From the Crisis of Critique to the Critique of Crisis

Ben Golder

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BEN GOLDER*

For Peter Fitzpatrick, with love

As I write these words, the East Coast of New South Wales (the most populous State in Australia) is being assailed with torrential rain that is likely to last for another week. From the South Coast, through Sydney (many parts of which now lie submerged), to the far North Coast of the State, sheets of long overdue rain are dousing the fire-ravaged coast, replenishing drought-affected water catchments, splaying trees, roofs, and fences throughout urban and suburban areas, and generally sowing disorder. Albeit not in this extreme, thirty-year maximum form, this ambivalent deluge is precisely what Australians had been waiting (indeed, many praying) for over the preceding months. The deadly summer of 2019–2020, whose fires are still smouldering and whose smoke will doubtless soon return to fill the lungs and water the eyes of city dwellers when the winds change direction and the rains abate, is one of climactic extremes. When "relief" finally came for firefighters, emergency services, stricken bush homeowners, and coastal communities, it did so in perversely Biblical form. There is absolutely nothing subtle about the climate crisis in this part of the world—neither the brazen political corruption that forestalls rational climate policy (let alone action) nor the daily, eye-watering reality of living on a warming planet. The climate crisis is palpable in the Australian settler colony. It is, literally, in one's face: now in one's eyes and nose and mouth, settling in one's throat and lungs. And as it lodges there it throws nostalgic tropes of Australian childhood summers not just into stark relief but into utter disarray—*our* children huddle under air conditioners or, if they're game, sport P-2 masks to venture to the local shops. As Sydney and the federal capital, Canberra, come increasingly to

resemble Jakarta and Delhi, blanketed in a suffocating haze of fossil fuel-induced smoke, global-spatial hierarchies of North and South, First World and Third, reveal themselves as tenuous and contingent affairs. Where are we now? Who are we anymore? Just what, on God's green earth, is going on here? These are depressing and disorienting times—apocalyptic, perhaps. *In many ways*, the call for papers for the present Symposium laments, *the future is downright frightening.*

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I open this brief Essay on the futures of critical theory with the above reflections about the recent Australian bushfire season not simply because the personal is the political, nor because the best—perhaps, the only worthwhile—critical theory tries to reckon with the present, nor because the climate crisis particularly demands our attention, although each of these things happen to be true. Rather, on a more basic level, I want to start with the preeminent language of crisis—and the various assertions and invocations of crises in our world today—as a way to think about the prospects of critique. Crisis and critique are indissolubly linked (etymologically, historically, politically), and the language of crisis, like the smoke I have been breathing for the last few months, is absolutely everywhere. It suffuses almost all. And just like the smoke, which is both palpably real and yet at the same time blinds us and gets in the way of things and installs itself as a horizon, we share and recirculate the language of crisis. In the pages that follow, I argue that one of critical theory's essential roles in our crisis-ridden world is to subject claims and counterclaims of crisis to critique, to slow down the headlong rush to crisis-driven judgment and action. But before coming to this argument, we need first to tarry with the crises just a little longer to set the anxious, contemporary scene.

Just in case any of us need convincing of the ubiquity of crisis, let us take stock with a brief roll call of our present crises. They appear cumulative and compounding. Crises of capital and the global financial system, which have deepened inequality, dispossession, and new forms of accumulation and enclosure even as they gesture to the 99 percent and possible new deals, green and otherwise. Crises of domestic liberalism and the international order, of Europe and of multilateralism, which have unleashed ancient atavisms and dreaded populisms, orange-

hued and otherwise. Crises of the rule of law and of democracy and human rights (in Brazil and Poland and India, much as in the United States). Crises of expertise and rationality and civility and moderation, and even of truth itself.

This is a familiar story by now. It could equally be told through various metonyms and proper names: Brexit, Trump, Le Pen, Cambridge Analytica, Bolsonaro, Orbán, Modhi, and so on and so forth. And of course, once truth itself is imperilled, once we are all post-truth and alternatively ensconced in our respective factualities, safely revolving in the orbit of our particular algorithmically mediated universe, then discourse, and intellection, and even critique itself become almost impossible.

A crisis of critique as well, then. The lineaments of this particular crisis are equally well known to us, if perhaps less easy to grapple with. They are also globally extended, shared, and cause for serious reflection and disagreement. If, as Wendy Brown teaches us, the global proliferation of walls is one telling index of the failures of a phantasmatic national sovereignty,[1] then surely the anxious proliferation in the last few years of conferences, colloquia, networks, and journals on the subject of critique, and critique *now*, is a sign that we ourselves have some problems with which to grapple in order, or before we purport, to resolve the outlying crises of the world. This surely cannot be the first Symposium we have all participated in on this topic nor, I suspect, will it be the last.

What are the dimensions of the current crisis of critique? They are connected to longer standing genealogies of intellectualism and expertise, humanistic knowledge and the university, although they are inflected differently in the present moment. The devaluation and defunding of the humanities is accelerating. The university's pet discourse of "the student experience" calls everywhere and incessantly for vocationalism, job-readiness, professionalism (now in a disruptive, innovative key) which,[2] if it does not lead to the cutting of departments and the axing of programs of study, tends at best to the technocratic narrowing of our fields or their rebranding as just as useful as their

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1. *See generally* WENDY BROWN, WALLED STATES, WANING SOVEREIGNTY (2010).

2. *See also* Christopher Newfield, *"Innovation" Discourse and the Neoliberal University: Top Ten Reasons to Abolish Disruptive Innovation, in* MUTANT NEOLIBERALISM: MARKET RULE AND POLITICAL RUPTURE 244 (William Callison & Zachary Manfredi eds., 2019).

STEM cousins. When every philosophy, legal theory, or history course mandates critical thinking as a learning outcome, and when programs commit themselves to producing critical and reflective global citizens as one among many graduate outcomes, then we have cause to wonder exactly what has happened to the language and the practice of critique in a university setting.

If there is a dispersal and a cheapening and a hollowing out of the language of critique inside the university—by no means its only or best home, but an important one nonetheless—then this is reproduced hyperbolically in what university administrators like (self-loathingly and free of irony) to refer to as "the real world." Denizens of this technologically mediated world participate in a constant cacophony of fact-checking of fake news and debunking of bunkum. Precisely everyone and no one is critical. And in this viral scene the intellectual critic, laboriously wielding the tools of humanistic analysis, of ideology critique or genealogical reversal, rendering the familiar strange (and vice versa), is regarded alternately with suspicion or derision. In these times of populist challenges to human rights, sagely observes the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights,[3] the blandishments of the critical theorist risk seducing the idealistic student into a Nietzschean abyss when what is needed now is constructive and principled opposition. Critique is a dangerous and luxurious irrelevance. Are we to blame? Have our deconstructive critical tools furnished our more powerful enemies with weapons they can wield more effectively against us? Have we discursively prepared the ground for widespread cynicism and refusal to face the scientific facts of impending ecological collapse? Have our critiques missed their mark or "run out of steam?" Are we simply too late? (Bruno Latour will reappear shortly, as a foil and a spur.) And who are "we," anyway? Is critical theory altogether too white, too old (dead, even?), and too male to deal with the interlinked crises of colonialism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and homophobia that structure and divide our world? What can a curriculum of Marx and Freud and Nietzsche, of Derrida and Foucault, teach us about 2021? (Is "curriculum" even the right collective noun for a group of critical theorists? A pretension? A latecoming?) What a diabolical mess it seems we are in.

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3. Philip Alston, *The Populist Challenge to Human Rights*, 9 J. HUM. RTS. PRAC. 1, 13 (2017).

But perhaps we can find a certain consolation in history. Perhaps, whoever "we" are or turn out to be, we have always been in such a mess. Perhaps the mess is generative—constitutive, even. Perhaps it says something important about the critical condition. Moments of historical and political rupture are potentially fecund moments for the critic. After all, when the social world reveals itself to be in flux and tension and contradiction and change, the critic can prosecute the case[4] that what once appeared necessary is in fact contingent and hence could very well be otherwise.[5] All that is solid, etc., etc. Moments of crisis—etymologically "turning points" (*krisis*) that call for a swift and critical decision (*krinein*)—present themselves to the critic as openings to judgment and action. Now, there are a whole set of epistemological and political questions about how such an understanding of critique figures the critic *vis à vis* the crisis that would be answered differently by different traditions of critique. But we can nevertheless acknowledge the basic point that moments of crisis, and diagnoses of crisis, clearly can be—and historically have been—generative for critique. We critics should not shy away from a crisis. Indeed, we should aspire never to let a good one go to waste—perhaps even to foment a few ourselves.[6]

But what, precisely, makes a good crisis, and how do we know one when we see one? When thinking along these lines, critics have been cautious of crises. And justly so. Indeed, and as I said at the outset, I am shortly going to argue that critical theory needs to subject crisis itself, and the deployment of crisis talk, to critique—which given the very real crises we face today I take to be a difficult, if not a dangerous, position to maintain. Crisis imperils our very ability to think. There is a performativity and a temporality to the mode of crisis that both rushes and clouds critical judgment and that tends to telescope things. Smoke gets in our eyes. When thinking in the mode of crisis, we attend to certain things and not to others, certain logics and dynamics are foregrounded while others are backgrounded, and

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4.   As Costas Douzinas reminds us, critique classically takes place according to juridical protocols. *See* Costas Douzinas, *Oubliez Critique*, 16 LAW & CRITIQUE 47–48 (2005).

5.   ROBERTO MANGABEIRA UNGER, FALSE NECESSITY: ANTI-NECESSITARIAN SOCIAL THEORY IN THE SERVICE OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY (1987); *cf.* Susan Marks, *False Contingency*, 16 CURRENT LEGAL PROBS. 1 (2009) (extending Unger's analysis and developing a rival concept of "false contingency").

6.   For the classic reference, see REINHART KOSELLECK, CRITIQUE AND CRISIS: ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE PATHOGENESIS OF MODERN SOCIETY (1988).

certain actors are singled out whilst other actors (or structures, or causes, or determinants) are elided or left out of the frame. Scholars have made this argument powerfully—none more so than Janet Roitman who, in her book *Anti-Crisis*, contends that "accession to crisis engenders certain narrations . . . [that both] . . . enable and foreclose various kinds of question."[7] Recent political experience furnishes a further example. In the midst of the recent Australian bushfire season, after the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison (in folksy Australian diminutive: "Scomo"), had returned from an ill-judged family holiday to Hawaii whilst the country burned, there were a series of popular and cathartic demonstrations where we called, not unreasonably and with visceral hatred, for the bathetic figure Scomo to be sacked immediately. To take another example from international law, in her *Reading Humanitarian Intervention* (which, incidentally, opens with an account of the author's ambivalent relation to street protests in Australia in 1999 calling for international peacekeepers in East Timor), Anne Orford argues that one of the discursive functions of a crisis (or emergency) narrative is to focus attentions on the instant question and to reduce political discussions to an anguished normativity of whether to intervene or not. All the while, a muscular humanitarianism is allowed to displace critical questions about which international actors might have generated the conditions of the crisis and who might stand to profit from the particular form of their resolution.[8] Just as post-critical critics of critique have pointed out that there is an oft-disavowed pleasure to the act of critique, in expertly deciphering and deconstructing and diagnosing and always being insufferably right,[9] so too is there a *jouissance* of crisis. And so, as critics attentive to the gendered logics of public persuasion and narrative construction, we have been concerned to slow down crises, to doubt them, to turn them over and look beside and underneath and beyond them. To hold them at bay, somehow; to still the too-quick hand of judgment. Where there is smoke there is fire, to be sure, but who started the fire and what is the best way of ensuring it does not catch alight again?

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7. JANET ROITMAN, ANTI-CRISIS 10 (2013).

8. ANNE ORFORD, READING HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE USE OF FORCE IN INTERNATIONAL LAW (2003).

9. Bruno Latour, *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern*, 30 CRITICAL INQUIRY 225, 238–39, (2004); *see also* Elizabeth S. Anker & Rita Felski, *Introduction* to CRITIQUE AND POSTCRITIQUE 1 (Elizabeth S. Anker & Rita Felski eds., 2017).

If crisis is both generative and debilitating, simultaneously an opportunity and a dangerous seduction to the critic, then the desire somehow to resolve or get beyond crisis, to be decisively post-crisis, is an eminently understandable one. Something of this desire perhaps animates calls, on the critique side of the ledger, as it were, to go beyond or have done with critique itself—as if critique had not only exhausted itself but in some way (complicitly or heedlessly) brought things to a critical head. As if critique, thinking itself in subversive opposition to the dominant orders of the time, was, in fact, hopelessly co-opted by them. (Foucauldian ironies abound.) But what, after all, might it mean to be *post*-critical in these crisis-ridden times?

In asking with polemic humour whether critique had simply "run out of steam," Bruno Latour suggested several years ago that "a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies."[10] Against a critique figured as relentlessly deconstructive and injudiciously and belatedly directed at the wrong targets, a critique giving comfort to conspiracy theorists and hard-right scientific denialists, Latour called for a thoroughgoing renewal of empiricism. His polemic is sufficiently infamous to constructivists and discourse analysts of any stripe as to excuse me from the obligations of exegesis in these pages. Suffice it to say, I neither recognise myself nor any of my fellow critics in Latour's deliciously satiric descriptions of the affect of the crit (well, maybe some of us, on our bad days) nor, more seriously, do I agree with his verdict on the politics, direction, and effects of contemporary critical work in the humanities.

Rather, I recall Latour's critical provocations now in order to remind us that even the most bombastic calls for disciplinary and intellectual breaks are just as often calls to replace one modality of critique with another, or to return nostalgically to a lost meaning or vocation of critique, or to renew or replenish our understanding of critique with something else that will be called critique (like his own salvo). There is no getting afield of critique, it seems, for it turns out that even Latour's is a brief for "renewal" and re-established "relevance" of the embattled "critical

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10. Latour, *supra* note 9, at 231.

mind."[11] And I say "salvo" advisedly, as Latour's intervention is polemical in its style and intent, in its own metaphors, and in its consciously and strategically thinking about whether critique is "aiming at the right target."[12] I think Latour's framing is helpful. Critique is a means, in Latour's understanding (and my own), to effect change in the world and the distribution of its forces. There is no sense in deploying the critical weapons of a bygone age in order to grapple with the problems of the present if they no longer have that effect (or worse: if they somehow reinforce the ramparts under attack). In this, Latour productively reorients us to the question of the present, which is a time of proliferating, disorienting, and ever-intensifying crises. Where does this leave us? If critique is in a putative crisis for just some of the reasons I lay out above (and doubtless others), then our response should be (pace Latour) not to relinquish critique but to intensify it and redirect it. Where should critique be directed now? To crisis, of course. Hence my title: "From the Crisis of Critique to the Critique of Crisis."

In my argument, contemporary critique can find renewal in the vocation of crisis-critique. But what does it mean to critique the notion of crisis? Critique is often figured as denial, rejection, trashing, exposure,[13] an exercise in showing that things are not as they appear to the benighted, to the critically uninitiated. But in suggesting that contemporary critical theory take on the notion of crisis itself, I do not propose a simple denial of the problems of the world that we are living in (there is still richly symptomatic smoke outside my window) and a critical debunking of supposed crises. Nor in critiquing crisis am I commending a kind of salvific turning towards the present danger (Hölderlin, Heidegger, Agamben . . .). In fact, I have something less poetically redemptive and more mundanely genealogical and analytic in mind. If we return to the idea of a crisis as a turning point, then the critic can be figured as a kind of triage nurse, an austere diagnostician sifting and assessing the various symptoms and potential causes, sending some would-be crises back to the waiting room whilst escalating others to different levels of

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11. *Id.* at 231. For reflections closer to our disciplinary home, see David Kennedy, *When Renewal Repeats: Thinking Against the Box, in* LEFT LEGALISM/LEFT CRITIQUE 373 (Wendy Brown & Janet Halley eds., 2002).

12. Latour, *supra* note 9, at 225.

13. Wendy Brown, *Revaluing Critique: A Response to Kenneth Baynes*, 28 POL. THEORY 469 (2000).

intervention in the emergency room. Indeed, the cascading avalanche of crises with which I started this Essay invokes very well this idea of an overcrowded emergency waiting room.

But in the queue of crises presenting themselves to the critical diagnostician, I am really not so sure about the putative urgency of all of these crises. Are they all crises, even? And are their diseases progressing at the same rate and in the same direction? At any rate, I believe the starting point for a contemporary critique of crisis should be one of cool suspicion and scepticism—not simply because it is impossible to address all of these self-proclaimed crises simultaneously but because the discursive and political effects of labelling something a crisis is not always what we intend (more on this in a moment).

Can all of these phenomena be urgent in the same way, and at the same time? Are some of them different symptoms of the same malaise? The very first line of the call for papers for the event (first physical, now virtual) that was to bring together this Symposium's participants captures my meaning well: *In these first decades of the Twenty-First century, crisis seems everywhere.* For the contemporary critic, the accent should very much be placed on the hesitant yet important qualifier: "seems." The first role of the critic-*qua*-diagnostician is hence to assess the seriousness of the situation, to try to figure out what is truly in a critical condition. If this sounds like an abidingly traditional, hermeneutically suspicious conception of the role of the critic, then I suppose that it is—the newness of the situation in which we are all living and working today, and its particular, fiendish concatenation of contingencies and crystallization of tendencies, need not spook us into trying to concoct entirely new critical methods. And so however we methodologically practice this triaging (or, to mix metaphors, this mapping) function—whether it be through producing a history of the present that emphasizes the multiple, overdetermined ways in which the crisis of the present presents itself or through a historically materialist or a psychoanalytic register—I am simply suggesting the importance of not taking at face value either the implicit present-ness or the claimed *crisis*-ness of the present crisis. A crisis is not, after all, a miracle; it comes from somewhere, has a history—indeed, many histories—and a present that differs from itself.[14]

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14. DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE: POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT AND HISTORICAL DIFFERENCE 3–23 (2008).

The critique of crisis demands a difficult slowing down and a form of distancing. Many of us work in universities that are committed to some form of "knowledge exchange." The branding and the idiom may change, but the conceit is presumably widely shared: namely, that universities should share their elite expertise with the public, imagined as lacking and in need of it. In reality, of course, the relationship flows in reverse—it is government, industry, and certain sections of the community that frequently set the intellectual agenda, and university workers (*qua* knowledge subcontractors) who try to solve the problems that are (literally more often than figuratively) seen to be worth solving. Much has been, and remains to be, written about the effect of the discourses of relevance and impact on the production and circulation of knowledge in a university setting, particularly on the critical and theoretical humanities.[15] I do not wish to add to these debates here but simply adduce a quick anecdote to make my point about speed and priorities and the way in which the university sector mimics—arguably intensifies?—the frenzied temporality of the "real world" and its escalating crises.

At my university, which I have no reason to suspect is particularly egregious in this regard, we maintain a set of projects dubbed "Grand Challenges" that are directed by academics working in a particular field, who are enjoined to deploy their academic expertise (and events management nous) to solve, in a typically modest formulation, some of the "greatest issues facing humanity."[16] I recently had an inquiry from a potential PhD student seeking scholarship funding and, in helping to redraft their application, I just thought I would double check that the relevant "Grand Challenge" the student was referencing was, in fact, still on foot. A quick search of the website informed me that we were both too late. Not only "Refugees and Migrants," but "Inequality" and even "Climate Change" had been consigned to the ranks of "Past Grand Challenges" after just two years of dedicated academic work. Solved. Insufficiently challenging (or grand, perhaps). The lack of seriousness is staggering. My basic point is that the conditions under which we might wish to practice a theoretical critique of crisis are profoundly inhospitable to the enterprise, and we need, therefore, to attend collectively to

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15. *See, e.g.,* Andrew Vincent, *The Ideological Context of Impact,* 13 POL. STUD. REV. 474 (2015).

16. *See Grand Challenges,* UNIV. N.S.W. SYDNEY, https://www.grandchallenges.unsw.edu.au/ (last visited Jan. 1, 2021) [https://perma.cc/AC9M-TAG6].

constructing and reconstructing those intellectual, affective, and industrial conditions.

Crises speed things up, then. And with speed comes the frisson of engagement (and worldly impact!). "International lawyers revel in a good crisis," opens Hilary Charlesworth's classic and cautionary text on the ways in which the discipline of international law is both constituted by and constitutive of crisis. "Kosovo," she suggests, "gave international lawyers a sense of relevance, of being exhilaratingly close to the heart of grand and important issues of our time."[17] But the temporality of crisis is not necessarily the temporality of critique—even as crisis demands critique. When under the sway of crisis we tend to miss the selectivity, the presentation, and the curation of certain facts; we tend to narrow our frame of reference to the episodic event and not the series or the structure (the extraordinary and the symbolic rather than the politics of the everyday); and we are pressed not simply to think but to act—and act quickly—in certain prescribed ways. This enjoins a straightened (and impoverished) normativity—in a crisis one acts or one does not.[18] One intervenes, or one (lamentably) fails to intervene. What one does not do is subject the terms of the crisis itself to a problematisation. There is simply not time for that. First, crisis; then, grudgingly, critique. This is a self-reproducingly circular temporality. Critique needs to interrupt it. And slowly.

To come back to the Australian bushfires and the protests in the streets as we chanted through our masks for the Nero-like Scomo to be sacked, a series of insistent questions returned: How did we get here? What effect will sacking Scomo really have? Is Scomo, as personally culpable as he is, really the primary danger? Would removing him actually achieve anything, or would the structures that enabled this grotesque mediocrity refashion a more monstrous sovereign in his place? "We need to cut off the king's head: in political theory, that has still to be done."[19]

But crisis is not simply an epistemological problem, not solely a way of seeing or not seeing, of foreshortening and adumbrating. It is directly political and governmental. It is an

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17. Hilary Charlesworth, *International Law: A Discipline of Crisis*, 65 MOD. L. REV. 377, 381 (2002).

18. *Id.* at 382–89.

19. Michel Foucault, *Two Lectures*, *in* POWER/KNOWLEDGE: SELECTED INTERVIEWS AND OTHER WRITINGS 78, 121 (Colin Gordon ed., 1980); *see also* KARL MARX, THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE OF LOUIS BONAPARTE (Daniel de Leon trans., Charles H. Kerr & Co. 3d ed. 1919) (1852).

apparatus of knowledge and power. We are governed in and through the modality of crisis, a routine and replicable—viral, even—form of contemporary governmentality. As countless theorists of neoliberal capitalism and its disaster model attest,[20] we are better off understanding contemporary capital accumulation as functioning not on the brink of or in spite of crisis but in and through it. Crisis pays. Crisis also produces particular political subjectivities and fashions objects of institutional and intellectual knowledge, remaking entire domains of human experience. And yet if crisis is risky and profitable and protean and generative as governmentality, it is also, at the same time, deeply conservative as intellectual framing—in this guise, it shores up existing orders of power and privilege. Crisis can forestall and defer and stabilise as much as it disrupts.

As critics of crisis, we thus need to ask after the ways in which crisis invisibilises dissenting and dissident understandings of the present conjuncture in favour of established institutional agendas. Let me take an obvious example from among those crises instanced at the beginning of this piece, the much-discussed crises of liberalism and of the rule of law and of human rights today (I will focus briefly on this last).

Contemporary crises of human rights are routinely framed so as to make it seem as if the vulnerable—and venerable—liberal fetish is under attack and in need of replenishment and support. Accordingly, the orthodox framing of the contemporary crisis of human rights is one in which a rising tide of populism and xenophobia assails the fragile cosmopolitanism of the international human rights law regime.[21] Deftly left to one side are questions about how that regime is itself complicit with economic inequality and whether indeed it can solve the problems it purports to solve.[22] Implicitly commended is a nostalgic politics of repair, saviour, and redemption of the status quo.[23] How is it that human rights lurches serially from one crisis to

    20. *See, e.g.,* NAOMI KLEIN, THE SHOCK DOCTRINE: THE RISE OF DISASTER CAPITALISM (2007).

    21. *See, e.g.,* Kenneth Roth, *The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values,* 70 J. INT'L AFFS. 79 (2017).

    22. JESSICA WHYTE, THE MORALS OF THE MARKET: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE RISE OF NEOLIBERALISM (2019); SAMUEL MOYN, NOT ENOUGH: HUMAN RIGHTS IN AN UNEQUAL WORLD (2019).

    23. *Cf.* Wendy Brown, *Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy, in* EDGEWORK: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICS 37 (2005) (arguing against a melancholic return to liberalism in light of the depredations of neoliberalism).

another? Recall that almost twenty years ago, after the Twin Towers fell, it was a different crisis. Then, the crisis was one of terror, fundamentalism, and state power that managed to elide more searching questions about the racialisation of human rights and its problematic investment in the same state power it sought to "civilise." What does it say about human rights as a political discourse, as an institution, as a movement, that it functions in this way and mobilises the discursive framing and the affect of crisis to re-entrench a certain "moderation?" These kinds of questions struggle to be articulated (let alone heard) in a crisis.

We are seduced into the language of crisis. It quickens the pulse and stiffens the sinews. But, as I have briefly tried to suggest here, there are ample reasons to be cautious (indeed, critical) of it. And those reasons should give contemporary critical theorists enough pause and enough to work with. It should be clear enough, but (as crisis-mongers themselves often say) out of an abundance of caution I want to emphasize that I am *not* counselling a form of political quietism or a retreat from the pressing and material challenges of the day. (The attentive reader will see those challenges signaled clearly, impinging on this text, framing it, even.) Rather, I suppose I am implying and relying upon an admittedly rough division of intellectual-political labour. As critical intellectuals and readers of the contemporary, rather than (as we all are) political actors in our communities, workplaces, and unions, I am suggesting we take our critical distance from crisis thinking. "Left intellectuals," the left intellectual T. J. Clark reminds us,

> are not good at politics . . . . Intellectuals get the fingering wrong. Up on stage they play too many wrong notes. But one thing they may be good for: sticking to the concert-hall analogy, they are sometimes the bassist in the back row whose groaning establishes the key of politics for a moment, and even points to a possible new one.[24]

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The fires have all but finished and the sky is mercifully blue once again. In what seasonally passes for autumn in my part of

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24.   T. J. Clark, *For a Left with No Future*, 74 NEW LEFT REV. 53, 53 (2012).

the world, yellowing leaves lie thicker on the ground, and the air is both clear to breathe again and getting a little colder in the mornings. Autumnal serenity threatens to replace entirely the frenzied mobilizations of the summer just passed, with its haunting images of post-apocalyptic coastlines and iconic Australian fauna being saved from raging bushfires. For many, it must be as though the fires never took place. The mass protests have dissipated, climate policy remains deadlocked, and devastated communities are left to pick through the embers and negotiate the structuring, background injustices of the insurance industry and the insufficiency of government bailouts (conveniently away from mainstream media attention). All the while the world heats up. And yet strange reminiscences of the fires nightly echo into our living rooms and daily reappear on our iPhones, as television news stories and Guardian live blogs are peopled with more and more panicked, mask-wearing characters, this time wielding thermometers and dressed in hazmat suits. The crisis has now mutated, from fire to viral contamination. Contagion replaces conflagration, but the logic, the pace, and the affects of crisis (foreshortening, dizzying, exhausting) remain consistent. Can critique be equal to the task? Can we collectively slow down in a time of crisis? Slow down long enough to subject the crisis itself to critique? And thereby, to pluralise our understanding of what counts as a problem in the present? This will remain our problem.