

## Africa, Otherwise

Cameroon, 1993. Two decades past. Crisis. *J'ai la crise*.

When I traveled through Cameroon in the early 1990s, people everywhere lamented: "*J'ai la crise*." Literally translated as "I have the crisis," this beleaguered statement was intoned in the same way that someone would say, "I have a cold" or "I have the flu." At the time, it seemed clear that one could only conclude that Cameroonians were living in times of crisis (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). That is to say that, crisis, for those living in Cameroon some two decades ago, was more than set of statistics. *La crise* was a condition and, as lived experience, had become an imperative, or a figure of rationality.

Doubtless, as we might imagine, and as Achille Mbembe and I argued some fifteen years ago (1995), the lived experience of what is deemed "crisis" cannot be reduced to a statistical event or an ensemble of socio-economic indicators. Such representations disregard the ways in which crisis becomes a device for understanding how to act effectively in situations that belie, for the actors, a sense of possibility. But, still, we must ask a prior question: if crisis designates something more than a socio-economic indicator or a historical conjuncture, what is the status of that term? How did crisis, habitually a signifier for a critical, decisive moment, come to be construed as a protracted experiential or historical condition?<sup>1</sup>

The mere idea of crisis as a condition – *j'ai la crise* – suggests an ongoing state of affairs. Although crisis typically refers to a historical conjuncture (war, economic recession, famine) – or to a moment in history, a turning point – it has been taken to be the defining characteristic of the African continent for some twenty years now. Can one speak of a state of enduring crisis? Is this not an oxymoron? In effect, how can one think about Africa – or think "Africa" – otherwise than under the sign of crisis? This is a crucial question.

Needless to say, this is not a particularly African question. The geography of crisis has come to be world geography, CNN-style: crisis in Afghanistan, crisis in Darfur, crisis in Gaza, crisis in the Middle East, crisis in the Congo, crisis in Iraq, crisis in Lebanon, crisis in Cairo, crisis on Main Street. The singularity of political events is abstracted by a generic logic, making crisis a term that seems self-explanatory.<sup>2</sup> In a reversal of this typical manner of starting with a case ("Africa") and then proceeding on to generalizations (colonialism, postcolonialism, neoliberalism), I begin with a general problem in order to take us to Africa. The problem is not Africa per se, but rather the concept of crisis.

Crisis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today; it is mobilized as the defining category of our contemporary situation. The recent bibliography in the social sciences and popular press is vast; crisis texts are a veritable industry.<sup>3</sup> In considering the status of crisis in

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<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe and myself did not ask this question in our 1995 publication, which is the subject of an extended essay on the concept of crisis in Roitman (in press), where I reflect upon the status of "crisis" in social science theory and narrative in an effort to consider *what is at stake with crisis in-and-of itself*.

<sup>2</sup> For a fascinating screen-based visual arts project on the term "crisis" in the news media that aims to visualize how the replication of the term generates – and does not merely reflect – a particular situation, see Katie Levitt's "Poetical Crisis," which uses live news feeds, data processing, and typographical imagery. <http://katielevitt.wordpress.com>

<sup>3</sup> Referencing this bibliography, which spans topics from humanitarianism to finance to the environment, and so forth, would take up an inordinate amount of space, as would the notation of recent conferences

such narrative forms, the point is not to theorize the term crisis or to come up with a working definition of it. Rather than essentialize it so as to make better use of it, the point is to understand the kinds of work the term crisis is or is not doing in the construction of narrative forms. Likewise, the point is not to demonstrate that crisis signifies something new in contemporary narrative accounts, nor is it to demonstrate how contemporary usages of the term crisis are wrong and hence argue for a true, or more correct meaning.<sup>4</sup> My aim is to inquire into the significance of crisis in-and-of-itself. Instead of starting with a particular crisis – the crisis of Africa – and then rushing to explain its causes and fundamentals, I first ask questions of the concept of crisis itself. To do so, we must consider how we think crisis came to be a historical concept; we must inquire as to how crisis achieves its status as a historico-philosophical concept and how we *practice* that very premise in narrations of history and in the determinations of what even counts as history.<sup>5</sup>

As I argue elsewhere (Roitman, in press), crisis serves as a noun-formation of contemporary historical narrative; it is a non-locus from which to claim access to history and knowledge of history. In other words, crisis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out or to designate “moments of truth”; it is taken to be a means to access historical truth, and even a means to think “history” itself. Though seemingly without recourse to teleology, crisis moments are defined as instances when normativity is laid bare, such as when the contingent or partial quality of knowledge claims – principles, suppositions, premises, criteria, and logical or causal relations – are disputed, critiqued, challenged or disclosed. It follows that crisis is taken to be an epistemological impasse and is thus claimed to found the possibility for alternative historical trajectories and even for (new) futures.

When one speaks of “the crisis in Africa” or when Cameroonians say, “*J’ai la crise*,” one can only ask, “But what *exactly* is in crisis?” And that question leads us to consider how crisis is constituted as an object of knowledge. Crisis is mobilized to mark out a “moment of truth,” which might be defined as turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology. It is likewise defined as an instance when “the real” is made bare, such as when a so-called financial “bubble” is seemingly burst, thus divulging alleged “false value” based on speculation or miscalculation, and offering the hope of re-establishing “true value,” or what we like to think of as the fundamentals of the economy. As a category denoting a moment of truth in these ways, and despite presumptions that crisis does not imply, in itself, a definite direction of change, the term crisis signifies a diagnostic of the present; it implies a certain telos because it is inevitably, though most often implicitly, directed toward a norm. Evoking crisis entails reference to a norm because it requires a comparative state for judgment: crisis compared to what? That question evokes the significance of crisis as an axiological problem, or the questioning of the epistemological or ethical grounds of certain domains of life and thought.

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dedicated to “explaining the crisis,” which have been impulsively staged by universities, think tanks, and periodicals.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the term “crisis,” cf. Beckett (2008), who shows how crisis has been posited in Haiti in relation to a wider discursive field in which the notion of “decline” is dependent upon ideas of progress held to obtain outside of Haiti, most notably in the global North.

<sup>5</sup> That project is the basis of Roitman (in press); it is only alluded to in this short text, which is focused on crisis and Africa.

## *Judging Time?*

When we take crisis to signify a generalized condition, as opposed to a critical, decisive moment, we assume that a meaningful world is in crisis. But what does it take to posit the very idea that meaning or thought can be in a state of crisis? Moreover, what does it take to envisage a society as breaking down? Such visions can only arise in counter-distinction to imaged alternative societies. Without them, we could not make such a judgment: the affirmation “this society is breaking down” requires a comparison, a comparative state of affairs.

As is well known, the very etymology of the term “crisis” speaks to that requirement of judgment. The complex details of its semantic history can be found in many places and go beyond the scope of this text. Briefly, it is worth noting that its etymology originates with the Ancient Greek term *krinô* (to cut, to select, to decide, to judge), which suggested a definitive decision. With significance in the domains of law, medicine and theology, by the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the medical signification prevailed. Associated with the Hippocratic school (*Corpus Hippocratium*) as part of a medical grammar, crisis denoted the turning point of a disease, or a critical phase in which life or death was at stake and called for an irrevocable decision. Significantly, crisis was not the disease or illness per se; it was the condition that *called for* decisive judgment between alternatives.

In the social sciences, crisis is conceived as a historical concept. Because it is taken to be both a particular entry point into history (a means to “know” what is “historical”) and as a means to reveal historical truth (as a turning point or epistemological impasse), crisis is necessarily posited as history itself. In other words, in the social sciences, when history is taken to be immanent to social relations, crisis serves as the term that enables the very elaboration of what we call history. This founding role of the concept of crisis in social science narration and in the constitution and elaboration of history itself is set forth by the late German historian, Reinhart Koselleck, author of perhaps the only conceptual history of crisis, which thus serves as the authoritative historiography (2002, 1988 [1959], 2002, 2004[1979] and 2006 [1972-1997]).<sup>6</sup> Koselleck provides an illustration of the temporalization of history, or the emergence of “history” as a temporal category. He attributes the emergence of the category of history as a temporality to the concomitant displacement of the term crisis, arguing that, by the end of the eighteenth century, crisis is the basis for the claim that one can judge history by means of a diagnosis of time. He likewise maintains that both this claim and this judgment entail a specific historical consciousness – *a consciousness that posits history as a temporality upon which one can act*. For this historical consciousness, crisis is a criterion for what counts as “history”; crisis signifies change, such that crisis “is” history; and crisis designates “history” as such. In this way, crisis achieves the status of a historico-philosophical concept; it is the means by which history is located, recognized, comprehended, and even posited.

I take Reinhart Koselleck’s remarkable conceptual history of crisis to be indicative of the practice of the concept of crisis. His account of how crisis achieves status as a historico-philosophical concept illustrates the practice of the premise of crisis, or how it serves a set of interlocking determinations: what counts as an event, the status of an event, the qualification of history itself, and the basis of narration. I refer to Koselleck’s conceptual history on two registers: as the orthodox historiography of the term and as an account that, itself, partakes of a conventional practice of historiography, which presupposes criteria for what counts as an event and premises as

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<sup>6</sup> For short articles that offer encyclopedia-style entries on the concept of crisis, cf. Masur 1973, Starn 1971, Béjin and Morin 1976. The numerous texts in German are found in Koselleck’s bibliography (cf. notably 2006).

to what can be narrated – or the means to distinguish between “a properly historical account of reality and a nonhistorical or ahistorical or antihistorical account” (White 2002: xii). Less concerned with the question of whether or not Koselleck’s rendering of the emergence of historical consciousness is correct or accurate, I dwell instead on the question of *how the term crisis is posited* as fundamental to this very idea of historical consciousness and to a metaphysics of history. My point is not that crisis is false or merely a constructed basis for narration; my aim is to raise questions about the status of the concept of crisis as a founding term for the elaboration of “history” per se – history being the ultimate locus of significance and the ontological status of historical temporality being taken for granted. In its practice, as we learn from Koselleck, crisis is figured as judgment: judging time in terms of analogous intervals and judging history in terms of its significance. But it equally serves expectations for world-immanent justice, or the faith that history is the ultimate form of judgment. One can then ask – inspired by Koselleck and yet putting the question to him, as well: what is the burden of proof for such judgments?

Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual history describes a decisive shift in the semantics of crisis, transpiring between Hippocratic medical grammar and Christian exegesis. Not surprisingly, one did not replace the other: in the elaboration of Christian theology, with reference to the New Testament and alongside Aristotelian legal language, *crisis* was paired with *judicium* and came to signify judgment before God, which Koselleck characterizes as possibly the unsurpassable signification of crisis in the course of its conceptual history (2002: 237; 2006: 358-359) and indicates how the secular term partakes of a Christian theological grammar.<sup>7</sup> Through the history of its conceptual displacements – involving the elaboration of semantic webs as opposed to a linear development of substitutions, and which I have drastically abbreviated<sup>8</sup> – the term crisis entailed prognosis, which increasingly came to imply a prognosis of time.

Koselleck illustrates how, over the course of the eighteenth century, a spatial metaphor comes to be an historical concept through the temporalization of history. What does he mean by this? By the temporalization of history, Koselleck refers to the process by which, since the late eighteenth century, time is no longer figured as a medium *in which* histories take place; rather *time* itself is conceived as having a historical quality. In other words, history no longer occurs in time; instead, time itself becomes an active, transformative (historical) principle (2004 [1979]: 236 and 2002: 165-167). Koselleck’s point, in a sentence, is that this temporalization of history transpires through the temporalization of the Last Judgment: prophecy is displaced by prognosis.<sup>9</sup> While prophecy involves symbols of what is already known and entails expectation in constant similitude, prognosis, to the contrary, generates novel events.<sup>10</sup> Crisis serves this transposition from prophecy to prognosis, or the “channeling of millennial expectations,” because it becomes the basis for claims that one can interpret the entire course of history via a diagnosis of time.

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<sup>7</sup> This point is elaborated in Roitman (in press), but see Said 1979; Fabian 1983, Asad 1998, 2003; Anidjar 2006; and Davis 2008 for this argument, though without reference to the term crisis.

<sup>8</sup> The various “semantic options” are set forth as distinct but not mutually exclusive in 2002: 240-244 and 2006: 371-372. It is important to note that, for Koselleck’s brand of conceptual history, and contrary to a history of ideas, concepts cannot be defined; they have no inner core meaning that undergoes permutations. Instead, concepts consist of semantic webs of meaning, which bring definitions into a wider relational nexus, thus producing relatively stable units of sense. Cf. Koselleck 2004 [1979]: 75-92.

<sup>9</sup> For another account of this temporalization see Lovejoy 1976 [1936].

<sup>10</sup> Although the Last Judgment is yet to come, the Annunciation makes this cosmic event of future historical time already present as the Christian conscience (a point elaborated upon in the important references in Koselleck 2006: 360, footnote 10).

Koselleck's account of this semantic shift is part of his oeuvre on the emergence of the European concept of history and the ways in which its associated historico-political concepts (e.g. progress) thematize time.<sup>11</sup> Prior to the achievement of this shift, crisis did not have a time; it was not historically dated and it did not signify historical dates.<sup>12</sup> By the eighteenth century, the term crisis attains the status of an historical concept, which means that it signifies temporal spans. But it equally is now apprehended as a temporal category itself: it denotes time (war, revolution, a time of crisis) and it denotes history itself (World War II, the French Revolution, Darfur). Through this process of temporalization, the term crisis comes to signify an historically unique transition phase, which would mark a fundamental transformation of social relations, as in the case of the French Revolution or Marxist capitalist crisis, both which signify a fundamental break with the past. Yet it also comes to signify an epoch insofar as this alleged break with the past defines new time – hence we refer, post hoc, to “the medieval era,” “the Renaissance” or “the Industrial Age.”

Through the invocation of the term crisis as an historically unique transition phase, which marks off an epoch, historical experience is likewise generalized as a logical recurrence – the historian is the judge of events. And we, as narrators of history, recognize moments of crisis in terms of epistemological rupture, or a supposed problem of meaning or legitimacy. The role of the historian (as witness) is thus to judge events as both significant and logical. And yet, at the same time, *history itself* is posited as serving the *ultimate* form of judgment. This is exemplified, in a trivial manner, by the expression “time will tell”; but is best understood in terms of an expectation for world-immanent justice, which many, from Schiller to Koselleck, have noted is the fundamental condition of modern reason (see Koselleck 2002:241; 2006: 371).<sup>13</sup> It is assumed – as we often do – that history, as an acting subject, enforces justice. And this judgment is effected, retrospectively, through acts and errors. Judging time (sorting change from stasis, perceiving intervals) and judging history (diagnosing demise or improvement, defining winners and losers) is a matter of prognosis. What are the criteria by which we justify such markings? This is failure. This is an error.

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<sup>11</sup> By a European concept of history, I refer to the project of *Begriffsgeschichte*, devoted to study of the fundamental concepts that partake of, and give rise to, both a specific concept of “history” and a distinctly historical consciousness. Koselleck's extensive writing on this subject and on the ultimate question of the emergence of *Neuzeit* (the modern age, modernity) as a historical concept has been commented at length. For brief reviews, cf. Tribe 1989 and Richter 1990. The main body of Koselleck's work in English includes Koselleck 1988 [original German 1959], 2002, 2004 [original German 1979].

<sup>12</sup> While serving throughout the seventeenth century as a catchword with a range of political applications related to the body politic, constitutional order, and military situations, by the late eighteenth century, its religious connotation is exacerbated, though in a “post-theological mode,” or as a philosophy of history (Koselleck 2006: 370). Through its semantic history, crisis, as a concept, sheds its apocalyptic meaning: “...it turns into a structural category of Christianly understood history pure and simple; eschatology is, so to speak, historically monopolized” (2002: 242). Read also Koselleck 2004, esp. chapter 13; and cf. Blumenberg, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> With reference to a host of witnesses of the impending or attested crisis, including Robespierre, Rousseau, Diderot, Thomas Paine, Burke, Herder, Fichte, Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, Lorenz von Stein, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, and Marx and Engels, Koselleck declares: “That the crisis in which one currently finds oneself could be the last, great, and unique decision, after which history would look entirely different in the future – this semantic option is taken up *more and more frequently* the less the absolute end of history is believed to be approaching with the Last Judgment. To this extent, it is a question of recasting a theological principle of belief. It is expected of world-immanent history itself” (2002: 243, my emphasis; and see 2002: 243-244; 2006: 370-397).

The term crisis serves this manner of denoting “history.” It raises the issue of the burden of proof for meaning *in* history – that events have significance. And it raises the issue of the burden of proof for the meaning *of* history itself – that we can qualify history itself as an “epoch,” as a turning point, as entailing failure or justice. The idea that history is just or unjust for certain populations is common to both popular media and social science accounts. In this way, we assume that there is a possibility for world-immanent justice (as opposed to transcendentally-derived justice). Without an inviolate transcendental realm – God, the planets, reason, truth – from which to signify human history and to account for the nature of events, or because observation takes place within immanence, we effectively assume a negative occupation of an immanent world (see Rasch 2000, 2002). However, we nonetheless mobilize referents that serve as a non-locus from which to signify contingency, or to qualify the nature of events. Crisis is just such a non-locus, or an enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

In order to better understand that point, we can consider the words of William Rasch (2002:20), following Niklas Luhmann: “In a world where descriptions proliferate and faith in the authority of reason has gone the way of faith in the authority of God, contingency becomes the transcendental placeholder.”<sup>i</sup> Inspired by this Luhmannian point, I argue that crisis serves as a transcendental placeholder because it is a means for signifying contingency; it is a term that allegedly allows one to think the “otherwise.” Though not concerned with the term crisis, Rasch presents my point of departure clearly: “If [...] moral codes (commandments), Holy Scripture, papal and royal edicts, and the voice of prophets and visionaries no longer deliver direct evidence of the transcendent realm, but rather become historicized and seen as socially constructed artifacts, the task of reclaiming authority must be negotiated within the domain of an immanence that has been loosed from its transcendent anchorage. The world is as it is, but it could be otherwise. *How that ‘otherwise’ is to be thought* becomes the ‘quasi-transcendental’ task of an immanence trying to think itself” (Rasch 2000: 130, my emphasis). The concept of crisis is crucial to the “how” of thinking otherwise. And there is not “crisis” versus “non-crisis,” both of which can be observed empirically; rather, crisis is a logical observation that generates meaning in a self-referential system, or a non-locus from which to signify contingency and paradox.<sup>ii</sup> The judgment of crisis is necessarily a post-hoc interrogation: “What went wrong?” Crisis is posited as an a priori; the grounds for knowledge of crisis are neither questioned nor made explicit. And hence contemporary narratives of crisis elude two questions: How can one *know* crisis in history? And how can one *know* crisis itself?

### *Times of Crisis?*

The very notion that one could judge historical time – that it presents itself to us as an entity to be judged and that it can be deemed good or bad, a failure or a success – and that history is defined by a teleology of justice – that there are winners and losers, errors and victories – conjures an extraordinarily self-conscious mode of being. This critical historical consciousness – or this specific way of knowing the world as “history” and this specific way of positing that there is a distinction to be made between historical events and knowledge of those events – is consumed with the puzzle of how inadequate such knowledge inevitably, always, necessarily is. We thus discern historical significance in terms of dissonance between politics and morality, between theory and practice, between knowledge and human interests, between technology and culture – in brief, in terms of ethical failures.

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<sup>14</sup> The point that crisis is a blind spot for the production of knowledge is developed in Roitman (in press).

In the social sciences generally, crisis is posited so as to establish the grounds for questioning the terms of normativity.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, one assumes that, if the grounds for truth are necessarily contingent and partial, truth is nonetheless performed in moments of crisis because these are instances when the contingency of these truth claims are made bare and the limits of intelligibility are potentially transgressed. Examples could be given from the ranks of critical theory<sup>16</sup> or the sociology of critique<sup>17</sup> or post-structuralism. To take a contemporary example of the latter genre, epistemological crisis is defined by Judith Butler (tautologically?) as a “crisis over what constitutes the limits of intelligibility”(1993: 138). Many scholars, including myself (Roitman 2005), have taken crisis to be the starting point for narration. Following the work of Michel Foucault, we assume that if we start with the disciplinary concepts or techniques that allow us to think ourselves as subjects – that enable us to tell the truth about ourselves – then limits to ways of knowing necessarily entail epistemological crises. For Butler, then, subject formation transpires through crisis: that is, crisis, or the disclosure of epistemological limits, occasions critique, and potentially gives rise to counter-normativities that speak the unspeakable (1999, 2004: 307-308; and see Boland 2007, Lyotard 1988). For Foucault, crisis signifies a discursive impasse and the potential for a new form of historical subject. For both, crisis is productive; it is the means to transgress and is necessary for change or transformation.<sup>18</sup>

To take a recent intervention, which assumes crisis as a point of departure for narration and is specifically concerned with Africa, the contributors to a special issue of *Ethnos*, devoted to “Crisis and Chronicity” (Vigh 2008) posit crisis as the point from which ethnography begins. In his introductory essay, the anthropologist Henrik Vigh proposes a move from “placing a given instance of crisis in context” to “seeing crisis as a context,” by which he means “a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration” (8). This manner of taking crisis to be a state of affairs, or an enduring condition, implies that crisis is not an event that occurs in a given context, but that it is itself an experience of historical time. In other words, crisis is itself a context, such that we are “the subjects of times of crisis” (Mbembe and Roitman 1995, and see Lomnitz 2003, Greenhouse 2002, Vigh 2008, Khan 2009). Posited in this way, crisis is the point from which hermeneutics or anthropology begins: crisis is the means to access both “the social” and “experience” because it entails the disclosure of the constitutive conditions of human practice.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This refers to the co-constitutive relationship between the cognate terms, critique and crisis, explored most distinctly by Koselleck ([1959] 1988). For commentary on Koselleck’s *Critique and Crisis*, which is relevant to this essay, see Edwards (2006), amongst the extensive secondary literature. See also Roitman, forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> Although certain authors associated with the Frankfurt School argued that state capitalism had developed mechanisms to avoid crises, for most others the teleology or dialectics of social contradictions, the problem of “lost meaning” or alienation, and the grounds for critical reason remained the fundamental sources of crises for modern society. The bibliography is lengthy: see the extensive works of Pollock, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Offe, Arendt and Habermas.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 1991 for non-Foucauldian approach that similarly (and productively) inquires into the limits of intelligibility as a prime mover in history is the sociology of critique. Evidently, because it is structurally necessary for capitalism, crisis is construed as productive in Marxist-inspired analyses, as well: see, for example, Arrighi, Harvey.

<sup>18</sup> In keeping with this, because reason has no end other than itself, the decisive duty of critique is essentially to produce crisis – to engage in the permanent critique of one’s self, to be in critical relation to normative life is a form of ethics and a virtue (Foucault: 1997: 303-319 and 1985). Similarly, Simon Critchley (1999:12) sees crisis as necessary for politics, or for producing a “critical consciousness of the present.” Indeed, philosophy would have no purpose in a world without crisis: “the real crisis would be a situation where crisis was not recognized...” If the grounds for truth are necessarily contingent or partial, and if philosophy thus has no intrinsic object, its authority only possibly emerges as such in moments of crisis, which he defines as the “time when philosophy happens.”

This notion of crisis as a state of affairs – times of crisis – set the stage for the present essay; it was the main point of the article published by Achille Mbembe and myself (1995), though we contended that crisis had become a figure of rationality, and was thus not merely a context for action. As Vigh himself notes, the very notion of constant crisis implodes the concept of crisis, since one ends with an oxymoronic “ordered disorder.” He welcomes this implosion of the concept (while nevertheless retaining the term...) as a means of “freeing the concept from its temporal confines” (2008: 9). To unleash the concept of crisis from time would clearly be an unprecedented form of freedom (see Roitman, forthcoming), but the claim seems to entirely disregard the conceptual history of the term, or Koselleck’s point that crisis is necessarily a temporal concept.

The programmatic statement set forth in several edited volumes (Vigh 2008; Greenhouse, Mertz and Warren 2002; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; Hammar, McGregor, Landau 2010) is that crisis is a point of departure for both ethnographic insights, produced by social scientists, as well as a point of departure for the “production of social rules, norms and meaning,” generated by local people. This approach is in keeping with a longstanding tradition of social science theory, described above, for which crisis serves as a mediation between theory and practice (cf. Habermas 1975, 1984-87, 1987; Benhabib 1986).<sup>19</sup> Leaving that latter point aside, for ethnographers today, and especially for those doing research in Africa, crisis is a means to account for the emergent. As I have argued above, crisis is the place from which one claims access to history and knowledge of history. And because crisis is taken to be an instance when the contingency of truth claims are made bare, it presumably grants access to a social world: “When crisis becomes context the order of our social world becomes in other words questioned and substituted by multiple contestations and interpretations leading to the recognition that our world is in fact plural rather than singular: social rather than natural” (Vigh 2008: 16). This claim reiterates the approach to critique associated with the pragmatic sociology practiced by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), which takes reflexivity as crucial to practices of justification and the formation of critique. But social reflexivity is inherent to praxis; it is not necessarily or inevitably contingent upon crisis.<sup>20</sup>

Carol Greenhouse states “...crises, by definition, involve conditions in which people (including the state’s agents) must improvise with the elements of their social and political technologies and cope with a variety of unexpected disruptions and opportunities” (2002: 9). Following Habermas, she takes crisis to refer to “conditions that make outcomes unpredictable.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, crisis seems to allow for interpretations of historical situations that do not partake of linear causality or an ideology of progress. As Pedersen, Hojer and Vigh maintain (all in Vigh 2002), crisis situations abolish a coherent progression of time, a chaotic succession of changes disrupts linearity. We thus purportedly have “‘progressless’ motion” (Vigh 2002: 17), which *nonetheless* can be narrated. While that feat of narration deserves more thought, suffice it here to note that the term crisis suits well contemporary dispositions, which, while committed to narrativity, renounce linearity and causality.

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<sup>19</sup> Vigh claims (2008: 15), “The interesting thing about the perspective of ‘crisis as context’ is that it leads us to realize that new configurations are sought [and] established, even in situations where social instability and volatility prevail, and that it grants us an analytical optic able to engage anthropologically in such social processes.”

<sup>20</sup> Vigh refers to Giddens 1984 and Beck et al 2003 regarding social praxis and routinization. For an approach that takes reflexivity to be central yet which does not posit crisis as a means to produce the social and/or history, see the work of Michel Callon.

<sup>21</sup> Her reference is to *Legitimation Crisis*, an early Habermas text.



Africanist anthropologists have much to learn from critiques of historiography (cf. White 1973, 1978). The practice of historiography has made much use of crisis as a metaphor, or as “a criterion for selection and emphasis,” as Randolph Starn has observed. Starn also notes the ways in which crisis is used as an “organic analogy,” since it does not imply, in itself, a definite direction of change, nor does it predict an outcome. “Applied to any place or period, it may assuage the historian’s usual discomfort with extremes, allowing him to have both continuity and change, for ‘crisis’ implies the continuity of organic processes but not steady equilibrium, decisive conflict but not ‘total’ revolution” (Starn 1971: 17).<sup>22</sup>

### *A Politics of Crisis?*

Of course, most scholars now reject any form of historicism – renouncing the validity of claims to knowledge of the facts of the past as well as the grounds for claims to authoritative accounts – and a philosophy of history – or confidence in the teleological nature of time and events. Daniel Parrochia sums up the situation succinctly:

From a philosophical point of view, during the last quarter of the century we have witnessed perhaps not “the end of History” but at least the end of philosophies of history, if by that we mean messianic belief systems that entail an unyielding confidence in a teleology of time. Whether it be the Christian eschatology of a paradisiacal community; the Enlightenment belief in the irreversible progress of humanity towards happiness and ‘perfect health’; the Communist vision of a pacified, classless society; or even the recent utopia of a world of perfectly transparent communication – all are versions (religious or secular) of a “becoming” (*un devenir*) that is oriented toward a collective imaginary. What remains, it seems, for these majestic manners of organizing shared time is a pointed attention to *events*. The latter constitute, in their often irruptive nature, the elements of a network, the signification of which is not preordained and which must be reconstituted patiently, like a puzzle or a painting that has no model (2008: 5-6, my translation).

Recourse to “moments” (“the postcolonial moment”), events, and networks does indeed characterize the constitutive elements of contemporary social science narratives, being a reflection of strategies for avoiding teleology. Surely “crisis” figures as a part of that constellation of concepts; its increasingly widespread use is thus in part a symptom of such strategies. There is no doubt, as well, that the most recent flurry of social science writing on crisis – be that writing that assumes crisis as a condition or writing that investigates crisis as a condition – is inspired by the translations and publications of Giorgio Agamben and the consequential fascination with Carl Schmitt. Most notably, various forms of incarceration – “the camp” – have been apprehended as instantiations of the sovereign’s constitutive power to decide the exception. There is perhaps good reason for the appeal of Agamben and Schmitt for these interpretations: in the United States, the events of September 11, 2001 unleashed a great desire to examine and contest the consequences of a “state of emergency” and a “state of exception.” The invocation of crisis served to legitimate the abridgment of constitutional rights and the institutionalization of extra-judicial executive powers. The merits of these analyses aside, an entire array of institutions, situations, and processes – the nation-state, humanitarianism, war,

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<sup>22</sup> Starn refers to Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962 as an example of this use of crisis, which conveys processes of destruction and construction (anomaly and contingent) in the history of science.

migration, empire, citizenship, finance capital — have been interpreted with reference to “states of exception” and “states of emergency” as the fundamental conditions of their emergence.<sup>23</sup>

“Risk,” “catastrophe,” “disaster,” “emergency,” “crisis,” “trauma,” “shock” – these are now common topics and rapidly proliferating adjectives in a great deal of scholarship today. Some of this work is dedicated to exploring the very emergence of such critical situations. For example, a typical and pervasive question guiding current research is: How did “the camp” come to define a fundamental aspect of the nexus between national and international politics in the management of human life? Some of this work considers “the politics of crisis,” taking crisis to be a contested term. Nevertheless, it is typically assumed that, while contested and an object of various forms of politics, “crisis” is an ontological state, or at least a condition of human history and human affairs. Crises happen and crises are propagated; they *then* become sites of contestation, with political and social consequences. Crisis – be it disputed, contested, authored – has a particular status in history.

One particularly compelling exposition of the politics of crisis, which likewise grapples with the question of the status of the term, is Peter Redfield’s thoughtful article (2005) on the ethical dilemmas associated with the genre of humanitarian action established and pursued by the French organization, Doctors without Borders, or *Médecins sans frontières* (MSF). Redfield (330) discusses MSF’s “global form of medical humanitarianism and the conditions of life in crisis to which it responds,” thus taking up the “bare life” postulate of Giorgio Agamben, or the ways in which, through a specific form of humanitarian ethics and action, “a lower threshold possibility of life” is delimited and perpetuated. For Redfield, this “stabilization of crisis” is revelatory: it indicates an ethical dilemma.<sup>24</sup>

To gain insight into this dilemma, Redfield (335) takes crisis in both the Greek Hippocratic sense – as eliciting or demanding a definitive response – and in Starn’s sense – as a narrative device that establishes certain events as moments of truth. Crisis is used to denote a state of affairs (war, famine). It is likewise invoked to conjure “the real” insofar as it establishes the physical and ethical situations (bare life, the camp) as well as claims for “self-authorizing” action (conditions under which one can claim to “feel like a real doctor”). This double signification is expressed in the following: “Once a state of crisis has been established, then action (especially technical, expert action) acquires a self-authorizing status by virtue of circumstance. In ethical terms, if one has a capacity to act, then not acting takes on new significance” (337). This ethics of action is elaborated according to the imperative to bear witness, which one might surmise, and as we noted above, is a historically Christian ethical imperative that entails the judgment of history and immanent justice.

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<sup>23</sup> Vigh (2008) refers to Walter Benjamin’s “state of emergency” in his definition of “crisis.” See also Fassin and Pandolfi 2010. But see Collier and Lakoff (2008), who, in their work on the concepts and techniques that were elaborated in the theorization of “emergency situations” for United States civil defense programs in the 1950s, and the concomitant production of a consensus around the doctrine and ideal of the “national security state,” note the inappropriate referencing of “states of exception” for situations that did not necessarily entail sovereign exception to extant legality. Alongside the passion for Schmidt and Agamben, is the influence of Giddens and Beck, who claim that risk has become a primary mode of socio-political organization and an ultra-reflexive phase of modernity. They argue that “manufactured risk” and “reflexivity” are the defining features of a new or “second” modernity, which is given the rather athletic title of “reflexive risk-modernity” (cf. Giddens 1992, 1993; Giddens and Griffiths 2006; Beck 1992, 1999, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> A similar point is made by Alex de Waal, probably the first author to define a “humanitarian mode of power” in his book, *Famine Crimes* (1997).

Redfield does not pursue that point. He says that “[m]embers of MSF commit themselves to witness injustice and thereby contribute to a larger representational struggle against inhuman conditions, but they do so always through the frame of a present decision in the field, rather than an overriding conceptual strategy of development or a political ideal” (338). MSF proceeds cautiously with respect to the ways in which its work in welfare provisioning might allow states to avoid responsibilities to citizens – as demonstrated in MSF’s decision to stop work in Darfur in 2007 [2008?]. The organization is also careful to avoid acting in the name of general policy positions or specific national political agendas. Its claim is action through “the frame of a present decision in the field,” which, as Redfield indicates, means that crisis engenders the conditions of action for its specific humanitarian ideals. In that sense, one might add that crisis not only constitutes humanitarian ethics; it becomes a mode of justification. Humanitarianism has become a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century form of social and political critique, a striking – almost uncanny – manifestation of the mutual constitution of critique and crisis documented by Koselleck ([1959 (1988)], where he argues that claims to a moral imperative mark out a pre-political sphere, denoting the separation between morality (conscience) and politics (the state), or the notion of a private inner space as the natural site for social critique – what he called the “apolitical politics.”

The “self-authorizing” action of so-called humanitarianism that ensues from the *immediacy* of the crisis frame is eventually, necessarily narrated in terms of “history.” Redfield asks, “For how else are we to evaluate action, if not through its eventual incorporation into a historical frame?”<sup>25</sup> He sets that frame to the measure of time by noting how these exceptional, immediate actions have historical effects, the refugee camp having become one of the most enduring features of our contemporary political landscapes. But there is a concurrent measure of judgment and action. The “ethic of refusal” that characterizes MSF-style humanitarianism – the refusal of national politics, of the will of certain sovereign states, and of “the apparent futility of the way the world is”<sup>26</sup> – involves an appeal to “conscience,” or to the historical form of Christian conscience associated with the temporalization of the Last Judgment, as document by Koselleck.

The obligation to witness is equally a relevant register for MSF. Redfield (2006) explores this ethics of witnessing (*témoignage*) and advocacy through his argument that MSF, as part of an international community of nongovernmental organizations, is implicated in processes that serve to define secular moral truth today. The production of those truths and their inscription in history transpires through the act of witnessing, which is posited as a collective moral duty in the organization’s Charter.<sup>27</sup> Without theological justification for human suffering, this form of witnessing seeks to inscribe human drama in a form of secular, historical narrative. And, although, as Redfield demonstrates, there are ongoing discussions about the appropriate ways and means of witnessing within the organization, including its various national sections, it seems nonetheless that the *very possibility of representation itself* is left unquestioned.

The very impossibility of bearing witness – what is now often signified as the “unsayability” of Auschwitz – is an unexamined problem for this self-proclaimed secular ethics. Also unexamined are the ways in which witnessing is purported to redeem meaning (of events, of suffering) for history; that is, the ways that acts of witnessing and testimony are figured as the means by which victims relocate themselves as survivors (see LaCapra 2004: 175-176). But perhaps this latter

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<sup>25</sup> This is the question that LaCapra (2004: 157) puts to Agamben with regard to the latter’s notion of a “threshold of indistinction.” See his trenchant evaluation of so-called “bare life” and the problem of witnessing. I thank Vasiliki Touhouliotis for calling my attention to the relevance of LaCapra’s critique.

<sup>26</sup> Orbinski quoted in Redfield 2006: 7.

<sup>27</sup> A collective duty that is not without dissentors or at least discussion about the binding nature of the ethics of witnessing and guidelines for such ethical action. Cf. Redfield: 2006: 9-10.

point is irrelevant: the “crisis” that conjures humanitarianism is conceivably less the impossibility of representation produced in historical experience – such as the inability to utter, to speak, to narrate, to write – than a non-locus from which to signify contingency. This presupposition is highly reminiscent of what LaCapra (2004: 176) discerns in Agamben’s writing on Auschwitz and his treatment of the problem of bearing witness: “In Agamben one often has the sense that he begins with the presupposition of the *aporia* or paradox, which itself may at times lose its force and its insistence in that it does not come about through the breakdown or experienced *impasse* in speaking, writing, or trying to communicate but instead seems to be postulated at the outset. In other words, a prepackaged form seems to seek its somewhat arbitrary content. And the paradox and the *aporia* become predictable components of a fixated methodology.” The presupposition of a form – a paradox, an *aporia*, crisis – establishes the slate upon which the act of witnessing potentially can occur.<sup>28</sup>

### *Africa, Otherwise?*

Today, it goes without saying that the African continent is designated and conjured under the sign of crisis. This is not a diagnostic of a continent. It is a diagnostic of history as such. In the same way that our contemporary history is qualified as humanitarian crisis, environmental crisis, financial crisis, etcetera, and is thus given ontological status as “history” through these terms, “Africa” is posited as an ontological category of thought under the sign of crisis.

Africa is elicited as a category in terms of pathology: we have weak states, failed states, crisis states. Of course, failed states are defined, quite tautologically, as the failure of state infrastructures and capacities (Migdal 1988, Zartman 1995, Rotberg 2003, Beissinger and Young 2002, Debiel and Lambach 2007, amongst many others; but see Bilgin and Morton 2002). As has been noted, this view is concerned with the integrity of a rational-legal bureaucracy, and is normative insofar as it presupposes the Weberian definition of the rational-legal state (Bayart, Hibou 2004). But, contrary to what one might expect, recent attention to the proliferation of non-state actors has only exacerbated this failed states or crisis states appraisal, giving rise to interpretations of life in Africa in terms of legitimacy crises, fragmented sovereignties or partial sovereigns, and “no-war-no-peace” zones (Richards 2005, Arnaut and Hojbjerg 2008, Krasner, [S. Lee]). Africa is thereby qualified as a condition of crisis, a permanent time of crisis. Crisis signifies the paradox (no-war-no-peace) that serves a fixated methodology for delineating the emergent (new sovereigns, new assemblages).

Despite the fact that much of this work disavows, either explicitly or implicitly, the determinism implicit in the dialectic of social contradictions, crisis is mobilized to show how conflict and disorder generate new normativities. This view is reminiscent of the ethnographies of Gluckman and Balandier, who described how custom and social order were produced out of social conflict.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, despite strategies for avoiding teleology, and despite conceptual concerns for delineating the emergent, crisis is perhaps evoked today because it is perceived as having purchase on the empirical.

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<sup>28</sup> For LaCapra, this presupposition of crisis is to be contrasted to an anthropological or historical approach “that does not begin with, or become fixated on, breakdown or *aporia* but is open and alert to such breakdown or *aporia* when it occurs in the witness’s *attempt* to recount traumatic experience...” (2004: 174, my emphasis).

<sup>29</sup> A point made by Arnaut and Hojbjerg 2008: 12, with reference to Fischer 1999. And repeated to me by Michael Gilsean, personal communication, May 2011.

Daniel Parrochia makes this claim. He calls for an “urgent reflection” on crises as empirical events because, despite the end of philosophies of history, history itself is still accessible to rationality. Crisis events are privileged entry points into the logics or rationalities of history: crisis translates empirical specificity into the language of generality, understood as trends, topologies, probabilities, and even logical-mathematical models. Parrochia’s quest to recuperate history for rationality is in some ways reminiscent of past claims for the fulfillment of the demands of reason, or the assumption and desire to demonstrate that “change takes place in analogous forms” (Koselleck 2002: 240). But Parrochia’s project is in keeping with a recent trend that admits of an ontological condition of uncertainty and nonetheless takes up the problem of rationality as a matter of pure logic:

The absence of finalities does not mean renunciation, and the inescapable presence of both chance (*le hasard*) and the “logic of a grain of sand” is by no means crippling. The very existence of powerful logical-mathematical models -- be it in the domain of differential topology or probability or game theory or graphics – should allow us to restore explanatory associations (*filiations explicatives*) and give reasons to hope.<sup>30</sup> We should keep ourselves, nonetheless, from creating new myths. A general theory of crises remains to be established...” (Parrochia 2008: 7, my translation)

The theorization of crises would be a science of change. It would be a victory of reason over contingency. This is, of course, an ancient battle, as Parrochia acknowledges:

To be sure, Hegelian philosophy had the incomparable merit of demonstrating how speculative thought (*la pensée speculative*) could overcome contingency, but this was at the price of a transformation in the image of reason, which became divine Reason – that is to say, *Dé-raison*, *Sur-raison* and *Trans-raison*, all at once. A return to the real presupposes, then, not only effective recognition of the power of chance (*le hasard*), but also the possibility of its mathematical determination, be that in the form of the mastery of randomness via the theory of probability or in the diverse forms of the mathematics of action (game theory, simulation, etc.). In this context, but only in this context, we affirm the possibility of a theory of crises and the new vision of time that it carries with it. (*Ibid*: 12, my translation)<sup>31</sup>

What is striking here is the way in which the alleged epistemological divide between empiricism and pure logic seems to have collapsed in this accounting of the contemporary world. Parrochia warns against oppositions between history, on the one hand, and “the rational understanding of conflicts and crises,” on the other, quoting, somewhat cryptically, the French philosopher, Augustin Cournot, who sets forth the anecdotal facts of a general crisis: “the grain of sand in Cromwell’s urethra, the gust of wind that kept the Prince of Orange in the waters of Zealand or that brought him to Toray, Lady Churchill’s glass of water that saved the works of Richelieu and the great king” (quoted in 2008: 19).

His point is that one must distinguish between “causes” and “reasons,” or between empirical causality and reason in/of history. The role of chance (*le hasard*) – the combination or the fortuitous encounter of events belonging, respectively, to independent series – in history and in

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<sup>30</sup> And thus take up the redemptive claim inherent to crisis, as argued by Koselleck. See Roitman forthcoming for elaboration.

<sup>31</sup> It is worth comparing Giddens (1998) and Beck (1992) on risk society with regard to this point, and the rise of “mathematical ethics” as a form of judgment, without losing the point that Beck’s apocalyptic vision is in direct confrontation with Parrochia’s mathematical ethics.

nature is, as Cournot maintained, fundamental and precludes any deterministic causal theory of history. However, there are “laws of chance” in the mathematical sense. While we cannot aspire to knowledge of the laws of history, we can hope to establish laws of probability with regard to history. History is still accessible to reason and the entryway is crisis: “[E]very crisis is in reality revelatory of a conflict, which is doubtless latent at the onset, but which becomes, through the crisis, exacerbated” (33). Because “man is in permanent tension with his environment (*milieu*), [he] is naturally inclined to existential conflict. But the latter reveals itself only in times of crisis” (34).<sup>32</sup> Through the concept of crisis as a revelatory moment – an “event” in historical time as well as an “event” as the disclosure of the existential conditions of life – Parrochia articulates his plea for the regeneration of a philosophy of history grounded in laws of probability as opposed to the Law of History.

This plea makes good on the now prevalent – and tautological – assumption that all forms of conflict can be translated into the terms of crisis. But surely scholars working in the empirical tradition would be astonished, if not infuriated, by this conjectured link between their empirical accounts of crisis situations, on the one hand, and the mathematization of history, on the other. Those committed to the ethnographic enterprise assume an epistemological gulf between their empirical approach to crisis and a probabilistic approach to crisis. The notion, for instance, that there is a point of translation between an ethnography of crisis in Darfur and a rational choice model of conflict resolution in Darfur has not been given sufficient scrutiny. The point is perhaps not to renounce crisis as a concept, but at least to reflect upon its entailments. The point is to ask questions about our assumption that crisis has a status in history and our assumption that crisis is the status of a particular history.

As I have argued herein, inspired by Reinhart Koselleck, crisis is a term that is bound up in the predicament of signifying human history. Crisis allows for paradox: it is the enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge. It is a distinction that, at least since the late eighteenth century, and like all latencies, is not seen as an enabling paradox, but rather as an error or deformation – a discrepancy between the world and knowledge of the world.<sup>33</sup> But if we take crisis to be a blind spot, or a distinction, which makes certain things visible and others invisible, it is merely an a priori. Crisis is claimed, but it remains a latency; it is never itself explained because it allows for the further reduction of “crisis” to other elements, such as capitalism, economy, politics, culture, subjectivity. In that sense, crisis is not a condition to be observed (loss of meaning, alienation, faulty knowledge); it is an observation that produces meaning.

### *Futures?*

When I returned to Cameroon some time after having published “Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis,” a new beverage had appeared at the roadside stalls where one habitually could purchase the three main soft drinks: Coke, Sprite and (my personal favorite) bright orange Fanta – all made in Nigeria with high doses of glucose syrup. These familiar brands had been replaced by a very pale yellow drink consisting of murky water, a spoonful of sugar, and some lemon juice –

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<sup>32</sup> Parrochia refers to Canguilhem’s magnificent statement about life (*le vivant*) being in constant debate with its environment (*le milieu*), though he strangely ignores Canguilhem’s point that this debate is not a form of crisis; it is the ongoing production of new forms and states of normativity.

<sup>33</sup> I follow Luhmann’s definition: “The distinction that is operatively used in observation but not observable is the observer’s blind spot” (2002: 190). Cf. Rasch’s introductory remarks (2002: 104-105) on this notion of blind spot. My own formulation is very much influenced by Luhmann and Rasch.

an insipid substitute for the high-energy Nigerian originals. This new drink was called *l'anti-crise*: the anti-crisis.

Anti-crisis was the remedy to economic hardship in an economic sense: it was the cheap alternative. And yet anti-crisis was also taken to be a remedy in the sense of a medicine or a potion that one drinks so as to become immune to disease, bullets or even love. Made on the streets and at home, the anti-crisis drink was part of unregulated trade. Many an anthropologist would surely take anti-crisis to be an instance of the informal market, ingenious modes of *bricolage*, and savvy local manners of responding to the wrath of global markets. These views are valid. However, anti-crisis was equally a symptom of the ways in which crisis had become a part of the life-world – that is, a point of resistance but also a clear demonstration that the grounds for resistance are typically devised on the basis of prevailing epistemologies. A response, an antidote, and thus the profession or seeming acknowledgement of – and accession to – a particular condition.

Were we, then, in “times of anti-crisis”? This question brings us back to the matter, raised above, of what is expected of history – that is, the ethical dilemma that is ultimately a moral demand for a difference between past and future.<sup>34</sup> Doubtless, the world could be otherwise; we can envisage amendments that would address poverty and wellbeing. But the movements or publics that emerge around these issues must be acknowledged as such – that is, as effective publics or as movements with legitimate claims. Hence they can never constitute an alternative politics, being inevitably inscribed in, for example, the language of rights and sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> Without a non-foundational foundation for political action, we can only have crisis and anti-crisis, not crisis and something else. How would that something else obtain?

Making the term crisis, as a blind spot, visible means asking questions about how we produce significance for ourselves – about how we produce “history.” One such question might be: what kind of narrative could be produced where meaning is not everywhere a problem, where the future is not a moral demand, and where the problem is not attributing moral failure?<sup>36</sup> This is the crucial question for “otherwise.”

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<sup>34</sup> I refer to the ethical dilemma noted by Redfield with regard to MSF, but the “moral demand for a difference” is a subject of philosophical speculation and ethics since Kant. The literature is vast; see, for recent commentary, Critchley 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Political legitimacy is generated out of the exile of moral innocence, out of hypocrisy, As Koselleck ([1959] 1988) argued for the private, secret Masonic Lodges. In Niklas Luhmann’s words, “The secret of alternative movements is that they cannot offer any alternatives” (1990: 141). In related manner, Luhmann (1982: 119) argues that, because critique, as a “reflexive method for formulating values and norms” is fully institutionalized, terms such as “justice” and “truth” retain only symbolic functions. In that sense, the dichotomies that structure all social theory ensure the unity of allegedly rival approaches; transformation can only ensue by accounting for that unity.

<sup>36</sup> In his reflective essay on Husserl’s *Crisis of the European Sciences* (1970 [1954]), James Dodd (2004: 19) notes similar questions, though with the aim, following Husserl, to show that science itself would not be possible without a human understanding of the world as a problem, or experienced as failure.

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<sup>i</sup> For Luhmann, this necessarily contingent world is signified by the term "modernity." Though characterized by the "loss of an outside," or loss of a outside reference point, Luhmann does not see this situation of necessary contingency as a problem, or a loss to be lamented or condemned.

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Cf. Luhmann (1998) [1992], 2002; and Rasch 2000. Though he does not consider the term crisis, my thinking is inspired by the work of Niklas Luhmann, discussed below.

<sup>ii</sup> This statement smacks of an idealist or constructivist position, which states that there is no knowledge-independent reality. See pp. 43-49 below for clarification. In particular, at least for my rendering of crisis as a logical observation, see Luhmann 1990b, Christis 2001, and Rasch 2012. But more generally, cf. Rorty 1979, Bernstein 1983, Hacking 1999, Latour 2003, and Meillassoux 2008, amongst others.

<sup>iii</sup> This point, not elaborated extensively herein, is the subject of Roitman, forthcoming.