



# Towards a Theory of Crisis: A Thought in Progress with Raymond Williams

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Several years ago, a book of mine on the concept of crisis was published (cf. Vanhoutte 2018). The reason I had written that book was that I was surprised by how little accurate attention the concept of crisis had received of late, especially considering its increasing presence in our lives – everything has basically been declared to be in a state of crisis.<sup>1</sup> But it seemed this was of little interest to academics (in particular, the so-called humanists and social scientists). It was as if scholars were stuck in a binary matrix. Either every reference to crisis had to be ignored because it would only become a mere ripple *post factum*, or it had to be considered in its most apocalyptic understanding.

True, not all scholarly publications can be listed in these two reductive categories. But even the ones that attempted to go beyond this limiting binary, in the end, were either repulsive or just left one unconvinced. This research went either in the direction of Milton Friedman's shock-doctrine crisis opportunism (cf. Friedman 2002) or somehow wasn't able to stay focused on the concept of crisis itself. For example, Janet Roitman claims that a crisis is a "non-locus" (Roitman 2014: 10) that "cannot be taken as a description of a historical situation nor can it be taken to be a diagnosis of the status of history" (Roitman 2014: 49). One should not deny the existence of 'real' crisis (Roitman 2014: 94), but the point of a crisis is not the crisis itself but that "claims to crisis are the grounds for critique" (Roitman 2014: 90). Some years before Roitman, Simon Critchley

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<sup>1</sup> A possible list of 'things' that have been declared of being (or having been) in crisis includes: the humanities, the university in its totality, or, reversely, education as such; literature as well has been declared to be in a crisis; (traditional) religion is in a crisis, and, maybe correlated, the (traditional?) family is also in a crisis; there is (was) a housing crisis; healthcare is in crisis; the banks are in crisis; and general politics is in a terrible crisis—even the nation-state (especially in its, so-called, Post-Westphalian form) and sovereignty as such have both been declared to be in crisis; the community (general social and organizational life) is in crisis; labour has been declared repetitively as being in crisis; the euro(zone) is in crisis and several European countries are in crisis (a list of non-European countries that are in crisis would be even longer); information (journalism) is in an existential crisis; and fully aware of the non-exhaustiveness of this list, we can conclude with the harsh reality that an awful lot of people (ever more as the rise in (ab)use of pharmaceuticals indicate) are going through endless personal crisis as well.



made a similar claim. Although also Critchley does not want to deny the importance and the existence of crisis, for him a crisis can only have a purpose when it is linked to “the attempt to produce critical consciousness” (Critchley 2001: xv). Although Roitman and Critchley did not go the Friedman way, they too, however, had failed to keep the concept of crisis at the center of attention. Only in the work of Reinhart Koselleck or in some of the critical work of Paul de Man did I find some desire to focus on the concept of crisis and not deviate from it.<sup>2</sup>

Had I read Raymond Williams when I wrote my book, my very short list of authors that had focused directly on the concept of crisis in the way I wanted to do and that only contained Koselleck and de Man would have received a third member. Unfortunately, I hadn't read him. In the months I have now spent reading a large part of his work, I have found much of what I intended to write back then. And for him never having quite thematized the concept of crisis, I consider this exceptional (not that he is in need of my praise). In what follows, I will try and draw Williams' various comments on the concept of crisis out and formulate them in a sort of unified theory of crisis that will include both his understanding of the concept of crisis and his speculations about how a crisis can be overcome, and where the forces can be found to overcome it.

Before I embark upon this adventure, I think it necessary to first hold still with the historical and etymological meaning and understanding of the concept of crisis. This is of essential importance already in itself and even more so considering that Williams himself also demonstrated particular interest in the historical and etymological situating of words and their changing meaning, as we can see from the opening pages of his *Culture and Society* (2017: 1-6) or his more detailed investigation of this in *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2015a),<sup>3</sup> it is particularly appropriate, before venturing into an investigation of this nature, to make sure that the basics of the most important terminology in question are understood.

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Originating from the Proto-Indo-European root *krei*, which means to sieve, to discriminate, or to distinguish, our contemporary word ‘crisis’ derives directly from the Greek word *krinō* which means to separate or to decide, to cut, to judge or to select. As a

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<sup>2</sup> In the end, I ended up striking analytical gold in Medieval religious theory, particularly in the theory of Limbo, but this is not the place, nor do I have the time, to tell this other story.

<sup>3</sup> It might be interesting to add that Williams did not have the concept of ‘crisis’ as lemma present in his *Keywords*; the word ‘creative’ (Williams 2015a: 45) is followed by ‘criticism’ (Williams 2015a: 47). The Raymond Williams Society has a journal dedicated to Williams’ study of keywords: *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*. Only the 17<sup>th</sup> Issue of this journal (2019) was dedicated to the concept of crisis. Although the five interesting articles (and Robert Spencer and Christopher Vardy’s introduction) are obviously centred on the concept of crisis, they, by no means, have in the historical and etymological situating of the word crisis its main focus; as such they did not offer any help in what follows.



fundamental concept in ancient Greek language and life – it “potentially registered all the decision situations of inner and outer life, of individual humans and their communities” (Koselleck 2002: 237) – it was used in a variety of different domains: politics, theology, and, predominantly, medicine. That the medical usage of the concept is historically predominant not only implied that the usage of the concept of crisis featured prevalently in this context (which it de facto did), but it was also the medical meaning and understanding of crisis that shaped the usage of the word in the various other fields (cf. Koselleck 2002: 240).<sup>4</sup> This much we know, leaving little room for ambiguity about this etymological and historical information.

Also, we can be unequivocal regarding the implications of this etymological and historical information. As the German historian, and one of the founders of the *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), Koselleck summarized so accurately, a crisis implies:

1. The presence of strict, irrevocable, and definitive alternatives (cf. Koselleck 2002: 237).
2. A strict and limited temporal dimension (cf. Koselleck 2002: 237).

Although these implications at times might suggest themselves in a more complex fashion, they are necessary implications of the etymological and historical meaning of the concept of crisis. What is important about the ‘original’ understanding and implication of the concept of ‘crisis’ is thus the fact that a crisis requires a timely resolution in favor of two irrevocable alternatives (one either continues to live or dies).

As with many things, the unambiguous understanding of the concept of crisis started to give way with the coming of modernity. The birthing pangs of this unraveling of the concept of crisis can be read in the works of Immanuel Kant, and the consequences of it were even predicted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

*Sapere aude!* is Immanuel Kant’s famous Enlightenment motto. It is accompanied by the saying that the “*Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity*” (Kant 1996: 58). Interestingly, according to Kant, the self-incurred immaturity is caused

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘original’ medical understanding of crisis, as phrased by and understood in the Hippocratic tradition, needs to be considered within a more ‘general’ theory of diseases. A disease, which has a ‘regular’ course, was considered as a disturbance of the natural/normal human body. The (medical) crisis is then to be understood as a moment where the battle and the decision between the disease and nature (the natural human body) will occur. We can thus read in *Affections*, the treatise that has what comes closest to a definition of the concept of crisis, that “[T]o be judged (Κρίνεσθαι) in diseases is when they increase, diminish, change into another disease, or end” (Hippocrates 1988, §8; 17). So a person who is sick will reach, in the critical days, the stage or moment of ‘crisis’ where, on the one hand, the battle will be fought between his nature and the disease, and, on the other hand (but simultaneously), the disease will be decided (judged) upon. After the stage or moment of crisis, the patient will become well again, or he will have lost the battle and die.



by man's refusal, or his lack of courage, to *decide* (*EntschlieÙung*) to emerge from immaturity and enter into maturity. Now what is this voyage from immaturity, over a decision, and into maturity if not a perfect description of a crisis? And what is this lack of courage if not the refusal to let the crisis go its natural course of 'deciding' between irrevocable and definitive alternatives (maturity and immaturity) in the strict and limited temporal dimension that is available?

What Kant did not write down found its voice in another 'godfather' of modernism: Rousseau. Rousseau also understood that modernity was closely related to and involved with the concept of crisis. He differed from Kant in that he realized the peril existed that this required crisis-moment would (could?) not be overcome.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we find him prophesizing in his *Emile: Or on Education*: "[W]e are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolutions" (Rousseau 1979: 194). And, as Koselleck has rendered perfectly clear, the revolutions on the horizon are multiple but the crisis is only one. Therefore, what we are dealing with is the prophesy of a "perpetual crisis" (Koselleck 2004: 23).

For as much as this aspect of modernity could only be unconsciously present or prophesized, in our times – of 'hypermodernity' or late-modernity, as they have been called – this peculiar aspect of the crisis, namely it having received these qualifiers of 'perpetual', 'enduring', or even 'perennial', has become all too evident. In fact, I think we can even state, more solidly than ever before, that the idea of a perennial crisis is the cipher of our (modern) times. What our epoch is dealing with is not just a sequence of different crises, but one single and enduring crisis.

If Koselleck was still able to write that in the past the only certainty present in the nature of a crisis was "its end" (Koselleck 1988: 127) – "The eventual solution is uncertain", he continued, "but the end of the crisis, a change in the existing situation – [...] – is not" (Koselleck 1988: 127) – and if what I have just described is accurate, then it seems that we can't be so certain about that certainty anymore.

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Having clearly stated the basics (historical and etymological) of the main concept of this text (crisis), we have now arrived at the moment when we can finally turn directly to Williams' work.

As Williams' son Ederyn remarked, Raymond had remarkable prophetic qualities (cf. Williams 2003: xvi). These qualities were, however, not limited to the field of media studies – the field Ederyn was indicating when he wrote about the prophetic capacities of his father. His prophetic sensibility, in fact, also regarded the concept of crisis. And

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<sup>5</sup> But Kant's insistence on the necessary courage to take this decision makes me wonder if he was not, at least unconsciously, aware of the problematic as well.



like every prophet, he was not only aware of what was yet to come, but he also knew and perfectly understood what had been.

First of all, Williams was perfectly aware of the antique understanding of the concept of crisis. We can, for example, read in the collection of essays that was published after his death and that goes under the title of *Resources of Hope* (1989) that “a genuine crisis” comports “always, in practice, a crisis of change” (Williams 1989: 288). Just like in the ancient understanding, Williams stresses that a crisis will bring forth, and necessarily so, a change. That this change is one between two opposing alternatives is not present in this short statement, but that is of little importance at this moment. A similar statement can be found in another text that is inserted in this same collection. Here, Williams asserts that at a certain moment one will come to a “crisis point, when there is a profound challenge to the existing way of life” (Williams 1989: 224). If I am allowed to temporalize Williams’ spatial ‘point’, then we find here an almost perfect transposition of the classical Greek understanding of a crisis being a timely resolution in favor of irrevocable alternatives. But it is not only in *Resources of Hope* that we find the ancient understanding of crisis. When speaking about Bertolt Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and her Children* in his *Modern Tragedy* (2013b), the ancient understanding of crisis returns once again. “Its crisis”, that is, the moment of crisis in the play, he remarks, “is properly reached in the frantic drumming of the dumb girl: [...]” (Williams 2013b: loc. 3322). And this awareness is present also on numerous occasions in the play (homonymously entitled ‘Modern Tragedy’) written by Williams that concludes this volume – there is, for example, the “pressure of the crisis” (Williams 2013b: loc. 4360), and “the crisis moment” (Williams 2013b: loc. 4406), etc.

Besides the presence of this more ancient understanding of the concept of crisis in the work of Williams, we also find references to crisis that are more neutral in understanding. These various ‘crises’ don’t explicitly refer to the specific understanding of crisis being a turning-point whose outcome consisted of a decisive either/or between two opposing alternatives, but refer to a more basic and superficial understanding of a crisis being a mere profound problem or an upheaval of some sort, be that a personal or collective one or one merely related to a specific field. One can hear an echo of the ancient understanding in these crises, a resolution will have to come about, and this resolution will change the situation. But the emphasis we found on the timely aspect or on the presence of strict opposing alternatives is not present. A substantial list of examples could be proposed here, but the following will have to do: there is “the crisis of socialism” (Williams 1989: 295), we are touching “forms of a general crisis” (Williams 2016: 420), there is an “underlying crisis” of our social relations (Williams 2016: 426), the “[T]he human crisis is always a crisis of understanding” (Williams 2017: 442), and, to conclude, “[...] whether they are in fact the symptoms of some very deep crisis in experience [...]” (Williams 2013a: 330). For as much as these quotations are reported



here out of their context, that very context never offered any extra information regarding the nature of that particular crisis.

If we discovered that Williams was aware of the continuing operativity of the ancient understanding of the concept of crisis – even though he did not always refer to a crisis within the context of this older understanding – he was also aware that crisis was used in a different way as well. For as much as we don't know whether Williams' awareness of that other, modern understanding and usage of the concept of crisis was along the Kantian unconscious line and not the Rousseauian futuristic one, the fact remains that his usage and referrals to a crisis did also include a crisis under the tag of 'perennial'.

If we then turn to the presence of the 'perennial crisis', we don't have to wait to the last years of his activity to find it present in his work. It suffices to have a look at his *The Country and the City*, a book originally published in 1973, where we find him referring to a "deepening crisis" of our mode of living and of the poverty in the world (Williams 2016: 432). But this deepening crisis we are facing is "not a crisis of manufacturing industry alone" (Williams 2016: 432). In fact, the crisis is not of a single something. It is a "global crisis" (Williams 2016: 413) and a "general crisis" (Williams 2016: 420). And, as he will summarize in his *Resources of Hope*, it is a "long-run" and "deep crisis" (Williams 1989: 149). It is the "wider system itself [that is] in crisis" (Williams 1989: 252), and we are in it for the long haul because it is a "severe and prolonged world crisis" (Williams 1989: 177). Although Williams never literally called the modern crisis a perennial or lasting crisis, I believe it is correct to consider his comments to be along precisely that line of understanding the concept of crisis.

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As can be deduced from what we just read, Williams was not only aware of the traditional understanding of the concept of crisis, he also preceded most in the awareness of the so-called hyper-modern surfacing of the perennial crisis that is endemic to modernity. With this being the case, this also leaves him open to the criticism that has been raised against the binomial of the "perennial crisis", namely that, as a number of humanists we have already encountered and who favored the precedence of criticism over crisis, have indicated, it is an oxymoron (e.g. Roitman 2014: 2; Shaviro 2015: 9). Can something that requires a timely resolution become perennial? More importantly, can something that we all know is supposed to terminate, and terminate quickly, suddenly have no more end? If it does, then what are the implications of this peculiar and paradoxical duplicity?

It is necessary to stress that contrary to the scholars who have simply 'surrendered' to the oxymoronic usage of a 'perennial crisis', or who have, in order to avoid dealing



with the concept of crisis anymore, simply denied the existence or the appropriateness of the concept of crisis in today's world, Williams did not shy away from a confrontation with the implications of this paradoxical binomial. Even though he did not confront the problematic head-on, the few comments he made regarding the consequences of this becoming perennial or a lasting crisis, and what is required above all to minimally attempt to overcome this stalemate, are particularly rigorous and precise.

Starting with the implications of the peculiar and paradoxical duplicity of a 'perennial crisis', what is at stake is indeed, as Williams sharply stated a "widespread loss of the future" (Williams 2007: 96). As I wrote in my book *Limbo Reapplied. On Living in Perennial Crisis and the Immanent Afterlife* (cf. Vanhoutte 2018: 218-221), the addition of the qualifier 'perennial' to the concept of crisis, exhausts it, wearing out its understanding and operativity. The limited time(/space)-frame of the crisis' judging decision (between opposing alternatives) becomes somnolently numb and enters into a phase of endless deferral (something I called an exhausting 'logoration') which, to make the story and the paradox complete, nevertheless leaves us in the Limboic state of meaningless enthusiasm, even ecstasy, as Baudrillard already phrased it (cf. Baudrillard 1993: 33).

But acknowledging the nefarious implications of this qualified crisis was not enough for Williams. For as much as he was aware of the meaning of the paradox of this enduring crisis, he also clearly and decidedly pointed at a direction out of this peculiarly detrimental state of affairs. Considering that the core of the crisis (also of the 'pimped' version of the perennial crisis) is the actual moment of deciding (of its critical, sifting, judging action that forms the linguistic and etymological base of the word *krisis* itself) – and that the 'enduring crisis' is endlessly stretching the time before that precise and decisive moment, so that it never actually takes place – Williams is very conscious that any possible way out needs to find its origin exactly in that critical, deciding moment of the crisis.

We can thus read in his *The Country and the City* the following masterfully phrased words that are of cardinal importance in understanding the specific nature of, and any possible solution to a perennial crisis:

[...] we need to acknowledge that recognition of the crisis, and almost all possible ways of resolving it, are functions of consciousness: of a flexible and highly mobile capacity to observe and intervene: in techniques and modes of planning and conservation, but even more critically in the area which will really decide our future, *the area of decision itself*. (Williams 2016: 432, emphasis added)

It is only in the recognition of the importance of the decision that any possible solution can be discovered.



But how can this occur? And by whom?

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Before we can answer these two questions, it is necessary to quickly confront a thematic that is supposed to work as the glue between what we have just said about the ‘crisis’ and what will follow as I will attempt to go ‘beyond’ that ‘same’ crisis. This ‘sticky’ topic (in both its understanding of gluing on and of being particularly challenging) is that of hope. If there is no hope of any possible means to go beyond the crisis as we have just come to describe it, then there is no reason at all to proceed (here and in real life).

Now just like Williams did not confront the topic of crisis thematically, neither did he do this regarding the word and concept of ‘hope’. In fact, he hardly ever referred to it. However, on the few occasions he did confront this particularly ambiguous and even dangerous concept, he did so in a way that is almost identical to how it has been mentioned in a recent book that also deals with the topic. The book I am referring to is David Newheiser’s volume *Hope in a Secular Age. Deconstruction, Negative Theology and the Future of Faith* (Newheiser 2019) and the understanding of hope that is shared by Williams and Newheiser is that of considering it rigorously as a practice. Both Williams and Newheiser are convinced that the only way in which hope can be of any real help is “in making hope practical” (Williams 1989: 209), or if one can consider it as “a practice” (Newheiser 2019: 14).

But what does it mean that hope is a practice? Basically, it means a number of separate things. First, it implies that hope is not an outcome. Hope is not that illusionary, futuristic, especially rosy or comforting prospect that justifies all the pains and sorrows of the now. Secondly, hope is also “disengaged from the calculation of probabilities” (Newheiser 2019: 64, 79). Hope isn’t a conclusion to a rational estimation or even prediction. Thirdly, and consequentially, hope does not offer any guarantees whatsoever (cf. Newheiser 2019: 56, 79). In fact, if hope doesn’t include a sense of pessimism, even the simple awareness of its own (possible) failure, then it isn’t properly hope (cf. Newheiser 2019: 74).

As much as this is the thesis of Newheiser, I believe it is also what Williams’ theory of the Long Revolution stands for.<sup>6</sup> Isn’t the Long Revolution the (hopeful) conviction that man can (practically) direct his own life, but at the same time he is also “continually limited and opposed” (Williams 2013a: 397)? Furthermore, isn’t the Long Revolution also that same process that “necessarily includes both success and failure” (Williams 2013a: 396)? Finally, isn’t the Long Revolution also that paradoxical (ironically just like

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<sup>6</sup> Isn’t the Long Revolution also the tragic revolution from his *Modern Tragedy* (cf. Williams 2013b: loc. 1097-1116)?



the ‘perennial crisis’, an oxymoron), and intrinsically never-ending continuum that is not an outcome?<sup>7</sup> Basically, for both authors, hope is thus a ‘struggle’ in all its cultural and socio-political meanings.

Finally, there is one more aspect on which Newheiser and Williams seem to (indirectly) agree regarding the concept of hope. That is its political application, and how it allows us to enter into the field of the ‘beyond’:

On my account, hope constitutes a disciplined resilience that allows us to admit that our cherished assumptions may be misguided and that familiar institutions may be unjust. For this reason, it nurtures the work of attentive reflection and democratic debate – open, undetermined, and honest. In many parts of the world, these practices appear to be breaking down, and in some cases (it would seem) the damage to civil society may be irreparable. However, hope is also the precondition for action in the face of overwhelming odds. Although hope does not determine what we should do, it empowers us to address problems that appear intractable. (Newheiser 2019: 16)

Or to say it with Williams’ Long Revolution: “[I] believe that it is not necessary to abandon a parliamentary perspective as a matter of principle, but as a matter of practice I am quite sure that we have to begin to look beyond it” (Williams 1989: 75).

So, let us start to look ‘beyond’.

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But where do we start? Maybe with some literary work? And where better than with the Portuguese Nobel Prize winner, José Saramago’s (hyper-)modern tragedy/dystopian novel *Seeing*, the sequel to that other dystopia *Blindness* – but maybe labelling both books, but especially *Seeing*, as a dystopia was done without much thought? –.

Hardly any vote has been cast on election day in an unnamed democratic country. With hours passing, and the weather improving (a storm had been raging all day), the feared prospect of massive abstention slightly diminishes. At exactly four o’clock in the afternoon, people start to turn up at the voting booths *en masse*. However, the relief felt for having avoided this possible political disaster is short-lived. As the outcome of the election becomes clear, it turns out that party votes only reach 25% while blank votes exceed 70% (cf. Saramago 2006: 16). In order to overcome this political inconvenience, the government calls for new elections the following Sunday. Under a promising clear sky, voting takes place in a much more regular way. When the results are finally known, the verdict is more surprising than the week before; with no abstentions and no spoiled

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<sup>7</sup> Anthony Barnett, in his foreword to Williams’ *The Long Revolution*, is correct in indicating that the Long Revolution is not intended as being about duration (cf. Williams 2013a: vii), but, whether he likes it or not, it is also about duration.



votes, the regular parties divide only 17% this time, while the blank votes reach 83% (cf. Saramago 2006: 27).

This is how *Seeing* begins. And it proceeds into even less promising – but, alas, by now all too familiar – territory.

The prime minister decides, as Saramago's novel continues, that the government must leave the capital as a result and declares a state of emergency. Warned by their (former) leaders that they will become victims of looting, rape, murder, terror and, eventually, some kind of totalitarian regime, the city's inhabitants soon indeed fall victim to strikes, bombings, terror attacks, (KGB/Stasi-type) espionage and murder. What wasn't revealed by the (former) government's apocalyptic prophecies was that all these tribulations are the result of a sinister plot by the dethroned politicians to make the inhabitants of the former capital surrender.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, in the moments when the former capital is not held hostage by the political leadership, life in it simply continues as before. People pay their rent, food is present in the supermarkets and even the less joyous requirements that are to be maintained for the city's basic survival, such as refuse collection, are not interrupted. Without any remaining laws, without any governing bodies in place, without anyone with representative authority, and without anybody telling anybody else what to do, the city keeps on functioning perfectly well.

How the novel ends is of little importance for us, and I will not reveal it. What is essential is this residue of 'normalcy' that we find persisting in the behavior of the population of the non-named (former) capital. It is this aspect that allows us to return once more to Raymond Williams.

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What is this stubborn populace from the former capital? Isn't this what we know as the 'mob', this beast that Thomas Hardy saw as this "monster whose body [in the case of London] had four million heads and eight million eyes" (reported in Williams 2016: 311)? Isn't this also that 'crowd' that Gustave Le Bon more than a century ago (1896) already described as being merely "powerful for destruction" (Le Bon 2009: 19) and which can basically only be characterized for its "stupidity" (33)? Or, if we are to generalize a bit more, can this crowd not be denigrated also for its "extreme mental inferiority" (6)? Is this mob or this crowd also not the so-called 'masses', that 'thing' that

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<sup>8</sup> This plot twist is very similar to Orwell's in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the most dangerous book – *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* – that is claimed to be written by the arch-enemy of the Party, Emmanuel Goldstein, and that collects the most wicked and heresies for society, turns out to be written by the Party itself.



we find so repugnant and which stands for “gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, lowness of taste and habit [... and] the perpetual threat to culture” (Williams 2017: 391)?<sup>9</sup> How can one expect any solution coming from that inimical group of people?

If we start with Hardy’s or Le Bon’s take on accumulations of people, then there seems little to go from. The question that needs to be posed then is whether we indeed should depart from their understanding of crowds and masses. But, an even more important question that needs to be posed is if these mobs and masses truly exist. And in responding to this extremely important question can we, I think, find one of Williams’ most important contributions to social thinking.

Williams is extremely adamant – and justifiably so – in refusing the existence of these so-called masses. There “are in fact no masses”, he bluntly states, “but only means of seeing people as masses” (Williams 1989: 11).<sup>10</sup> “Mass’, or ‘masses’”, are nothing but “a peculiar kind of impersonal grouping” (Williams 2013a: 212). Not only aren’t there any “ordinary people [that] resemble the normal description of the masses, low and trivial in taste and habit” (Williams 1989: 11), there are also no people that ever accept the descriptions of feelings, attitudes and behaviors that appertain to the ‘masses’ as their own. To be a part of a ‘mass’ is always how some, or even *the*, others are. If there ever was a group of people that minimally resemble these ‘masses’ then, at least when considering the quality of the embraced and consumed printed word, it would, in a very ironical way, be the so-called cultural elites who fulfill the required vulgarity attributed to the ‘masses’ (cf. Williams 2013a: 249-250; Williams 1989: 13).

But this harsh stance is not just sloganized posing. He has a clear take on the coming about of these fictional (and tragic) groupings:

[T]he version of ordinary people as masses is not only the conscious creation of the élites (who work very hard at it, by the way).<sup>11</sup> It is also a conclusion from actual experience within the forms of a society which requires the existence of masses. The framing of different expectations of others has to be carried out, always, against the pressures of an existing culture [...]. (Williams 2013a: 399)

Rephrasing this last sentence slightly different, our understanding and expectation are always mediated by our context, and it is our social context, our socio-political context

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<sup>9</sup> Williams seems to have had different takes on usage of the word ‘mass’ and ‘mob’. Whereas in *Politics of Modernism* he seems to be considering the word ‘mass’ as a “significant change from the earlier ‘mob’” (Williams 2007: 42), in *Resources of Hope* he sees them as synonyms: “[M]asses became a new word for mob. [...]” (Williams 1989: 11). In *Culture and Society*, he takes this topic up once again, and this time he gives a slightly different interpretation still, saying that; “[M]asses was a new word for mob, and it is a very significant word” (Williams 2017: 390). It is of little importance for our reading of Williams which one of the two observations are correct, so I will not enter into this discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Williams repeats this statement identically in *Culture and Society* (Williams 2017: 393).

<sup>11</sup> A similar idea is expressed in (Williams 2013a: 136-137).



that requires for there to be ‘masses’. Masses, “this version of other people is, precisely, a social expectation” (Williams 2013a: 399).

The stubborn populace of the former capital from Saramago’s novel are thus not the masses, but the simple ordinary people: we, me, you, all of us individually. And their actions are not the base and horrific nature as the one predicted by the political elite. But neither does it belong to that so-called ‘minority culture’ – or Culture, with capital C.<sup>12</sup> We are in fact wrong, as Williams makes clear, to reach for our elegant dress when we think about culture (cf. Williams 1989: 99). Their actions are ordinary, but highly cultured, and this because of the simple fact that “culture is ordinary” (Williams 1989: 4). And it is exactly these ordinary people, in their ordinary acts, that were able, at least in the fictional tale by Saramago, to make that revolution come about – a revolution that did not comport with the creation of a revolutionary society, but in that of a simple and ordinary one.

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But how, in an attempt to conclude this (unfortunately all too short) journey through the work of Williams, can the ordinary people and their ordinary culture be the solution to the state of perennial crisis in which our Western culture finds itself, and this outside of a fictitious story? Well obviously, they can’t. That is, they can’t in any immediate way. This cultural revolution that is required is still a long one. We have, however, been able to discover some solid ground in this arduous and dangerous climb where we can plant our boots firmly so that we will not fall down – and maybe even succeed in taking a further step.

Our starting point is us, the ordinary people. What comes next is ordinary (hopeful) practice. That is the practical activities and operativity of our ordinary culture, which includes “a whole range of practical skills”, the arts (even the one understood as highbrow), and goes all the way to “active politics” (Williams 2017: 405). It is this practice of ordinary activity that will start eating away at the qualifier of our modern lasting crisis because it will reinstate the simple realization of the ordinariness of deciding, of the necessity in ordinary daily life of taking decisions and the bearing of responsibility. As Frank Furedi has recently shown (2021), as our contemporary society is increasingly refusing boundaries, it also refuses, in an ironically contradictory way, to make simple decisions, distinctions and judgements. All these acts – those of distinguishing, deciding and judging – take us directly back to the meaning and purpose

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<sup>12</sup> “Many highly educated people have”, Williams explains the bias of the ‘Cultured’, “in fact, been so driven in on their reading, as a stabilizing habit, that they fail to notice that there are other forms of skilled, intelligent, creative activity: [...]. The contempt for many of these activities, which is always latent in the highly literate, is a mark of the observers’ limit, not those of the activities themselves” (Williams 2017: 405).



of the concept of crisis. Returning to practice ordinary acts of deciding and even judging will start to undermine the constant and haunting presence of perennial crisis.

Within this context of deciding within a realm of ordinary practice, a necessary link needs to be made to what is probably Williams' most famous and influential concept: structure of feeling. This concept, that Williams used in various works over a wide period of time and the composition of which (structure and feeling) he himself defined as "deliberately contradictory" with which he, furthermore, had "never been happy" (Williams 2015b: 159), has both been lauded, widely used and criticized (that it was able to elicit this variety of reactions probably derives, as Stuart Middleton has recently hinted at (2020: 1135), from its profound ambiguity). Important as a profound investigation into the history, paradoxicality, and precise meaning of the concept of 'structure of feeling' should be (this, however, is not the place to perform a similar investigation), it is not without some ironical snuggles that I think Sean Matthews made a very good point when he underlined that similar studies are very limited in understanding the theoretical function it held in Williams' work, the value of its remaining applicability, and its continuing critical service (cf. Matthews 2001: 179). However, it is exactly in this practical application that a 'catch' present in the concept of structure of feeling can be discovered and for which reason it can be discarded in the present context of ordinary practice. Besides the fact that the structure of feeling was "developed as an analytic procedure for actual written words" (Williams 2015b: 159) and the idea of ordinary practice I am trying to develop goes far beyond the written word,<sup>13</sup> it seems to me<sup>14</sup> impossible to completely get rid of minority cultures when clinging to the concept of structure of feeling. Any attempt to change the predominant structure of feeling is dependent, as Williams wrote when first trying to get analytical grip to his own concept, on "a few minds only" (Williams and Orrom 1954: 23). Although Williams did attempt to overcome this problem of preferential or special roles for specific categories of people (be they artists or critics) in the change of structure of feeling – by rendering change unconscious or by simply ignoring any mediational character –, the problem is never truly resolved. In my attempt to avoid and argue against any of these preferential roles in the context of ordinary practice, I thus find no particular advantage in the usage or reference to Williams' concept of structure of feeling.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I am aware that I am being too literal here, but I want to avoid at all cost the all-too inclusive idea voiced by Jacques Derrida that there is "nothing outside the text" (Derrida 1997: 158) – in the original it said "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" which would lead to the following literal translation: "there is no outside-text". After a fierce discussion with John Searle, Derrida had to adjust his *boutade* to "there is nothing outside context" (Derrida 1988: 136, 152).

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Middleton's recent article on Williams' structure of feeling (Middleton 2020) was of great help in the formulation of my ideas.

<sup>15</sup> A concept which I, otherwise, find of great interest; particularly its similarities and (above all) differences with Michel Foucault's concept of *epistème*.



Returning to our tentative roadmap out of our Limboic state of perennial crisis, a following step that can be imagined (but already much more difficult to obtain) is going beyond the contemporary political organization of our society. Although, as we already saw in precedence, Williams was not willing to abandon parliamentary politics, he did realize that looking beyond this form of societal organization was required – re-citing an already proposed line by Williams: “[I] believe that it is not necessary to abandon a parliamentary perspective as a matter of principle, but as a matter of practice I am quite sure that we have to begin to look beyond it” (Williams 1989: 75). But Williams was probably too good-hearted here, and we might as well follow through and abandon parliamentary and party politics. As many theorists – Solon, Numa, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Weil, to name a few – observed over the centuries, (party) interests and the existence of political fractions are solely detrimental for any decent form of societal living.

This might seem daunting, but it suffices to see through the apocalyptic threat that is always present in crisis. For as much as a ‘crisis’ is and requires a timely resolution in favor of one of two irrevocable alternatives (life or death), the almost exclusive attention that is almost always reserved for the negative outcome of every crisis seems, although not imaginary, to be at least a bit partisan. If we are to take history seriously in its offering of examples, then we can see that in almost all cases the negative scenarios foretold turn out to be true only if everything is done in order for the crisis not to reach its ‘natural’ outcome, that is, not reaching the decisive, judging moment. As Williams well understood regarding the Thatcherite regime, TINA (the fact that there is supposedly no alternative: There Is No Alternative) was mere propaganda (cf. Williams 1989: 164).

C. S. Lewis made a rather cunning remark in his *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1969). The acute, almost slick, remark is the following: “[A]pparently the door to the prison was really unlocked all the time; but it was only you who thought of trying the handle” (Lewis 1969: vi). So why don’t we all, we ordinary people, not try this very ordinary action. Let’s try the handle.

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