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**Stijn De Cauwer, ed. *Critical Theory at a Crossroads: Conversations on Resistance in Times of Crisis***

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Essential to the concept of crisis is, no doubt, the sense of urgency. A decision needs to be made, is already busy making itself, and time is of the essence if we are not to be merely swept along by it. The interviews and exchanges that make up *Critical Theory at a Crossroads* bear the marks of this impetus, the need for theory to happen in *real time,*or as close to it as the academic publishing apparatus will allow. They focus on events, primarily in Europe and the US—the influx of refugees, the rise of right-wing authoritarianism, the collapse of the middle class, the wealth gap exacerbated by the financial sector, protest and political “populism”—whose urgency is intimately felt today. At the heart of this urgency is the double bind of all decision: we are called upon for immediate response, but must know what to do, must take the time to formulate the theory and plan that can appropriately guide practice.

The concept of crisis forms a guiding thread for the book’s interviews with several prominent political theorists. Are we living in an era of crisis? Is the term a useful heuristic for understanding what is happening and how to respond, or is it an ideological tool just as likely to justify the interventions of the powerful? (One thinks of the manufactured “border crisis” in the US as a recent example.) Several interviewees recall the medical origin of the term, the crucial point beyond which a disease turns either toward recovery or toward death, and a doctor can do nothing more. Joseph Vogl recalls that even at its inception this definition crossed boundaries between the medical and the political, because the state has always been figured as an organism—he cites the example of *Oedipus Rex*, where social and political upheaval manifest themselves with or as a plague (63). He suggests, therefore, that crisis is invoked to abdicate responsibility, by handing a process over to natural necessity.

Among the interviewees, Wendy Brown perhaps goes furthest toward negotiating with the undecidable relations of theory and practice. In response to the appropriations of progressive discourse to justify right-wing agendas (such as invoking democracy and women’s rights to justify the invasion of Muslim countries), Brown explains that it is not some error or oversight on the part of the left that allows this to happen. There is only appropriation and counter-appropriation; the left should not forfeit terms like democracy but should attempt to recapture them. Similarly, she sees how a discourse of economic determinism can be misused on both the right and the left—by neoliberal apologists as well as communists. Whether Chicago-school economists are claiming that capitalism will intrinsically lead to greater democracy or communists are arguing the opposite, Brown argues that these economic narratives exist in constant relations or tensions with the “political,” where we set “the values by which we live” (82). Nor is capitalism for democracy’s sake the only or even the prominent neoliberal narrative; she points to ordoliberalism, which eschewed democracy for what it viewed as more reliable governance by technocrats or, today, algorithms. The populism that asserts itself in the face of this loss of control can just as easily be democratic as anti-democratic, and, Brown reminds us, needs for its leftist form a political program beyond simply the redistribution of wealth. Perhaps this takes the form of a subtler imaginary purity in her work, longing for a supposed time when the political and other domains could be kept clean of any contamination by economics.

Several contributors take a more one-sided approach to the relations of theory and practice. There are several expressions of nostalgia for a supposed communist unity—Jacques Rancière attributes what he sees as the weakness or even nonexistence of the antiglobalization movement to its comprisal of “little groups of, as it were, ‘specialized’ agitators of antiglobalization. This is very different from the traditional workers’ movement” (51), and Jean-Luc Nancy recalls that, “When I was young, political action was what one could call ‘general.’ We had the class struggle and the labor movement” (162). This imagined unity of the labor struggle requires the suppression of difference through economic reductionism. Of course, such economic essentialism inevitably takes the form of dismissing all other categories of political unity or action as specious “identity politics,” something Rancière hints at (59), and Tariq Ali states outright (112). Stijn De Cauwer, in his introduction, complains of the “sometimes overly high-strung political correctness, amounting to a form of self-censorship” of advocates for “diverse minority groups,” who are accused of playing into the hands of neoliberal politicians (xxx). If one has paid any attention to electoral politics over the last few years, one should recognize that it is at least as easy to coopt the language and resentment of class struggle in the service of neoliberalism.

Angela McRobbie occupies an interesting square in the grid of possible position taking on the relations of theory and practice, in which the difference between past and present political action is precisely the presence or absence of theory. She wants to draw a sharp distinction between the artists, activists, and intellectuals engaging in political work and a separate class she indicates mostly by examples—“working-class mothers living in housing estates,” “poor, disadvantaged people,” “refugees” and “prisoners” (149-50). She identifies the error made by the younger generation as a lack of theory, “one needs to have a slower form of reflection when young activists want to work alongside ‘local’ people […] there is a need to look back at radical social work theory and critical social policy” (151). Each of her examples takes this narrative form, the forgetting of the wisdom of an elder generation by inauthentic, headstrong youth. No doubt, if one looks for it, one will find instances that affirm this dichotomy, but there are both empirical and logical arguments to be made suggesting that these are differences that run *within* the past and present, the ‘local’ and the interloper. That is, one will find both errors and successes of theory, of the practice of theory and the theory of practice, among the older and younger generations—in fact, it will quickly become impossible to draw anything like the “generational cleavage” or “generational break” McRobbie posits (146-47). Nor can one say, purely and simply, whether this undecidability belongs to theory or to practice; it is harder than ever, today, to say who belongs in the categories McRobbie delineates. Indeed, there is much theory, and a significant amount of practice, occurring today around the difficulty of deciding who among us is still “middle class.”

Knowing how to respond to so many crises is, inevitably, both a problem of knowing how to act and knowing how to think. The interviews gathered here are important contributions to those tasks, fearlessly made at a moment (the present) when, by necessity, not everything that needs to be done has been, and not everything that needs to be known can be. Thus the calls that echo through these texts, to “invent situations in the form of redescriptions of the world we live in” (Rancière 53), “to invent a new radical form of democracy at a European level” (Negri 88), to create “new democratic forms” (Brown 77), or “an organizational form not yet discovered” (Lazzarrato 138). The openness of these invocations may be, in part, due to the restrictive form of the interviews, but it can also be read as the very openness toward the future that they herald.

The diagnoses and cures differ subtly when these interviews approach their zero point, when they consider the politics and economics of academia. The calls for innovations in democracy are not made explicit when it is a matter of democratizing the academic institution (where most of these scholars hold positions of power themselves). While Rosi Braidotti makes some suggestion that institutional reform is necessary (29), Wendy Brown, for example, posits counteracting the neoliberalization of the academy as “an *ethical* responsibility for scholars and academics to take up!” (85). That is, it remains a personal decision about how one guides one’s research and teaching, hopefully toward critical thinking rather than the reproduction of capital. Such a framing remains within the neoliberal imaginary, in which ethics is a personal decision taken within existing power relationships, rather than a structural challenge to those very social, political, and economic relations. The work being done on our campuses to organize academic labor, reduce debt burdens, and combat discrimination and sexual harassment go to the heart of both the practice of theory (who is free to participate in these spaces and these discussions?) and the broader political and economic questions facing our theorists and our societies, given that our institutions remain, for now, engines of social mobility.

The last question we would have to pose would be to what extent this deliberate crisis, the intense competition in our institutions given the glut of students and the dearth of stable futures for them, is itself producing some part, perhaps we could say the tone or framing, of so many discourses on *crisis*. The sense of urgency that goes along with crisis, the need for a response *now*, is both a response to undoubtedly real, external stimuli, and to some undecidable extent the product of an increasingly competitive academic marketplace in which we compete for attention. Could this very discourse on crisis be a justification for the intervention of the expert, the professional—one of us? Are we so many doctors clamoring that the last possible moment to accept our treatment is about to pass?