

Crisis

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Crisis

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Reinhart Koselleck, “Krise” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Konze, and Reinhart Koselleck (8 volumes; Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972–97), 3: 617–50.

I. INTRODUCTION

For the Greeks the term “crisis” had relatively clearly demarcated meanings in the spheres of law, medicine, and theology. The concept imposed choices between stark alternatives—right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death. Until the early modern period the medical meaning, which continued to be used technically, remained dominant virtually without interruption. From the seventeenth century on, the term, used as a metaphor, expanded into politics, economics, history, psychology. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the term once again took on religious and theological connotations; but by its application to the events of the French and American revolutions, the apocalyptic vision of the last judgment now acquired a secular meaning. Because of its metaphorical flexibility, the concept gains in importance; it enters into every day language; it becomes a central catchword (*Schlagwort*). In our century, there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this concept with its inherent demand for decisions and choices.

Applied to history, “crisis,” since 1780, has become an expression of a new sense of time which both indicated and intensified the end of an epoch. Perceptions of such epochal change can be measured by the increased use of crisis. But the concept remains as multi-layered and ambiguous as the emotions attached to it. Conceptualized as chronic, “crisis” can also indicate a state of greater or lesser permanence, as in a longer or shorter transition towards something better or worse or towards something altogether different. “Crisis” can announce a recurring event, as in economics, or become an existential term of analysis, as in psychology and theology. All these possible uses can be applied to history itself.

II. ON THE GREEK USE OF THE WORD

1. *Kρίσις* has its roots in the Greek verb *κρίνω* (*krinō*): to “separate” (part, divorce), to “choose,” to “judge,” to “decide”; as a means of “measuring oneself,” to “quarrel,” or to “fight.” This created a relatively broad spectrum of meanings. In classical Greek, the term was central to politics. It meant not only “divorce” and “quarrel,” but also “decision” in the sense of reaching a crucial point that would tip the scales. It was in this sense that Thucydides used the word when he linked the rapid conclusion of the Per-

sian Wars to four battles.¹ But “crisis” also meant “decision” in the sense of reaching a verdict or judgment, what today is meant by criticism (*Kritik*).² Thus in classical Greek the subsequent separation into two domains of meaning—that of a “subjective critique” and an “objective crisis”—were still covered by the same term. Both spheres were conceptually fused. Above all, it was in the sense of “judgment,” “trial,” “legal decision,” and ultimately “court” that crisis achieved a high constitutional status, through which the individual citizen and the community were bound together. The “for and against” was therefore present in the original meaning of the word and this in a manner that already conceptually anticipated the appropriate judgment. Aristotle frequently used the word in this way. As legal title and legal code *κρίσις* (*krisis*) defines the ordering of the civic community.³ From this specific legal meaning, the term begins to acquire political significance. It is extended to electoral decisions, government resolutions, decisions of war and peace, death sentences and exile, the acceptance of official reports, and, above all, to government decisions as such. Consequently, *κρίσις* (*krisis*) is most necessary for the community, representing what is at once just and salutary.⁴ For this reason, only one who participated as judge could be a citizen (*άρχι κριτική/αρχē kritikē*). For the Greeks, therefore, “crisis” was a central concept by which justice and the political order (*Herrschaftsordnung*) could be harmonized through appropriate legal decisions.

2. The juridical meaning of *κρίσις* (*krisis*) is fully taken over in the Septuaginta (ancient Greek translation of the Old and New Testament).⁵ But a new dimension is added to the concept. The court in this world is, in the Jewish tradition, linked to God, who is simultaneously both the ruler and judge of his people. Hence the act of judging also contains a promise of salvation. Beyond that, the concept gains central significance in the wake of apocalyptic expectations: the *κρίσις* (*krisis*) at the end of the world will for the first time reveal true justice. Christians lived in the expectation of the Last Judgment (*κρίσις/krisis = judicium*), whose hour, time, and place remained unknown but whose inevitability is certain.⁶ It will cover everyone, the pious and the unbelievers, the living and the dead.⁷ The Last Judg-

¹ Thucydides *History* 1,23.

² Aristotle *Politics*, 1289b,12.

³ Ibid.1253a,35

⁴ Ibid.1275b, 1ff.; 1326b, 1ff.

⁵ Acts 23:3.

⁶ Matthew 10:15; 12:36; 25:31f.

⁷ Romans, 14:10.

ment itself, however, will proceed like an ongoing trial.⁸ St. John even goes beyond this certainty by announcing to the faithful that they, by obeying the word of God, have already achieved salvation.⁹ While the coming crisis remains a cosmic event, its outcome is already anticipated by the certainty of that redemption which grants eternal life. The tension resulting from the knowledge that because of Christ's Annunciation the Last Judgment is already here even though it is yet to come, creates a new horizon of expectations that, theologically, qualifies future historical time. The Apocalypse, so to speak, has been anticipated in one's faith and hence is experienced as already present. Even while crisis remains open as a cosmic event, it is already taking place within one's conscience.¹⁰

3. While historically the domain of the judicial meaning of crisis in its narrow sense proceeds only through the theological teachings of the Last Judgment (*judicium*), another Greek use of the term has no less expanded the horizon of meanings for the modern concept of crisis. This is the medical theory of crisis, which originated in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* and which Galen (129–99) firmly entrenched for about fifteen hundred years.¹¹ In the case of illness, crisis refers both to the observable condition and to the judgment (*judicium*) about the course of the illness. At such a time, it will be determined whether the patient will live or die. This required properly identifying the beginning of an illness in order to predict how regular its development will be. Depending on whether or not the crisis led to a full restoration of health, the distinction was made between a perfect crisis and an imperfect crisis. The latter left open the possibility of a relapse. A further distinction, between acute and chronic crises, has led—since Galen—to a temporal differentiation in the progression of illnesses.¹²

With its adoption into Latin, the concept subsequently underwent a

⁸ Matthew 25:31f.

⁹ John 3:18f.; 5:24; 9:39.

¹⁰ Friedrich Büchsel, Volkmar Henrich, Article on “Krino,” “Krisis,” in Kittel, Gerhard, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 9 volumes, vol. 8 and 9 only in the first edition; new edition (Stuttgart, 1933 ff.), new edition, 1965–1969ff. (henceforth cited as Kittel); this citation, vol. 3 (1938), 920ff.; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 7th ed. Otto Merk (Tübingen, 1997), 77 ff.—as to St. John, compare *ibid.* 385 ff; and, more critically, Josef Blank, *Crisis: Untersuchungen zur johannischen Christologie und Eschatologie* (Freiburg i.B., 1984).

¹¹ See Nelly Tsouyopoulos's article “Krise” II, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, eds. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, Gottfried Gabriel (Basel, Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1971–), 4: 1240.

¹² Théophile de Bordeau, article on “crise,” *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société des gens des letters. Mis en ordre et publié*

metaphorical expansion into the domain of social and political language. There it is used as a transitional or temporal concept (*Verlaufsbegegnung*), which, as in a legal trial, leads towards a decision. It indicates that point in time in which a decision is due but has not yet been rendered.

Since then the concept of crisis assumed a double meaning that has been preserved in social and political language. On the one hand, the objective condition, about the origins of which there may be scientific disagreements, depends on the judgmental criteria used to diagnose that condition. On the other hand, the concept of illness itself presupposes a state of health—however conceived—that is either to be restored again or which will, at a specified time, result in death.¹³

The legal, theological, and medical usage of “crisis” thus contains discipline-bound, specific meanings. Taken together, however, they could—in different ways—be incorporated into modern social and political language. At all times the concept is applied to life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questions about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death.

III. THE ADOPTION INTO NATIONAL LANGUAGES

Given the use of Latin in the three previously named disciplines (law, theology, medicine), the Latinized form of “crisis” (next to *judicium*) continues to be part of their respective semantic fields so that in the seventeenth century the term occasionally appears in titles.¹⁴ The rarity of documentary evidence for such usage, however, seems to indicate that the term had not yet become a central concept. This could take place only after its transfer into national languages.

In French, “crisis”—still in the accusative “crisin”—first appeared as a

par M. Diderot, et, quant à la partie mathématique par M. d'Alembert (Paris, 1751–80), vol. 4 (1754), 471ff.

¹³ For the medical concept of crisis see Tsouyopoulos's article “Krise” II, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 4, 1240ff.; for the transmission of the concept of crisis into the psychological and anthropological sphere since the beginning of the nineteenth century see U. Schönplug, article on “Krise” III, *Historisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 4, 1242ff.

¹⁴ The history of the impact of the theological usage of “krinon” remains to be investigated. It may conceivably have begun with the Greek edition of the New Testament by Erasmus and in all probability has since then exerted some influence in the development of modern philosophy of history.

medical term in the fourteenth century,¹⁵ in English in 1543,¹⁶ and in German in the sixteenth century.¹⁷

Although the metaphor of the body or organism has been applied to the community since antiquity, it was not until the seventeenth century that the medical concept of crisis was applied to the “body politic” or to its constituent parts. Thus in 1627, Rudyerd used this term during the battle between parliament and the absolutist crown: “This is the Chrysis of Parliaments; we shall know by this if Parliaments life or die.”¹⁸ A little later, at the time of the civil war, the word became anglicized, lost its exclusively medical meaning, and perhaps began to refer more to its theological roots. In 1643, for example, Baillie wrote: “this seems to be a new period and crise of the most great affairs.”¹⁹ This expression became generally established, while increasingly acquiring religious connotations. In 1714 Richard Steele published his Whiggish pamphlet “The Crisis,” which cost him his parliamentary seat. The title of the pamphlet, loaded with religious emphasis, pointed toward a decision between liberty and slavery. Steele saw in England the first line of defense against the “barbaric” overrunning of Europe by Catholics.²⁰

In France as well—with Furetière in 1690—the concept entered into the political sphere after it had previously been transferred into that of psychology.²¹ At the end of the seventeenth century, this concept was applied as well to France’s economic difficulties at the time of Louis XIV. D’Argenson in 1743 used this term to describe the French internal situation as a whole.²²

Just before that, Leibniz—still writing in French—uses the concept at

¹⁵ Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch. Eine Darstellung des galloromanischen Sprachschatzes, ed. Oscar Bloch and Walter v. Wartburg, 20 vols. (Bonn, Leipzig, Berlin, 1928 ff.) vol.2/2 (1946), 1345, s.v. “crisis.”

¹⁶ Murray, James August Henry, *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. J.A. H. Murray, W. A. Craigie, C.T. Onions, 10 volumes and 1 supplement (Oxford, 1884–1928, 1933), = basis of the OED in 13 volumes from 1933; vol. 2 (1888), 1178, s.v. “crisis;” ibid. 1180, s.v. “crisis.”

¹⁷ Duden, *Etymologie. Herkunftswörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, ed. Günther Drosdowsky, Paul Grebe, et al. (Mannheim, Wien, and Zürich, 1963), 271, s.v. “Krise.”

¹⁸ Sir B. Rudyerd, *History*, coll., vol. 1 (1659), cited in Murray, vol. 2, 1178, s.v. “crisis.”

¹⁹ R. Baillie, *Letters*, vol.2 (1841) cited ibid., s.v. “Crisis”

²⁰ Richard Steele, *The Crisis or, a Discourse Representing . . . , the Just Cause of the Late Happy Revolution. . . . With Some Reasonable Remarks on the Danger of a Popish Succession* (London, 1714).

²¹ Furetière, Antoine, *Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots françois tant vieux que modernes*, 3 vols. (The Hague, Rotterdam, 1690), vol. 1 (1690); reprinted 1978), s.v. “crise.”

²² Compare Beunot, vol. 6/1 (1966), 44ff.

a central point in order to diagnose the opportunities and dangers of the emerging Russian empire during the Nordic War: “*Momenta temporum pretiosissima sunt in transitu rerum. Et l’Europe est maintenant dans un état de changement et dans une crise, où elle n’a jamais été depuis l’Empire de Charlemagne.*”²³ (“And Europe is now in a state of change and in a crisis such as has not been known since Charlemagne’s empire.”) Leibniz saw in Russia’s development a change of fundamental world-historical significance comparable only to the formation of Charlemagne’s empire. The concept has now entered into a dimension of the philosophy of history that was to become ever more significant in the course of the eighteenth century. Through English and French usage and its entry into the German language, the concept had expanded into the spheres of internal and external politics as well as economics. In the process, it acquired a historical dimension that continued to draw upon its original medical and theological meanings.

IV. LEXICA AND DICTIONARIES:

Dictionaries and lexica show that in Germany the term “crisis” is registered—with a few exceptions—only after the French Revolution and even then only haphazardly as a political, social, and ultimately economic concept.

- 1) A few lexica register the expression only in its Greek usage: “judgment,” “reason,” “reflection,” as e.g., *critica*, *Wort-Deuteley*, in the 1695 edition of Stieler. Hübner, who in 1739 referred only to illness, in 1742 recorded merely the meaning that otherwise was already treated under “critique”: Man has no crisis, i.e. he cannot render judgment on a thing. This he copied from Sperander or Zedler.²⁴

²³ Leibniz, “Konzepte eines Briefes an Schleinitz” (23 Sept. 1712), in *Leibniz’ Russland betreffender Briefwechsel und Denkschrift ed.*. Wladimir Iwanowitsch Guerrier, Part 2 (Petersburg, Leipzig, 1873), 227 ff.; see also Dieter Groh, *Russland und das Selbstverständnis Europas* (Neuwied, 1961), 39.

²⁴ Stieler, Caspar, *Zeitungs Lust und Nutz* (Hamburg, 1695), 560, s.v. “crise.” Johan Hübner, *Reales Staats-und Zeitungslexicon* (Leipzig, 1704), 570 s.v. “Crisis”; (1739 edition); ibid., (1742 edition), 312, s.v. “Crisis”; Johannes Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, 64 volumes and 4 supplementary volumes (Halle, Leipzig, 1732–1754, reprinted Graz, 1961–1964) vol. 6 (1733), 1653, article on “Crisis;” Sperander [i.e. Gladow, Friedrich], *A la Mode-Sprach der Teutschen oder compendieuses Hand-lexicon in welchem die meisten aus fremden Sprachen entlehnter Wörter und gewöhnliche Redensarten . . . klar und deutlich erklärt werden* (Nürnberg, 1727), 171, s.v. “Crisis naturae.”

- 2) Numerous lexica register only the spectrum of medical meanings, as do Hübner, 1731, and Jablonski, 1748, and 1767. De Bordeu, in the great French *Encyclopédie* of 1754, provides a scholarly treatise on the history of the medical concept in order to confront the teachings of the Ancients with their modern critics. The same applies to the *Encyclopédie méthodique* of 1792. In a considerably shorter entry, the 1820 Brockhaus also gives only the medical meaning of the term.²⁵ Even the 1866 Brockhaus refers only to the medical meaning, dropping all references to different meanings that had appeared in earlier editions: “Now one applies ‘crisis’ to the rapid decline of high temperature compared to the norm, and this goes to the heart of the issue since, on the basis of the change in temperature, . . . we can explain all other symptoms.”²⁶
- 3) Many lexica briefly point to the original Greek meaning of judging, while at the same time giving a central place to the medical crisis doctrine, as did Pomey (1715) and Sperander (1727). In 1733, Zedler posits: “Today one calls ‘*crisin*’ that healing act of nature, through which the matter of the illness, which previously had contributed to its appearance, is driven out of the body by proper and clear emunctories, and which, as a result, is freed from its decline and illness”—although the alternative of death is obviously omitted.²⁷ Equal priority to the medical usage is given by Heinse (1793) and in the various editions of Brockhaus.²⁸
- 4) The juridical and, above all, the theological meanings of “crisis” clearly did not make their way into either the general lexica for the

²⁵ Hübner, Johann *Curieuses und Reales Natur-, Kunsts-, Berg-, Gewerck- und Handlungsslexikon* (Leipzig, 1712); cited from the 1731 edition,,560, s.v. “Crisis;” Johann Theodor Jablonski, *Allgemeines Lexicon der Künste und Wissenschaften*, 2nd ed, vol.1 (Königsberg, Leipzig, 1748), 252, s.v. ‘Crisis,’ ibid., 3rd ed. (1767), 345 s.v. “Crisis;” De Bordeu, art. “Crise” (see note 12), 471; *Encyclopédie méthodique, par ordre des matières*, begun by L.J. Pancoucke, later Agasse, 133 vols: A-Z, vol. 5 (Paris,1792), 202ff., art. “Crise;” Brockhaus, *Conversations-Lexicon oder kurzgefasstes Handwörterbuch* (Amsterdam, 1809), 5th ed. Vol. 2 (1820), 870, art. “Crisis;” *Allgemeines deutsches Conversations Lexikon*, vol. 6 (Reprinted 1840), 262, art. “Krisis.”

²⁶ Brockhaus, 11th ed., vol. 9 (1866), 83ff., art. “Krisis.”

²⁷ Zedler, vol. 6 (1652), art. “Crisis”; François-Antoine Pomey, *Le Grand Dictionnaire Royal*, (Frankfurt, 1709), 5th ed. Vol.1 (1715), 240, s.v. “Crises;” Sperander (1727), 171, s.v. “Crisis naturae.”

²⁸ Heinse, Gottlob H., *Encyklopädisches Wörterbuch oder alphabetische Erklärung aller Wörter aus fremden Sprachen die im Deutschen angenommen sind . . .* (11 vols.; Zeitz, Naumburg, 1793–1805), vol. 1 (1793), 63, s.v. “Crisis”; Brockhaus, 10th ed., 9 (1853), 227ff., art. “Krisis.”

learned in the eighteenth century or into those for the educated in the nineteenth century. Although we can presuppose that many scholars were familiar with those meanings, it appears that the primary point of departure for the expansion of the term into the political and economic sphere was the medical usage. Adelung does not register the term at all, and neither Rotteck/Welcker nor Bluntschli provide a separate entry for the term, despite the fact that it is liberally used in their texts.²⁹

- 5) Even references to the metaphorical extension of the term to politics and economics or to its broader use in ordinary language are comparatively rare.

In 1715, Pomey already provides, in addition to “judgment” and “a change in the course of an illness,” a third meaning: “L’affaire est dans sa crise—res ad triarios rediit.—Die Sach ist auf höchste kommen.” (“Matters have reached their critical point.”)³⁰ The reliance on French points to the belated Germanization of the term in the course of the eighteenth century. Pomey’s use, however, was followed only hesitantly, while Johnson still registers the medical meaning: “The point of time at which any affair comes to the height.”³¹ In 1770, Alletz, who specialized in neologisms, for the first time cites the political and military meaning, but does so exclusively in French.³² The 1792 Kuppermann was the first to bring together—somewhat laconically—all the three meanings that had long been current in German: “change in the course of an illness,” “decisive point in time,” and “alarming situation”; to this, Heinse added “germination.”³³ Much the same is found in the 1808 Beyschlag: “change in the course of an illness,” “alarming state of

²⁹ See Adelung, Johann Christoph, *Versuch eines vollständigen grammatisch-kritischen Wörterbuches der hochdeutschen Mundart*, 5 vol. (Leipzig, 1774–1786) vol. 1 (1774); *ibid.* 2nd ed., vol 1 (1793); Rotteck, Carl and Carl Welcker, eds. *Staatslexicon oder Encyclopädie der Staatswissenschaften*, 15 vols., 4 supplementary vols. (Altona, 1834–1847), vol. 1 (1834); Bluntschli, Johan Caspar and Karl Ludwig Theodor Brater, *Deutsches Staatswörterbuch*, 11 vols (Stuttgart, Leipzig, 1857–1870), vol. 2 (1857)—none of these contain articles on “Krise/Crisis.”

³⁰ Pomey, *Grand Dictionnaire Royal*, 5th ed. Part.1, 240, s.v. “crise.” The proverbial Latin use comes from Livy, 8,8,11.

³¹ Johnson, Samuel, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (2 vols.; London, 1755), 1 (1755), s.v. “crisis.”

³² Alletz, Pons-Augustin, *Dictionnaire des richesse de la langue françoise et du neologisme qui s'y est introduit* (Paris, 1770), 93, s.v. “crise.”

³³ Kuppermann, A.H. *Juristisches Wörterbuch zur Verbesserung des Actenstils . . . mit Beispielen erleutert* (Leipzig, 1792), 131, s.v. “Crisis;” Heinse, *Encyklopädisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1, 63, s.v. “Crisis.”

affairs.”³⁴ In the same year, Oertel writes: “*Crisis, die Krise*”—the first evidence for the germanization of the term’s spelling—“1) the decisive point (as in an illness), 2) signal for decision (*Entscheidungszeichen*) . . . , 3) state or condition requiring decision . . . alarming circumstances”³⁵; the 1813 Campe follows in the same vein.³⁶ These examples demonstrate that, at least as far as lexica are concerned, the medical meaning has entered everyday language. Heyse’s dictionaries of foreign words largely confirm this usage of *Krisis* or *Krise*, albeit with a few additional definitions; especially the 1873 edition, which points to “crises” in the “life of peoples or states,” or to the “crucial point of a political disease, requiring at once a decision and judgment.”³⁷ The 1845 Brockhaus for the first time registers the adoption of crisis in everyday language: “In ordinary life ‘crisis’ refers to that point in an event or a series of events which determines it/their outcome(s) and which signals the direction it / they will finally take.” In the same year, Pierer points to “a rapid change from one condition to another, as e.g. a revolution in a state or in someone’s circumstances; hence critical moment or critical case.”³⁸

On the basis of these examples we can conclude that the metaphorical extension of crisis into the German vernacular entered first through political rather than economic language. Thus Pierer in 1845 points to the political but not yet economic application of the term. At the same time, however, French lexicography already provides a comprehensive article on “*crise commerciale*” and gives it parity with “*crise (médicine)*” and “*crise politique*.³⁹

In Germany, however, such an economic application was not made

³⁴ Beyschlag, Daniel Eberhard, *Sammlung ausländischer Wörter, die im alltäglichen Leben öfters vorkommen* (Nördlingen, 1794), 2nd ed. (1806), s.v. “Crisis.”

³⁵ Oertel, Eucharius Ferdinand Christian, *Gemeinnütziges Wörterbuch zur Erklärung und Verdeutschung der im gemeinen Leben vorkommenden fremden Ausdrücke*. (2 vols.; 2nd ed., Ansbach, 1806), 1, 461, s.v. “Crisis”

³⁶ Campe, Joachim Heinrich, *Wörterbuch zur Erklärung und Verdeutschung der unserer Sprache aufgedrungenen fremden Ausdrücke (Fremdwörterbuch)*, 2nd ed. (Braunschweig, 1813; new print, Hildesheim, New York, 1970), 2nd ed., 239, s.v. “Crise, Crisis.”

³⁷ Heyse, Johan Christian August, *Verdeutschungs-Wörterbuch* (Oldenburg, 1804); later under the title of *Allgemeines verdeutschendes und erklärendes Fremdwörterbuch*, 15th ed., vol.1 (Hannover, 1873), 513, s.v. “Krisis” or “Krise.”

³⁸ Brockhaus, 9th ed., vol. 8 (1845), 399, s.v. “Krisis”; Pierer, A.H., *Encyklopädisches Wörterbuch der Wissenschaften, Künste, und Gewerbe*, 26 vols., ed. A. Binzer (Altenburg 1822–36); 2nd ed under the title of *Universal Lexikon der Gegenwart und Vergangenheit oder neuestes encyklopädisches Wörterbuch . . .*, 2nd ed., vol. 16 (1845), 467, article on “Krise”.

³⁹ *Encyclopédie des gens du monde*, 22 vols. (Paris, 1836), vol. 7, 257ff., s.v. article on “crise commercial,” “crise (médicine).”

until 1850 with Roscher's article in the Brockhaus's *Gegenwart* (*The Present*), in which he writes of "production crises considered with special reference to the most recent decades."⁴⁰ The economic use of the term, which had long become current in the professional language of economists, did not lead to separate entries in German lexica until the second half of the nineteenth century. Bluntschli mentions "crisis" in his analysis under the keyword "credit." In 1862 Wagener was the first lexicographer to give the most complete spectrum of meanings: economic, political, social, and historical. In 1859, Pierer provides a very brief article, in 1891, a very thorough one on "commercial crises." Brockhaus follows suit in 1894 and 1898, but it was not until the 1931 edition that "crisis" is given a predominantly economic meaning.⁴¹ Clearly, only the 1848 Revolution and the global economic crisis of 1857 finally prompted German lexicographers, who had been largely trained in the humanities, to register a use that had already become common in the professional language of economists as well as in everyday life.⁴²

Thus the term never crystallized into a concept sufficiently clear to be used as a basic concept in social, economic, or political language, despite—or perhaps because of—its manifold meanings. Evidence to this effect is also the extremely cursory reference in Grimm's *Dictionary* (*Wörterbuch*) of 1872, which seems satisfied with two citations—one of them by Goethe: "all transitions are crises" and "is a crisis not an illness?"⁴³ These lexical findings lead to the conclusion that other than in professional terminologies, the term was used essentially as a catchword. This is not to say that the term could not express emotional states or moods, but only that these had not yet been clearly identified as integral to the concept. But precisely what appeared to be so peripheral in lexicography until that time, could indeed become an indicator of and contributor to a widespread sense of radical change from the second part of the eighteenth century on.

⁴⁰ Wilhelm Roscher, article on "Produktionskrise," in Brockhaus *Die Gegenwart, Eine encyklopädische Darstellung der neuesten Zeitgeschichte für alle Stände*, 12 vols (Leipzig, 1848–1856), vol. 3 (1849), 721ff.

⁴¹ Bluntschli/Brater, vol. 6 (1861) 51ff.; Pierer, 4th.ed., vol. 7 (1859), 946, article on "Handelskrisen"; ibid. 7th ed. vol. 7, Article on "Handelskrisis"; Brockhaus, 14th ed., vol. 8 (1898), 743; article on "Handelskrisen"; ibid. 15th ed., vol. 10 (1931), 632, article on "Krise."

⁴² See Pierer, 2nd ed., vol. 16, 467, article on "Krise," which registers exclusively the political but not yet the economic meaning.

⁴³ Grimm, Jakob und Wilhelm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 16 vols. (Leipzig, 1854–1965), vol. 5 (1873), 2332, s.v. "Krise."

V. FROM POLITICAL CONCEPT TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

1. *Political Usage*

Frederick the Great provides early evidence for applying this term to foreign policy and military affairs. When the European states were already committed to but not yet ready for the Austrian War of Succession in 1740, the King seized the opportunity of “*cette crise pour exécuter ses grands projets*” (“this crisis to execute his grand projects”) by marching into Silesia.⁴⁴ Once again he saw himself “*dans une grande crise*” (“in a great crisis”) when, just before the battle of Hohenfriedberg, he unsuccessfully sought to undertake steps toward peace.⁴⁵ In a similar vein he defined—in a conversation with Catt—the situation after Kolin.⁴⁶ Henceforth a situation presenting decisive alternatives to different actors comes to be registered also in German as “crisis.” As early as Prussia’s rise following the Austrian War of Succession, Johan Jacob Schmaus wrote of “a present crisis created by a declining balance among European powers.”⁴⁷ The consequences of this process too are registered conceptually in a document crucial to the law of the Holy Roman Empire. As stated in the 1785 Preamble, the League of German Princes was reacting to “a crisis in the imperial order.”⁴⁸ As so often since, this diagnosis of a crisis became a formula legitimating action.

Gradually the term, initially applied solely to external and military situations, entered into the realm of domestic constitutional life in general. In the “*Staatsanzeigen*” of 1782, Schlözer, reporting about the anarchy in

⁴⁴ Friederich d. Grosse (Frederick the Great) *Histoire de mon temps* (1775), *Oeuvres*, ed. Johann David Erdmann Preuss, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1846), 66.

⁴⁵ The same, letter to Heinrich Graf Podewils, 29.3.1745, in Friedrich d. Grosse, *Politische Correspondenz*, eds. Johann Gustav Droysen, Max Duncker, Heinrich v. Sybel (Berlin, 1880), vol. 4, 96.

⁴⁶ The same, “Gespräch mit Heinrich de Catt,” 20.6.1758, in *Unterhaltungen mit Friedrich d. Grossen. Memoiren und Tagebücher von Heinrich v. Catt*, ed. Reinhold Koser (Leipzig, 1864), 107: “Mon frère partit pour Dresden et quitta l’armée; sans doute, dans le moment de crise où je me trouvais.” (“My brother has left for Dresden and left the army, undoubtedly in the midst of the crisis in which I find myself”).

⁴⁷ Johan Jacob Schmauss, *Die Historie der Balance von Europa* (Leipzig, 1741), page. 2; also, Schmaus, *Gleichgewicht*; vol. 2, 960.

⁴⁸ Deutscher Fürstenbund. “Vertrag zwischen den Churfürsten von Sachsen, Brandenburg, und Braunschweig-Lüneburg (23.7.1785)”; printed in Ellinor v. Puttkamer, *Föderative Elemente im deutschen Staatsrecht seit 1648* (Göttingen, Berlin, Frankfurt, 1955), 53.

Geneva, described the internal upheaval of the city state as a “*Crise*” (“Crisis”).⁴⁹ With the introduction of the French constitution of 1791, Wieland sees “the moment of the decisive crisis. It is a matter of life and death; never before was the internal and external danger greater than now.”⁵⁰ He already uses the term to characterize as civil war the intermeshing of domestic and external politics. Later, Scharnweber, in the same comprehensive fashion—but using different alternatives—could speak of a “crisis of the state” confronting Hardenberg in Prussia as he fought for the reforms needed to “save the state” from revolution.⁵¹

“Crisis” was used appropriately to describe concrete civil war situations that divided the loyalty of citizens. Pleading along this line, Count Reinhard, in a petition to the King of Westphalia, used the term to prevent him from carrying out summary executions. On the other hand, he could apply the same term in 1819—“political crisis”—to a mere change of cabinet in Paris.⁵²

The spectrum of political applications thus ranged broadly. “Crisis” marked external or military situations that were reaching a decisive point; it pointed to fundamental changes in constitutions in which the alternatives were the survival or demise of a political entity and its constitutional order; but it could also describe a simple change of government. The common use of the word had neither been validated nor sufficiently enriched to be elevated into a basic concept. It served both as a descriptive category and as a diagnostic criterion for political or military action. Thus at the time of the Karlsbad Resolutions, Clausewitz described the revolutionary tendencies which, “combined with other circumstances, could bring about crises. We know from history that some peoples [Völker] have experienced such paroxysms.”⁵³ In the same vein, in 1813 Baron von Stein appealed to Hardenberg to strive for a strong German federal constitution: “If the . . . statesmen do not use the crisis of the moment to secure permanently the welfare of their fatherland, . . . our contemporaries and posterity will justly accuse

⁴⁹ August Ludwig Schlözer, “Anarchie von Genf,” in *Staatsanzeigen*, 1 (1792), 462.

⁵⁰ Wieland, Christoph Martin, “Sendschreiben an Herrn Professor Eggers in Kiel (Jan. 1782),” *Sämtliche Werke*, 45 vols. 1794–181, vol. 31 (Berlin, 1857), 162.

⁵¹ Christian Friedrich Scharnweber to Hardenberg, 20.11.1820, cited in the editor’s “Introduction,” *Preussische Reformen 1807–1820*, ed., Barbara Vogel (Königstein/Ts. 1980), 20, footnote 30.

⁵² Karl Friedrich Graf v. Reinhard an den König von Westfalen, Oct. 1813, printed in *Goethe und Reinhard. Briefwechsel in den Jahren 1807–1832*. ed. Otto Heuschele (Wiesbaden 1957), 443; Reinhard to Goethe, 16th Jan. 1819, *ibid.* 227.

⁵³ Carl von Clausewitz, “Umtriebe” (1819/23), *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Hans Rothfels (München, 1922), 192.

and condemn them for having sacrificed the happiness of their fatherland through carelessness and indifference.”⁵⁴ With respect to both the moment of judgment and diagnosis, as well as the prescription for a therapy, the medical origins of the term clearly continue to be preserved in the usage of political language. That remains the case to this day, although the determination of the optimal time for a decision is now thought to be determined by inescapable pressures for action. At that moment, use of the concept of crisis is meant to reduce the room for maneuver, forcing the actors to choose between diametrically opposed alternatives.

2. The Extension of “Crisis” to the Philosophy of History

From the second half of the eighteenth century on, a religious connotation enters into the way the term is used. It does so, however, in a post-theological mode, namely as a philosophy of history. At the same time, the metaphor of illness as well as the associational power of the “Last Judgment” and the “Apocalypse” remain pervasive in the way the term is used, leaving no doubt as to the theological origins of the new way in which the concept is constructed. For that reason too, the formation of a concept of crisis in the philosophy of history still leads to harsh dualistic alternatives. But as yet the concept is not associated with any one camp. As a party-political term, “crisis” remains ambivalent. The sense of experiencing a crisis becomes generalized but the diagnoses and prognoses vary with the user.

For this reason it is not appropriate to follow the pragmatic linguistic habit of using the political divisions of that time as the principle of classification. That would mean accepting alternatives derived from personal interpretations as indicators of historical reality. This mode of classification misses the semantic quality of the concept of crisis, which always admits alternatives pointing not just to diametrically opposed possibilities, but also to those cutting across such opposites. It is precisely through the multiplicity of mutually exclusive alternatives that the various uses of the term may point to existence of a real “crisis,” even though it is not yet fully captured in any of the interpretations offered at that moment.

That is why the emphasis here is as much on substantive ideas about future goals as it is on the modes of interpreting them. The medical and theological origins of the term facilitate this task. From their respective per-

⁵⁴ Frh. Von Stein, “Denkschrift aus Prag” (End of August 1813), *Ausgabe Politischer Briefe und Denkschrift*, ed. Erich Botzenhart and Gunther Ipsen (Stuttgart, 1955), 333.

spectives, a crisis either reveals a situation that may be unique but could also—as in the process of an illness—continue to recur. Or, analogous to the Last Judgment, a crisis is interpreted as involving a decision which, while unique, is above all final. Thereafter, everything will be different. Between these two extremes there may be a cornucopia of variants which, although logically exclusive, can influence the characterization of crisis both as entailing a possible structural recurrence and as absolutely unique.

In this way, the concept of crisis can generalize the modern experience to such an extent that “crisis” becomes a permanent concept of “history.” This appears for the first time with Schiller’s dictum: “*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*” (“World History is the Last Judgment”),⁵⁵ the impact of which cannot be overestimated. Without actually taking over the term “Last Judgment,” Schiller nonetheless interprets all of human history as a single crisis that is constantly and permanently taking place. The final judgment will not be pronounced from without, either by God or by historians in ex post facto pronouncements about history. Rather, it will be executed through all the actions and omissions of mankind. What was left undone in one minute, eternity will not retrieve. The concept of crisis has become the fundamental mode of interpreting historical time.

Another variant lies in the repeated application of a crisis concept that represents at the same time—like the ascending line of progress—a historically unique transition phase. It then coagulates into an epochal concept in that it indicates a critical transition period after which—if not everything, then much—will be different. The use of “crisis” as an epochal concept pointing to an exceptionally rare, if not unique, transition period, has expanded most dramatically since the last third of the eighteenth century, irrespective of the partisan camp using it.

As it pertains to historical time, then, the semantics of the crisis concept contains four interpretative possibilities. 1) Following the medical-political-military use, “crisis” can mean that chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required. 2) In line with the theological promise of a future Last Day, “crisis” may be defined as a unique and final point, after which the quality of history will be changed forever. 3) Some-

⁵⁵ Friedrich Schiller, “Resignation. Eine Phantasie” (178/84), *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1904), vol.1, 199; also Schiller, *Geschichte, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2, 667ff. For an early evidence of “crisis” as a permanent category of history, albeit with progressive overtones, see Justus Möser, “Patriotische Phantasien” (1778), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6 (1943), 81; to make a people great, it must be kept active and “kept in such permanent crisis . . . as will make it necessary to draw on all its powers and through the use of the same to increase the sum of the good of the world.”

what more removed from the earlier medical or theological semantic spheres, are two new historical (or temporal) coinages. The first uses “crisis” as a permanent or conditional category pointing to a critical situation which may constantly recur or else to situations in which decisions have momentous consequences. 4) The second new coinage uses “crisis” to indicate a historically immanent transitional phase. When this transition will occur and whether it leads to a worse or better condition depends on the specific diagnosis offered. All of these possibilities reveal attempts to develop a single concept limited to the present with which to capture a new era that may have various temporal beginnings and whose unknown future seems to give free scope to all sorts of wishes and anxieties, fears and hope. “Crisis” becomes a structural signature of modernity.

a) Western Precursors in the Formation of a Historical Concept of Crisis

Rousseau (1762) offers the first usage of “crisis” in the modern sense, i.e., one that emanates from a philosophy of history and also offers a prognosis of the future. The use of the term was directed against both an optimistic faith in progress and an unchanged cyclical theory. Because of this dual thrust, “crisis” became, as it were, a new concept. Having reduced—in *Émile*—master and serf to the same human status based on the satisfaction of natural need, Rousseau suggestively proclaims that the existing social order cannot last. It will succumb to an inevitable revolution that can be neither predicted nor prevented. The great monarchies have already passed their heyday. Rousseau here applies the familiar cyclical theory of successive changes in the forms of government. Behind the overthrow of monarchs, however, emerges a vision of radical transformation encompassing all of society: “*Nous approchons de l'état de crises et du siècle des révoltes*” (“We are approaching a state of crises and a century of revolutions”).⁵⁶ There will be many revolutions, leading to the subsequent conclusion that the condition of crisis which opens the nineteenth century will become permanent. The future of history is being anticipated, half as prophecy, half as prognosis. Rousseau conjures up a vision of a long-term future, in which only those who work count; in which wealth and poverty are supplanted by production that benefits society; in which the idle will be called wastrels. The critique of his own society, which anticipates future upheavals, contains the same temporal tension associated in earlier times with chiliastic or apocalyptic invocations of the Last Judgment.⁵⁷ This vi-

⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762), *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1969), 4:468.

⁵⁷ A preliminary attempt to de-theologize the concept of crisis is offered by Montesquieu, “*Lettres persanes*, Nr. 39,” *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1964), 1:187, in which he paraphrases ironically the report about Mohammed’s birth (comparing it to Christ’s): “*Il me semble, . . . qu'il y a toujours des signes éclatantes, qui préparent à la naissance des*

sion of post-revolutionary society suggests the nullification of all human history to date. Rousseau, in effect, turns an eschatological concept into a philosophy of history. This adds a meaning to the concept which goes beyond previous uses of the term in political language (known to Rousseau).⁵⁸

Though applied primarily to his own situation, Diderot uses the term in the same way. In 1771, after the dissolution of the Paris *parlement*, he wrote that the previously hidden fire of liberty is now breaking out openly. Once divine majesty has been threatened, the attack on earthly sovereigns can no longer be averted. This is the present situation and who can say where it will lead us? “*Nous touchons à une crise qui aboutira à l'esclavage ou à la liberté*” (“We are reaching a crisis that will culminate in either slavery or liberty”).⁵⁹ Diderot is providing an inescapable dualistic prognosis that involves more than just a political constitution. The alternative is total, encompassing the entire society.

Seven years later, Diderot used the medical metaphor to describe a similarly apocalyptic situation in the Rome of Claudius and Nero (by which, of course, he meant the Paris of 1778). Popular unrest precedes great revolutions. To escape their misery, the people believe everything that promises an end. Friendships dissolve, enemies are reconciled, visions and prophecies that anticipate the coming catastrophes proliferate. “*C'est l'effet d'un malaise semblable à celui qui precede la crise dans la maladie: il s'élève un mouvement de fermentation secrète au dedans de la cité; la terreur realize ce qu'elle craint*” (“This is the effect of an illness like that which precedes the crisis of a sickness: A secret fermentation begins in the state; terror makes real what was feared”).⁶⁰

Depending on the circumstances, the term could serve either as indica-

hommes extraordinaires; comme si la nature souffrait une èspece de crise, et que la Puissance céleste ne produisit qu'avec effort . . . Les trônes des rois furent renversés; Lucifer fut jeté au fond de la mer.” (“It seems to me . . . that the birth of an extraordinary man is always preceded by remarkable signs announcing his coming. It is as though nature itself has fallen into a sort of crisis and even the power of heaven requires unusual effort to realize its will. Kings were dethroned; Lucifer thrown to the bottom of the sea.”)

⁵⁸ See Rousseau, *Contrat social* 2, 10 (1762), *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1966), 3:390, where he talks about the time of crisis (“*temps de crise*”) during the time when society is being formed; also *ibid.*, 4, 6 (p. 458), where he speaks of a crisis (“*crise*”) that will lead to dictatorship, in the course of which there will be a decision between salvation or doom. Though still separated, Rousseau uses both concepts, *ibid.*, 2, 8 (p. 385) when he expressly compares revolutions and civil wars in states to the crisis of an illness experienced by individual human beings; both may lead to regeneration.

⁵⁹ Denis Diderot to the Princess Daschkoff, April 3, 1771; *Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Jean Assézat and Maurice Tourneaux, vol. 20 (Paris, 1877), p. 28.

⁶⁰ Diderot, *Essai sur les règne de Claude et de Néro* (1778), *ibid.* vol. 3 (Paris, 1875), 168ff.

tor or cause of a situation demanding decision. In these two instances, crisis can be conceptualized as both structurally recurring and utterly unique. The very ambiguity of crisis turns the word into a basic concept, even though neither Diderot nor Rousseau offered an explicit theory of crisis. As used by them, the concept incorporates (in different degrees) all the various functions the term had come to perform: as historical assessment and judgment, as medical diagnosis, and as theological entreaty. It is precisely the exciting possibility of combining so many functions that defines the term as concept: it takes hold of old experiences and transforms them metaphorically in ways that create altogether new expectations. Hence, from the 1770s on, “crisis” becomes a structural signature of modernity.

With the American War of Independence, our concept of crisis assumes an additional dimension. It now comes to signify an epochal threshold which at the same time anticipates a final reckoning of universal significance. For this reason, Thomas Paine aptly named his journal, *The Crisis*, a term which, by that time, had become common in English journalism.⁶¹ His commentaries in that journal seek to give historical meaning to the American developments between 1776 and 1783 by depicting them as a fundamental and inescapable moral challenge that will decide finally whether virtue or vice, natural democracy or corrupt despotism would prevail. “These are the times that try men’s souls.”⁶² As one of Rousseau’s disciples, he saw in the victory of the new world and the defeat of the old, the final realization of Rousseau’s vision of the future. To Paine, the War of Independence was no mere political or military event—rather it was the completion of a universal world historical process, the final Day of Judgment that would entail the end of all tyranny and the ultimate victory over hell: “the greatest revolution the world ever knew, gloriously and happily accomplished.”⁶³ Here we find a semantic expansion of the concept of cri-

⁶¹ At the time when democratic ideas were beginning to percolate, Junius, in 1769, concluded a letter with a passage that demonstrates the shift from a theological to a historical dimension: “If, by the immediate interposition of Providence, it were possible for us to escape a crisis so full of terror and despair, posterity will not believe the history of present times,” in Junius, “Including letters by the same writer . . . ,” January 21, 1769, ed. John Wade, vol. 1 (London, 1850), 111. On the increase in the pamphlets containing the word “crisis” since 1775/76, see Thomas Paine, *The Writings*, ed. Moncure Daniel Conway, vol. 1 (New York, 1902; reprinted New York, 1969), 168f., “Introduction.” In 1779, when the entry of France into the War of Independence threatened an invasion, the Lord Chancellor wrote of “a crisis more alarming than this country had ever known before.” Cited in Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People 1779–1780* (London, 1949), 47.

⁶² Paine, *The Crisis*, Nr. 1 (December 23, 1776); *Writings*, vol. 1, 170.

⁶³ Paine, *The Crisis*, Nr. 13 (April 19, 1783), *ibid.* 370.

sis, analogous to a change in the meaning of “revolution.” For Paine, crisis is no longer a phase preliminary to revolution but continues to unfold through the American Revolution, which thus realizes its unique character. In terms of the history of concepts, this was possible only because the political concept of crisis, by incorporating the theological idea of the Last Judgment, had been elevated into a concept marking a new epoch in the philosophy of history. This development did not preclude subsequent uses of “crisis” that were more specifically bound to a given time and situation.

It is in this latter sense that in 1791 Paine defends the French Revolution against Burke’s vehement criticism: It had resulted from a corruption which, having festered for centuries, could be overcome only “by a complete and universal Revolution. . . .” “When it becomes necessary to do a thing, the whole heart and soul should go into the measure or not attempt it. That crisis was then arrived, and there remained no choice but to act with determined vigor, or not to act at all.”⁶⁴ On the one hand, crisis is the result of a historical movement; on the other, it can be overcome only by the historically legitimated acceptance of an absolute moral responsibility for action, on which depends success—and salvation.

Burke himself used the same term to describe analytically the phenomena which Paine had conjured up. In doing so, “crisis” by no means lost its historical function of depicting an altogether unique situation: “It appears to me as if I were in a great crisis, not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps more than Europe. All circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that had hitherto happened in the world.”⁶⁵ Somewhat later, Burke explained the uniqueness of this crisis: it lay in the introduction of new political principles, doctrines, theories, and dogma. Out of this has been created a new, hitherto unknown, type of constitution: “This declaration of a new species of governments, on new principles (such it professes itself to be), is a real crisis in the politics of Europe.” It is comparable only to the Reformation. Once again, the boundaries between domestic and foreign politics are being eaten away as the internal order of all European states is corroded by the emergence of new definitions of friends and foes. In short, Burke conveys the image of a European civil war, which, in a quasi religious manner, will explode all traditional social ties and political principles.⁶⁶ Burke’s diagnosis of that crisis

⁶⁴ Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791), *ibid.*, vol. 2 (1906; reprinted 1969), 283.

⁶⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. A.J. Grieve (London, 1950), 8.

⁶⁶ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on French Affairs* (1781), *ibid.* 287.

utilizes historical analogies to deny the claim of uniqueness made by the revolution's defenders. At the same time, he is forced to share their conception in order to grasp the novelty of the actual "crisis." In Burke's perspective, crisis as a revolutionary concept of redemption becomes an analytical category for understanding concrete historical situations—though it too aims to inspire political action. Although the diagnostic and prognostic functions of the term are the same for Paine and Burke, the contents of their diagnoses as well as their expectations are diametrically opposed. While Burke's use of crisis reflects its medical antecedents, that of Paine is closer to its theological origins. Nonetheless, both make use of the new semantic quality of "crisis" to suggest, or, rather, to set out new, universally valid historical alternatives. They thereby transform crisis into a concept designed for combat (*Kampfbegriff*) that could be used by both sides against each other.

Chateaubriand similarly uses the term as a key concept essential to all political parties: "Nul cépendant dans ce moment de crise ne peut se dire: 'Je ferai telle chose demain', s'il n'a prévue quel sera ce demain" ("In this moment of crisis no one can say 'I will do something tomorrow' without having foreseen what tomorrow will bring"). Everyone is equally in the dark. All therefore must seek to discover the origins of this crisis, one's own situation in it and the path to the future. This was to be his task. He compared all earlier revolutions with the ongoing French Revolution. For him, "crisis" is the point at which the present situation intersects with universal historical conditions that must first be understood before a prognosis could be offered.⁶⁷

For Saint-Simon and his disciples as well, "crisis" serves a central function in the philosophy of history. The antecedents of the French Revolution, dating back centuries, continue to exert pressure for a fundamental transformation of society. The Revolution was only one part of a global historical crisis. "Crisis" is now frequently used interchangeably with "revolution." Elastic in time, it becomes the supreme concept of modernity. Though largely driven by societal forces, crisis now encompasses as well religion, science, morality, and politics. "La crise dans laquelle le corps politique se trouve engagé depuis trente ans, a pour cause fondamentale le changement total du système social" ("What has caused the thirty-year long crisis in the

⁶⁷ François René Vicomte de Chateaubriand (1797), *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1843), 248.[*Essai sur les révolutions*. Translator's note.]

body politic is the total change in the social system”).⁶⁸ All indicators point to a classless society but, to hasten this process, a “science of crisis” is needed to explain society and the laws of its history. Only such a science can provide the means by which to resolve the crisis. In Comte’s words: “La réorganisation totale, qui peut seule terminer la grande crise moderne, consiste, en effet . . . à constituer une théorie sociologique propre à expliquer convenablement l’ensemble du passé humain” (“The great modern crisis can be resolved only by a total reorganization. This requires a sociological theory capable of explaining everything in humanity’s past”). Once crisis has been identified as an inevitable and necessary phase of history, it can be overcome through proper prognosis and planning. Although “crisis” has become an epochal concept for comprehending the “entire period,” it still retains its eschatological significance. But now humans are left to terminate “la Grande Crise finale.”⁶⁹ While still reflecting its theological roots, “crisis” nonetheless has emerged as a truly autonomous concept of history. A central cognitive category—according to the positivist belief—it now provides the possibility of envisioning, and hence planning for the foreseeable future.

b. Variant Philosophies of History in German

In German-speaking Europe, it was probably Herder who first applied our term to the philosophy of history. In 1774, he confronts the oft-debated alternative as to whether the human race will improve itself morally and become happier, or whether everything will become worse. He seeks to analyze this either-or alternative by referring to historical forces and tendencies, institutions and developments. Conditions and changes in them are played off against a linear theory of progress. It is in line with this far-reaching change of perspective, that Herder employs the decisive concept of crisis: “since for a variety of reasons we are living in the midst of such a strange crisis of the human spirit (indeed why not also of the human heart?), it is up to us to discover and assess all the inner forces of history rather than continue paying homage to a naïve idea of progress.”⁷⁰

In 1786, Iselin, whose theory of history as accelerated, cumulative

⁶⁸ Claude-Henri Saint-Simon, “Du système industriel” (1824), *Oeuvres*, ed. E. Dentu, vol. 3 (Paris, 1869; reprinted Paris, 1966), 3; see also Nicolaus Sombart, “Vom Ursprung der Geschichtsphilosophie,” *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 41 (1955): 487.

⁶⁹ Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, vol. 2, *Discourse sur l'esprit positif* (1844); bilingual edition, ed. Iring Fettscher (Hamburg, 1956), 124f., 106.

⁷⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, “Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit” (1774), *Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin, 1877–1913), vol. 5 (1891), 589.

progress Herder had attacked, inserted a discussion of crisis into the fifth edition of his history of humanity. Thus Iselin depicts the division of Poland, the American War of Independence, the populist fermentation in England as “moral thunderstorms that will finally clear the air and create joy and tranquility. . . . They [these events] seem to justify the supposition that Europe is in the midst of a crisis far more serious and dangerous than any since it began to be civilized. While we fearful observers should view this crisis, though distant, as a danger, it offers us rather comforting and hopeful visions of the future.”⁷¹ Drawn into the current of such hope in progress, the concept of crisis is shorn of its meaning as presenting inescapable alternatives. This is replaced by a more optimistic meaning, that of a transition towards a better future. In the nineteenth century this scaled-down meaning of “crisis” becomes dominant in theories of economic liberalism. But before becoming an iterative concept of progressive history during the revolutionary period, its meaning in German was that of a singular, epochal challenge. Thus in 1793, Herder speaks of an “epochal crisis” that imposed the choice between the alternatives of revolution or evolution.⁷²

Herder uses “crisis” as a central concept of history. Offering alternatives which could no longer be simply reduced to death or rebirth, the concept now necessitated thinking about long-term transformations. The medical metaphor pales, while the historical concept of crisis increasingly stands on its own.

Much the same process can be traced in the writings of the young Görres, who, as a republican, was in the opposite camp. At first he used the short-term medical concept of crisis to describe isolated situations of political upheaval. But then he broadened the horizon in order to derive universal global alternatives from the crisis. In the “Fragment of our newly discovered political pathology,” published in 1798 in his *“Rothes Blatt”* (*Red Journal*), Görres, in his diagnosis of two days of the (French revolutionary) crisis, the 9th Thermidor (1794) and the 18th Fructidor (1797), drew a medical-political parallel between the four stages of smallpox and the revolutionary fever. Shortly thereafter, on the eve of the War of the Second Coalition, he formulated in his *Rübezahl* (*Gnome of the Sudeten Mountains*), “some ideas about the newest crisis in the state system of Europe.”

⁷¹ Isaac Iselin, *Philosophische Mutmassungen über die Geschichte der Menschheit* (1764/70), 5th ed., vol. 2 (Basel 1786), 380.

⁷² Johann Gottfried Herder, “Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität” in *Anhang: zurück behaltene und abgeschnittene Briefe* (1792/97), *Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin, 1877–1913) vol. 18 (1883), 331. Also “Entwicklung,” vol. 2: 206.

He confessed that he did not know when a “tranquil future” will return: “For six years, Monarchism and Republicanism have been locked in a life and death struggle unique in the annals of world history.” Forty-two million Europeans are committed to the Republican system, forty million are “neutral,” and another fifty-seven million follow “the opposite monarchial principle.” But whether there will be peace or war, those favoring Republicanism can look towards the future with confidence. For them there is no turning back, while monarchies will see themselves threatened by the transition to a Republic. In this way, the concept of crisis has acquired the function not only of describing but also of evoking a transition that is at once historically unique and progressive. Thus it takes up the variant first advanced by Paine and Iselin.⁷³

Two years later, Gentz used the concept of crisis in the opposite direction to convey a long-term structural transformation the end of which could not yet be determined. His revised use of the term clearly demonstrates the influence of his spiritual mentor Burke, whom he translated into German, while Rousseau became his intellectual antagonist: “We believe we are nearing the end of the greatest, most awesome crisis which the social order of Europe has experienced in several centuries.” “Crisis” was thus broadened into an epochal concept in German as well, but without any prognosis of the ultimate outcome. Gentz goes on to ask: “What is the likely result? What are our expectations for the future?” He confesses to himself that “the crisis which introduced the nineteenth century is unpredictable.” Only its negative sides are clearly discernible. The peace-loving Enlightenment had entered into a fateful pact with the Revolution, thereby raising enormously the potential for “the cruellest and most divisive war ever visited upon a society.” If at all, only astute countermeasures could end the revolutionary wars.⁷⁴

The extent to which “crisis” had become an epochal concept of history

⁷³ Görres, “Rhötes Blatt” (1798), *Gesammelte Schriften* vol.1 (Cologne, 1928), 169, 164ff.; by the same author, “Rübezahl” (1798), ibid. 318ff. In 1819, long after his political conversion in 1799, Görres used the concept of crisis to warn about revolution. Just as nature threw the sick person into a delirium in order to husband all healing forces, “a people too may have to undergo a paroxysm of insanity if the disease is really to reach the ultimate crisis point.” See his *Deutschland und die Revolution*, ibid., vol. 13 (1929), 100. As shown by all previous examples, once it occurs, the revolution will, like a medical crisis, run through all its stages. To prevent its occurrence, he contends, it is better to offer a free constitution of estates—a position that led to his expulsion from the Rhineland.

⁷⁴ Friedrich v. Gentz, “Über den ewigen Frieden” (1800); printed in Kurt v. Raumer, *Ewiger Friede. Friedensaufrufe und Friedenspläne seit der Renaissance* (Freiburg, München, 1953), 492–494.

in German after 1800 can be seen by the failure to apply it in a Christian or religious sense to a critical turning point (*Zeitwende*). Schleiermacher understands the “mighty crisis” only in a secular sense: “as crossing the boundary between two different states of affairs.”⁷⁵ Novalis rejects the term altogether because to him “Christianity” will be “the intermediary between the old and the new world” on the path toward “eternal peace.”⁷⁶ Friedrich Schlegel already uses the concept of crisis as a historical category for explaining evolutionary transformations in the past. Thus, he argues, “the national character of the European state system has already experienced three great evolutions in the course of three decisive crises—in the time of the crusades, in the period of the Reformation and discovery of America, and in our own [the eighteenth] century.”⁷⁷ But whenever he is speaking as a Catholic theologian of history, he speaks of the preceding period, as the “worst and most dangerous time” which will be followed by the period of the “Last Judgment.”⁷⁸ In the same vein, he interpreted the fall of the Jewish nation as a “smaller, partial version of the Last Judgment.”⁷⁹ At the same time, he uses “crisis” in a narrower, more political and historical sense. Hence he saw the beginning of the 1820s as the dawn of “a new epoch that threatens everyone with a new and terrible crisis and general upheaval.” This was because the Revolution now came no longer from above or below but “from the middle.”⁸⁰ Similarly, in 1807 Ernst Moritz Arndt, who never tired of depicting the “spirit of the time” in apocalyptic terms, continued to make use of German biblical language: “Two centuries ago, this horrible period would have been likened to the Last Judgment! And are we not experiencing those last days of judgment ourselves? . . . There is only one salvation and that is to walk together through the death of fire in order to regain life for oneself and others.”⁸¹ The concepts of the “Last Judgment”

⁷⁵ Schleiermacher, “Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern” (1799), *Gesammelte Werke* 1, ABT. Vol.1 (1843), 437.

⁷⁶ Novalis, “Die Christenheit oder Europa” (1799), *Gesammelte Werke*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (1968), 524.

⁷⁷ Friedrich von Schlegel, “Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie” (1810/11), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol.1 (Paderborn, 1979), 356; see also his application to the English seventeenth century in “Über Fox und dessen Nachlass” (1810), ibid., vol. 7, 116.

⁷⁸ Schlegel, Friedrich, *Vorlesungen über Universalgeschichte* (1805/06), ibid., vol. 14 (1960), 252.

⁷⁹ Schlegel, Friedrich, *Philosophie der Geschichte* (1828), ibid., vol. 9 (Paderborn, 1971), 227.

⁸⁰ Schlegel, Friedrich, *Signatur des Zeitalters* (1820/23), ibid., vol.7, 534.

⁸¹ Ernst Moritz Arndt, *Geist der Zeit* (1807), *Werke*, eds. August Leffson und Wilhelm Steffens, vol. 6 (Berlin, Leipzig, Wien, Stuttgart, no date), 47.

and “crisis” are both being historicized. But the German biblical version came closer to carrying the sense of those religious impulses Arndt wished to turn in a democratic direction.

VI. “CRISIS” AND CRISES: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY (GERMANY)

“God, when will this world crisis pass and the spirit of justice and order become common once again!” So ends a petition written in 1814 to the governor (*Oberpräsident*) of a Prussian province by a journalist. The exaggerated choice of words is symptomatic.⁸² The era of the Revolution had apparently ended; but not the effects of having experienced its prolonged upheavals, the transition to a new order, or the hopes it had raised. For this aftermath, the concept of “crisis,” precisely because of its various meanings, seemed especially appropriate. It could express long-term changes as well as occasional outbursts, apocalyptic expectations as well as skeptical fears.

1. “Crisis” in Everyday Experience

If we take the frequency of its use as indicating the actuality of a crisis, then the modern period since the turn of the nineteenth century can be called the age of crisis. The “global crisis” encompassed all spheres. Already in 1820 Schlegel spoke of a “great crisis of German philosophy” demanding action by the younger generation.⁸³ The 1839 Brockhaus *Conversations-Lexikon der Gegenwart* (*Conversational Lexicon of the Present Time*) spoke of the “literary crisis” of “Young Germany,”⁸⁴ while in 1837 Bruno Bauer spoke of a “universal theological crisis.”⁸⁵ The extensive correspondence of Perthes, which provides a privileged view of contemporary public opinion, re-

⁸² Arnold Mallinckbrodt to Ludvig v. Wincke, Westphalia, *Hefte für Geschichte, Kunst, und Völkerkunde* 44 (1966): 268.

⁸³ Schlegel, *Signatur des Zeitalters*, 517.

⁸⁴ Brockhaus,, Article on “Junges Deutschland” in *Conversations-Lexikon der Gegenwart*, vol. 2 (1839), 1181.

⁸⁵ Bruno Bauer, review of Strauss’ “Leben Jesu” in *Jahrbuch für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, 1 (1837), 325; cited in Horst Stuke, *Philosophie der Tat: Studien zur ‘Verwirklichung der Philosophie’ bei den Junghegelianern und den wahren Sozialisten* (Stuttgart, 1963), p. 131

lies especially on the political-historical variant of the crisis concept. In 1819, after the Carlsbad Decrees, it was expected that “all of the German states will have to go through an internal crisis” that should lead to a change in ministers.⁸⁶ In 1822 he predicts “There will be more than one crisis before a sense of security will be finally restored which allows both individuals and states to enjoy their possessions.”⁸⁷

Shortly thereafter Perthes reports the view that Liberalism “is the only remedy against this sickness from which Europe is suffering.” True recovery, however, will begin only “when the crisis, brought on by the hasty administration of medicine, will come to a fortuitous end.”⁸⁸ The end of the July Revolution leads Perthes to predict a crisis for the German states so serious that “he recoils before it, even though it is only a premonition. Today there is no longer time to do what might have been done ten years earlier.”⁸⁹ Prussia, he adds a little bit later, is “especially challenged by the ongoing time of crisis, which might intensify and even culminate in open warfare.”⁹⁰ In 1843, Perthes himself writes: “We are on the eve of great and mighty events: political developments are pushing towards a European crisis.” Transformations in material and spiritual conditions are reaching a culmination point. “As long as there is history,” the peace of the last quarter of the century will be seen “as one of the most significant and decisive epochs.”⁹¹ Here the crisis concept covers equally well the uniqueness of both the perceived structural transformation and that of each acute moment of decision.

It was a logical consequence of the Revolution that, from 1847 on, the situational use of the term crisis proliferated. Beckerath, a liberal representative in the United *Landtag* (the combined provincial diets of Prussia) wrote: “We have lived through a great crisis. The choice now is either to deny the King obedience . . . or else to come into conflict with our own convictions.”⁹² In May 1848 Kapp, who belonged to the radical camp, writes that the coming republic will have to give up on the present generation of parliamentarians: “It demands new kinds of people and as such we

⁸⁶ Clemens Theodor Perthes, *Friedrich Perthes' Leben nach dessen schriftlichen und mündlichen Mitteilungen*. 6th ed., vol. 2 (Gotha, 1872), 176.

⁸⁷ Ibid., vol. 3 (1872), 241.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 259

⁸⁹ Ibid., 315

⁹⁰ Ibid., 343

⁹¹ Ibid., 455.

⁹² Herman von Beckerath to his family, 6.26. 1847; printed in *Rheinische Briefe und Akten zur Geschichte der politischen Bewegung 1830–1850*, ed. Joseph Hansen, vol. 2 (Bonn, 1942), 288.

have to present ourselves. Until that crisis ensues, I must live.”⁹³ And Moltke, to cite someone loyal to the state, used the term “crisis” again and again to diagnose internal and external turning points in the course of the (1848) Revolution.⁹⁴

To explain the coup d'état of Napoleon III historically, Constantin Frantz uses a concept of crisis that encompassed all previous temporal dimensions. He depicts the thirty-five years prior to the coup “as a never-ending cycle of ministerial crisis upon ministerial crisis.”⁹⁵ Avoiding supernatural or demonizing versions of the concept, he describes the 1848 Revolution instead in “physiological” terms as “having been merely a crisis of an illness in the nation’s life, the source of which can be clearly recognized.”⁹⁶ Moreover the coup itself was the inevitable consequence of an acute “crisis.”⁹⁷ As for the questionable figure of the new Napoleon, Frantz predicted: “France will remain in a state of crisis until there is no longer a divorce between what turns truth into reality and what reveals the falsity of lies. That is the solution, or else none exists.”⁹⁸ To Frantz, the origins of this permanent crisis lay in the discrepancy between a changing social structure and forms of government (*Herrschaftsformen*). Unable to adapt to the new structure of society, all these governments had lost their legitimacy. The only possible way out of this dilemma was a dictatorship—provided that it could succeed in representing itself as the product of the popular will.⁹⁹

Once “crisis” had become a commonly employed expression, its use became an indicator of both the intensity of a crisis and the perception of it as such. The frequent changes of chancellors after Bismarck’s fall, rapidly led to an inflationary use of the term “Chancellor crisis,” the sources of

⁹³ Friedrich Kapp to his father, 5 July, 1848, printed in his *Vom radikalen Frühsozialismus des Vormärz zum liberalen Parteipolitiker des Bismarckreiches. Briefe 1843–1884*. ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt a.M., 1969), 55.

⁹⁴ Helmut von Moltke to his mother, 8.3. 1848 ; also letter to his brother Adolf, 11.17.1848; letter to his brother Ludwig, 3.21.1850; in *Gesammelte Schriften und Denkwürdigkeiten*, vol. 4 (Berlin, 1891), 122, 129, 142.

⁹⁵ Constantin Frantz, *Louis Napoleon* (1852), reprint of the 1933 edition (Darmstadt, 1960), 34.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 54

⁹⁷ Ibid., 16

⁹⁸ Ibid., 76

⁹⁹ Already in 1850 Romieu used a similarly polysemic concept of “crise” to demand a dictatorship. His premise was “that the nineteenth century will not see the foundation of anything permanent.” Auguste Romieu, *Der Cäsarismus oder die Notwendigkeit der Säbelherrschaft, dargestan durch geschichtliche Beispiele von den Zeiten der Cäsaren bis auf die Gegenwart* (1850), German translation of the 2nd French edition (Weimar, 1851), 7, 47, 59, 79.

which were sought in either the personal qualities or the policies of a given officeholder. But it was this very indiscriminate use of the term that prompted Maximilian Harder to diagnose an institutional crisis behind it: “Rumors of a hidden camarilla increasingly feed expectations of a political crisis. Such usage labels every disturbance in the balance of the body politic as a crisis.” Yet as every lay person knows, the medical concept of crisis means “a rapid decision. . . . In this sense we cannot speak of a political crisis. The sickness in the life of our state is felt by everyone, and most fear that one day it will come to a bad end. . . . We can be happy if a prolonged crisis (*Lysis*) will finally liberate us from this creeping malaise.”¹⁰⁰

The return to the medical metaphor made it possible to differentiate the ongoing crisis—described in medical terms as *Lysis*—from those crises created by specific circumstances. In our century, however, such distinctions have been superseded by a single term with many meanings. Because of these emotional overtones, crisis loses its theoretical rigor. At the same time, attempts continued to use “crisis” more unambiguously within a context determined by theories of history.

2. The Concept of “Crisis” in [German] Theories of History

“Crisis” plays only a peripheral role in the German Idealist philosophy of history in which the spirit (*Geist*) that drives reality naturally triumphs over any acute crisis. But the concept of crisis assumed a central place among its heirs, the Young Hegelians (*Junghegelianer*). This praxis- and action-oriented philosophy seeks to achieve that freedom, the absence of which is the object of its critique. At odds with reality, that critique is pushing for a decision, which, historically understood as “crisis,” is already pre-programmed and prepared.¹⁰¹ As formulated by Ruge: “Our time has now become especially critical . . . and the crisis is . . . nothing more than . . . the attempt . . . to break through and to discard the shell of the past, a sign that something new has already replaced it.”¹⁰² Because it is able to see the

¹⁰⁰ Maximilian Harden, *Kamarilla*, cited in Jürgen W. Schäfer, *Kanzlerbild und Kanzlermythen in der Zeit des “Neuen Curses”* (Paderborn, 1973), 46; this also includes a semantic analysis of the use of the term. See also Letter of Bismarck to Kaiser Franz Joseph, 26. 3. 1890; *Friedrichsruhe Ausgabe*, vol. 14/2 (1933), 999: “In view of the domestic crises that seem to be brewing,” he (Bismarck) did not step down voluntarily.

¹⁰¹ See Horst Stuke, *Philosophie der Tat* (Stuttgart, 1963), *passim*; Kurt Röttgers, *Kritik und Praxis* (Berlin, New York, 1975), 165ff.

¹⁰² Arnold Ruge, *Die Zeit und die Zeitschrift* (1842), cited in Röttgers, *Kritik und Praxis*, 238.

direction of history, this critique is propelling the crisis. In Bruno Bauer's words: "History . . . will elevate to power the freedom which theory has given us and thereby create the world in a new form. . . . History will take care of the crisis and its outcome."¹⁰³ Judging history correctly will determine whether the problems of state, church, and society demanding a decision can be solved in practice. The concept of crisis thus remains within a philosophy of history calling for the execution of tendencies revealed through critique.

In the words of Mevissen, an entrepreneur close to the Young Hegelians and protector of Marx, "The recognition of the presence of an organic affliction, the sources of which are not yet or insufficiently understood, presages a historical crisis. Today, as in similar epochs in the past, the sole reason for the crisis is the incongruence between the culture [*Bildung*] of the century and its actual customs, forms of existence and conditions. The sole alternatives are whether the crisis will be resolved through revolutionary upheavals or whether the human spirit has become strong enough to transform voluntarily and from within those conditions revealed by the power of knowledge." In line with his theory, Mevissen actually sought to abrogate the privileges of property and, through the creation of a "General Assistance and Educational Association" to integrate—unsuccessfully—the "excluded majority" of workers into society, thereby linking freedom and equality.¹⁰⁴

That same diagnosis was offered by Lorenz von Stein when, in 1850, he was the last to attempt a system-immanent interpretation of history derived from the premises of German Idealism. "Seen from the perspective of society's development," European history reveals "two great epochs": The first, antiquity, was marked "by the coexistence of free property and unfree labor"; the second, the period of the Germanic kingdoms, "witnessed an ever-changing battle between free labor and free property. Our present epoch is nothing but the last stage of that battle. Throughout Europe there is a sense that the present condition cannot last much longer. Powerful and terrible movements are coming to the fore; no one dares to predict where they will lead. Hence no one has the right to offer a magic formula for the future." For this reason, von Stein withdraws to a third position and ad-

¹⁰³ Bruno Bauer, *Die gute Sache der Freiheit und meine eigene Angelegenheit* (1842), cited in Stuke, *Philosophie der Tat*, 174.

¹⁰⁴ Gustav von Mevissen, "Über den allgemeinen Hülfs-und Bildungsverein" (1845), printed in J. Hansen, *Gustav v. Mevissen vol. 2: Abhandlungen, Denkschriften, Reden und Briefe* (Berlin, 1906), 129ff.

vances a challenging prognosis with two stark alternatives. Either it is possible to convince capital and labor to sacrifice their special interests and to institutionalize instead a relationship of mutual dependency so that the state is no longer simply the handmaiden of property interests—or else “Europe descends again into barbarism and is lost.” The 1848 Revolution, which announces “the sovereignty of industrial society,” is merely one “act of that mighty crisis.”¹⁰⁵ As with Saint-Simon, von Stein’s concept of crisis is drawn from an all-encompassing view of history which sees the revolutions of the nineteenth century as steps in the transition toward industrial society. At the same time, Stein prognosticates only two alternatives: a just social order or collapse. Thus his theory of the three epochs contains a decidedly eschatological component.

This component is considerably weakened in Droysen in 1854 when, during the Crimean War, he places the “characteristics of this European crisis” within a world historical context. At issue is not simply war or constitutional questions during which the combatants involved test their strength against each other. Rather, “we are in the midst of one of those monumental crises—like the Crusades, the Reformation, or the discovery of America—that leads mankind from one world epoch to another.”¹⁰⁶ This crisis affects all spheres. Power is becoming an end in itself. In the competitive economy everything has become fungible; science is pursuing materialist principles against which a religion threatened by “nihilism” is no match.¹⁰⁷ International law is being revolutionized and in the current constellation of power, only Russia has a position “that will last beyond the moment (of the present crisis).”¹⁰⁸ A new “system of global powers” is appearing on the horizon, in which Russia, the British Empire, North America, later also China, and another European power as yet unknown, will compete against each other. Unlike von Stein, Droysen does not predict any alternatives for the future. Rather, the future outcome of the crisis is left open, though he provides a spectrum of various unforeseeable eventualities.¹⁰⁹

Even more removed from any eschatological explanation is Jacob Burckhardt’s 1870 synopsis of the world historical crisis.¹¹⁰ Rather than

¹⁰⁵ Lorenz von Stein, *Geschichte der sozialen Bewegung in Frankreich von 1789 bis auf unsere Tage* (1850); newly printed edition (Darmstadt, 1959), 208ff.

¹⁰⁶ Johann Gustav Droysen, “Zur Charakteristika der europäischen Krise,” in *Politische Schriften*, ed. Felix Gilbert (Munich, Berlin, 1933), 328.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 341; see also ibid., 323ff.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 332

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 330

¹¹⁰ Jacob Burckhardt, “Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen. Über geschichtliches Studium” (1870), *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4 (Basel, Stuttgart, 1970).

offering a diachronic overview demonstrating the singularity of the nineteenth century, Burckhardt provides a typology of past world crises in order to emphasize commonalities and similarities. Inspired by Thucydides and relying heavily on medical metaphors, his goal is to provide a historically and anthropologically grounded pathology of the processes of crises.¹¹¹

Although he recognizes “war as international crisis” he draws most of his examples from the accelerated dynamics of revolutionary processes.¹¹² Influenced by the cyclical theory of constitutional change (*Verfassungskreislauflehre*), he analyzes revolutions in terms of regular phases at the end of which there will be either restoration or despotism. Yet these relatively traditional, psychologically enhanced elements are clothed in a theory of crisis that does not view the unfolding of crises as mere diachronic events in a linear revolutionary process. Rather, “they are to be regarded as ‘developmental knots.’” Crises are more complex and multi-layered, even if they emerge erratically and suddenly. “Indeed, real crises are rare.”¹¹³ To Burckhardt, not even the English Revolution was a real crisis because it did not lead to a fundamental change in social relations. Similarly, the German Reformation was an incomplete crisis cut off by the Peasant Wars. So too was the French Revolution, the course of which was moderated. Neither the first Roman century nor the Peloponnesian War produced great, fundamental crises. On the other hand, the Athenian democracy lived in a constant crisis with the persistent threat of terrorism. As demonstrated by the multiplicity of historical examples, most crises are terminated before they reach their final endpoint. This was true also of the Seven Weeks War of 1866 (between Prussia and Austria), a crisis into which Austria was pushed.¹¹⁴

Crisis may be a permanent possibility in history, but reality creates so many moments of unexpected surprise as to make any typology of crisis relative. Religious, spiritual, economic, and political forces become intertwined. “When two crises cross each other”—national or religious—“the stronger consumes the weaker.” There are “failed crises” as well as “artificially created illusory crises.”¹¹⁵ Certainly only the age of mass migration of various peoples in early Christian Europe was a true and great crisis, “and this crisis, unlike any other familiar to us, remains unique of its kind. It led to fundamental transformations, to a mixing of races, and, above all, to the emergence of a historically powerful Christian Church.”¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Theodor Schieder, “Die historischen Krisen im Geschichtsdenken Jacob Burckhardts” (1950) in Theodor Schieder, *Begegnungen mit der Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1962), 129ff.

¹¹² Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, 117

¹¹³ Ibid., 138, 122.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 120, 139, 147.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 129, 122, 146.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 122.

Only this long, drawn-out crisis can be compared to that of nineteenth-century Europe. This is less because of any overt similarity than because of its uniqueness, shaped by the many facets of an unchanging human nature which, true to itself, forever seeks change. The wars of the nineteenth century were only a part of this larger crisis, into which the forces of democracy and material ambitions, lust for power, and intellectual utopias all merged. But the “principal crisis” will come only with the convergence of technology, wars, and social revolutions. “At that point, the main decision must come from the nature of humanity itself”¹¹⁷ (thus transforming once and for all the metaphor of the Last Judgment into an anthropological and historical category).

Burckhardt’s semantic fields were especially varied in order to redescribe the multi-layered and complex character of structural transformations and their explosive aggregate impact. “Crisis” became a transpersonal mode of interpretation at the highest level. Cutting across short- and long-term processes, this concept of crisis promises misery and crime, but also salvation and cleansing. Despite his amazing prognoses of future catastrophes, Burckhardt remained cautious in his judgment of the final outcome: “Of course, in the case of a truly great crisis, only after a lapse of time proportional to the scale of the crisis itself, can we discern the sum total of its true (i.e. relatively true) consequences (its so-called good and evil results or, rather, what the contemporary observer regards as desirable or undesirable).”¹¹⁸ Thus the most significant analyst of crisis remained considerably more cautious than all of his predecessors.

In 1888 Nietzsche, whose readiness to prophesy was the exact opposite of Burckhardt’s, asked himself: “Why am I a destiny?” (“Warum ich ein Schicksal bin”). Nietzsche’s answer, by fusing together all the diagnostic and prognostic strands of his philosophy, had in effect, reduced the European crisis to his own person: “One day my name will be connected with the recollection of something enormous—with a crisis such as never before existed on earth, with the deepest clash of conscience, with a decision solely invoked against all that had until then been believed, demanded, hallowed. I am not human, I am dynamite. . . . But my truth is *frightful*: for until now lies have been called the truth.—*Revaluation of all Values*: that is my formula for an act of the highest examination by mankind, which has become flesh and genius in me.” Once centuries of lies in moral, metaphysical, or Christian guises have been unmasked, “politics will then be taken up with

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 132f.

spiritual warfare, all the power structures of the old order will be blown sky high” and there will be “wars like never before on earth.”¹¹⁹

3. Extensions of the Concept of Crisis into Economics

Surely our concept would never have become a central concept had it not acquired an additional interpretive content that reflected an experience increasingly common in daily life: economic crises. In Germany these were initially due to the costs of the wars against the French, to agrarian surpluses, as in 1825, or to failed harvests, as in 1847. But from 1857 on, economic crises were increasingly viewed as global occurrences caused by the capitalist system itself. The use of the concept of crisis reflects this development. While “crisis” as an economic term was already common in eighteenth-century English, it seems to have entered into the German language only in the nineteenth century. Although the language of German mercantilists made prominent use of such metaphors as circulatory problems or imbalances in the body politic with respect to demand and supply, such problems were not specifically conceptualized as “crisis”—in the sense of an illness or imbalance—until the nineteenth century.

Instead, increasingly severe economic emergencies continued to be redescribed almost exclusively in such medical terms as “relapse,” “calamities,” “convulsions,” and, for an especially long time, “blockages.” Correspondents writing from England in 1825 warn of an “impending crisis” that may already have befallen that country. In the following year the expression is commonly used to describe its consequences in Germany, as well as those resulting from a wave of bankruptcies. “The crisis” which has befallen the commercial class in Frankfurt, “is terrible.”¹²⁰ The domestication of the expression can be seen in Perthes’s correspondence. He saw in England a “monetary crisis”—which, linking it to the “stock market mob,”—he condemned in moral and social as well as in economic terms.¹²¹ This style remained common. Niebuhr at once put the crisis into a historical perspective: “For the past 150 years, the history of commerce and monetary

¹¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Ecce homo. Man wird was man ist.* (1888). Werke, vol. 2 (1956), 1152f. This translation is taken from Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo and the AntiChrist*, trans. Thomas Wayne (New York, 2004), 90–91.

¹²⁰ References in Jürgen Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, Part 1, vol. 11, *Studien zur Geschichte der zyklischen Überproduktionskrisen in Deutschland 1825–1866* (Berlin, 1961), 40ff., 43ff.

¹²¹ Perthes, *Perthes’ Leben* (see footnote 86), vol. 3, 285.

affairs, like the history of epidemics, has been an integral part of world history. Before 1721 (referring to the speculative crises in England and France during that year), general trade crises were unknown; now as they become more and more frequent, the future looks dim.”¹²²

Composite terms changed depending on where the symptoms of crisis were felt first or most clearly. In the first half of the century, the terms “trade crisis” or “financial crisis” were especially prominent, although such usage was shaped by the extent to which the crisis was actually experienced—as is evidenced by the reports from chambers of commerce.¹²³ Insofar as the sources of the crisis were discussed in such reports or in newspapers, descriptions with strong moral overtones predominated. Thus speculation and greed were cited, along with overextensions of credit, weak purchasing power, new inventions and the installation of machines, custom laws and taxes, monetary regulations. These and others besides were variously evaluated in terms of their role and impact.¹²⁴

Not until 1849 did Roscher, in a highly influential essay, declare the descriptions of “financial or commercial crises” to be inappropriate. He suggested as a preferable term “production crisis” because “it better describes the nature of the disease.” After discussing the theories of western European economists, he opted—though with historical reservations—for the thesis of overproduction. Among others, it was used by Sismondi against Say and the two Millses. Roscher attributes the crisis to “the stagnation of consumption” and “the over-anticipation of demand,” which has led to an “excessive production of goods for which there are no customers.” He distinguishes between “production crises” of specific industries from “general crises” in all sectors of the market economy, a “‘general glut,’ as the English say.”

Although his theory is not especially rigorous, Roscher nonetheless links up with other western theories about a growing global economic interdependence attributed to an ever greater productivity. Otherwise he offers a relatively conventional “pathology of the disease” and “an appropriate therapy,” especially governmental preventive measures combined with financial assistance, though his examples were taken primarily from the Anglo-Saxon and American economies.¹²⁵

After 1825, German observers tended to agree that the economic crises

¹²² Barthold Georg Niebuhr, cited in *ibid.* 287

¹²³ For references see Kuczynski, part 1, vol. 11, 43ff.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42, 47 for 1825; *ibid.*, 66 for 1836; *ibid.*, 91 for 1848; *ibid.*, 132ff. for 1856.

¹²⁵ Roscher, article on “Production crises” (see footnote 40), 727f, 740.

of the first half of the century—and beyond—had been imported from the U.S.A., England, and France. Thus in 1837 the Cologne Chamber of Commerce reported: “Because in the last two decades our province had entered into significant direct and indirect relations with North America, it was inevitable that the adverse effects of this crisis would be felt by our commerce and factories.”¹²⁶

The belief in the recurrence of crises became no less entrenched. In 1837, Rother, the head of the Prussian Merchant Marine, speaks of “common, periodically recurring pressures” (without using our term)¹²⁷; as does Harkort in 1844: “those crises of market surpluses . . . which consistently recur within short periods.”¹²⁸ The sense of inevitability is spreading as well: “there exists no means by which to prevent a commercial crisis.”¹²⁹ Needless to say, economic crises were increasingly attributed to technical innovations. As noted by Henrik Steffens: “There is perhaps no crisis in modern times more devastating than that caused by the ever increasing introduction of railways.”¹³⁰

From the 1840s on, the economically-based concept of crisis permeates the growing literature of social criticisms—coming from all political and social camps—that had begun to flood the market.¹³¹ “Crisis” was well suited to conceptualize both the emergencies resulting from contemporary constitutional or class specific upheavals, as well as the distress caused by industry, technology, and the capitalist market economy. These could be treated as symptoms of a serious disease or as a disturbance of the economy’s equilibrium. This undoubtedly prompted Roscher, in 1854, to coin the general formula: these are crises “the changing substance of which may take changing forms. Such crises are called ‘reforms’ if they are resolved peacefully under the auspices of the established legal system, but ‘revolu-

¹²⁶ “Jahresbericht der Handelskammer Köln” (1837), cited in Kuczynski, *Lage der Arbeiter*, Part 1, vol 11, 69; see also ibid., 42, 100, 110, 132.

¹²⁷ Christian Rother, “Memorandum des Leiters des königlichen Seehandlungsinstituts” (April 3, 1837), cited in ibid., 7, footnote.

¹²⁸ Friedrich Harkort, *Bemerkungen über die Hindernisse der Civilisation und Emancipation der unteren Klasse* (Ebersfeld, 1844); see also J. Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, Part 1 vol. 9: *Bürgerliche und halbfeudale Literatur aus den Jahren 1840 bis 1847 zur Lage der Arbeiter. Eine Chrestomathie* (Berlin, 1960), 127.

¹²⁹ Karl Quentin, “Ein Wort zur Zeit der Arbeiterkoalitionen” (1840), Kuczynski, *Lage der Arbeiter*, Part 1, vol. 9, 185.

¹³⁰ Henrik Steffens, “Was ich erlebte. Aus der Erinnerung niedergeschrieben” (1844), cited in Manfred Riedel, “Vom Biedermeier zum Maschinenzeitalter,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 43 (1961), 103.

¹³¹ See Kuczynski, *Lage der Arbeiter*, Part 1, vol. 9, 47, 90, 94, 127f., 160ff., 185.

tions' if they produce changes violating the law."¹³² Thus, in the economic sphere as well, "crisis" had been elevated into a historical "super concept" (*Oberbegriff*) with which to analyze the challenges of the century.

The economic crisis after 1856, caused in part by the gold rush and the subsequent frenzy of speculation set off by it, established the dominance of economics. As a consular official reported from the U.S.A. to Berlin: "Attempts to identify the origins of this crisis have resulted in finding them everywhere and nowhere." Certainly, it was perceived as a "world crisis."¹³³ What made it altogether new was its conceptualization in international terms extended to commercial and political interactions as well as to the conditions of capitalist production. As noted by Michaelis, "the crisis of 1857 differs from all of its predecessors in that it was far more universal. Earlier crises hit only individual nations, while others were affected differently. . . . The causes of crisis also varied from place to place." To understand their common character and historical significance would require a "history of the world economy."¹³⁴

The next year appeared the first *History of Trade Crises* (*Geschichte der Handelskrisen*), by Max Wirth. This was a relatively naïve compilation of empirical observations and emphasized the exceptional importance of the credit system.¹³⁵ Eugen von Bergmann's *History of Political Economy Crisis Theories* (*Geschichte der nationalökonomischen Krisentheorien*), published in 1895, was pitched at a much higher level of reflection.¹³⁶

Compared with its use as a political or historical term, the economic concept of crisis now achieved far greater theoretical rigor. This was due to knowledge gained from experience. Economic crises—despite the misery and despair they caused and intensified—were transitional (not permanent). That perception made it possible to insert economic crises into specific phi-

¹³² W. Roscher, *System der Volkswirtschaft*, vol. 1: *Die Grundlage der Nationalökonomie* (Stuttgart, Tübingen, 1854), 36; see also J. Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, Part 1, vol. 10: *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter in Deutschland, 1789 bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1960), 36.

¹³³ Consul Adae from the USA to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (March 3, 1856), cited in Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, Part 2, vol. 31: *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter in England, in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika und in Frankreich* (Berlin 1968), 30.

¹³⁴ Otto Michaelis, "Die Handelskrise von 1857" (1858/59), *Volkswirtschaftliche Schriften*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1873), 240f.; see also Kuczynski, *Lage der Arbeiter*, Part 1, vol. 11, 111.

¹³⁵ Max Wirth, *Geschichte der Handelskrisen* (Frankfurt, 1858).

¹³⁶ Eugen von Bergmann, *Die Wirtschaftskrisen. Geschichte der nationalökonomischen Krisentheorien* (Stuttgart, 1895; reprinted in Glashütten/Ts and Tokyo, 1970).

losophies of history. In this way, economic crisis theories, both liberal and socialist, also influenced public perceptions.

For liberal optimists, every economic crisis became a step on the ladder of progress. As expressed by Julius Wolf: “Economic crises fulfill a mission. They are not merely recurring patterns from which businesses with superior leadership and resources can escape. Rather they push productive conditions onto a different plane. Because of their invigorating economic effects, one could almost say about crises what Voltaire said about God, that one would have to invent them if they did not already exist. . . .”¹³⁷ Lexis, in 1898, shared the view that the surplus of goods caused “almost everywhere and continuously a harsh struggle for survival” but he could not consider the concomitant “chronic process of selection as a crisis.”¹³⁸ However great the weight given to such social-Darwinian interpretations of crises, they were seen as transitional phases on the path to progress. Even socialist interpreters shared this view. But, horrified by the extreme misery that economic crises produced in daily life, their horizon of future expectations was more “eschatological.” This was evident in Marx and Engels, whose use of the concept of crisis alternated between revolutionary hope and economic analysis.

4. Marx and Engels

In his “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy” of 1844, Engels traced the steadily worsening cyclical crises to “such an oversupply of productive capacity” that “people are starving from that very surplus.” He added the expectation that this condition “will finally lead to a social revolution never imagined in the textbook knowledge of economists.”¹³⁹ From that point on, both Marx and Engels use crisis—with some exceptions—primarily as an economic term. It describes the time span when economic cycles begin to turn, the long-term courses of which have never previously been intelligible. Once these regularities are seen as historically determined, however, the chances increase that the capitalist system is about to succumb to its own

¹³⁷ Julius Wolf, *Sozialismus und kapitalistische Gesellschaftsordnung* (1892), cited by Bergmann, *Wirtschaftskrisen*, 232f.

¹³⁸ Wilhelm Lexis, article on “Krisen” in *Wörterbuch der Volkswirtschaft*, vol. 2 (1898), 122.

¹³⁹ Engels, *Umrisse zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie* (1844), *Marx-Engels Werke* (MEW), ed Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, 42 vols. and 2 suppl. vols. (Berlin-Ost, 1955 ff.) vol. 1 (1956), 516.

problems and has entered the critical phase that will lead to its end by revolution. In this sense, Marx and Engels integrate the economic concept of crisis into their political and historical analysis. This is illustrated in the *Communist Manifesto*: “For decades, the history of industry and commerce is but a history of the revolt of modern productive forces pitted against modern conditions of production, property relations that are the condition for the existence of the bourgeoisie and its domination. . . . In these crises there breaks out an epidemic that in all earlier epochs would have seemed an absurdity—an epidemic of overproduction. . . . How does the bourgeoisie overcome these crises? On the one hand, by enforced destruction of mass productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets and by a more thorough exploitation of old ones. But how then does it do this? By paving the way for ever more extensive and devastating crises and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.” On the basis of this economic interpretation, Marx and Engels could finally predict the foreseeable demise of capitalism. But this requires simultaneous political action by the proletariat, that “death-bearing” class which the bourgeoisie itself had created.¹⁴⁰

Incorporated into their social and political analysis, is the expectation of a final economic collapse, a “global crash” as well as the certainty of revolution—or whatever other circumlocution Marx and Engels chose instead:¹⁴¹ “A new revolution is possible only in the wake of a new crisis. But the one is as certain as the other.”¹⁴² Yet for Marx and Engels “crisis” retained an essentially positive connotation, though on political rather than economic grounds. As Engels exults in 1857: “The crisis will make me feel as good as a swim in the ocean.”¹⁴³

To the extent, of course, that recurring economic crises did not produce a revolution, Marx’s economic theory developed a life of its own. It went beyond all other economic theories in that—on the basis of its theory of economic factors as dominant—it simultaneously offered both a theory of history and a social theory. It is within this over-all economic framework,

¹⁴⁰ Marx and Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (1848), ibid., vol. 4 (1959), 467. Translation adapted from Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd ed. New York, 1978), 478.

¹⁴¹ Engels to Bebel, 30.3. 1881, MEW, vol. 35 (1967) , 175; for further examples—“after the deluge, it is our turn and ours alone” or “theory of the collapse”—see Rudolf Walther, *Marxismus und politisches Defizit in der SPD 1890–1914* (Frankfurt, Wien, 1981), 11.

¹⁴² Marx/Engels, “Revue. Mai bis October” (1850), MEW, vol. 7 (1960), 440.

¹⁴³ Engels to Marx, November 15, 1857, ibid., vol 29 (1963), 211f.; see also Peter Stadler, “Wirtschaftskrise und Revolution bei Marx und Engels. Zur Entwicklung ihres Denkens in den 50er Jahren.” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 199 (1964), 113ff.

that Marx's theory of crisis, though incomplete, assumed central importance.¹⁴⁴ In *Capital (Das Kapital)*, Marx points out the internal contradictions of capitalism which, leading to ever recurring cyclical crises, will ultimately create those conditions making the collapse of the system inevitable. His theory of crisis thus contains both system-immanent and system-exploding elements—a duality that accounts for the increasingly divergent reception of Marxist practice (*Praxis*) and his theory of history as dominated by economic factors.

Marx continues to make ever new attempts at stating “the general possibilities of crisis”¹⁴⁵ in order to explain real ones. “The real crisis can only be deduced from the real movement of capitalist production, competition, and credit.”¹⁴⁶ The causes of specific crises are all seen as symptoms of a capitalist crisis, as, for example, a credit shortage. Every financial crisis is viewed as part of a circulatory process of goods-finance-goods. The liberal theory of equilibrium between supply and demand will never be achieved. Rather, the system of circulation is already diachronically distorted. Neither the branches of production nor the circulation of goods and money are in tune with one another. “Those autonomous processes confronting each other, however, form an inner unity. Yet that inner unity is manifested in external disunity. If the external tendencies towards autonomy proceed against the internal interdependence of these processes, such unity will forcibly assert itself—in the form of a crisis.”¹⁴⁷ “Crisis” is thus “nothing but the forcible assertion of the inner unity of phases of the productive processes that externally have become autonomous from one another.”¹⁴⁸ For that reason, credit, which helps to expand the material development in productive powers and to open world markets, is—long before any actual shortage—only the occasion of an economic crisis: “It [credit] hastens . . . the forcible outbreak of this contradiction, i.e. crises, and those elements leading to the dissolution of the old mode of production.”¹⁴⁹

Under-consumption too is such a partial aspect. Since it was already part of everyday existence in pre-capitalist time, modern overproduction

¹⁴⁴ Trent Schroyer, “Marx's Theory of the Crisis,” *Telos* 14 (1972): 106.

¹⁴⁵ Marx *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, vol. 2 (1861/63), MEW, vol. 26/2 (1967), 512; see also his *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. Vol. 1 (1867), MEW, vol. 25 (1952), 128.

¹⁴⁶ Marx “*Theorien über den Mehrwert*,” vol. 2, 513.

¹⁴⁷ Marx, *Kapital*, vol. 1, 127f.

¹⁴⁸ Marx, “*Theorien über den Mehrwert*,” vol. 2, 510.

¹⁴⁹ Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, vol. 3 (1894), MEW, vol. 25 (1952), 457.

plays a comparatively larger role. It is—to put it briefly—always the result of a production process involving capital and labor, hence, sociologically speaking, also a product of the dependency of the proletarian class on capitalists. Every crisis is thus at once a “crisis of work” and a “crisis of capital.”¹⁵⁰ Their interrelationship is depicted in many forms.

Instead of producing for social needs, capitalism seeks only to maximize profits which, although acquired in the market, initially are in the form of surplus value created by workers but then taken from them. The temporal and geographic dissolution of production, utilization, and distribution creates disparities between supply and demand in capital, labor, and credit markets. Overproduction is determined by the accumulation of capital, investments, and modernization in the sphere of production, and by economic concentration at the expense of smaller firms, “through methods that reduce the number of employed workers in relation to increased production.”¹⁵¹ Rises in productive capacity thus increase the reserve army of unemployed workers who can no longer afford to buy goods, thereby paralyzing markets so that finally the profits of entrepreneurs will decline.

According to Marx, the systematic foundation of his own explanations and processes sketched above was Ricardo’s previously discovered “law of tendentially falling rates of profit.” Once the level of exploitation sinks “below a certain point . . . disturbances and blockages within the capitalist productive processes, crises, and the destruction of capital” will be inevitable.¹⁵² But this tendency need not immediately lead to a total collapse. Marx also analyzes counter-tendencies that may “stem, slow down, or partially interrupt the fall,”¹⁵³ and give rise to a repetitive, roughly ten-year cycle of “average activity, prosperity, over-production, crisis and stagnation.”¹⁵⁴ The capitalist mode of production will thus always run against its own barriers, because “the extension or contradiction of production will always be decided by the expected margin of profit and not by the relationship of production to social needs, to the needs of human beings developed as members of society.”¹⁵⁵ Crises therefore not only contain immanent forces through which they can be overcome, but are also manifestations of tendencies pointing to the structural limits of capitalism. It is that barrier across which, to quote Engels, “mankind’s leap from the realm of necessity will

¹⁵⁰ Marx, “Theorien des Mehrwerts,” vol. 2, 516.

¹⁵¹ Marx, *Kapital*, 662

¹⁵² Ibid., vol. 3, 221ff., 266.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 249.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., vol. 1, 476.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., vol. 1, 476.

lead to the realm of freedom.”¹⁵⁶ Marx’s theory of crisis was carefully formulated so as to allow two interpretations of crisis. These continue to influence economic interpretations of the modern world as well as those derived from philosophies of history.

VII. LATER USES OF CRISIS: AN OVERVIEW AND ASSESSMENT OF ITS PRESENT STATUS

From the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision. “Crisis” remains a catchword, used rigorously in only a few scholarly or scientific contexts. Schumpeter denies its utility even for political economy, which is why, in his analysis of business cycles, he gives “no technical meaning to the term crisis, but only to the concepts of prosperity and depression.”¹⁵⁷

Since World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, cultural critiques¹⁵⁸ and global interpretations with “crisis” in their titles, have proliferated. In 1918, Paul Valéry published three essays on “the intellectual crisis”: “La crise militaire est peut-être finie. La crise économique est visible dans tout sa force; mais la crise intellectuelle, plus subtile, et qui, par sa nature, même, prend les apparences les plus trompeuses (puisque se passe dans le royaume même de la dissimulation), cette crise laisse difficilement saisir son véritable point, sa phase.”¹⁵⁹ (“The military crisis is perhaps over; the economic crisis is all too evident. But the intellectual crisis is more subtle. By its very nature it can produce highly misleading impressions. These are due to the dissimulation which so often plays a part in intellectual life. Thus it becomes difficult to understand the real meaning of the intellectual crisis and to diagnose the phases of its development.”) Ortega y Gasset, drawing a parallel to the first century before Christ and to

¹⁵⁶ Engels, “Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft. ‘Anti-Dühring’” (1878), MEW vol. 20 (1962), 264

¹⁵⁷ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Konjunkturzyklen. Eine theoretische, historische und statistische Analyse des kapitalistischen Prozesses* (1939), ed. Klaus Dockhorn, vol 1 (Göttingen, 1961), 11. See also the English edition, *Business Cycles: A Theoretical, Historical and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process*, vol. 1 (New York, London, 1939), 5: “We shall not give any technical meaning to the term crisis but only to prosperity and depression.”

¹⁵⁸ See e.g. Ehrenfried Muthesius, *Ursprünge des modernen Krisenbewusstseins* (Munich, 1963).

¹⁵⁹ Paul Valéry, “La crise de l’esprit” (1918), *Variété*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1924), 15.

the Renaissance, sought to interpret the crisis of the twentieth century as characterized by alienation, cynicism, false heroism, shifting commitments, semi-education, and a relapse into barbarism. With the revolt of the masses modern man has reached his end point.¹⁶⁰ Huizinga , on the other hand, predicted a more open future. He was convinced that “the crisis in which we live, however serious, must be a phase in a progressive and irreversible process. . . . That is what makes the contemporary consciousness of crisis so new and so different from any previous experience.”¹⁶¹ Husserl expanded the theme of crisis into a broadly conceived philosophy of history. He characterized the “crisis of European sciences” as a manifestation of an ever more present “crisis of European civilization.” Ever since Descartes’s separation of object from subject, the Greek *telos* of following the dictates of reason has increasingly disappeared from sight. Phenomenology is meant to bridge the chasm between a science addicted to observable reality and the internal life of human beings.¹⁶²

Such efforts—whatever their analytical quality—do not reach much beyond the frame of philosophies of history already established in the previous (nineteenth) century. “Crisis” continues to demonstrate the ongoing novelty of our epoch, still perceived as a transitional stage. Another variant of twentieth-century use is evident in “negative theology,” which remains committed to incorporating the last judgment into world history. It views “crisis” as an immanent, permanent condition of the world. As early as 1837 this was how Richard Rothe conceptualized it: “The whole of Christian history is one great continuous crisis of mankind.” Yet he still saw that crisis as integral to progress.¹⁶³ Karl Barth removes all teleological overtones from “crisis” in order to interpret it existentially. God is “the origin of the crisis of every objectivity, an origin that lacks all objectivity, the judge, the non-being of the world. The so-called history of salvation [Heilsgeschichte] is only the continuous crisis of all history, not a history within

¹⁶⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, *Das Wesen geschichtlicher Krisen*, German translation by Fritz Schalk (Stuttgart, Berlin, 1943); first published in 1942 under the title *La esquema de las crisis y otros essayos*.

¹⁶¹ Johan Huizinga, *Im Schatten von Morgen. Eine Diagnose des kulturellen Leidens unserer Zeit* (1935), German translation by Werner Kaegi, 3rd edition (Bern, Leipzig, 1936), 18.

¹⁶² Edmund Husserl, *Die Krise der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie* (1935/36), ed. Walter Riemel, 2nd edition (The Hague, 1962), 10.

¹⁶³ Richard Rothe, *Die Anfänge der christlichen Kirche und ihre Verfassung* (1837), cited in Peter Meinhold, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Historiographie*, vol. 2 (Munich, Freiburg, 1967), 221.

or parallel to human history.”¹⁶⁴ The concept of crisis has here lost its meaning as a final or transitional stage—instead it has become a structural category for describing Christian history itself. Eschatology is now incorporated into history.

In all the human and social sciences, crisis appears as a key concept; in history, of course, to characterize epochs¹⁶⁵ or structures.¹⁶⁶ Political science tries to operationalize the term and distinguish it from “conflict.”¹⁶⁷ From medicine the concept has spread to psychology and anthropology,¹⁶⁸ ethnology, and the sociology of culture.¹⁶⁹ Above all, it is the media which have inflated the use of the term. On the basis of current headlines, a list of 200 different contexts was compiled in which the term crisis appears as adjective (crisis-torn), as subject (mini-crisis, crisis of self-confidence) or as defining word (crisis expert, crisis bungler).¹⁷⁰ Not only can “crisis” be conjoined with other terms, it is easy to do so. While it can be used to clarify, all such coinages then require clarification. “Crisis” is often used interchangeably with “unrest,” “conflict,” “revolution,” and to describe vaguely disturbing moods or situations. Every one of such uses is ambivalent. Indeed, “this lack of clarity is often welcome, since it makes it possible to keep open what it may mean in the future.”¹⁷¹ The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment. Such a tendency towards imprecision and vagueness, however, may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot as yet be fully gauged. This makes it all the more impor-

¹⁶⁴ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (1918), 9th reprinting of the 5th edition (1926); Zollikon-Zurich, 1954), 57.32. Translation adapted from *A Karl Barth Reader*, ed. R.T. Erler and R. Marquard, transl. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1986). For the Catholic usage see Harald Wagner, “Krise als Problem Katholischer Institutionalität,” in *Traditio-Krisis-Renovatio. Festschrift for Winfried Zeller*, eds. Bernd Jaspert and Rudolf Mohr (Marburg, 1976), 463ff.

¹⁶⁵ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne 1680–1715* (Paris, 1935).

¹⁶⁶ Christian Meier, *Res public amissa* (Wiesbaden, 1966), 201ff. where the first century before Christ is interpreted as a “crisis without end.”

¹⁶⁷ Martin Jänicke, ed. *Herrschaft und Krise. Beiträge zur politikwissenschaftlichen Krisenforschung* (Opladen, 1973).

¹⁶⁸ Schönpflug, Art. “Krise,” III (see footnote 13), 1242ff.

¹⁶⁹ Matthias Laubscher, “Krise und Evolution. Eine kulturwissenschaftliche Theorie zum Begriff ‘Krisenkult’” in Peter Eicher, ed., *Gottesvorstellung und Gesellschaftsentwicklung* (Munich, 1979), 131ff.

¹⁷⁰ Renate Bebermeyer, “‘Krise’-Komposita—verbale Leitfossilien unserer Tage, Muttersprache.” *Zeitschrift zur Pflege und Erforschung der deutschen Sprache*, 90 (1980), 189ff.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 189.

tant for scholars to weigh the concept carefully before adopting it in their own terminology.

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