

Consider the three major examples of the past 150 years. Out of the Long Depression of 1873-90, came a new capitalist era of large corporations, exploiting new technologies, such as steel and electricity. The centre of economic

In the decades since, various schools of Marxist and Schumpeterian economics have sought to understand how it is that capitalism is able to sustain relatively stable periods of economic growth, interspersed with major identifiable crises. Most agree that a historical crisis is resolved only when a new political, technological and cultural settlement arises, rendering the previous one obsolete.

as an attack on the old. Our society's current, almost obsessive veneration of

entrepreneurship is perhaps explicable in terms of the way this ideal represents

a fusion of philosophical and economic crisis – the businessman as theorist, and theorist as businessman.

judgement upon dominant firms, markets and methods, that mobilises the new

and practical, looking for ways in which existing structures can be abandoned,

destroyed and recreated. Entrepreneurial culture represents a permanent

position in the economy. The entrepreneur, comes to occupy the crucial

different and more efficient system of production, to be abandoned, and

transformative economic developments did not occur within existing structures

(such as a given market) but through the invention of new ones, that rendered

previous ones obsolete. The entrepreneur, who can imagine and create a radically

power shifted from the UK to the US. Out of the sustained political and economic

crisis of 1929-45 came a political-economic settlement that created more wealth,

distributed more broadly, than any era in history. With active government,

large hierarchical companies, and expanding public services, Western societies

prospered. Then out of the cultural, political and economic upheavals of 1968-

74 came what has come to be known as neo-liberalism. Financial markets took

advantage of rapid advances in telecommunications and processing power to

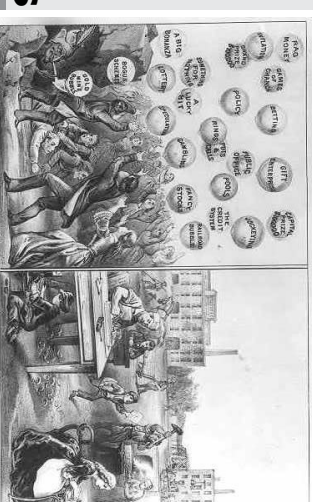
globalise beyond the reach of national regulators. A sixties culture of individual expression and feminism fed into the economy to produce an economy and society based around dual-earner households, rampant consumerism and debt, nurtured by a more psychoanalytically attuned advertising industry.

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WILLIAM DAVIES

CRISIS OF CIVILISATION

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THE WAY TO GROW POOR. ✦ THE WAY TO GROW RICH.

Waiting For Crisis

William Davies

Today our dominant metaphor is an amalgam of these two: transparency. Transparency combines the revelatory power of modern crisis, with the banal playfulness of post-modern surfaces. In the age of Twitter, Freedom of Information, peer-to-peer surveillance, perpetual self-auditing, more is known and revealed than ever before. Undoubtedly we get to see 'beneath' the surface. But it is the revelation of the voyeur and the surveillance operative, not that of the critic or

The idea of post-modernity offered its own metaphor of visibility. Rather than a hierarchy or evolution of perspectives, with facts above perspective, and future above the past, the post-modernist sees only a plurality of surfaces without hidden depths. There is no objectivity and no progress, only flux and consumer choice. The critic or scientist doesn't get any closer to reality than anyone else, but simply acts politically to exclude or include rival perspectives. Without anything 'beneath' to worry about, and no moment of rupture to reveal it, the post-modern individual can toy with appearances, without even the modern anxiety that certain tastes may be higher than others. The accompanying mood is one of irony, playfulness and – to those who resist such immersion in the image – smugness.

The revolutionary. Justifications for our dissatisfaction grow greater by the day, as more and more facts are brought to light regarding the economic, political and environmental disasters that are upon us.

But this is not a transformative or empowering revelation, but a curiously stabilising one. Our 'financial literacy' is rising, as the scale of our debt crisis becomes plain. Bureaucracies and parliaments are exposed, by the distributed surveillance of bloggers, aggregators and newspapers. And scientific advances into the deeper recesses of biology and ecology strip away mysteries, and replace them with numbers. In the transparent age, we become spectators and auditors of crisis, and therefore guarantors that it will never entirely erupt. Transparency does away with both hope and fear, offering explanation and disappointment in their place. Neither disruptive nor reassuring, the expression of the current era would be that "our situation is being monitored".

This is also a feature of the greatest crisis facing humanity today – global warming. A scientific consensus on the causes and threats of climate change has been growing for over twenty years now. A different economic and technological paradigm is clearly needed, which isn't dependent on the burning of fossil fuels. Historians will one day look back on the carbon-based economy, noting

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Britain's financial crisis was soon accompanied by a constitutional one. In May 2009, *The Telegraph* newspaper began to publish details of expense claims lodged by Members of Parliament, which were being compiled anyway due to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request. The government had initially attempted to make these details exempt from FOI rules, presumably because they were aware of the embarrassment that would be caused. Details of expense claims, ranging from the fraudulent to the ludicrous, from the shockingly excessive to the downright petty, were dripped slowly into the public domain by *The Telegraph*, to achieve maximum humiliation and outrage. It was an unprecedented parliamentary crisis, that saw the Speaker of the House of Commons reluctantly resign, Ministers sacked, and various gruesome revelations of the domestic tastes of politicians and their families, including the pornography enjoyed by the Home Secretary's husband. Trust placed in politicians had been low anyway, but this surely marked the moment at which Britain would have to reinvent its fundamental principles of representation and accountability.

going to be all right.

that our leadership has failed us relentlessly, and that no, we are not
our political and economic and social constructs are no longer viable,
is perhaps the only storytelling on television that overtly suggests that

Simon, argued that *The Wire*:

sphere of society act as failure, rather than explode as crisis. The show's creator, David
TV drama. *The Wire* perfectly encapsulates this mood, showing how failures in each
collective sense that they haven't – at least not yet, or not enough. The American
Rather than a collective awareness that things have gone critical, we have a rising
In another, 2009 seems like delay in one sphere spawning delay in another.
Perversely, if 1968 was an example of crisis in one sphere spawning crisis

real possibility. A year on, many feel that they are still waiting for it to begin.
explicitly – the civil rights movement, were invoked as proof that change was a
past in order to found his promise of 'change'. Lincoln, Roosevelt and – much less
campaign rhetoric, but it is no coincidence that he had to reach repeatedly for the
future unrecognisable from the past. Obama spoke to this yearning in his 2008
promised and threatened that radical disruption would arrive, rendering the
also one of nostalgia for modern critique and modern capitalism, both of which
crises, waiting for judgement to be declared, waiting for history to happen. It is
condition is one of dissatisfied waiting – waiting for failures to tip over into

Yet as a form of sociological art, *The Wire* has the unique capacity to communicate
this message, not through imagining things differently or demonstrating their
frailty, but displaying the capacity for failure to reproduce and stabilise itself. It is
the very sustainability of failed institutions that shocks. The mood of waiting for
crisis often contains a secret yearning that failures will get worse, in order to then
be transformed. As economists recollect the dread they felt in October 2008, when
the possibility loomed that ATMs would be emptied and whole high streets boarded
up, many of us have to suppress a tinge of dark regret that such history was not
made after all. Economic judgement day was put off. Which perhaps inspired the
deferral of political judgement day.

And cultural.
And environmental...

One way of understanding the stagnant historical period of the present is
in terms of the dominant visual metaphors that are at work. Consider the
following ways of seeing and concealing. The notion of the modern crisis is
accompanied by a metaphor of stripping away and revealing. The scientist who
makes a dramatic breakthrough attacks the dominant way of seeing the world,
and reveals a truth that had previously been hidden. Marx constantly employed
metaphors of visual illusion and ghosts. What appeared to exist, was in fact false;
what actually existed had been rendered mysteriously invisible. The purpose of
his critique – that would be confirmed by the final crisis of capitalism – was to strip

Dating back to the Enlightenment, European theory has placed particular
emphasis on crisis, in two inter-related senses. Firstly, writing in Prussia.

improvements or not, they must necessarily be different from what went before.
not known in advance. Regardless of whether resulting outcomes are viewed as
eventually arise is typically recognised; it is the outcome – the decision – that is
brought before a jury of some form, to discover one's future. That a crisis will
the status quo, rather than transform or replace it. To experience crisis is to be
'emergency', in that the latter is typically declared in order to defend or enforce
build-up in road deaths as nearing 'crisis point'. A crisis is subtly different from an
not describe a road accident as a 'crisis', although we might describe a gradual
To experience a crisis, therefore, is not simply to suffer some disaster. We do

have reached the turning point that will determine their fate.
patient is described as being in a 'critical' condition, this literally means that they
at which a decision occurs, similar to the conclusion of a trial. When a hospital
gets closer still to the original meaning, indicating the particular moment or event
the term 'critique' around the particular meaning, indicating the particular moment or event
the purpose of whom is to issue a judgement on something. The term 'critique'
or trial. The English vernacular retains some of this meaning in the word 'critic',
meaning. The Greek word *Krisis* from which it stems meant judgement, decision
expressions 'humanitarian crisis' or 'mid-life crisis'. But this is not its original
The term 'crisis' has acquired starkly negative connotations, as with the

its radically transformative impact upon nature, class mobilisation and geo-politics
during its short history. Carbon will one day be replaced as our primary source
of energy. But we should have already put it behind us. Some scientists believe we
have left things too late. Surely we couldn't be allowing a catastrophe to occur,
without first admitting to a crisis?

This essay considers the contemporary experience of crises. In particular,
it looks at the disappointment and frustration of waiting for crises to
become critical. The economic, political, environmental and – for those of a
more conservative stripe – moral crises of the present feel either delayed or too
protracted to register as moments of upheaval. Maybe we have crisis fatigue,
having become so familiar with the notion that 'change', 'insecurity', 'immigration'
and 'uncertainty' are ubiquitous, that no upheaval can now feel quite sufficient
to propel us into an alternative future. Our contemporary crises are dull,
sluggish affairs, that leave us dissatisfied but unable to transform dissatisfaction
into action. There is a widespread sense that the present is unsustainable, yet
nevertheless enduring. Why is this?



spatial or temporal habits, *constantly* creating and destroying, rather than doing liberalisation comes to operate as a constant crisis, in which capital avoids any fixed status of critique itself. The judge, scientist and critic become undermined by the very uncertainty that they are tasked with resolving. And on a material level, neo-liberalism comes to operate as a constant crisis, in which capital avoids any fixed status of critique itself. The judge, scientist and critic become undermined by the resulting in anything solid or better is thrown into doubt, thereby undermining the proposed. On a philosophical level, the very possibility (and value) of critique This is the scenario that the theorists of post-modernity and post-modernism once imposed. On a philosophical level, the very possibility (and value) of critique

But what if turbulence and stability became indistinguishable from one another? What would this mean for our sense of time, progress and hope? This is the scenario that the theorists of post-modernity and post-modernism once imposed. On a philosophical level, the very possibility (and value) of critique

In both the theoretical and the economic sense, a crisis performs a historical role in dividing the past from the future, even if (as the examples above testify) that division is itself protracted over time. The jury leaves the court-room to confer, and may not reappear for several years. Modern consciousness is shaped by this historical temporality, in which stability and turbulence produce one another, each guaranteeing that the other cannot last. Hope – and fear – lies in the fact that even the permanent features of our society will eventually be thrown into critical uncertainty, before being reinvented and re-embedded a new.

As much as anything, 1968 represented the collective awareness that things had *gone critical* – a form of self-consciousness that then seeped into every other corner of public and private life.

so periodically. The management gurus who preach constant chaos, throwing scorn upon all routine, repackage post-modern philosophy for the elites of the post-modern economy. From the 1970s onwards, the teachings of Schumpeter became absorbed into economic policy-making and corporate strategy, in the hope that through harnessing perpetual innovation, underlying economic power structures themselves would be unthreatened by creative destruction.

In what became known as the post-modern era, crisis lost its definition. It was no longer an interruption of any kind, no matter how protracted. It was constant, and therefore normal and deadening. As George Soros said of financial markets “I cannot predict anything except unpredictability”. In such circumstances, there is no grand narrative or coherent scientific paradigm, waiting in the wings to replace its predecessor. There is only the banality of flux – new products, new policies, new ideas, new styles, flowing in a constant stream of sameness.



What are we now to make of crisis, at the end of a period that rendered it constant and banal? How are we to imagine real change, in the suffocating managerial atmosphere that sees change everywhere and nowhere? Our current

The historical, turbulent, evolutionary view of economic development is also found in the work of the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, who coined the famous phrase ‘creative destruction’. Schumpeter argued that the most

capitalism itself.

The modern preoccupation with crisis appears very differently in a second theoretical tradition, initiated by Karl Marx. Here it is not a crisis of thinking that is being engendered, but one of *doing*. It is not modern philosophy that has a tendency to undermine, unsettle and re-establish itself in moments of crisis, but the social system known as capitalism. In Marx’s view, capitalism is always in a faintly critical condition, inasmuch as it produces a society of flux, innovation and uncertainty. This was the basis of a modernist sensibility that Marx was certainly intoxicated by, and which Marxists such as Walter Benjamin and Marshall Berman later dwelled upon. The central contradictions of the capitalist system – between capital and labour, between market value and utility – lead it to destroy and appropriate the very resources on which it depends. Tensions build up, and eventually explode into fully fledged economic crisis, which spills over into social, political and technological upheavals. Eventually, Marx argued, a crisis would occur that not only led to the destruction of a particular capitalist regime, but of capitalism itself.

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In the 1780s and 90s, Immanuel Kant reinvented philosophy as a critical tribunal, before which the principles of Western thinking would be judged. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Critique of Judgement*, Kant set about re-establishing the foundations of knowledge, morality and aesthetics respectively through testing them and establishing their limits. The Enlightenment itself made this necessary, having thrown doubt upon the old certainties that had once wedded science, ethical practices and artistic creation into a single theological system (as manifest in the Renaissance). Kant’s aim was not to exacerbate this sense of uncertainty, but to bring it to a climax and therefore to a close, issuing the philosophical decision that would allow modern thought to continue on a new, surer footing.

His critical philosophy aimed to bring something to the boil, to introduce a negative dimension to this – only through greatly restricting the scope of science, for example, did he hope to save it. But this is not so different from the negative function of a theatre critic: without the possibility, and sometimes even expectation, of a negative judgement, there is no meaning in an affirmative one. Modern philosophy had, after all, begun with a moment of radical doubt, when René Descartes asked how he could be sure of the existence of the outside world, or indeed himself. His famous answer – *cogito ergo sum* – was a foundation of sorts, but modern theory has been a recurring throwing-into-doubt ever since. This is not