Crisis, Modernity and the Emergence of Social Theory

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Abstract

Social theory arose as a response to two distinct needs in modern society: the need to categorize and organise information for the sake of technological progress, and the need to orient subjects who found social transformation and secularization was making meaning ever more elusive. This gives rise to two distinct methods in theorizing society: the scientific and the narrative. The first concerned with categorising and organising parts of the social whole for instrumental use, the second is concerned with providing meaning for modern subjects feeling disorientated by the collapse of traditional world-views. By looking at how these approaches are manifest in three key sources of modern social theory – that of early 19th century positivism, Marxism and the philosophy of Nietzsche – this paper seeks to better understand how social theories emerge as responses to and a part of the social worlds they examine.

Keywords: Crisis, grand narrative, social theory, crisis of meaning, theoretical method.

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Introduction

Social theory arose as a response to two distinct needs in modern society: the need to categorize and organise information for the sake of technological progress, and the need to orient subjects who found social transformation and secularization were making meaning ever more elusive. This is manifest in three key sources of modern social theory; that of early 19th century positivism, Marxism and the philosophy of Nietzsche.

This paper moves through two parts. First it will outline the specific form of social theory that it wishes to discuss, that of grand theory. A grand theory differs from other theoretical concerns in that it is concerned with society in its entirety. As we will see, this results in two distinct modes: That of a systematic and scientific understanding of society as a whole, and that of a narrative, which offers orientation by situating subjects’ lives within the story of larger social and cultural forces. The second part moves into a consideration of the idea of crisis and its centrality to grand theory. The argument is that grand theory itself is a response to crisis, hence the need to outline how social theories have utilized the two aforementioned modes in making sense of their contemporary worlds.

The grand theory

In his book The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology, Alvin Gouldner describes “grand theory” as a particular type of theory that, unlike what he calls “middle” order theories, is not formed through a dialogue with empirical research. Rather than serving as a means to categorise, organise and give meaning to specific data, the grand theory is itself, “in some ways, a self-sufficient response” (Gouldner 1970: 85-86). Grand theory is a source of
meaning rather than simply a response to facts. It provides a story with which society as a whole can be explained and in which the subject can locate themself.

For Gouldner, the phenomenon of the grand theory is historicized. He argues that it arises as a response to the requirements of “utilitarian culture”: The cultural environment of 19th century bourgeois Europe, where value had come to depend predominantly on how useful something is. In this cultural context, the grand theory fulfils two needs. First: It aims at a totalizing explanation of the world in order to better assess outcomes and consequences of actions. Utilitarianism is only concerned with outcomes; objects themselves are of little consequence but for the use to which they can be put. The purpose of a grand theory is therefore to provide a comprehensive assessment of use potentials. This is its scientific task.

Second: Reinhart Koselleck describes how the secular overturning of a medieval Christian cosmological order, with its teleological orientation toward an apocalyptic “end of time” in the last judgement, gives rise to a different experience of historical time (Koselleck 2004: 236, 239). Without an eschatological end-point for all activity, humanity is now confronted both with the prospect of making its own infinite future as a species and with the mortality and finitude of each individual’s soul. Gone is the religious metanarrative of genesis to revelation on which to situate all human affairs, engendering a modern concept of “crisis” as time experienced as relative and without inherent direction. In another sense, a culture where all value is reduced to usefulness tends to be destructive of traditional forms of morality and raises the question of what will replace them. The dominance of usefulness gives the impression of impersonal objects gaining power over humans. This results in a growing anxiety about the perceived inhumanity of industrial civilization. Here, grand theory seeks usefulness in-of-itself as it replaces the salient codes and enchanted stories of tradition with a new, secular and rational, source of meaning. For the modern individual, feeling alienated by the dominance of the objective world and anomic about the fluidity of meaning, a grand
theory gives history a sense of direction and helps orient the subject (Gouldner 1970: 84). This is its narrative (or hermeneutic) task. Overall, what sets grand theory apart from other theorization is that it is itself a response to the perceived crisis of modern civilization as a whole, rather than specific and isolated events. It seeks to provide both a means to comprehensive practical activity and a source of meaning.

But how historically specifiable is this hermeneutic demand for a grand narrative? Other accounts, such as those of John Carroll (2008) and Daniel Bell (1976), describe a central, meaning constituting story as an almost anthropological or ontological need. The universal presence of religion and mystery across all societies is often summoned to speak to this. They would agree that modernity has eroded this through its application of reason to all aspects of life. However, they would counter that reason is unsuitable to the task of re-constituting meaning. Rationality may offer practical benefits, but it is not amenable to the task of speaking to the deep existential questions of how to live life and how to approach death. Trying to resolve such questions once and for all---as grand theory often does, when the central task of culture should be to finds ways of living with uncertainty, is a flawed program. Reason promises certainty that it cannot deliver. Much of Carroll and Bell’s work goes into describing the kinds of pathological symptoms prevalent to a modern civilization deficient in effective culture: we are living in a “crisis of meaning” (Carroll 2008: 5).

Another argument, this time coming from Max Horkheimer (2013) and Herbert Marcuse (1964), is that reason itself is not the problem. Instead, reason has become one-sidedly “instrumental” to the point of becoming unreasonable. They argue that theory has become totally focussed on its scientific task; the categorization and organization of things within the objective world. It has lost its ability to ask questions about the entire nature of that objective world itself. After all, a totalizing theory involved only in science is not a totality at all. The outcome is that whole vistas of thought that are necessary for a critical and reflective attitude
toward the world have been closed off. Prevalent structures of social domination stand unquestioned while they exert total control over modern individuals. The spiritual deficiencies of late capitalist society are simply assuaged through endless consumerist distractions. This condition is a crisis of critique: A critical theory should provide a narrative through which subjects locate themselves and follow a path to emancipation. However, in a totally administered, “one-dimensional” society, the need for meaning itself has been repressed.

These thinkers of the Frankfurt School are effectively arguing that theory is no longer grand enough and that this presents a crisis. Critical theory is consciously involved in the reconstitution of grand theories in order to see ourselves out of this crisis. But the same is true for Carroll and Bell. By diagnosing the cultural crisis of modernity and explaining its development and possible transcendence, they too provide a grand narrative upon which the disorientated modern individual can locate the source of their distress. As Gouldner said, grand theories are always, themselves, answers to that central crisis of a modernity wrought by the loss of salience in our moral and cultural worlds. This is central to understanding the idea of a grand theory itself. However, we can only fully understand the idea of a grand theory once we understand the idea of crisis. It is this to which I now turn.

**The science of crisis**

In defining a social-scientific concept of crisis, Jürgen Habermas begins with the term’s roots in the field of medicine. The moment of crisis is the point of an illness where the organism’s powers of self-recovery are put into question. In contemporary medicine, this is most broadly known as a “critical condition”. The imperative is for medical practitioners to act, otherwise survival cannot be guaranteed. Treatment takes place through an understanding of biological processes and medical or surgical intervention; hence the crisis is conceived scientifically.
Habermas, however, emphasises that this is not a purely objective process. Crises must be experienced to be meaningful. Therefore, central to the concept is the notion that the subject undergoing the crisis has been “deprived… of some part of his normal sovereignty” (Habermas 1973: 1). Normality is conceived both as a subjective (existential) and objective (biological) sense of equilibrium. This has been temporarily disturbed, and the moment hinges on the alternatives of recovery or death.

Likewise, in the field of classical economics, the idea of a crisis also involves a disruption in rational equilibrium. Koselleck argues that an experience of global economic crisis in 1856 was central to establishing “the dominance of economics” (2006: 391-392). The worldwide scope of this crisis moved the focus from spatially contained local crises to the crisis as a universal moment in a unitary capitalist system. Modernity as whole is now conceived as a single system or organism, operating along specifiable “natural laws”. Anomalous disturbances and failures to fully understand these laws had broken the equilibrium, leading to economic catastrophes on a world level. In this way, the need to explain a global experience of crisis produces a grand theory of the scientific mode and engenders a prescriptive response. The crisis itself is a window to a better understanding of the processes in question; hence the construction of the theory itself is seen as a progression; an achievement of reason over contingency and catastrophe.

Sociology first emerged as a discipline that attempted to emulate economics by applying the scientific method to the study of social organisation. Pioneering sociological thinkers, Claude-Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, both explicitly described the aftermath of the French Revolution and the great political, social and economic disturbances of the 19th century as symptomatic of state of profound civilizational “crisis” (Comte 1974; Saint-Simon 1803). Comte, in particular, argued that the “grand crisis now experienced by the most civilized nations” would continue until scientific analysis could extend from the objective
domains of nature and economy into an understanding of culture, morality and meaning (Comte 1974: 111). He coined the term “sociology” as a new science that would serve to navigate a path between political radicalism and conservative reaction and exalt the “positive” aspects of prevailing conditions, bringing about equilibrium through total and unitary social consensus. Likewise, until there was a sociological counterbalance, which could broach cultural and normative questions, any one-sidedly instrumental utilitarian and individualistic industrial society would remain in a state of acute crisis, unable to address humanity’s spiritual needs (Wernick 2001).

The scientific grand theory runs another course, however, in the work of Karl Marx. In Capital, Marx sets out to create a comprehensive scientific analysis of the forces and principles behind the functioning of capitalism. His economic analysis concludes that through its own objective tendencies, capitalism is not equilibrious at all, but in fact, inevitably prone to periodic crises of overproduction. Moreover, Marx’s long view of capitalism is one of increased competition and technological revolution eventually driving down the profit rates of capitalist enterprise (Marx 1967). Unlike the economists and positivist sociologists, who saw crises as decisive challenges to be met within the prevailing system, Marx saw them as demonstrative of the very instability of the system itself. His prescription was not restorative, it was revolutionary. However, while at one level, his analysis of economic crisis works in the scientific mode, his theory of revolution is best understood as a narrative.

**The story of crisis**

In her novel Middlemarch, George Eliot offers us a definition of crisis in the context of narrative as something that “revels the bias of a nature, and is prophetic of the ultimate act which will end an intermediate struggle” (Eliot 1961: 712). Throughout her novel, set during the turbulent years of early 19th century England, social and individual concerns constantly
intersect, demanding decisive action from her characters. What characterises Eliot’s crisis plot points in particular is the way they function as devices that provide a window into the individual’s character. Crises are moments of imperative choice, and the choice that is made – or the failure to choose – is indicative of the nature and fate of the individual as a whole.

In the case of Marxism, this narrative aspect of crisis comes through in his theory of revolution. Marx borrows his methodology from Hegelian dialectics, but instead of the drama taking place as struggles between conflicting ideas, Marx grounds his theory in historical forces – as class struggle. The fate of the bourgeois class is a tragic one, by revolutionizing production and “tear[ing] asunder all motely feudal ties”, they only heighten the contradictions at the heart of their economic system. These manifest both as periodic economic crises, and as the meta-crisis of capitalist society, the emergence of revolutionary proletarian class consciousness and the “spectre of communism” (Marx and Engels 1973).

Unlike the theories of positivist sociology, the story of capitalism is a tragic one; its ultimate crisis revealing its deficiency as an economic order. However, like the positivists, the overall narrative remains a comic one with a sense of inevitable progression (White 1973: 287). The destruction of capitalism signals revolutionary transcendence into a classless future where the forms of alienation that pervade class society can be finally overcome.

A less optimistic narrative of crisis can be found in Frederick Nietzsche. In The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche eschews a scientific and systematic focus altogether, instead seeing “science under the lens of the artist”; thus making aesthetics the central concern of culture (Nietzsche 1993: 5). He reads western history as a dramatic struggle between two distinct forces, personified in the identities of two Greek gods: Apollo and Dionysus. The Apollonian represents the structured, symbolic and the formal. It signifies the containment of impulse and ambiguity for the purposes of clarity and representation. For Nietzsche it is best exemplified in the visual arts, especially sculpture, with their eye for formal perfection and
realism. The Dionysian stands as its opposite: An intoxicating forgetting of the self and the symbolic, and a primordial unity of humanity with nature. Its most exemplary expressions come through music. The historical narrative Nietzsche offers describes the estrangement of these two forces, which were once fused in the form of classical Greek tragedy.

In Nietzsche’s narrative, the emergence of Socratic philosophy, with its scepticism and its pursuit of formal truth at all costs, undermines the possibility of Dionysian experiences. It is embodied, most starkly, in scientific reason, which aims at nothing less than a total comprehension of life, thus overturning all myth and “killing God”. But this, for Nietzsche, is an impossible task. The crisis of science comes when it “reaches that peripheral boundary” and finds itself “staring into the ineffable” (Nietzsche 1993: 75). Reality is not amenable to total comprehension and systematization, and the progress of rationality trips over itself once it comes to this point. The early Nietzsche pinned his hopes on science renouncing its claim to universal validity and the restoration of shared tragic experiences through German music. However, later on, he began to exalt what he saw as the destruction of forms and codes, seeing it as an opportunity for individuals to free themselves of social fetters and emerge revitalized.

Thus in the Nietzschean scenario, the collective crisis of culture is behind us. The crisis is now individual and permanent. We all face the existential uncertainty of life alone. In an aesthetic sort of Darwinianism, Nietzsche sees this as a promising possibility for the rising of a new and better human being, free to realize the full vitality of their character now that they are liberated from the stifling restrictions of the mass and its culture once and for all (Nietzsche 2006).

Concluding remarks
Social theory has always been in the business of reading modernity as prone to crisis. Responding to a needs emergent from a particular time and place, those of early industrial society, it is a product of the very crises it seeks to identify. While positivists undertook a scientific analysis of social and cultural forces, with an eye to crisis resolution, both Marx and Nietzsche used historical narrative to play the condition of crisis out to its full extent. They both saw potential in (very different) new and better human beings, free from the constricting shackles of the past. The enduring influence that these works have held and the parts they have played in subsequent theoretical developments therefore prompts us to consider the contextual continuities the crisis diagnoses of the 19th century may have with our time. Does the proclaimed death of grand theory mark the end of our need to totalise, or does it offer a totalisating story of its very own?
References


