



# Introduction: Crisis, Criticism and Beyond

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We are living in a time of crisis. There has been a crucial shift in public awareness since the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when (at least, in the affluent societies of the West) crisis-aversion was predominant. Today, few would disagree that there *actually is* a kind of crisis, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, Black Lives Matter and Me Too, precarious migration and the rise of right-wing populism, and the continued repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis. Yet, crisis awareness is inherently political, as it is highly contested where the eye of the storm is to be located, if and how crises connect with other crises, who is to blame and what the ‘right’ responses might be. The deeper causes and interrelations of crises give rise to both qualified investigation and conspiracy theories, while some quarters insist on framing crises as just rare and temporary states of exception, implying that ‘we’ can simply go on with our habitual ways as soon as the ‘crisis’, seen as limited in scope, is over.

The least that can be said is that it is difficult to get a grip on crisis, and these difficulties start with definitions. The term ‘crisis’ is predominantly used today in two different yet relatable ways. First, the most common and ‘classical’ use of the term defines crisis as an exceptional moment or phase, interrupting a previously stable running of a system or order and temporarily impairing its functions. Crisis understood this way would entail an emphasis on acting, centred around the ability to identify a crisis with a return to prior stability. This everyday perception is essentially about *overcoming* a crisis, about putting the train back on the track, or fixing a hole where the rain gets in. But then, to refer to acting in an emphatic sense might be misleading, as such problem-solving might be aimed at keeping things in place rather than adjusting a system in more profound and considerate fashion – or changing it completely.

This takes us to the second widespread use of ‘crisis’ in terms of longer, enduring and complex problems for which no straightforward ‘solution’ is at hand. The latter understanding of crisis is often associated with Marxist theory and the analysis of capitalism as a system inherently verging on crisis. However, the idea of an enduring crisis not only has wider theological and philosophical dimensions, but has, in the age of the ongoing pandemic, climate change and permanent nuclear threat, become the more timely, concrete, and plausible definition. Crises, then, are typically complex and



interrelated; they are not to be reduced to what you see on the surface or any narrow framing in terms of immediately manageable tasks. Facing crises in their actual complexity, breaking through the veils of repression, illusions, and misinformation, might be the crucial thing rather than clinging to the naïve optimism that there might be an ‘easy way out’.

What we think is important to emphasize is that both definitions offer cues for approaching the crises of the present. While the second definition serves as a warning against a reductive and simplistic perception of crises by considering their complex, interrelated and lasting dimensions, the first definition emphasizes the possibility and importance to act, resisting the apathetic and depoliticising tendency that takes today’s crises for granted and as insurmountable. Both definitions are thus crucial to go ‘beyond crisis’ – to avoid a naïve framing of crisis phenomena in confronting their underlying actual complexity, and to find strategies of acting, even when the omnipresence of crises seems to constitute a ‘new normalcy’.

It seems that bringing the two levels of meaning together would be a key requirement for any theoretical and practical approach to engage with the crises of the present, and we would like to draw the reader’s attention to Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte’s essay included in this issue for a deeper historical look at the definitional complexities and how Raymond Williams bridges two different understandings of crisis. All we can state at this point is that Williams’ thought offers numerous cues that strike us as surprisingly timely and relevant to analyse crisis in the present conjuncture. What is surprising, though, is that a focus on crisis is not too obvious when taking a first glance at Williams’ writings – you would have to go a bit deeper for that. For example, looking at Williams’ *Keywords*, his famous historical semantic probe into the contestations that underlie the vocabulary that forms the socio-cultural core of British (and other) English(es), it is striking that ‘crisis’ does not have an entry of its own,<sup>1</sup> which does not mean that ‘crisis’ is absent from the book. In fact, there is a short parenthetical section related to crisis in the entry on ‘criticism’ where Williams discusses the implication of authoritative judgment that is also enshrined in the related words ‘critic’ and ‘critical’:

Critical has another specialized but important and persistent use, not to describe judgment, but from a specialized use in medicine to refer to a turning point, hence decisive. *Crisis* itself has of course been extended to any difficulty as well as to any turning point. (Williams 1983 [1976]: 85, emphasis in original)

At first sight, Williams would seem to merely dismiss the word ‘crisis’ for its inflationary use. However, we can also grasp the passage in terms of a qualified understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Crisis’ is also absent from the 2005 *New Keywords* edited by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris – but this omission was taken up by the Raymond Williams Society in the 2019 special issue on crisis of their annual journal, *Key Words*.



crisis that is worth taking seriously. The association derived from medicine, which frames 'critical' in a non-normative sense in terms of a crucial turning point calling for decisions, is deliberately attributed by Williams to the word 'crisis'. Referring to "any difficulty as well as to any turning point", 'crisis' is thus generally defined as moment or situation where decisions need to be made. What seems to be implied by including these reflections in the 'criticism' entry is that criticism's task is to direct these crucial decisions. While this view seems to underwrite the first definition of crisis as a manageable problem to overcome, Williams' entry takes issue with an all-too normative understanding of criticism. More specifically, the "fault-finding" that criticism is endowed with should not be content with abstract judging 'from above' but be seen as "a definite practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context" (Williams 1985: 66). In short, while underwriting an idea of crisis as practically surmountable based on decisions at crucial turning points, Williams also insists on the "complex" aspects of crisis seen as a "whole situation" – a sensitivity that calls for better decisions, and non-normative (or at least, not overly dogmatic) and actively engaged criticism would play a crucial role in bringing this sensitivity to the fore.

Williams' paradoxical outlook of registering the wider dimensions of crisis while still retaining the aim of overcoming it is in many ways reflected in his seminal idea of the 'long revolution' – an idea Williams developed not only in the major work of the same name (1961), but also significantly shaped in later texts such as, *Modern Tragedy* (1966). Here, the long revolution is crisply defined as an ongoing struggle for "full membership" in a society, more specifically, "the capacity to direct a particular society, by active mutual responsibility and co-operation, on a basis of full social equality" (Williams 2006: 101-102). However, the long revolution is not just an aspiration but remains "necessary", "because there can be no acceptable human order while the full humanity of any class of men is in practice denied" (Williams 2006: 102). Williams even refers to the long revolution as "tragic", as a "radical disorder" that is often intensified by the very measures intended to overcome it (2006: 102). The long revolution, in short, relies on an awareness of a complex crisis and is nonetheless relentless in continued practical efforts at changing societies to incorporate "all its people, *as whole human beings*" (Williams 2006: 101, emphasis in original). While chiefly interested in overcoming social barriers and political inequality when writing these lines in 1966, Williams soon extended his awareness of the deeper crisis beyond anthropocentric confines to consider ecology and the nuclear threat, very much helping to lift these dimensions on the political agenda at an early stage.

When it comes to extending critical awareness to register the deeper levels of crisis, 'structure of feeling', at once Williams' most influential and elusive concept, is of special importance. According to the final revision of the concept in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), analysing the structure of feeling of a certain historical situation allows to get to



the level of “feeling” or “experience” to which the fixed cultural forms – the “received interpretation” constituting “official consciousness” – do not speak at all, which indeed they do not “recognize” (130). Such experience typically registers as a disturbance of a dominant form, in terms of “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency” (Williams 1977: 130). Still, symptoms like these reflect “practical experience”, usually consisting of “mixed experiences”, which are often highly incompatible with, and hence should not be reduced to, dominant cultural forms. The “consciousness” manifesting here, then, is a dimly manifesting awareness of a ‘structure’ – conventions, institutions, discourses – in crisis. But Williams understands this ‘critical’ consciousness also as a way-out of crisis, conceptualising structure of feeling as the “emergent or pre-emergent” (1977: 132), an “actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms”: “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange”, in “exceptionally complex” relations with the “already articulate” (1977: 131). Williams thus sees “feeling” – and perhaps crisis itself – as a dynamic element in his Gramsci-inspired theory of social transformation, and this view is not restricted to revolutionary change. Dominant culture, in other words, is never uncontested and stable, the (pre-)emergent might manifest in all kinds of unforeseen ways and crystallize as alternative or oppositional cultural forms, also allowing for unforeseen connections with residual culture.

It is thus that structure of feeling offers itself to understand the deeper and interrelated levels of crisis precisely to overcome it. Further considering the latter aspect of overcoming, or moving ‘beyond’ crisis, we should note Lawrence Grossberg’s reconstruction of structure of feeling as the key element in Williams’ implicit theory of modernity. Grossberg emphasises that there are “multiple ways of being modern” (2010: 31). There is hence “a certain variability in the ways people can belong in the world, in what we might call the lived temporalities (and geographies) of existence, understood as simultaneously material, discursive, ideological and affective” (Grossberg 2010: 30). This multiplicity of being modern is due to what Grossberg describes as “the intersection of two chronotopes, the singular event and [historical] change, through which the virtual gives itself over to expression and actualization” (2010: 32):

The structure of feeling offers a vision of being modern that involves not a choice between either the event or change but a relationship between concrete actualizations of both. Insofar as each of these varied logics of belonging in time are never simply singular and universal, as if there were only one possibility of the event or of chronos, then we have to think of ‘being modern’ itself, like the structure of feeling, as a real and positive multiplicity. (Grossberg 2010: 31)

According to Grossberg’s seminal reading, ‘structure of feeling’ fuses historical change unfolding in chronological time with the ‘presentist’ temporality of the event, the emphatic moment celebrated by Baudelaire as the *now*, and described by Benjamin as



messianic time (Grossberg 2010: 28-29). Seen in this way, 'structure of feeling' would register the emphatic awareness of the multiple and real possibilities to bring about change as an event in a historical situation – an affectual awareness that may well animate action.

The complex affectual experience of crisis – between disturbance and event – is thus made aware in a way that simultaneously insists on differences in 'feeling' and the real possibility of actively changing 'structures' – ideologies, conventions and institutions. 'Structure of feeling' as emphatic awareness of the changeable 'present', as elucidated by Grossberg, is thus both linked and unlinked to the historical conjuncture within and against which it manifests.

It is with this prospect of capturing, resisting and transforming the 'here' and 'now' that the contributions in this *Coils of the Serpent* special issue follow Williams' cue to look at the 'present conjuncture' from different perspectives. Contributors from various disciplines and fields – among others, history, philosophy, political theory, social work, literary studies, film studies and cultural studies, approach crisis phenomena from various angles. They all share an interest in tracing the complex and deeper levels of a conjuncture-in-crisis while simultaneously registering, in response to these historical complexities, the (pre-)emergent figurations of the present that point 'beyond crisis' by simultaneously giving rise to, hopefully, what Grossberg has phrased the "multiplicity of being modern".

Drawing on a variety of Williams' writings, **Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte** argues that Williams' understanding of crisis – which was never articulated as such and therefore has to be reconstructed from the margins of his work – should nonetheless be critically appreciated. More specifically, Williams' thinking about crisis shows a potential to connect two otherwise incompatible philosophical-historical conceptualizations of crisis: crisis seen as a temporary state of exception, and crisis seen as enduring or perennial. Collecting and supplementing Williams' dispersed thoughts on this matter, Vanhoutte ultimately reads Williams' understanding of crisis in terms of a timely call for practical hope, "ordinary" acting, deciding and judging.

**Daniel G. Williams** points out a notable convergence between Raymond Williams' and Hannah Arendt's thought. Both intellectuals stress the importance of belonging to a local communal or national particularity as opposed to an abstract ideal of citizenship. It is in this cultural and political sense that Raymond Williams, who from early on engaged with the question of Welsh national autonomy and the disintegration of Britain, offers important cues for Welsh Europeanism in post-Brexit times, allowing a perspective of independence for European regions that is not grounded in essentialism but in difference and responsibility.



**Iván Alvarado, Diego Parejo and Luis Díaz** critically discuss their experience of being involved in a major Spanish community intervention project. Looking at two case studies from Spain, they question the dominant view of ‘community’, arguing that it tends to replicate a liberal conceptualization which sees the community primarily as compensation for sustaining the capitalist everyday. The authors also argue against right-wing glorifications of the ‘deep’ community and call for a more democratic approach to community intervention which actively involves the citizens instead of clinging to static technocratic models.

The collaborative reflection piece by **Victoria Allen, Kirsti Bohata, Phoebe Braithwaite, Emily Cuming, Ingrid von Rosenberg and Kath Woodward** shows how Williams’ thought and writing has inspired and influenced the work of female academics at various points in their careers. Focused on a set of questions posed to the correspondents (contributors), the piece reveals the continued relevance of working with Williams, but also reflects his limitations, drawing attention to the work and voices of people who have developed, reorientated and revitalised his work and thought.

**Manuel Yang** historicizes Williams’ *Culture and Society*, reading it as an intervention directed against Cold War conformism enshrining conservative values as ‘Culture with a capital C’. Williams’ seminal work should therefore be understood in context with other radically dissenting voices of the time such as Herbert Marcuse, Raya Dunayevskaya, C. Wright Mills and E.P. Thompson. It is for its strategy of dismantling a depoliticised notion of culture that *Culture and Society* can also accompany later critical struggles against neoliberal and neoconservative ‘culture wars’ in the present conjuncture.

Critically reflecting on the principles of canon-formation, **Cyprian Piskurek** compares Williams’ idea of “selective tradition” governed by “structures of feeling” to Franco Moretti’s concept of “distant reading”. The two approaches associated with these ideas have much in common: both can be said to have contributed to the historical rise of major academic fields within the humanities – Cultural Studies and Digital Humanities, respectively. Moreover, both approaches have reacted to ‘crises of knowledge’ specific to their time of emergence, such as the elitist outlook of post-war universities in Williams’ case, and the need to deal with the newly available huge amount of digital data in Moretti’s.

**Johannes Schlegel** takes a critical look at popular self-help books such as Marie Kondo’s bestselling *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* and *Spark Joy*. Schlegel draws on Williams’ structure of feeling to argue that Kondo’s works epitomise a contemporary ‘material crisis’ of the bourgeois middle classes of the Global North, in which objects are increasingly seen as removed from their social history and reduced to the affects they evoke in individuals, to be ultimately discarded if the objects don’t ‘spark joy’. What Schlegel sees reflected in Kondo’s de-politicised outlook is a precarious subject position



that defines itself not by consumerist possession, but by the – likewise commodified – renunciation of objects.

Arguing that Williams had a considerable affinity with film theory and film history, **Monika Seidl** traces the striking convergences between filmic theories concerned with the close-up and Williams' conceptualization of structure and feeling. Both entail potential moments of unease, as the affects aroused by a magnified detail might be understood in terms of 'feeling' temporarily losing its ties with social and narrative 'structures'. Discussing examples from Alfred Hitchcock and Rouben Mamoulian, Seidl demonstrates that the "paradoxical nature of the close-up" – as unsettling totality that still remains integrated into the filmic narrative – confronts the audience with a crisis-like experience that they can but need not engage with – an ambivalent school of crisis and how to deal with it, for those willing to see.

**C. Parker Krieg** follows Williams' insight that ideas about the environment and nature are more social and cultural than one might think, arguing that there is a dominant post-Fordist model of nature constructed as a flexible network. This model problematically corresponds with neoliberal ideology and thus sustains a mode of production that has contributed to environmental crisis at a global scale. Looking at a selection of philosophical, science- and eco-fiction novels, Krieg sees literature – very much in Williams' vein – in its capacity to capture, criticize and point beyond this ongoing crisis of "flexible nature".

**Anupam Siddharth's** look at science fiction is interested in the problematic role resilience plays in discourses around crises. Resilience is typically aimed at sustaining the status quo and preventing transformation as a more 'real' response to crises from happening. While praising resilience often disables a serious engagement with the deeper dimensions of crises, science fiction has a general potential to act as a medium for crisis reflection. In the light of Williams' categories, science fiction typically reconfigures the now-dominant as the residual when critically projecting it into the future. Works like Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti*, translated into English as *The Method*, thus offer a critical framework that presents established views and hegemonic orders as contingent and contestable.

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This *Coils of the Serpent* special issue is published in late 2021, the centenary of Raymond Williams. Many new publications and events give witness to a sustained, even increasing, interest in the major post-war intellectual of working-class descent, who was also a key thinker of the left. To name just a few of these special events, the Raymond Williams Society organized an "Online Autumn Series" to celebrate the occasion, and 2022 will see a centenary conference in Manchester. Daniel G. Williams at Swansea



University hosted an online series of “Centenary Symposia: Raymond Williams in an Age of Globalization”, connecting researchers from Brazil, Japan, Europe and China. The Raymond Williams Foundation launched an extensive set of online “explainers” on their website, along with personal memoirs and readings from Williams’ work. New publications include a Centenary Edition of *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, edited by Daniel G. Williams, which compiles Raymond Williams’ key writings around Wales, and two volumes of essays, *Raymond Williams at 100*, edited by Paul Stasi, and *Raymond Williams: From Wales to the World*, edited by Stephen Woodhams. A collection of difficult to find and hitherto unpublished writings by Williams, *Culture and Politics: Class, Writing, Socialism*, edited by Phil O’Brien, is due to appear in early 2022. The online focus of many of the centenary activities attests the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, but also benefits from the digital to make new connections possible. It is in this sense that this special issue on Raymond Williams also reflects the increased international interest and outlook in Williams studies.

This special issue has been a long way in the making and is in many ways a product of the pandemic days. Also, this issue takes up the impetus of the conference “Beyond Crisis: Reassessing Raymond Williams’ Cultural Materialism”, organized by Michael Krause and Harald Pittel, which took place at the University of Potsdam from 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> January 2018. Due to various circumstances, the publication of the conference papers had to be postponed. In Spring 2020, Victoria Allen and Harald Pittel revitalized the project, and, amid the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, the decision was taken to publish a selection of the conference papers, and also to send out a new call for papers engaging with a wider range of crisis phenomena.

The editors would like to thank all contributors to the 2018 conference, and, it goes without saying, all the new contributors who responded to our second call for papers. An extra big thank you to Garret Scally for providing additional feedback and making important suggestions when decisions needed to be made – in short, for acting as a third editor, ‘under cover’, as it were. We would also like to thank Florian Cord for making this special issue possible and for having been extremely helpful and supportive throughout.

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Our special issue is dedicated to the memory of H. Gustav Klaus, who sadly passed away in early 2020. Klaus was a leading historian of British working-class literature. His major study *Literature of Labour* (1985), together with the edited collections *The Socialist Novel in Britain* (1982) and *The Rise of Socialist Fiction 1880-1914* (1987), were of formative significance for the field.<sup>2</sup> In his later critical work, Klaus went on to highlight

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<sup>2</sup> All these books have recently been reissued with new prefaces by Klaus at Edward Everett Root Publishers: [eerpublishing.com](http://eerpublishing.com)





crucial topics such as working-class women, the rise of anarchism, and literature's relations with ecology, just to name a few. His most recent collection of essays, *Voices of Anger and Hope: Studies in the Literature of Labour and Socialism*, appeared in 2019.

Klaus had a special relation to Raymond Williams: not only did Williams contribute an essay on Welsh novels to *The Socialist Novel in Britain*, but Klaus had also edited a volume of German translations of Williams' key writings under the title *Innovationen* (1977, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1983). When originally published, the 'innovative' book was a timely intervention in contemporary debates among the German-speaking left in their continued struggles to position themselves between (various strands of) Marxism and the more recent perspectives of the new social movements. It was as part of this collection that "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", with its seminal clarification on the meaning of 'to determine', was made available to a wider group of German readers.

In 2018, Klaus was one of the keynote speakers at the "Beyond Crisis" conference in Potsdam. Crisis was very much present as several participants were not able to reach the conference location because train operations were partly interrupted. This was not, as so frequently in recent years, conditioned by a train drivers' strike, but due to a snowstorm. While several of the invited guests saw no alternative to cancelling at the very last minute, Klaus, on his way from southern Germany, was temporarily stranded in Frankfurt. Instead of cancelling and returning home, Klaus booked a room in a hotel to make it to Potsdam on the second conference day, where he gave a talk on the international dimensions of the 1968 student uprisings – in particular, the *May Day Manifesto*, co-written by a group of critical scholars and turned into a book by Williams – to a packed auditorium. For Klaus, as for many involved in the historical movements, crises, though undoubtedly deep and complex, were never insurmountable.

When we approached Klaus to contribute to this special issue, he made no secret about his reservations concerning the rise of academic online journals and the waning status of the printed book. He expressed his cordial solidarity, though, and when he heard that the project took longer due to the precarious situation in academia as experienced by the conference organisers, he wrote a long letter in which he looked back at his career, pointing out that he had never had a permanent position until he became Professor of Literature of the British Isles at the University of Rostock rather late in his life. Klaus pointed out in detail the difficulties he had to face and had no illusions that the situation would likely not improve for younger generations. Yet he wrote without bitterness, his letter providing for us what Williams might have called a 'resource of hope' – 'hope' not in the sense of higher expectations, but of taking heart and going on against all odds.



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