciences, it is because “the cure” in psychoanalysis – the restoration of critical self-reflection – is dependent on intersubjective legitimation. In attempting to apply a version of this method to “the crisis of the critique of knowledge,” however, several crucial questions arise. As there is no clear empirical subject of crisis in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, of what use here is the concept of intersubjectivity? Does this fact release Habermas of his requirement that crises must in this way be legitimated? By what criterion, after all, ought “the crisis of the critique of knowledge” be validated?

¹²² Though Habermas distances himself to some extent in *Knowledge and Human Interests* from the cultural-hermeneutical approach of Dilthey, to the degree that the psychoanalytic “general interpretation,” on his reading, is an instance of an emancipatory activity taking place within the sphere of communication free from domination, in which societal repression can be measured by the analysand’s relation to language, the former appears closely allied with the social-phenomenological approach.

As neither *Knowledge and Human Interests* nor *Legitimation Crisis* provide the means to definitively answer questions such as these, through the lens of the latter work, Habermas' diagnosis of "the crisis of the critique of knowledge," by which he situates his efforts in the former work to reground critical social theory, appears illegitimate. Moreover, in applying his reconstructive technique to this perceived crisis without reference to any other subject through whom the efficacy of his attempts may be intersubjectively validated (as in psychoanalytic reconstruction), his critical interventions in the former work appear indistinct from the corrective techniques which, in the context of systems theory, he criticized as excessively objectivistic. Far from transforming the relationship between philosophy and science, Habermas merely attempts to "steer" the epistemological ground of modern technology away from imminent danger. To the extent that, as he recognizes elsewhere, in advanced capitalism, technology has become the leading productive force, in striving to maintain the stability of the latter, next to Marx, for whom economic crisis presented a possibility for the dissolution of ideology and revolutionary praxis, Habermas' critical intervention here appears somewhat conservative. Finally, if Habermas' treatment of crisis is methodologically ambiguous, at a certain point, this ambiguity may run counter to some of the overarching intentions of his work: with an irredeemable concept of crisis, crisis ideology dovetails into the technological ideology Habermas has so often criticized.

If the developmental tendencies of advanced capitalism require Marx's critique of political economy to be jettisoned, elements of his crisis theory, nevertheless stand up to the test of time. Even in the age of globalization, crisis remains capitalism's manna: quite recently we have seen how crises can be manipulated to legitimate private economic interests

over the overwhelming exigencies of the public.¹²³ That we understand ourselves as living in a time of crisis takes on a new meaning in Habermas' analysis of advanced capitalism – it supports the claim that increasingly we relate to the world as subjects who defer political power to the authority of scientific technicians, rather than as practically-oriented subjects who participate in decision-making processes irreducible to technical appropriation.

Habermas' contribution to our current study, then, is that he tacitly identifies the necessary depoliticization which is effected through the production of crisis consciousness. If for Marx, the diagnosis of crisis served the function of the critique of ideology – today it is the reverse: the diagnosis of crisis seems to serve ideological purposes.

¹²³ For a wealth of material examples, see Naomi Klein's important work, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.

CHAPTER IV

SPEAKING OF CRISIS

In an interview soon after the attacks of September 11 2001, Jacques Derrida made the following comment:

As with so many other crucial juridical notions, what remains obscure, dogmatic, or precritical does not prevent the powers that be, the so-called legitimate powers, from making use of these notions when it seems opportune. On the contrary, the more confused the concept the more it lends itself to an opportunistic appropriation.¹²⁴

Though he makes this claim with reference to the abuse of the phrase “international terrorism,” the comment captures something essential to his response to the events of 9/11 recorded in “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides.” It exemplifies the way in which, as a critical moment in the hegemony of Western capitalism, these events disclose for Derrida, at once, the necessity and the impossibility of diagnosing the full extent of their impact upon this system. While Derrida takes very seriously the significance which the date September 11 holds for all of those families claimed by this event, and, indeed, condemns the perpetrators of these violent acts unequivocally, he nevertheless finds something very curious about the way in which it has come to signify for us “a major event,” and even a historic crisis.¹²⁵ He

¹²⁴ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 103-104

¹²⁵ Earlier in the interview Derrida uses the language of crisis with respect to the identity he takes to have been put at risk in the September 11th attacks: “And it is very much a question of the still enigmatic but also *critical* essence of this hegemony. By *critical*, I mean at once decisive, potentially decisionary, decision-making, and *in crisis*: today more vulnerable and threatened than ever.” Ibid, 88

insists that our experience of such an event is always inseparable from its construction and dissemination – that an event such as 9/11 is only ever “major” (or, I would add, critical) to the extent that it *presents itself* as such to those who it would claim. Although Derrida’s argument here appeals to a discourse of disaster, this is not the focus of his essay. He did, however, endeavor to deconstruct the rhetoric of the crisis through the lens of what he called “a newly arisen apocalyptic tone in philosophy,”¹²⁶ in an essay of the same name. Read together, these two essays provide the basis for a deconstructive critique of crisis. Nevertheless, while it appears that Derrida is endorsing a critique akin to that which I have tried to articulate here, I argue that, because of its methodological commitment to “the philosophy of the subject,”¹²⁷ deconstructive criticism is powerless to transform crisis consciousness into collective political activity.

§1 The Experience of Traumatism

After learning that both Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida were in New York City just weeks after 9/11, Giovanna Borradori arranged to interview the two, hoping to solicit their reflections on a time manifestly marked by terror.¹²⁸ Early on in Derrida’s interview, he is asked to evaluate the event’s historical significance. “September 11,”

¹²⁶ Jacques Derrida, trans. John Leavey, Jr., “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)

¹²⁷ Seyla Benhabib considers the following four attributes characteristic of the “philosophy of the subject:” “(a) the unitary model of activity, (b) the model of a transsubjective subject, (c) history as the story of transsubjectivity, and (d) the identity of constituting and constituted subjectivity...” Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 54

¹²⁸ *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

Borradori writes, “gave us the impression of being a *major event*, one of the most important historical events we will witness in our lifetime. . . .”¹²⁹ Responding to this provocation, Derrida endeavors to lay bear the “impression” which 9/11 left upon us all:

“Something” took place, we have the feeling of not having seen it coming, and certain consequences undeniably follow upon the “thing.” But this very thing, the place and meaning of this “event,” remains ineffable, like an intuition without a concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it’s talking about. We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, *le 11 septembre*, September 11.¹³⁰

September 11 presented to us, Derrida says, “something” unrecognizable, “something” unprecedented – it gave us an “impression” which we did not know how to receive. On his account, the experience of 9/11 was manifest as the retreat of knowledge; not only the knowledge of what had occurred, or that of what possibilities had in this way been disclosed – in exhibiting “something” “beyond language” the crisis emerged as inseparable from the perception of powerlessness it provoked. For Derrida, this “impression” was most palpable in speaking of the event. Though it is clear that the gravity of such an event dictates a very specific lexicon – a vocabulary reserved for the absolute worst – as Derrida contends, what the event announced was precisely the insufficiency of language to *make sense* of what struck us as most critical. It was “impossible not to speak on this subject,”¹³¹ Derrida notes, and yet,

¹²⁹ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 86

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 87

with nothing to say, such speaking inevitably lapsed into the mechanical repetition of the date “September 11.” Derrida’s reflections here are made with reference to his own “impression” of 9/11; this “impression,” however, is meant to bespeak the more fundamental structures which condition our experience of crisis, and, moreover, those specific to experience as such in the age of globalization.

In maintaining that it is impossible to reduce our “impression” of 9/11 to the “brute fact” of its occurrence, Derrida suggests that any understanding of this event must be sought in looking to the system which deemed it a “major event.” “Whether this ‘impression’ is *justified or not*,” he says,

it is in itself an event, let us never forget it, especially when it is, though in quite different ways, *a properly global effect*. The “impression” cannot be dissociated from all the affects, interpretations, and rhetoric that have at once reflected, communicated, and “globalized” it, from everything that also and first of all formed, produced, and made it possible. [...] We could say that the impression is “informed,” in both senses of the word: a predominant system gave it form, and this form then gets run through an organized information machine (language, communication, rhetoric, image, media, and so on). This informational apparatus is from the very outset political, technical, economic.¹³²

Because deconstruction entails a methodological commitment to the inherent semantic instability of all discourse, it would seem misguided perhaps to insist upon distinguishing between the various levels upon which Derrida’s comments here are operative. Nevertheless, to get to what is at stake in his essay, I think it helpful here to do just this. In speaking of the “impression” which 9/11 left us with, Derrida moves within the Kantian dichotomy of the transcendental and empirical. He suggests at once that the acute trauma of 9/11 revealed something originary about the structure of human experience, but also that this same

¹³² Ibid, 88-89, my emphasis

experience had been thoroughly conditioned by an “informational apparatus” of our own making. On the one hand, the specificity of this particular event indicates something of the transcendental structure by which we come to experience the event as such:

although the experience of an event, the mode according to which it affects us, calls for a movement of appropriation (comprehension, recognition, identification, description, determination, interpretation on the basis of a horizon of anticipation, knowledge, naming, and so on), although this movement of appropriation is irreducible and ineluctable, there is no event worthy of its name except insofar as this appropriation *falters* at some border or frontier.¹³³

The subjective inappropriability of 9/11 discloses for Derrida the radical indeterminacy intrinsic to our experience of any event “worthy of its name.” But, on the other hand, our “impression” of 9/11, he claims, is completely inseparable from the empirical, hegemonic interpretive schema through which it was disseminated and given over to us. An irreducible difference, according to Derrida, inheres between the mediatized “impression” we were made to receive through a process of cultural appropriation and the inappropriable factual occurrence of this event. Although it is, for Derrida, “just about impossible... to distinguish the ‘brute’ fact from the system that produces the ‘information’ about it,”¹³⁴ to the extent that each and every event is, to a certain degree, an “event of appropriation,” he insists that this distinction is one that nevertheless must be made – especially when it comes to a crisis of such apparent gravity as 9/11.

Although he deems it necessary to rigorously distinguish between the event and the interpretation with which it has emerged, Derrida maintains that it is “just about impossible”

¹³³ Ibid, 90

¹³⁴ Ibid, 89

to do so. In making this claim, he seems to be constructing a transcendental argument. Just as, for Kant, “intuitions without concepts are blind,”¹³⁵ in a quasi-Kantian fashion, Derrida suggests that the crisis of 9/11 cannot be reduced to its bare occurrence without, at once, disavowing its sense, including its very status *as* event. At the same time, however, it is clear that Derrida’s argument is empirically informed. Those who counted 9/11 a “major event” (that plurality of individuals I have referred to as a collective “subject of crisis”), would be hard-pressed to fully extricate themselves from the interpretive schema within which this diagnosis was determined. In inquiring into why 9/11 seems to have outshone many other events with a comparable, or even, a substantially larger death toll (for instance, the estimated 800,000 murdered in Rwanda less than a decade prior), he discusses the phenomenon of “accreditation.” He suggests that in connection with disparities such as these, we must consider “the interpreted, interpretive, informed impression, the conditional evaluation that makes us *believe* that this is a ‘major event.’ *Belief*, the phenomenon of *credit* and of *accreditation*, constitutes an essential dimension of the evaluation, of the dating, indeed, of the compulsive inflation of which we’ve been speaking.”¹³⁶ Playing on the Latin root *credere*, “to believe,” Derrida claims that evaluations of disaster are always in thrall to a global system of *credit*. His emphasis on this terminology suggests that he regards the “inflated” degree of trust invested in the West to be less a matter of loyalty, than a socio-economic

¹³⁵ Immanuel Kant, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193, A 51

¹³⁶ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 89

necessity.¹³⁷ According to Derrida, it is precisely because those claimed by 9/11 were literally *invested* in what was targeted in these attacks – the *credit* of the Western, Democratic, Capitalist system – that this event has had such overwhelming significance. It may seem somewhat intuitive that those who felt most threatened by 9/11 would be inclined to sensationalize the significance of this event, but Derrida takes this even further. “What is therefore threatened?” he asks.

Not only a great number of forces, powers, or “things” that depend, even for the most determined adversaries of the United States, on the order that is more or less assured by this superpower; it is also, *more radically still* (and I would underscore this point), the system of interpretation, the axiomatic, logic, rhetoric, concepts, and evaluations that are supposed to allow one to *comprehend* and to explain precisely something like “September 11.” I am speaking here of the *discourse* that comes to be, in a pervasive and overwhelming, hegemonic fashion, *accredited* in the world’s public space.¹³⁸

September 11 was absolutely critical, for Derrida, not because it threatened the safety of US citizens, not even because it put at risk Western military or economic hegemony. Rather, in his estimation 9/11 was critical because, in demonstrating to us our “powerlessness to comprehend, recognize, cognize, identify, name, describe, foresee”¹³⁹ what had occurred in these attacks, it revealed the contingency of the entire dominant “hermeneutic apparatus”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Credit, Derrida suggests, must be understood in a double sense: “credit in the sense of financial transactions but also the credit granted to languages, laws, political or diplomatic transactions. The United States holds this credit, for which everyone – including those who are trying to ruin it – feel the need, and it shows it not only through its wealth and its technoscientific and military power but also, at the same time, through its role as arbitrator in all conflicts, through its dominant presence on the Security Council and in so many other international institutions.” Ibid, 94

¹³⁸ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 93

¹³⁹ Ibid, 94

¹⁴⁰ He fleshes out this last point in the following: “No, it was not *only* all that but perhaps especially, through all that, the conceptual, semantic, and one could even say hermeneutic apparatus that might have allowed one to

of the West: 9/11 overloaded the critical-diagnostic capacity essential to the system of *credit* upon which much of the world depends.

An Autoimmunitary Crisis

Even though he provides nothing here in the way of formal criteria for the legitimate assessment of events like 9/11, the impossibility of evaluating whether and to what extent 9/11 was a “major event,” nevertheless, indicates, for Derrida, the presence of another crisis. He contends that “there is no event worthy of its name except insofar as this appropriation *falters* at some border or frontier;”¹⁴¹ and yet, in doing so, he seems merely to be substituting one diagnosis for another. In eluding critical assessment, and withdrawing from appropriation, 9/11 displayed symptoms of an “autoimmunitary” disorder¹⁴² – “that strange behavior,” he explains, “where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity.”¹⁴³ He describes the first moment of this process as it emerged with 9/11:

not only is the ground, that is, the literal figure of the founding or foundation of this “force of law,” *seen* to be *exposed* to aggression, but the aggression of which it is the *object* (the *object exposed*, precisely, to violence, but also, “in a

see coming, to comprehend, interpret, described, speak of, and name ‘September 11’ – and in so doing to neutralize the traumatism and come to terms with it through a ‘work of mourning.’ What I am suggesting here might appear abstract and overly reliant on what seems like a simple conceptual or discursive activity, a question of knowledge; it is as if I were in fact content to say that what is terrible about ‘September 11’ what remains ‘infinite’ in this wound, is that we do not *know* what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it. And that is, in fact, what I’m saying.” Ibid, 93-94

¹⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 90

¹⁴² The medical origins of crisis are just as evident here as elsewhere.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 94

loop,” to its own cameras in its own interests) from forces that are apparently without any force of their own but that are able to find the means, through ruse and the implementation of *high-tech* knowledge, to get hold of an American weapon in an American city on the ground of an American airport.¹⁴⁴

In exposing the insufficiency of “accredited” forms of diagnosis, sensationalizing and even “globalizing” this exposure, Derrida suggests, the autoimmunitary subject contributes to its own *discrediting* while attempting to protect itself.¹⁴⁵ He does not, however, limit his account of autoimmunity to symbolic acts of suicide – Derrida includes in his analysis the very real violence which occurred on September 11. Invoking the prehistory of these attacks, Derrida reminds us that “the United States had in effect paved the way for and consolidated the forces of the ‘adversary’ by training people like ‘bin Laden’, [...] and by first of all creating the politico-military circumstances that would favor their emergence and their shifts in allegiance.”¹⁴⁶ He claims, moreover, that

if the organized perpetrators of the “September 11” attacks are themselves among those who benefit from this so-called globalization (capitalist power, telecommunication, advanced technology, the openness of borders, and so on), they nonetheless claimed to be acting in the name of those doomed by globalization, all those who feel excluded or rejected, disenfranchised, left by the wayside, who have only the means of the poor in this age of globalization (which is, today, television, an instrument that is never neutral) to witness the spectacle of the offensive property of others.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 95

¹⁴⁵ “It is this process, the putting-a-part-of-itself-to-death in order to stay alive,” Haddad writes, “that Derrida names auto-immunity.” Samir Haddad, “Derrida and Democracy at Risk,” *Contretemps* no.4 (2004), <http://www.usyd.edu.au/contretemps/4september2004/haddad.pdf>

¹⁴⁶ Derrida mentions here “the alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Arab Muslim countries in its war against the Soviet Union or Russia in Afghanistan;” though he adds that “one could endlessly multiply examples of these suicidal paradoxes.” Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 95

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 122

Not only is it the case that the attacks were made possible by actions taken by the US in the Cold War: because those claiming to act in the interest of the victims of globalization – the apparent perpetrators of 9/11 – profited from this development, they cannot, according to Derrida, be isolated from the “global system” they intended to damage. This is not to say that the victims of globalization cannot be rigorously distinguished from its would be beneficiaries – such an equivocation would surely be a vulgar misappropriation of deconstruction.¹⁴⁸ Rather, Derrida is suggesting here that because the myriad conditions informing the event cannot be effectively disentangled, it would be misleading to claim that the attacks were made either in the interest or against the interest of the victims of globalization. And yet, if it is evident that in the age of globalization an autoimmunity disorder cannot be localized to the West, that according to its very logic, autoimmunity contests the same borders it is meant to secure – implicating precisely what claims to be beyond its reach – to what entity may we diagnose this self-destructive process? Which subject is in crisis here?

Looking to the various forms in which the notion of autoimmunity is manifest within Derrida’s corpus, Samir Haddad argues in “Derrida and Democracy at Risk”¹⁴⁹ that, in accordance with “La Raison du Plus Fort,”¹⁵⁰ the subject of autoimmunity crisis described in “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides” is none other than democracy

¹⁴⁸ As Derrida asserts elsewhere: “For this witness there is no *other* witness: there is no witness for the witness. There is never a witness for the witness.” Jacques Derrida, trans. Outi Pasanen, “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 83

¹⁴⁹ Samir Haddad, “Derrida and Democracy at Risk,” *Contretemps* no.4 (2004) <http://www.usyd.edu.au/contretemps/4september2004/haddad.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?),” *Voyou* (Paris: Galilée, 2003)

itself. While I grant Haddad that the existence of democracy is certainly at stake in the 9/11 interview, as I demonstrated above, because it put at risk not only a single form of government but also, as Derrida indicates, “the system of interpretation, the axiomatic, logic, rhetoric, concepts, and evaluations that are supposed to allow one to *comprehend* and to explain precisely something like ‘September 11,’”¹⁵¹ I find his construal of the autoimmunitary subject unduly narrow. My own contention is that, for Derrida (to play on his famous dictum), *there is nothing outside the crisis*.¹⁵² The subject of autoimmunitary crisis is not merely one subject among others; it is *the* subject of Derrida’s philosophy. Although Derrida would like to maintain that the irruption of 9/11 revealed the existence of an empirical autoimmunitary subject produced by the same forces which propel globalization, his description of the logic of autoimmunity seems rather to implicate a transcendental subject imported from the philosophy of history. Because, as Derrida contends, the autoimmunitary movement of September 11 threatened “*the very possibility of a world* and of any worldwide effort [*mondialisation*] (international law, a world market, a universal language, and so on), what is thus put at risk by this *terrifying* autoimmunitary logic is nothing less than the existence of the world, of the worldwide itself.”¹⁵³ As this line reveals, it is not democracy, but in fact “the world” to which Derrida ascribes the autoimmunitary crisis. It is not only, however, the earth and the sum of its inhabitants that this conditions places in

¹⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 93

¹⁵² The reference is to the line: “*There is nothing outside the text.*” Jacques Derrida, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 158

¹⁵³ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 98-99, my emphasis

jeopardy: the logic of autoimmunity, Derrida asserts, puts at risk *the possibility of a world* – the crisis spans the empirical as well as the transcendental. Like the *pharmakon*, or so many other deconstructive tropes, “both self-protecting and self-destroying, at once remedy and poison,”¹⁵⁴ the logic of autoimmunity is constitutive of one and the same subject; however, in collapsing once again the distinction between the empirical and transcendental, Derrida obscures the subject of crisis. Thus, what might appear in another context as theoretical undecideability emerges here as practical indecision.

Derrida is concerned above all in “Autoimmunity” with our ability to recognize, that is, to critically diagnose our current condition. Nevertheless, whether or not the theoretical framework he provides actually allows for such a diagnosis – much less an intervention – remains unclear. Articulating a case for the necessity of philosophical reflection in a time of crisis, Derrida raises the following concern:

...and here’s another paradox...because of the anonymous invisibility of the enemy, because of the undetermined origin of the terror, because we cannot put a face on such terror (individual or state), because we do not know what an event *of the unconscious or for the unconscious is* (though we must nonetheless take it into account), the worst can simultaneously appear insubstantial, fleeting, light, and so seem to be denied, repressed, indeed forgotten, relegated to being just one event among others, *one* of the “major events,” if you will, in a long chain of past and future events.¹⁵⁵

To find oneself in crisis, in other words, is not necessarily to recognize the situation as absolutely perilous. Neither, therefore, is the recognition of crisis sufficient to motivate critical response. “Yet all these efforts,” he continues, “to attenuate or neutralize the effect of the traumatism (to deny, repress, or forget it, *to get over it*) are but so many desperate

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 124

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 99

attempts. And so many autoimmunitary movements. Which produce, invent, and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome.”¹⁵⁶ Those efforts claiming to diminish or surmount the effect of the crisis, he argues, must be considered suspect – the defensive movements of the autoimmunitary process evidently assume the most ingenious forms. But what of those actions legitimately taken to overcome the crisis? Are they too but the convulsions of one and the same subject? And the philosophical response, he argues, the crisis necessitates?¹⁵⁷ Because he holds that it is “just about impossible... to distinguish the ‘brute’ fact from the system that produces the ‘information’ about it,”¹⁵⁸ and because he is committed to the notion that the crisis puts at risk precisely the means to diagnose the time as critical, Derrida seems to leave no room for such responses or interventions. What, then, becomes of the content of Derrida’s appeal? Can his call for a critique of crisis be considered a practical political injunction? Or do Derrida’s invocations, like those of Habermas, shut themselves up within the tomb of philosophical soliloquy? Derrida does not take up these questions here; however, in striving to deconstruct appeals to crisis in “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” he gives us a better idea of how to evaluate the political efficacy of his invocations.

¹⁵⁶ *Idem*, my emphasis

¹⁵⁷ “Such an ‘event,’ surely calls for a philosophical response. Better, a response that calls into question, at their most fundamental level, the most deep-seated conceptual presuppositions in philosophical discourse. The concepts with which this ‘event’ has most often been described, named, categorized, are the products of a ‘dogmatic slumber’ from which only a new philosophical reflection can awaken us, a reflection *on* philosophy, most notably on political philosophy and its heritage.” *Ibid*, 100

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 89

§2 The Subject of Eschatological Discourse

Responding to the charge that he had “*taken on an apocalyptic tone and put forward apocalyptic themes*”¹⁵⁹ in his own work, Derrida undertakes in “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy” to deconstruct the philosophical discourse on crisis. He situates his efforts here vis-à-vis Kant’s earlier denunciation of the “superior tone” philosophers of his time were wont to use, claiming that he intends to “mime in citation but also to transform into a genre, and then parody, deport, deform the well-known title of a perhaps less well-known pamphlet of Kant, *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie*.”¹⁶⁰ In “On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy,” Kant criticizes those thinkers who attempt to shroud philosophical activity within a plume of incense, believing themselves “to be in possession of intellectual intuition.”¹⁶¹ Kant argues that while these philosophers have ears to hear the voice of reason (*dictamen rationis*), they nevertheless cling to “some sort of feeling” (*Gefühl*) by which they wish to ground knowledge of the supersensible. Curious about what motives may be harbored within their invocations, Kant treats these writers with suspicion. Kant, Derrida writes, “brings to judgment those who, by the tone they take and the air they give themselves when saying certain things, place philosophy in danger of death and tell philosophy or philosophers the imminence of their

¹⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, trans. John Leavey, Jr., “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 160

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 122

¹⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, trans. Peter Fenves, “On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 51

end.”¹⁶² Mimicking Kant’s essay, Derrida endeavors in his essay to pass judgment upon those who, in announcing the *eschaton*, diagnose the time as critical. As in the “Autoimmunity” essay, Derrida has misgivings about such appeals, and accordingly, strives to deconstruct the apocalyptic tone. Finally, in motioning toward the limits of demystification, Derrida provides us the means to appraise the political potential of his critique of crisis.

Suspicious of the way in which Kant casts his critique, Derrida inquires into the role tone plays in the philosophical mystagogy of which he disapproves. “By what is a tone marked,” he asks:

a change or a rupture of tone? And how do you recognize a tonal difference within the same corpus? What traits are to be trusted for analyzing this, what signposting [*signalisation*] neither stylistic, nor rhetorical, nor evidently thematic or semantic? The extreme difficulty of this question, indeed of this task, becomes more accentuated in the case of philosophy. Isn’t the dream or the ideal of philosophical discourse, of philosophical address [*allocution*], and of the writing supposed to represent that address, isn’t it to make tonal difference inaudible, and with it a whole desire, affect, or scene that works (over) the concept in contraband? Through what is called neutrality of tone, philosophical discourse must also guarantee the neutrality or at least the imperturbable serenity that should accompany the relation to the true and the universal.¹⁶³

To criticize the tone of philosophy, Derrida points out, is necessarily to betray philosophy’s own atonal self-understanding. Philosophy wants to reinforce the truth and universality of its claims through inhabiting a tone of neutrality; however, as Derrida indicates, to speak without accent, inflection, or affect is itself an unphilosophical dream. If such an ideal

¹⁶² Jacques Derrida, trans. John Leavey, Jr., “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 124-125

¹⁶³ Ibid, 122

philosophical language were possible, it would only be so by virtue of that element of desire philosophy wishes to dismiss. In other words, a tonal analysis, according to Derrida, is just as misguided with respect to its aims as it is to its own feasibility. Nonetheless, this does not lead Derrida to renounce his own analysis of the apocalyptic tone in philosophy *in toto*, but only to recognize its necessary limits and presuppositions and, most importantly, its relation to language itself.¹⁶⁴

Similar to the way that the impression of 9/11, he argued, was informed by an “organized information machine... political, technical, economic,”¹⁶⁵ Derrida wants to suggest here that our perception of tone is always conditioned by factors which appear to exceed it. And yet, because the apocalyptic tone is used in such widely differing contexts, such motivating factors are even less easy to identify than those which mediate our experience of trauma. Always sensitive to the way that our most basic impressions are in thrall to conditions withheld from our grasp, Kant endeavors to determine what motivates those philosophers inhabiting the superior tone. As Derrida points out, however, Kant remains committed to the notion, in this context, that these factors are tied to subjective intentions:

Kant is sure that those who speak in this tone expect some benefit from it, and that is what will first interest me. What benefit? What bonus of seduction

¹⁶⁴ On this point, he adds: “While still remaining in the Kantian axiomatic, as it were, we can already infer from this that no harm would have happened [*arrivé*], no mystagogic speculation would have been credible or efficient, nothing or no one would have detonated [*détonné*] in philosophy without this errance of the name far from the thing, and if the relation of the name philosophy to its originary sense had been insured against every accident.” *Ibid*, 126

¹⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 89

or intimidation? What social or political advantage? Do they want to cause fear? Do they want to give pleasure? To whom and how? Do they want to terrify? To blackmail? [*Faire chanter?*] To lure into an outmatching in enjoyment? Is this contradictory? In view of what interests, *to what ends* do they wish to come with these heated proclamations on the end to come or the end already accomplished?¹⁶⁶

Kant is sure, says Derrida, that the phenomena of tone can be explained by recourse to the intentions of the addresser; Derrida, on the other hand, is not so certain. Though he does not make this point explicitly, a sense of incredulity seems to emerge with the litany of questions to which he subjects Kant's thesis.¹⁶⁷ What reasons, after all, could one elaborate to account for a tone of voice? Consistent with his position in the 9/11 interview, Derrida does not entirely abandon here the intuition that private interests may underlie a discourse dead set on announcing the end of an era.¹⁶⁸ Nonetheless, he takes his own analysis in another direction, interrogating the language that such critical appeals employ.

Derrida begins his analysis by elaborating those characteristics he takes to be paradigmatic of apocalyptic discourse: "Among the numerous traits characterizing an apocalyptic type of writing [*écriture*], let us provisionally isolate prediction and eschatological preaching [*prédication*], the fact of telling, foretelling, or preaching the end, the extreme limit, the imminence of the last."¹⁶⁹ Within this delimitation, he identifies several variants – the end

¹⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, trans. John Leavey, Jr., "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 125

¹⁶⁷ Questions such as these continue throughout the entire length of the text.

¹⁶⁸ Derrida's analysis of the potential subjective motives behind the apocalyptic tone, however, goes no further than this: "The end is beginning, signifies the apocalyptic tone. But to what ends does the tone signify this? The apocalyptic tone naturally wants to attract, to get to come, to arrive at this, to seduce in order to lead to this, in other words, to the place where the first vibration of the tone is heard, which is called, as will be one's want, subject, person, sex, desire." Ibid, 151

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 144

of history, the death of god, the end of philosophy, the last man, the end of class struggle, the closure of metaphysics, and so on.¹⁷⁰ However, as facile as this construal appears, it is actually a quite decisive moment in Derrida's argument. For, in isolating 'the limit' as what is essential to this discourse, he is able to abstract from these writings the most minimal formal criteria for identifying apocalyptic writing. This, in turn, gives rise to crucial consequences:

And whoever would come to refine, to say the finally final [*le fin du fin*], namely the end of the end [*la fin de la fin*], the end of ends, that the end has always already begun, that we must still distinguish between closure and end, that person would, whether wanting to or not, participate in the concert. [...] *With the result that we can wonder if eschatology is a tone, or even the voice itself. Isn't the voice always that of the last man?*¹⁷¹

Not only is this criterion slack enough to allow Derrida to excuse himself of his own participation in philosophical eschatology – it also gives him license to secretly hypostasize the foretelling of doom, elevating this appeal to an essential component of all discourse. It is only on account of the imprecision of his definition of the apocalyptic that he is able to make such a claim. Next, Derrida attempts to substantiate his argument by calling to witness those philosophers he had just proscribed. He cites Nietzsche's fragment "Oedipus:" "I call myself the last philosopher, because I am the last man. No one speaks with me but myself, and my voice comes to me like the voice of a dying man!"¹⁷² Even if we were to grant that

¹⁷⁰ "Haven't all the differences [*différends*]," he goes on to say, "taken the form of a going-one-better in eschatological eloquence, each newcomer more lucid than the other, more vigilant and more prodigal too, coming to add more to it: I tell you this in truth; this is not only the end of this here but also and first of that there, the end of history, the end of class struggle, the end of philosophy, the death of God, the end of religions, the end of Christianity and morals, the end of the subject, the end of man, the end of the West, the end of Oedipus, the end of the earth...?" Ibid, 145

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 145-146, my emphasis

¹⁷² Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Daniel Breazale, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), 33-34 (#87)

this passage exemplifies the voice of eschatological *écriture*, this is still to say nothing of the claim to universality Derrida is arguing for. This does not, however, prevent Derrida from taking his presentiment even further.

Returning to one of his perennial insights, namely, that in *all* writing the addresser and the addressee may be equally disowned, Derrida now ascribes this characteristic to the apocalyptic genre exclusively: “One does not know to whom the apocalyptic sending returns; it leaps from one place of emission to the other; it goes from one destination, one name, and one tone to the other...”¹⁷³ In taking this structure to be fundamental to the discourse on crisis, Derrida is able to explode his prior claim:

...as soon as one no longer knows who speaks or who writes, the text becomes apocalyptic. And if the *envois* always refer [*renvoient*] to other *envois* without decidable destination, the destination remaining to come, then isn't this completely angelic structure, that of the Johannine apocalypse, isn't it also the structure of every scene of writing in general? This is one of the suggestions I wanted to submit for your discussion: wouldn't the apocalyptic be a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience even, of every mark or every trace? And the genre of writings called 'apocalyptic' in the strict sense, then, would be only an example, an *exemplary* revelation of this transcendental structure.¹⁷⁴

Earlier, Derrida suggested that eschatology is not only a tone, but indeed, “the voice itself.” Now, his deconstruction of the tone leads him to posit the apocalyptic claim as not merely a possibility available to the writer, but a condition for the possibility of writing as such. As I noted earlier, Derrida's argument does not expressly preclude the possibility that appeals to crisis can be traced back to the intentions of the subject of eschatological discourse. Even

¹⁷³ Jacques Derrida, trans. John Leavey, Jr., “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 156

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 156-157

after Derrida raises the apocalyptic to the status of a transcendental structure, he recognizes that, in the narrower sense, it still lives on. But what becomes of such appeals? What of those critical diagnoses with which we have been concerned? Are they no more than exemplary formulations of the crisis always already underway in writing? Could they be, at bottom, “but so many desperate attempts... so many autoimmunitary movements,”¹⁷⁵ independent of the interests and participation of every other subject?

In both essays, Derrida insists on the necessity of deconstructing the discourse on crisis. While he fails to acknowledge in “Autoimmunity” the way in which his own account may preclude the possibility of critical intervention, in “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” he appears increasingly aware of the limits of deconstructive criticism:

We cannot and we must not – *this is a law and a destiny* – forgo the *Aufklärung*, in other words, what imposes itself as the enigmatic desire for vigilance, for the lucid vigil, for elucidation, for critique and truth, but for a truth that at the same time keeps within itself some apocalyptic desire, this time as desire for clarity and revelation, in order to demystify or, if you prefer, to deconstruct apocalyptic discourse itself and with it everything that speculates on vision, the imminence of the end, theophany, parousia, the last judgment.¹⁷⁶

Derrida asserts that “this demystification must be led as far as possible,”¹⁷⁷ that in face of apparent urgency, one *must* remain vigilant, one *must* adopt a critical stance. His conflation of “law” and “destiny” seems to suggest, however, that he considers the necessity of this critical

¹⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 99

¹⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, trans. John Leavey, Jr., “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenes (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 148, my emphasis

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 159

response less a matter of individual responsibility than the force of reason. Indeed, throughout his reading of Kant's essay, Derrida intimates time and again that it is impossible to rigorously distinguish between the Enlightenment interest in rational emancipation and the apocalyptic desire for revelation. And yet, if it is the case that Derrida elevates the apocalyptic tone to a transcendental structure of all writing, all but eliminating the subjective dimension embedded within this appeal, then, in recognizing that "demystification must give in to the finest diversity of apocalyptic ruses,"¹⁷⁸ and thus, collapsing the distinction between critique and crisis, it appears that he has incapacitated in advance the same work of criticism he now invokes. The philosophical response to 9/11 Derrida invokes in "Autoimmunity" must be read in this light. Our impression of 9/11, Derrida says, was determined in advance by the hegemonic Western hermeneutic apparatus; so too are our efforts of critical reflection and intervention. Not only, however, are these informed by the same apparatus – they are, Derrida claims, indistinguishable from it. To speak of crisis, for Derrida, is always already to speak *in* crisis: language, in running along ahead of us, leaves us behind. On his own terms then, Derrida's diagnoses lapse into mere autopsy; they thereby renounce their claim upon the living – all those who would, in truth, find themselves claimed by the crisis of 9/11.

In deconstructing the apocalyptic tone, Derrida effectively depoliticizes the discourse of crisis. As both disaster and intervention are thought here primarily in terms of the activity of a singular, trans-historical subject, Derrida's exhortations lose their prescriptive power; they appear rather like a narration of the unfolding of *Geist* in which "the worst can

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 149

simultaneously appear insubstantial, fleeting, light.”¹⁷⁹ Although he never explicitly dismisses the role subjective motivation may play in appeals to crisis (this is manifestly the case in his reflections on 9/11), in ascribing all critical activity to one and the same subject, Derrida practically eliminates precisely what these injunctions accent: the sense of urgency necessary to incite wide-scale, collective effort among a plurality of subjects. The critique of crisis Derrida develops through these two essays urges us to recognize the way that claims of crisis are always conditioned by factors which tend to go unnoticed. To this degree, his critique is effective. However, when deconstruction becomes auto-telic, eclipsing the ends of such criticism, it goes too far. Left unanswered, Habermas’ diagnosis of crisis remains hypothetical – granted a transcendental status, far removed from the interests of the people, Derrida’s call remains unanswerable.

¹⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 99

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