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Between Crisis and Critique:
The Fragile Foundations of Social Life à la Rodrigo Cordero

Simon Susen

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to provide a review of Rodrigo Cordero's *Crisis and critique: On the fragile foundations of social life* (2017).[1] To this end, the analysis examines Cordero's book at several levels. The first part makes some general observations on its principal *strengths*. The second part gives a brief overview of its *thematic structure*. The third part elucidates its *key arguments*. The fourth part sheds light on its most significant *limitations*. The paper concludes by identifying major challenges to which, in light of the methodical evaluation of Cordero's study, we need to face up in order to do justice to the tension-laden role that the relationship between crisis and critique can, and should, play in contemporary social theory.

1. Strengths

Let me begin by drawing attention to some noteworthy strengths of Cordero's excellent book. A few months before its publication, the author kindly asked me to provide an endorsement. Allow me to quote my endorsement here, since it sums up the gist of my (largely favourable) assessment of this study:

> Rodrigo Cordero has done a magnificent job in shedding light on the *pivotal role* that both *crisis and critique* play in the *tension-laden construction of human reality*. This book is a powerful reminder of the profound *fragility* that permeates the whole of *social life*, including its seemingly most solidified dimensions. I have never come across a more persuasive account of the multiple ways in which the *dynamic relationship* between the *experience of crisis* and the *practice of critique* defines – and, indeed, constantly redefines – the *normative parameters* for what it means to be *human*. (i, italics added)

My endorsement summarizes what I regard as three essential contributions of Cordero's book:

(a) its ability to shed light on the *pivotal role* that both *crisis and critique* play in the *tension-laden construction of human reality*;

(b) its ability to illustrate the extent to which the whole of *social life* is permeated not only by a profound *sense of fragility*, at both the subjective level and the intersubjective level, but also by a profound *state of fragility*, at the objective level; and

(c) its ability to enhance our understanding of the multiple ways in which the *dynamic relationship* between the *experience of crisis* and the *practice of critique* defines – and, indeed, constantly redefines – the *normative parameters* for what it means to be *human*.

Before examining the substantial intellectual contributions of *Crisis and critique* in detail, let us briefly consider some of its general strengths. At least five positive qualities of this study stand out.

1.1. ***Structure***

Both in terms of its overall structure and in terms of the internal structure of each chapter, the book is smartly organized. To be exact, it contains the following key sections:

(a) an *Introduction* (1–12);

(b) *three Parts* (13–57 [Part I], 59–100 [Part II], and 101–52 [Part III]);

(c) a *Postscript* (153–61);

(d) an extensive *Bibliography* (162–77); and

(e) a valuable and user-friendly *Index* (178–86). (Unfortunately, the Index of Subjects and the Index of Names are collapsed into one another.)

Furthermore, the book contains an *Acknowledgments* section (xi–xii), which should not go unnoticed, as it comprises several important personal remarks on the biographical factors that form the background to this study. A cursory look at the *Table of Contents* (ix–x) and at the *Introduction* (1–12) suffices to recognize that the manuscript is embedded in a sophisticated, clever, and cogent epistemic architecture.

Most readers – especially those who are less familiar with the key thinkers and themes in question – will appreciate the fact that each chapter covers at least three dimensions that are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the principal points made in each section: (a) *historical context*, (b) *central issues and contributions*, as well as (c) *strengths and weaknesses*. This tripartite mission, pursued in each chapter, permits the reader to grasp the following aspects in relation to the scholars and topics occupying a paradigmatic place in Cordero's investigation:

(a) the *historical circumstances* by which particular thinkers were influenced before and/or when developing their respective theoretical frameworks;

(b) the *central issues* at stake in the writings of prominent scholars – or, indeed, of intellectual currents –as well as their most significant contributions to modern social and political thought; and

(c) the most striking *strengths and weaknesses* of the conceptual frameworks under consideration, based on insightful accounts of their respective merits and limitations.

This tripartite analytical strategy, which is more or less consistently applied in each of the six key chapters, enables the reader to obtain *a balanced understanding of the role of the relationship between crisis and critique in the works of major social and political thinkers*.

Cordero's inquiry into the place of the concepts of 'crisis' and 'critique' in the history of modern intellectual thought has, in epistemic terms, delivered on fundamental levels of social-scientific knowledge production: (a) *description*; (b) *analysis*, *interpretation*, and *explanation*; and (c) *assessment*.

(a) It skilfully *describes* the historical contexts in which particular understandings (and, arguably, misunderstandings) of 'crisis' and 'critique' emerged.

(b) It competently *analyses, interprets, and explains* the essential conceptual presuppositions underlying specific accounts of 'crisis' and 'critique', elucidating the extent to which these two terms are (and are not) interrelated.

(c) It carefully *assesses* the value of the contributions made by leading intellectual figures to contemporary debates on the relationship between 'crisis' and 'critique'. What is, in my view, noteworthy in this regard is the following: even when Cordero strongly sympathizes with a specific theoretical perspective, he does not shy away from the task of putting his finger on its respective limitations and shortcomings; analogously, even when Cordero expresses serious doubts about the validity of a conceptual framework in question, he makes every effort to draw his reader's attention to some of its most valuable contributions.

In brief, Cordero's study comprises (a) accurate historical *descriptions*, (b) insightful *analyses*, *interpretations*, and *explanations*, as well as (c) balanced, grounded, and critical *assessments*.

1.2. Scope

In any in-depth investigation, authors have to make a decision on where their story starts and where it ends. In this respect, Cordero's book is no exception. When skimming through the list of authors mentioned in the Table of Contents (ix–x) as well as those that are included in the Index (178–86), one may easily get the impression that this project is overly ambitious, trying to cover too much intellectual ground, comparing and contrasting too many different scholars and too many different traditions of thought, and seeking to tell too long a story, given the limitations attached to a conventional monograph of medium-size length. A closer examination of the manuscript reveals, however, that Cordero has done an outstanding job in providing an *unprecedented account of key modern approaches to the relationship between crisis and critique*. Far from rushing through what is, inevitably, dense theoretical material, Cordero has succeeded in engaging with a number of notoriously complex thinkers at a high level of abstraction and sophistication, but without losing sight of the *socio-historical situatedness* of their writings, let alone of the *tangible relevance* of their intellectual contributions to real-life issues.

It is also worth pointing out that Cordero's erudite way of approaching the subject is reflected in the fact that his elucidation of the relationship between crisis and critique in the works of influential social and political thinkers is based on a *healthy balance between primary and secondary sources*, demonstrating that his key arguments are derived from a thorough examination of central original texts, whilst being informed and inspired by disputes and controversies between advocates and opponents of particular theoretical traditions.

1.3. Depth

Because of the way in which Cordero adeptly combines the *descriptive*, *analytical*, *interpretive*, *explanatory*, and *evaluative* dimensions underlying his comprehensive inquiry into the role that the relationship between crisis and critique plays in modern social and political thought, the depth of his study is remarkable. Indeed, he brilliantly cross-fertilizes *author-focused* and *issue-focused* levels of consideration. Thus, an eclectic list of *scholars* and an equally diverse list of *themes* are covered and scrutinized through the lenses of one key question: What is their respective understanding of the relationship between crisis and critique? Each chapter responds to this question in a systematic fashion – that is, by reflecting upon (a) *historical circumstances*, (b) *central issues and contributions*, as well as (c) *strengths and weaknesses*. In light of this task, paradigmatic works of the following authors are examined: Karl Marx and Ulrich Beck (Chapter 1), Georg W. F. Hegel and Niklas Luhmann (Chapter 2), Jürgen Habermas (Chapter 3) and Reinhart Koselleck (Chapter 4), Hannah Arendt (Chapter 5), Michel Foucault (Chapter 6), and Theodor W. Adorno (Postscript).

Surely, one may legitimately object that it is impossible to do justice to the complexity of their writings in a medium-size monograph. Yet, since Cordero, throughout the book, is guided by a *sharp analytical motivation*, which is expressed in his sociological concern with the relationship between crisis and critique, the *depth* of his investigation is not compromised by its *scope*. In other words, the crisis/critique problematic serves as a *Leitmotif* catching the readers' attention and monitoring them through what is a

conceptually differentiated – and, in some ways, amorphous – landscape of ideas, presuppositions, and propositions. One of Cordero's greatest achievements, in this respect, is that he *succeeds in separating essential from non-essential arguments*. Hence, rather than offering superficial, shorthand, or misleading snapshots of complex conceptual frameworks, Cordero penetrates deep into the rough sea of modern intellectual thought by demonstrating that – although, admittedly, to different degrees – the relationship between crisis and critique plays a pivotal role in the works of prominent social and political theorists. By virtue of his aforementioned tripartite analytical approach, Cordero has managed to provide his reader with a painstakingly detailed account of the multiple ways in which the relationship between crisis and critique has been both represented and misrepresented, conceptualized and misconceptualized, as well as understood and misunderstood in modern social and political thought.

1.4. Language

For the right or the wrong reasons, 'social theory is often perceived as hopelessly abstract and unnecessarily complex – that is, as a conceptually sophisticated way of making relatively simple points in a remarkably difficult language' (Susen 2013a, 83). Cordero is to be congratulated for having produced a superb piece of work that, although large parts of it are written at a high level of abstraction and sophistication, is *linguistically accessible to non-specialists and non-experts*. One of the reasons for this is the book's conceptual *clarity*. Another reason for this is that, particularly when dealing with complex theoretical issues, Cordero rightly insists on both their *spatiotemporal embeddedness in socio-historically contingent contexts* and their *tangible relevance to real-life issues*. Throughout the inquiry, Cordero provides numerous concrete examples to illustrate the sociological significance of important theoretical points that may otherwise come across as removed from the empirical realm of social practices. Put differently, the *linguistic style* in which the book is written is symptomatic of the *epistemic convictions* upon which it is based: instead of falling into the theoreticist trap of hiding a potential lack of content-related substance behind a veil of an impenetrable terminology of pompous expressions, Cordero has put together an argument that is presented not only with considerable eloquence and elegance, but also with conceptual precision and clarity.

1.5. Contemporary relevance

One of the greatest achievements of Cordero's treatise is that it *succeeds* in offering a comprehensive, systematic, and fine-grained account of the role that the relationship between crisis and critique plays in the writings of major modern social and political thinkers *without* getting caught up in the pointless exercise of intellectualist exegesis. Cordero's study is *not* simply another book in the history of modern social and political thought with a short shelf life. Its purpose, instead of being merely exegetical or decorative, is ambitious: rather than constructing a narrative about the genealogy of the relationship between crisis and critique, the point of Cordero's inquiry is to identify valuable lessons that can be learned from exploring how these concepts have been used

(and misused) by influential thinkers and how they should (and should not) be used in contemporary forms of social and political analysis. The result is a fascinating theoretical exposition, which transcends rigid epistemic boundaries – such as those set up between 'the classical' and 'the contemporary', 'the philosophical' and 'the sociological', 'the conceptual' and 'the empirical', 'the concrete' and 'the abstract', 'the continental' and 'the analytical', 'the macro' and 'the micro'. Moreover, it convincingly demonstrates that, far from being reducible to two sub-categories of marginal importance, crisis and critique constitute two foundational *moments* of social *life* in general and two foundational *categories* of social *investigation* in particular. It is no accident, then, that these two concepts lie at the core of the key works that have shaped modern social and political thought all the way from the early Enlightenment to the contemporary era.

2. Thematic structure

As mentioned above, the book is divided into (a) an *Introduction* (1–12), (b) *three Parts* (13–57 [Part I], 59–100 [Part II], and 101–52 [Part III]), and (c) a *Postscript* (153–61), in addition to containing (d) an extensive *Bibliography* (162–77) as well as (e) a valuable and user-friendly *Index* (178–86).

2.1. Part I

Part I is entitled 'Sociologies of crisis/critiques of sociology' (13–57). This part examines the numerous ways in which the idea of *crisis* has been scrutinized, problematized, and criticized within *sociological theory*, whilst elucidating the principal objections raised by social theorists when calling the 'promises' of *social critique* (articulated by intellectuals) and *social criticism* (formulated by ordinary actors) into question.

Chapter 1 – entitled 'The critique of crisis: From Marx to Beck' (15–37) – provides a comprehensive, and highly sophisticated, overview of the explanatory role assigned to the concept of crisis 'at the core of the sociological tradition' (9). A key aspect, in this regard, is Cordero's critical analysis of – in his words – 'the *normalization* and *dissolution* of crisis in sociological theory' (9, italics added). Particularly problematic, in his opinion, is its 'tendency to treat it [i.e. crisis] as a *static* concept' (9, italics added), thereby preventing a number of both classical and contemporary sociologists from recognizing that crisis constitutes 'an *open field of struggles*' (9, italics added). Far from being reducible to a matter of structural *determinacy*, crises in the social world – in terms of both their causes and their consequences – are characterized by high degrees of *uncertainty*. Furthermore, Cordero grapples with the pitfalls and shortcomings of 'the *normalization* of the Marxist concept of crisis' (9, italics added) – notably, when it is being used as a reductionist conceptual tool within determinist accounts of capitalist society. Criticisms of such reductive explanatory frameworks, common within different variants of 'vulgar Marxism' (*Vulgärmarxismus*), became increasingly influential in the aftermath of the student revolts that took place in May 1968. It is ironic, however, that *neo-conservative*

scholars and politicians subsequently succeeded in re-appropriating the concept of crisis, by using collective experiences of social, political, and economic instability as 'an ideological tool of government in the 1970s and 1980s' (9). It seems, then, that *legitimation crisis* – as it was famously described by Habermas in one of his earlier books (see Habermas [1973] 1988) – became not an obstacle to but, rather, an indispensable *vehicle of adjustment, restructuration, and transformation* for advanced capitalist societies. No less important than its normalization, however, is the *dissolution* of the concept of crisis, which, in Cordero's view, 'gained terrain with the advance of *postmodern and global sociologies*' (9, italics added).

Chapter 2 – entitled 'The crisis of critique: From Hegel to Luhmann' (38–57) – aims to complete the picture by telling 'the other side of the story' (38; see also 9). In this chapter, we are confronted with the rationale, implications, and consequences of the so-called 'crisis of critique' (see 38–57), which it has become increasingly popular to announce, and also to denounce, in contemporary social theory (cf. Frère 2015). Such disillusionment with the emancipatory promise of *social critique* and *social criticism*, articulated by different versions of critical theory, coincides – as Cordero contends – with the '*domestication of critique*'*s disruptive potential* in social life' (10, italics added). To the extent that critique is incorporated into the mainstream mode of functioning, that is, to the extent that critique becomes an integral ingredient of hegemonic behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns in stratified societies, it risks losing its transformative and subversive potential. Taking Cordero's account a step further, we may argue that 'the spirit of critique' can be assimilated into 'the new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999)[2] and, arguably, into 'the new spirit' of all foundational forms of social domination – such as *classism* (class), *sexism* (gender), *racism* ('race' and ethnicity), *ageism* (age), and *ableism* (capacity). What Cordero is even more concerned about in this context, however, is the danger that sociological approaches may end up turning 'the practice of critique *away from* the experience of crisis' (10, italics added), as epitomized in systematic – above all, political – 'attempts at giving *normative closure* to social life' (10, italics added). Drawing on the works of both Hegel and Adorno, Cordero insists that '*our capacities to crack open society*'*s fragile foundations*' (10, italics added) are the ultimate – and, arguably, anthropological – resource by means of which the imposition of different forms and different degrees of closure can be both critiqued and subverted.

2.2. Part II

Part II is entitled 'Models of crisis/forms of critique' (59–100). In this part, Cordero proposes to embark upon a somewhat unorthodox journey – namely, the attempt to combine and to cross-fertilize two seemingly antithetical approaches to making sense of the dialectical relationship between crisis and critique: *Habermas*' *critical theory* and *Koselleck*'*s conceptual history*.

Chapter 3 – entitled 'Diremption of social life: Bringing capitalist crisis and social critique back together – Jürgen Habermas' (61–78) – explores the relationship between crisis and critique by focusing on 'the *paradoxes of rationalization processes in capitalist societies*' (10, italics added). According to Habermas, critical capacity is embedded in, and derived

from, our communicative capacity: as subjects capable of speech and action, we develop our ability to form critical judgments about particular aspects of our existence by communicating, and reasoning, with one another.[3] In Cordero's opinion, however, the problem with Habermas' approach is that it is '*one-sided*' (10, italics added), in the sense that it portrays critique as a reaction to, and a product of, crisis. Consequently, it fails to account for the fact that, in many cases, '*critique* actually *initiates, enacts and furthers the moment of crisis*' (10, italics added; see also 63), rather than merely responding to it.

Chapter 4 – entitled 'The non-closure of human history: The vicissitudes of social critique and the political foundations of concepts – Reinhart Koselleck' (79–100) – examines the relationship between crisis and critique by reconsidering a significant historical dynamic: 'the *revolutionary dialectic* between *bourgeois social criticism* and the *political crisis of absolutism*' (10, italics added). From a historical perspective, this example is indicative of the degree to which *different forms of critique can trigger different forms of crisis*. To be sure, this is not to suggest that the relationship between crisis and critique can be reduced to a one-way process. *Just as crisis can trigger critique, critique can trigger crisis.* The work of the German historian Koselleck – notably, his *Critique and crisis: Enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society* ([1959] 1988) – serves as a starting point to illustrate not only 'the practical involvement of critique in political life' (10) but also 'the crisis-ridden processes it [i.e. critique] helps to unfold' (10). An '*excess of utopianism*' (10, italics added) can have catastrophic consequences to the extent that it fosters 'the impulses that drive critique away from the political struggles for interpretation that crisis situations open and intensify' (10). Not dissimilar to postmodern attacks on, and deconstructions of, metanarratives, Koselleck's defence of the idea of 'the non-closure of history' (10) is motivated by his radical opposition to 'any political claim to close the world around one principle' (10) – that is, to any attempt at reducing realities of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and complexity to imaginaries of monolithic determinacy.

2.3. Part III

Part III is entitled 'Fragile foundations/political struggles' (101–52). This part scrutinizes the relationship between crisis and critique by taking into consideration two large-scale phenomena, both of which profoundly shaped the history of the twentieth century: the rise of *totalitarianism* and the rise of *neoliberalism*.

Chapter 5 – entitled 'The fragile world in-between: Totalitarian destruction and the modesty of critical thinking – Hannah Arendt' (103–27) – grapples with the relationship between crisis and critique by problematizing the historical experience of *totalitarianism*. According to Arendt's phenomenological interpretation, 'the totalitarian experience' (10) can be regarded as '*the crisis of our century*' (10, italics added) par excellence. In fact, in the history of humanity, totalitarianism ranks among the most radical experiences of crisis – that is, of a civilizational era whose brutality and barbarism oblige critical commentators to call the very foundations of the human condition into question. Cordero offers a brilliant discussion of Arendt's controversial assertion that 'in times of political emergency the *power of critique* lies in its "*modesty*" rather than in its radicalism' (11, italics added).

Chapter 6 – entitled 'Making things more fragile: The persistence of crisis and the neoliberal disorder of things – Michel Foucault' (128–52) – analyses the relationship between crisis and critique by problematizing the very possibility of *governmentality*. In Cordero's judgment, Foucault's *genealogical* account of liberalism, although the concept of crisis appears to play a minor role in it, provides valuable insights into the functioning of 'a new economy of power' (11). Within liberal and neoliberal regimes of power, crisis is not only converted into an object of normative and scientific inquiry, but also used in order to shape political agendas. Indeed, as Cordero maintains, 'neoliberalism mobilizes crisis' (11), permitting it to engage in the 're-programing' (11) of social life according to systemic imperatives. At the same time, within the most sophisticated versions of 'the neoliberal governmental matrix' (11; see also 129 and 145), there is sufficient room for critique especially, when confronted with, or when seeking to provoke, a crisis – 'to make truth and power more fragile' (11). Put differently, crisis and critique are not only part of the story of *social domination* but also part of the story of *human emancipation*.

In both chapters, then, Cordero is concerned with the degree to which critique enables historically situated subjects 'to *struggle against the logic of ideological closure of meaning and action*' (11, italics added) – a logic that underlies both 'nation-based utopias of totalitarianism' (11; see also 95) and 'market-based utopias of neoliberal capitalism' (11; see also 95). Despite the numerous differences that exist between Arendt and Foucault, the two scholars are – in Cordero's eyes – united by their radical *anti-foundationalism*. Hence, they share the following conviction: if the modern house of being is based on any kind of foundations, these *foundations are fragile*.

2.4. Postscript

The Postscript is entitled 'Decoding social hieroglyphics: Notes on the philosophical actuality of sociology – Theodor Adorno' (153–61). As Cordero explains, it is no accident that his book does *not* contain a 'Conclusion' in the conventional sense, since this would defeat the point of the entire study: namely, the ambition to face up to 'the *impossibility of closure* of the social' (11, italics added; see also 38 and 154). Drawing on Adorno's essay 'Society' ([1968] 1972), this chapter is an attempt to make a case for both 'the sociological actuality of philosophy' (see 160, 161*n*27, and 162) and 'the philosophical actuality of sociology' (see x, 11, 153, 155, and 160), the simultaneous recognition of which compels us to overcome the 'false dilemma' (see 7, 155, and 160) between sociology and philosophy. In an emphatically anti-positivist tone, Cordero contends that such a transdisciplinary endeavour must involve 'the right to speculation' (see 11 and 158) – regardless of whether this epistemic privilege is exercised by insisting on the *foundations of fragility* or the *fragility of foundations* (or both).

3. Key arguments

3.1. Crisis and critique

The main assumption underlying Cordero's study is that '*crisis* and *critique* are both concepts deeply intertwined with *moments of rupture*' (1, italics added). More specifically, the book aims to explore 'the relationship between the *experience of crisis* and the *practice of critique*' (1, italics added), insisting that these two essential elements of social life are *interdependent*. In other words, rather than subscribing to the mainstream view that *critique* tends to be a *product of crisis*, Cordero reminds us that, in a fundamental sense, *crisis* can be a *product of critique*. As the author demonstrates, this twofold movement applies, in particular, to the tension-laden relationship between *social* crisis and *social* critique.

3.2. Sociality and performativity

In Cordero's eyes, '[s]ocial life is a delicate and complex *achievement*' (1, italics added). Thus, the *performative* constitution of human existence is inextricably linked to the instability and indeterminacy that are built into our ontological condition as a species. As Cordero posits, 'the *seemingly unitary and durable* character of the social world is inherently *fragile*, without fixed and ultimate foundations' (1, italics added). In his view, such a sense – and, arguably, also presence – of fragility is a ubiquitous feature of social life, even (or, perhaps, especially) if it is not always directly observable. It lurks in the background, until 'the world *around* us' (1, italics added) – or, as he forgot to add, the world *within* us – 'becomes *problematic* and loses its character as a unitary and natural phenomenon' (1, italics added). This is the moment of *crisis*, which, by definition, 'interrupts the continuity of what appears solid, justified and functional' (1, italics added). Crisis, in this sense, is inextricably linked to moments of *questioning*: 'where are we, what is going on, what went wrong, how [can we] get out of here?' (1, quotation modified).

3.3. Abstraction and concreteness

Crisis obliges us to pose the most fundamental questions about the constitution, development, (dys)functionality, and future prospects of a particular aspect, or particular aspects, of our existence. For Cordero, the crucial consequence of crisis, therefore, is that it '*breaks the silence of things and interrupts the sense of completion of the world*' (1, italics added) – that is, it puts us in a position in which we are confronted with the task of calling the taken-for-grantedness of particular aspects of our existence into question. The experience of crisis, irrespective of whether it is individual or collective, requires us to convert 'the implicit' into 'the explicit', 'the hidden' into 'the overt', 'the intuitive' into 'the discursive', 'the normal' into 'the problematic', 'the accepted' into 'the questioned'.[4]

Cordero's boldest assertion in this regard is as follows: '*Without such moments that provoke questions* […] *social life becomes a dangerous abstraction; it consolidates the appearance of being a reality without question*' (1, italics added). On this account, Cordero makes not only the '*soft*' *claim* that moments of crisis are *vital ingredients* of human life forms, but also the '*strong*' *claim* that the latter would be reduced to *perilous abstractions* – devoid of meaningful actions and socio-hermeneutic accomplishments – without the presence of the former.

In a philosophical sense, experiences of crisis are a strong reminder of the fact that 'the *unity of society* is never attained once and for all' (2, italics added). As such, they highlight the extent to which key (arguably, Durkheimian) ingredients of social order – such as social cohesion, social integration, social identity, social belonging, social solidarity, and collective consciousness – are spatiotemporally contingent *achievements*, which, despite their enormous normative force, can never be taken for granted and are always potentially fragile.

3.4. Objectivity and subjectivity

Warning his readers that it would be a mistake to treat the terms 'crisis' and 'critique' interchangeably, Cordero insists that they possess fundamentally different meanings: 'whilst *crisis* designates an *objective experience or situation*, *critique* refers to a *practice performed by* subjects' (2, italics added). Whereas the concept of 'crisis' stands for a factually existent condition, the concept of 'critique' describes a performative accomplishment of ordinary actors. Notwithstanding the question of how subjective, biased, partial, prejudiced, or perspectival an actor's *critique* may be, it must – when attributing meaning to the experience of *crisis* – make reference to an objectively existing *reality* in order to succeed in making a claim to epistemic *validity*. Critique, understood in this way, 'appears as a subjective response to the contradictions and problems that the crisis situation reveals' (2). Insofar as it is empirically grounded and rationally sustained, critique cannot simply 'invent' or 'fabricate' evidence in support of its legitimacy; rather, it presupposes that the series of events or the state of affairs to which it refers *does* exist in the present or at least *did* exist in the past.

3.5. Unity and divorce

Throughout the book, Cordero insists on the socio-ontological significance of the fact that, within the daily construction of human life forms, crisis and critique are intimately interrelated. On this interpretation, we must avoid falling into the trap of a double reduction: *just as it would be mistaken to reduce 'critique' to a mere reaction to or derivative of 'crisis', it would be erroneous to reduce 'crisis' to a sheer upshot of 'critique'*. It is crucial to recognize that, even if in some situations one may precede – if not, trigger – the existence of the other, crisis and critique are *intrinsically intertwined.*

There are, however, '*instances of divorce* between the *experience of crisis* and the *practice of critique*' (2, italics added). For example, if the *practice of critique* is converted into a self-referential act arising from 'the inwardness of pure subjectivity' (2), disconnected from 'the practical struggles of life' (2), then – although it may have personal, or even

psychoanalytic, value – it will not be able to establish a meaningful relationship with the social world. In a similar vein, if the *experience of crisis* is not accompanied by critical reflection, then it is reduced to an immersive state of real or potential suffering, without containing the potential of being problematized, let alone transcended, by those directly or indirectly affected by it. Put differently, the experience of crisis and the practice of critique have to go hand in hand, in order to ensure that the latter can provide the cognitive, evaluative, and projective resources that are necessary to face up to – and, if possible, to resolve – the challenges posed by the former.

3.6. Normalization and subversion

One key issue with which Cordero grapples throughout the book is the problem of *normalization*. Ironically, *processes of normalization* constitute not only a central feature of *social life* but also a vital element of *experiences of crisis* and *practices of critique* themselves. There is no society without normalization processes because human life forms are inconceivable without the *codification* of behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns, to which we generally refer as 'culture'. The moment in which experiences of crisis or practices of critique become normalized, however, the former are converted into a habitual facet of social life, whilst the latter are in danger of losing their analytical, let alone imaginative or subversive, force. As Cordero explicitly acknowledges, '*strategies of normalization* are part of the *inbuilt practical rationality* that actors put at work in everyday life and which is *necessary for the construction of a common world*' (3, italics added). These *strategies* – or, rather, *habits – of normalization* serve a *species-constitutive function*, in the sense that the regulation of social life forms would be inconceivable without the existence of normalized and normalizing activities. To the degree that these normalization processes perpetuate logics of domination, however, they contribute to the reproduction, as well as to the tacit legitimization, of asymmetrical power structures.

*3.6.1. Excursus on 'world' (*monde*) and 'reality' (*réalité*)*

Referring to social phenomenology, Cordero draws attention to another key sociological – and, arguably, existential – function of normalization processes: they '*reduce dissonances* that may appear between our *conceptions of the world* and *how the world presents itself* in specific forms and situations' (3, italics added). What springs to mind, in light of this reflection, is Luc Boltanski's distinction between 'world' (*monde*) and 'reality' (*réalité*).[5] The world is 'everything that is the case' (Boltanski [2009] 2011, 57)[6], whereas reality encompasses 'everything that is constructed' (cf. Boltanski [2009] 2011, 57). Put differently, the world is 'everything that happens *to* people' (Susen [2012] 2014, 184, italics in original), and reality is 'everything that is constructed *by* people' (Susen [2012] 2014, 184, italics in original). The world is a sphere that exists *beyond* our will and *regardless of* our intentions, whereas reality is a domain that exists *through* our will and *because of* our intentions. The key issue in this respect, however, concerns situations in which 'world' and 'reality' are *out of sync* or in which – to use Cordero's vocabulary – there is a *dissonance* between them. We construct a 'reality' and, as hermeneutic beings, do so

normatively and/or *subjectively*; at the same time, we inhabit a 'world' full of occurrences and, as physical beings, do so *objectively*. Yet, as soon as our normative and/or subjective construction of 'reality' is manifestly at odds with the objective constitution of the 'world', that is, as soon as the ways in which reality is assembled normatively and/or subjectively are significantly out of sync with the ways in which the 'world' presents itself to us objectively, *experiences of crisis and practices of critique become imminent*. The reason for this is that these moments of dissonance or discrepancy between 'world' and 'reality' tend to lead to *experiences of crisis*, insofar as they undermine our expectations by throwing actors into unknown and potentially destabilizing territory, and tend to trigger *practices of critique*, insofar as actors can make sense of changing circumstances only by revising their previous presuppositions and corresponding parameters of validity.

3.7. Reproduction and transformation

Drawing the reader's attention to 'the post-Hegelian tradition of critical theory' (4 and 92), Cordero reminds us that the relationship between crisis and critique plays a pivotal role in the analysis of capitalist society, especially in relation to the '*diagnosis of systemic problems*' (4, italics added; see also 82) that are indicative of 'its tendencies to *reproduce*' (4, italics added) – and, arguably, also to *transform* – 'through *recurrent crises*' (4, italics added). On this account, periodic crises constitute not only an immanent feature of capitalist society but also an indispensable vehicle for its systemic adjustments to constantly evolving – and often both economically and politically challenging – circumstances. Critique, therefore, can be conceived of as a form of 'crisis consciousness' (4, 33, 72, and 142), enabling historically situated subjects to expose, and to problematize, the limitations of their behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning.

To a greater or lesser extent, then, it is by virtue of critique that subjects capable of speech and self-justification can call 'the *logic of closure* of meaning and action' (4, italics added) into question. Ironically, though, they can do so to contribute to (a) the *reproduction*, (b) the *transformation*, or (c) both the *reproduction* and the *transformation* of a specific set of social arrangements and state of affairs. In the case of capitalism, the dynamic relationship between crisis and critique underlies the simultaneous *reproduction* and *transformation* of its own logic of functioning: its *foundational* logic of functioning (which is based on its essential ingredients) tends to be *confirmed* and *reproduced* by crises, whereas its *contingent* logic of functioning (which changes across time and in different contexts) tends to be *undermined* and *transformed* by crises. The former concerns the *nature* of capitalism, whereas the latter manifests itself in different *spirits* of capitalism.

At the *foundational* level, for instance, capitalism is driven by four geo-economic dynamics:

> (a) the creation of new markets of production, distribution, and consumption; (b) the expansion of capital across the globe; (c) the borderless exploitation of labour power as 'human capital'; and (d) the tapping of raw materials and natural resources in different parts of the world. (Susen 2015, 125, italics added)

These dynamics are built into the very *nature* of capitalism – that is, no capitalist system can function without them. How these dynamics are historically realized, however, differs between – spatiotemporally specific – types, contexts, and 'spirits' of capitalism. Thus, at the *contingent* level, capitalism functions, and responds to crises, in variable ways.

3.8. Construction and deconstruction

Drawing upon Marx, Cordero stresses the significance of the fact that '*society is no solid crystal*' (4, italics added, quotation modified; see also i, 19, and 32; in addition, see Marx [1867] 2000/1977, 455). Any attempt to convert the whole of society into 'a crystal palace' (4; see also 5), reducible to 'a conservatory for commodity exchange and an exhibition piece of capitalist excess' (4), is futile in the sense that the very forces of its construction may turn out to be the forces of its own destruction (and, as Marxist environmentalists would add, the forces of environmental destruction). Paradoxically, as the Japanese philosopher and literary critic Kōjin Karatani – to whose work Cordero refers in this context – remarks, 'the "will to construct a solid edifice" ultimately does not achieve a foundation, but reveals instead the very absence of its own foundation' (Karatani [1983] 1995, 8; see also Cordero 2017, 5). In other words, there would be no point in trying to erect solid foundations if they were already built into the social fabric, let alone into capitalism. The metaphor of the 'Crystal Palace' conveys the Marxist conviction that capitalist society is tantamount to a 'crystal-like' (5; see also 27) historical formation, whose destiny is one of *apparent* indestructibility and *actual* self-destructibility. On this view, '*fragility* is a *condition* inscribed in the very *core* of the sociological idea of *modern society*' (5, italics added). Far from representing a peripheral element or exceptional epiphenomenon of modern life, fragility constitutes 'an ontological property of social life as a mode of existence' (5) shaped by material and symbolic processes of construction and deconstruction.

3.9. Relationality and fragility

Another crucial proposition underlying Cordero's argument is the contention that '*the fragile condition* of the social world is a result of its *relational foundation*' (5, italics added). Put differently, the *fragility* of the social and the *relationality* of the social not only go hand in hand, but the former stems from the latter. Cordero describes his *relationalist conception of social fragility* as follows:

> If we understand *the social* as a *principle of coexistence* (that is, a mode of proximity and being-together), *relation* is what defines the *structure of the social world* from the very beginning. This structure basically consists of the *unity between qualitatively different entities* which were *not originally united* and therefore *could separate*. Seen in this way, social theory confronts the problem that in order to elucidate what makes possible the unity and relative solidness of life in common, it must examine at the same time what *interrupts* and *tears* it *apart*. (5, italics added)

What is perhaps more important, however, is that – in Cordero's verdict – such a relationalist mode of conceptualizing fragility obliges us to acknowledge that the

quest for foundationalist forms of unity is doomed to failure, *owing to* the relational constitution of society:

> The definition of society as a form of *relation* then suggests that *the social* is a *mode of coexistence* whose *unity* is *constituted* in the *absence of unity*. Therefore, it lacks a *substantial foundation*, *original identity* or *absolute destiny*. In fact, the social means a relentless opening of existence toward the other and, therefore, the always-present *possibility of estrangement, fissure and divorce*. (5–6, italics added)

In short, *the anti-foundationalist nature of critical theory emanates from the foundationless constitution of its main object of study: society*. This insight requires us to recognize that the 'in-itselfness' and the 'for-itselfness' of the social world are inextricably linked: for us, as subjects capable of both action and interpretation, the universe is not only what it *is* ('in-it-selfness') but also what we *make of*, and how we *attribute meaning to*, it ('for-itselfness'). It is precisely in moments of crisis that, by virtue of critique, worldly 'in-itselfness' is bestowed with meaning through socio-cognitive 'for-itselfness'. Indeed, as Cordero puts it, 'the world torn apart demands new attention – it acquires *consciousness of itself* as world' (6, italics added): it is only through its protagonists' awareness of themselves and of their environment that it can constitute, and constantly re-constitute, itself in a meaningful and purposive fashion. Hermeneutically inspired actors, then, are regularly confronted with the challenge of turning crisis not only into an object of critique but also into an existential opportunity.

3.9.1. Excursus on the 'middle space' between crisis and critique

For Cordero, *fragility* is not a negative feature, let alone a weakness, of social existence in particular or of the human condition in general. Rather, in a positive sense of individual and/or collective empowerment, it is '*the price to be paid*' (6, italics added) – not only 'for refusing all forms of transcendence and accepting the relational constitution of the social world' (6), but also 'for wishing to *break free from the dominance of pure immanence and the closure of meaning and action*' (6, italics added). This reflection enables Cordero to make a powerful case for the insight that crisis and critique, far from being situated at two opposite ends of the sociological matrix, unfold both within and through 'the *emergent middle space* where the social opens itself to question' (6, italics added).

Cordero rightly insists, however, that the socio-ontological centrality of the relationship between crisis and critique manifests itself in both *empirical* and *conceptual* moments of social life:

(a) At the *empirical* level, the interaction between crisis and critique is shaped by human practices that are spatiotemporally situated 'in concrete historical and institutional contexts' (6).

(b) At the *conceptual* level, the interaction between crisis and critique constitutes a major object of inquiry – not only for critical theorists but also, in a more fundamental sense, for ordinary actors as they grapple with the tensions, frictions, and disappointments of their everyday lives.

In brief, the dynamic relationship between crisis and critique is vital to both the material and the symbolic construction of social reality.

3.10. Philosophy and sociology

On several occasions throughout the book, Cordero insists that the alleged disciplinary gap between philosophy and sociology is based on an erroneous, and largely counterproductive, antinomy. On this account, 'the conventional distinction between *conceptual thought* and *empirical inquiry* […] creates a *false dilemma* between *philosophy* and *sociology*' (7, italics added). Such a misleading dichotomous understanding of the two disciplines is founded on the following presuppositional opposition:

- On the one hand, *philosophy* is concerned, above all, with the 'reflection on and creation of *concepts*' (7, italics added), implying that the study of the genealogy of their meaning is crucial to this kind of *theoretical* investigation.
- On the other hand, *sociology* is concerned, primarily, with *society*, implying that the study of both its constitution and its development is central to this form of *empirical* analysis.

In Cordero's view, such a binary approach prevents us from grasping the degree to which it may be possible 'to obtain *sociological* knowledge from an inquiry [into] *concepts*' (7, italics added, quotation modified), thereby overlooking the fact that 'concepts themselves may be sociological objects in their own right' (7). What may be added to Cordero's argument is that, in a similar vein, such a separatist division of labour precludes us from recognizing that it may be viable to acquire *philosophical* knowledge from an inquiry into *society*. Thus, Cordero converges with Bourdieusian – and, indeed, many other transdisciplinary – scholars in insisting that, for *critical* social researchers, it is essential to move beyond the false antagonism between different modes of knowledge production and to transcend the '*apparent* antinomy' between them (Bourdieu 1980, 46, italics added, my translation; cf. Susen 2007, esp. 149–50). The Bourdieusian conviction that 'research without theory is blind, and theory without research is empty' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 162, italics removed)[7] falls squarely in line with Cordero's contention that the divide between philosophy and sociology is misleading.

3.11. The sociology of concepts and the conceptuality of sociology

Setting out the presuppositional underpinnings of his study, Cordero aims to make a case for a *paradigm shift:*

> In the following chapters, I intend to leave aside the impression that *concepts of crisis and critique* are intellectual products of subjective imagination, mere representations of pre-constituted definitions, or essential unities of meaning with secure foundations. This supposes an important *change of perspective*: from understanding *concepts as mere classificatory tools that help us measure social regularities* to understanding *concepts as constellations of elements apparently dispersed in social life*. Put differently, concepts are crystallizations of the way in which social relations are historically organized. (7–8, italics added)

The aforementioned paradigm shift has three crucial implications:

(a) Within the discursive domain of *social theory*, every concept is a '*reconstruction*' (8, italics added; see also 68 and 73) and, as such, 'an essentially *contestable* and *transformable* unity of meaning' (8, italics added). Consequently, concepts do not possess 'a principle of closure' (8; see also 4, 32, and 146), they 'can never be self-sufficient and coherent unities of meaning' (8), but they emerge and evolve within and through '*spaces of struggle* and social forms *open to question*' (8, italics added).

(b) Within the empirical realm of *social existence*, all concepts are shaped by *human practices*. In this sense, 'they stand neither a priori nor *ex post facto* but in the middle of social life' (8). Concepts, as they develop in relation to socio-historically situated activities, can be regarded as 'the crystallization of certain experiences' (8) – that is, as expressions of people's daily immersion in the world.

(c) Within the epistemological province of the *sociology of knowledge*, it is vital to examine concepts not as isolated units but, in a Saussurean fashion, in terms of the '*relationship* between them' (8, italics added). In the context of Cordero's study, this means that it is futile to pretend 'one can think *crisis without critique* and *critique without crisis*' (8, italics added). For we need to shed light on the links between them in order to 'be able to grasp *social diremptions*' (8, italics added) – that is, processes that are aimed at ripping apart elements of social life that essentially belong together.

3.12. The tripartite challenge of critical theory

For Cordero, critical theory can claim to be truly 'critical' only insofar as it is committed to three levels of self-understanding:

(a) It is '*materially grounded*' (6, italics added), in the sense that it sheds light on the multifaceted ways in which 'social relations are objectively produced and transformed' (6), thereby presupposing that they exist as empirically verifiable and conceptually graspable realities.

(b) It is '*phenomenologically invested*' (6, italics added), in the sense that it engages with people's quotidian experiences of the world, including their 'everyday struggles for interpretation' (6) and recognition, in which they, as hermeneutic entities, are inevitably involved.

(c) It is '*genealogically deployed*' (6, italics added), in the sense that it fleshes out 'the historical constitution of practices, norms and institutions that hold social relations together' (6), or indeed transform them, thereby demonstrating that all modes of individual or social abstraction are embedded in spatiotemporal horizons of concrete human actions.

In brief, critical theory constitutes a materially grounded, phenomenologically invested, and genealogically deployed endeavour, in the sense that it is committed not only to studying the objective, subjective, and normative dimensions of existence, but also to exposing the extent to which they perpetuate relations of domination and thereby undermine the potential of human emancipation.

4. Limitations

Let me now turn to the task of shedding light on the most significant weaknesses and limitations of Cordero's *Crisis and critique*.

4.1. Definitions: 'crisis' and 'critique'?

It is striking that, in the introductory section of – and, in fact, throughout – the book, Cordero does not provide *definitions* of the concepts of 'crisis' and 'critique'. The same applies not only to the concept of 'foundations', which features centrally in the subtitle of his book, but also to various other concepts that appear on several pages and in crucial passages – such as 'abstraction', 'actuality', 'assemblage', 'closure'/'non-closure', 'diremption', 'essentialist'/'non-essentialist', 'freedom', 'postmodern', 'reality', 'uncertainty', 'utopia', or 'validity'. Granted, some of these concepts are notoriously difficult to define, which is precisely what makes them sociologically interesting and epistemically controversial. To the extent that they constitute presuppositional cornerstones of Cordero's theoretical architecture, however, it is vital to offer at least shorthand definitions, so that the reader knows what the author has in mind when employing these terms in his analysis. To be fair, Cordero may legitimately argue that providing shorthand definitions of the two key foundational concepts of his study – that is, 'crisis' and 'critique'– would defeat the point of producing an almost 200-page volume on their meaning, significance, and role in sociological inquiry. Yet, even if his in-depth investigation demonstrates that these terms can be, and have been, used and described in a large variety of ways, it would have been beneficial to include at least minimalist definitions of them, thereby not only 'setting the scene' but also providing an epistemically valuable ground for subsequent reflections.

4.2. Key thinkers: (a) similarities, (b) differences, and (c) integration?

A fundamental three-step challenge with which we are confronted when comparing and contrasting rival approaches to a particular topic consists in identifying (a) *affinities and commonalties*, (b) *differences and discrepancies*, as well as (c) *points of integration and cross-fertilization*. Tasks (a) and (b) are merely scholastic endeavours if they fail to demonstrate what can be gained – theoretically and/or practically – from (c). Cordero's study succeeds in comparing and contrasting insightful accounts of 'crisis' and 'critique' within individual chapters, but it contains little in the way of a decisive attempt at cross-fertilizing, let alone integrating, these approaches in a systematic manner. Such a task could have been

undertaken in an additional (penultimate or final) chapter, in order for the reader to know how contemporary social and political thought can benefit – theoretically and/or practically – from Cordero's previous analysis. Far from constituting a scholastic exercise of intellectualist posturing, such a threefold undertaking – for which it is essential that concepts be clearly and concisely defined – would have permitted the author to push the debate forward, thereby taking our understanding of the relationship between crisis and critique to an epistemically superior level.

4.3. Contribution: alternative outline?

Sympathetic readers may applaud Cordero's decision not to provide a 'Conclusion' in the conventional sense, as the orderly formulation of a set of definitive and categorical statements in the final chapter would have defeated the whole point of his normative enterprise, consisting in the uncompromising insistence on the radical 'openness' – and, hence, 'non-closure' and 'indeterminacy' – of the social universe. Indeed, Cordero's entire project is driven by the ambition to face up to – and by the motivation to urge his readers to accept – 'the *impossibility of closure* of the social' (11, italics added; see also 38 and 154). A crucial dimension that, in my view, the book falls short of, however, is to accomplish precisely what Cordero shied away from accomplishing in the final section of his study: namely, to develop *his own* approach – that is, an approach that, whilst drawing on and borrowing from numerous other sources, distinguishes itself from already existing conceptual frameworks. Cordero's explicit and detailed defence of his *own perspective* would have enabled him to make an original contribution to our understanding of crisis and critique.

4.4. Normalization: habit or strategy (or both)?

On numerous occasions, Cordero grapples with the issue of 'normalization' (see iii, 3, 8–9, 16, 22–7, 31–2, 38, 51, and 118), notably in terms of its role in social life. There is a tension in his understanding of 'normalization', which can be described as follows:

- On the one hand, he accepts that '*strategies of normalization* are part of the *inbuilt practical rationality* that actors put at work in everyday life and which is *necessary for the construction of a common world*' (3, italics added).
- On the other hand, he suggests that *normalization processes* are deeply *problematic*, insofar as they perpetuate *logics of domination* and, consequently, contribute to the reproduction, as well as the tacit legitimization, of *asymmetrical powerstructures.*[8]

Paradoxically, then, normalization processes are both empowering and disempowering. The problem with Cordero's analysis, however, is that it tends to *underemphasize* the positive and empowering functions and accomplishments, whilst it tends to *overemphasize* the negative and disempowering functions and consequences, of normalization processes. Cordero's preferred wording '*strategies of normalization*' (3, italics added) is misleading – not only because it disregards the fact that habits (rather than strategies) of normalization serve a vital *species-constitutive function*, to the degree

that they allow for the emergence of culturally codified forms of action and cognition, but also because it erroneously suggests that normalization processes are *consciously* generated, shaped, or designed by instrumentally motivated, utility-driven, and outcome-oriented subjects.

Throughout the book, Cordero has a tendency to fall into the poststructuralist trap of portraying any social phenomenon, social force, social structure, or social action that has anything remotely to do with 'normalization' in a *negative* light, as if the subject in question were reducible to a hegemonically ruled object of power struggles. A more nuanced, balanced, and accurate understanding of 'normalization' processes is needed in order to recognize not only their disempowering aspects but also their empowering potential – particularly, in terms of their invaluable contribution to sustaining culturally codified life forms.

4.5. Crisis: norm or exception?

According to Cordero, one of the key sociological functions of crises is to undermine 'the *seemingly unitary and durable* character of the social world' (1, italics added). In this sense, they expose the fundamentally non-unitary and non-durable constitution of the human universe, demonstrating that it is 'inherently *fragile*, without fixed and ultimate foundations' (1, italics added). Not many – if any – contemporary sociologists would take issue with this characterization; yet, this crucial reflection, which underlies the main argument of the book, needs to be taken a step further. What about those people – that is, individual or collective actors – for whom *crisis* is, or who experience crisis as, *the norm*?

Consider, for instance, children who grow up in conflict or war zones, or persons who – for different reasons – suffer from mental depression or personality disorders, or actors who struggle to make ends meet and live, as deprived citizens or non-citizens, on the fringes of society. For them, *crisis* is the *norm*. For them, the state or experience of *non-crisis* is the *exception*. In my mind, a truly *comprehensive* critical theory of crisis needs to pay attention to, and to flesh out, what can be learned from those individual or collective actors for whom the *presence of crisis* is a state of *normality* and for whom the *absence of crisis* is a state of *abnormality*. Surely, the analysis of almost *permanent* states of crisis, experienced by some individual or collective actors, can be just as enlightening as the analysis of relatively *transient* states of crisis. Whilst different forms of crisis can be sources of illumination for both the *ordinary actors* who experience them and the *critical researchers* who study them, both *normality as the absence of crisis* and *normality as the presence of crisis* need to be part of the sociological picture.

4.6. Sense of completion?

Cordero contends that crisis 'breaks the silence of things and interrupts the sense of completion of the world' (1, italics added). As such, crisis constitutes both a disruptive and an unsettling process, putting actors in a position in which they are compelled to call the taken-for-grantedness of particular aspects of their existence into question. Again, the following question arises: to what extent does this statement apply to individual or

collective actors for whom the experience of a state of crisis is the *norm*, rather than the *exception*? A provocative answer to this question would be to recognize that, for them, it is the *end of crisis*, along with the subsequent *experience of non- or post-crisis*, which 'breaks the silence of things and interrupts the sense of *non*-completion of the world' (see 1, italics added, quotation modified).

It is true that crisis – understood in the conventional sociological sense – usually requires us to convert 'the implicit' into 'the explicit', 'the hidden' into 'the overt', 'the intuitive' into 'the discursive', 'the normal' into 'the problematic', 'the accepted' into 'the questioned'. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that, in our everyday immersion in reality, we enjoy a 'sense of completion of the world' (1), which is occasionally disrupted by experiences of crisis. Rather, normality, for most of us, is the constant experience of *non-completion* – that is, of longing, aspiring, desiring, yearning, imagining, wanting to reach further, seeking to realize unfulfilled dreams, and projecting ourselves into a not-yet.[9]

On this account, it appears accurate to admit that a 'sense of completion' (iii, 1, and 6) is the exception, arising in moments in which we experience unusually high levels of fulfilment, love, and self-realization. Granted, the experience of crisis can *interrupt* our sense of objective, normative, or subjective completion – notably, when we are thrown into a situation in which our previous state of relative satisfaction, contentment, or happiness is undermined. At the same time, however, the experience of *the opposite of crisis* – such as fulfilment, love, or self-realization – can *trigger* a sense of completion of the world, often up to delusional levels, precisely because our *lack of a sense of completion of the world* is the norm for most of us when immersed in the routine-driven mechanics of our everyday lives.

4.7. Social life as a dangerous abstraction?

As stated above, one of the boldest assertions underlying Cordero's analysis is the following affirmation: '*Without such moments that provoke questions* […] *social life becomes a dangerous abstraction; it consolidates the appearance of being a reality without question*' (1, italics added). To be precise, Cordero makes two claims in this passage: the '*soft*' *claim* that moments of crisis are *vital ingredients* of human life forms, and the '*strong*' *claim* that the latter would be reduced to *perilous abstractions* – devoid of meaningful actions and socio-hermeneutic accomplishments – without the presence of the former. Hardly anyone – as a critical theorist, critical actor, or otherwise – would seriously call the validity of this contention into question. For it is by relating to, attributing meaning to, and acting upon the world in a *critical* manner that human beings, unlike other entities, develop the capacity to mobilize their symbolic resources in order to define, and to redefine, their place in the world not only as *socio-constructive* but also as *reflexive* entities (see Susen 2007, 287– 92 [section on 'culture'] and 283–7 [section on 'language']). Insofar as our critical capacity is embedded in and derived from our linguistic capacity, the species-empowering – that is, (a) assertive, (b) normative, (c) expressive, (d) communicative, and (e) imaginative – functions of language are crucial to our ability to convert our involvement in the world into a daily search for, and struggle over, meaning.

One significant aspect of our meaning-laden engagement with the world that Cordero appears to overlook, however, is the fact that we tend to enjoy the greatest amount of fulfilment, self-realization, and happiness precisely when we do *not* question the experience in which we find ourselves immersed – that is, when we 'switch off' and 'let go', without letting our conscious, let alone critical or reflexive, control mechanisms get in the way. This is a basic idea one finds in numerous paradigmatic approaches, such as the following:

(a) in *therapeutic* approaches, especially those related to *meditation* and *mindfulness*[10];

(b) in *philosophical* approaches, notably those inspired by Martin Heidegger's concepts of *Dasein* (being-there) and *thrownness* or *being-thrown-into-the-world*[11];

(c) in *sociological* approaches concerned with different forms of *engagement*, such as those by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot[12].

Without *these* moments – in which actors, even if only temporarily, *disregard* all questions – social life would indeed become 'a dangerous abstraction' (1 and 6). In other words, *both* the moments that *provoke* questions *and* the moments that *dispense with* questions are essential to the *empowering* construction of social life. Humans have the potential to realize themselves not only by calling particular aspects of their existence into question but also, paradoxically, by refraining from doing so, because otherwise life would be unbearable for them.

One need not be an existentialist to concede that 'life seems worth living because the world seems worth relating to' (Susen 2007, 292). Yet, meaningful and concrete – rather than meaningless and abstract – ways of relating to the world can be either *reflexive* or *intuitive*. It is not only due to our *reflexive* engagement with the challenging and crisis-ridden aspects of our lives, but also by virtue of our *intuitive* engagement with key dimensions of our existence that we have learned to be, and that we continue to learn how to be, human.

4.8. 'Crisis' and 'critique': objective, normative, or subjective?

Cordero makes it clear that, from his perspective, the terms 'crisis' and 'critique' must *not* be used interchangeably: 'whilst *crisis* designates an *objective experience or situation, critique* refers to a *practice performed by subjects*' (2, italics added). On this account, the concept of 'crisis' stands for a factually existent condition, whereas the concept of 'critique' describes a performative accomplishment of ordinary actors. Critique, understood in this way, 'appears as a *subjective* response to the [*objective*] contradictions and problems that the crisis situation reveals' (2, italics added).

In light of this description, Cordero is culpable of reducing *crisis* to an *objective* state of affairs and *critique* to a *subjective* performance. Such a dualistic – and, arguably, reductive – reading overlooks the extent to which both crisis and critique have (a) *objective*, (b) *normative*, and (c) *subjective* dimensions. A *crisis* may be (a) *objectively* happening, (b) *normatively* constructed in terms of both its social constitution and its

collective perception, and (c) *subjectively* experienced and perceived by different actors. *Critique* may make reference to, and be formulated from the point of view of, (a) an *objective* world, (b) a *normative* world, and (c) a *subjective* world. Just as all persons are simultaneously immersed in spheres of objectivity, normativity, and subjectivity, both crisis and critique are integral components, as well as developmental forces, of these foundational domains of human reality.

4.9. *No closure?*

It is striking that, throughout the book, Cordero engages both repeatedly and substantially with the concept of *closure*. For him, both crisis and critique are indicative of the fact that 'the social world is an *open relational space* that *lacks a principle of closure'* (8, italics added). It seems to me, however, that Cordero could have been more precise about the different levels of inquiry in relation to which it is vital to recognize the implications of the principle of *non-closure* or, if one prefers, *openness*. Indeed, if we agree with the gist of Cordero's argument, then we may spell out that his *attack on the illusion of closure* and his *emphasis on the ubiquity of openness* are crucial at three levels:

(a) At the *ontological* level, *reality* is fundamentally open, in the sense that it is in a constant state of flux and permeated by the spatiotemporal contingency of being.

(b) At the *epistemological* level, *concepts* are fundamentally open, in the sense that they are relatively arbitrary to the extent that they are value-, meaning-, perspective-, interest-, and power-laden.

(c) At the *methodological* level, *techniques of inquiry* are fundamentally open, in the sense that the tools by means of which reality is studied are both normatively and subjectively constructed, as well as being constantly reconstructed.

The problem with Cordero's understanding of closure and openness, however, is not only that it reproduces the jargon of poststructuralism in an overly derivative and largely unsubstantiated manner, but also that it fails to account for considerable degrees and forms of *determinacy* pervading our existence.

(a) At the *ontological* level, *reality* is, in some measure, 'closed', in the sense that it is shaped by patterns and regularities, which exercise a constraining mode of power over both non-human and human entities.

(b) At the *epistemological* level, *concepts* are, in some measure, 'closed', in the sense that they are hermeneutic products of particular historical contexts and shaped by numerous civilizational – notably, social, cultural, linguistic, political, ideological, and economic – forces of influence.

(c) At the *methodological* level, *techniques of inquiry* are, in some measure, 'closed', in the sense that the descriptibility of the object depends on the epistemic scope of the tools by means of which it is studied.

In short, instead of buying into the poststructuralist dogma according to which all modes of ontological, epistemological, and methodological 'closure' are illusory, Cordero's analysis would have been strengthened if it had been prepared to acknowledge the significant degrees and types of *determinacy*[13] that pervade not only diverse 'forms of ideological unanimity' (4, 91, and 96) but also fundamental constituents of human reality. Notwithstanding its inherent fragility, the human universe is shaped by an *abundance* of principles of closure, as expressed in the power of social structures.[14]

4.10. Epiphenomenalism?

Cordero confidently announces that '*a critique of society cannot proceed without a critique of concepts*' (8, italics added). It is due to this conviction that he seeks to defend the corresponding claim that '*concepts are small clues to general social problems*' (8, italics added). Not many – if any – critical theorists will be opposed to this contention; it is important, however, to recognize that its one-sided defence may lead to a form of *epiphenomenalist reductionism*, according to which 'superstructural' elements – such as concepts, representations, ideology, etc. – are mere products of an underlying social or economic 'base'.[15] Of course, Cordero is right to insist that concepts must not be reduced to 'mere classificatory tools' (7) by means of which it is possible to represent, or even to measure, specific aspects of reality.

To interpret all concepts as '*crystallizations* of the way in which social relations are historically organized' (8, italics added), however, is tantamount to a sociologistic reduction, implying that semantic expressions are sheer manifestations of particular sets of interactional arrangements and, ultimately, of culturally specific modes of existence. Granted, all *symbolic forms* – including concepts – are embedded in spatiotemporally contingent *contexts of action and interaction*, from which they cannot be dissociated. This does not mean, however, that the former can be reduced to epiphenomena of the latter, as if they stood for little more than 'symptoms' of underlying social forces. Given the 'relative autonomy'[16] of symbolic forms, we must resist the temptation to reduce concepts to epiphenomena.

4.11. Cognitivism?

Any reader familiar with different sociologies of the body will notice that Cordero's analysis suffers from a cognitivist-rationalist fallacy, which *overestimates* the power of *consciousness* and *underestimates* the power of the *unconscious*. The point is not to deny that human cognition in general and human rationality in particular can be regarded as both species-constitutive and species-generative forces of the human condition: as *species-constitutive* forces, they are an integral part of what it means to be human; as *species-generative* forces, they have permitted humans to raise themselves above nature on the basis of reason-guided actions and interactions.

When confronting, and seeking to resolve, different forms and degrees of crisis, however, individual or collective actors have a large amount of empowering approaches at their disposal, some of which break out of the cognitivist straitjacket

of rational control. For instance, there are numerous artistic ways (such as music, painting, poetry, etc.) in which crises can be thematized, as well as problematized, enabling people to face up to and, if possible, to resolve the personal or social issues they may be experiencing. In fact, one may go one step further by suggesting that non-human actors – such as animals and plants, but also, in a larger sense, the planet – are equipped with evolutionary resources to respond to, to adjust to, and to overcome different forms and degrees of crisis.

4.12. Appearance vs. substance?

At the core of Cordero's approach lies a great irony. On the one hand, it is *anti-essentialist*, insisting on the constructability and reconstructability of the social world, which, ultimately, manifests itself in its fragility. On the other hand, it is – inadvertently – *essentialist*, positing that the social word is divided between appearances and substances, symptoms and causes, visible indications and hidden forces. Indeed, the conviction that crisis can be the source of '*revealing* some kind of *truth* about the social world that we are not completely aware of yet or remains *hidden under the surface*' (15, italics added) is based on the assumption that moments of potential or actual breakdown, collapse, and dysfunctionality permit us – not only as critical researchers, but also as reflexive actors – to grasp aspects of reality that we would not be able to comprehend otherwise. There is ample sociological evidence to substantiate the validity of this claim (see Susen 2007, esp. 214-6, 240-1, 251-2; see also Celikates 2009; in addition, see Susen 2011a, 2016b). Yet, we cannot have it both ways. We cannot seriously maintain that the social world represents *both* a relational construct, constellation, or assemblage without any 'essential' properties (*anti-essentialism*) *and* an interactional conglomerate that is divided into an epiphenomenal surface level of appearances and an infrastructural substance level of underlying forces (*essentialism*). If Cordero believes that these two positions can logically coexist, he needs to explain how they can be reconciled.

4.13. Enlightening vs. blinding?

One of the most interesting themes developed in Cordero's book touches upon the notion that crises tend to be deeply *ambivalent* in terms of their consequences. The effects of crises can be empowering and disempowering, emancipatory and repressive, transformative and reproductive, progressive and regressive, subversive and conformative. Thus, different crises can have radically different – and, in several respects, contradictory – outcomes, some of which are more desirable and some of which are less desirable, depending on how they are interpreted.

A central issue that, in this respect, Cordero could have explored in more detail, however, concerns not the *normative* value but, rather, the *epistemic* value of crises, the latter being no less ambivalent than the former. To put it bluntly: *just as crises can be enlightening, they can beblinding*. Cordero's book contains numerous valuable reflections in relation to the former, but it comprises little in the way of a systematic engagement with the latter. Granted, for critical researchers and arguably also for reflexive

laypersons, crises can be eye-openers, permitting them to grasp elements of reality that appear to be hidden in a state of apparent normality. Adorno's famous assertion that '[t]he splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass' ([1951] 1978, 50) captures this idea in an aphoristic manner. As sources of epistemically informed revelation, crises can make us see things of which we are usually not aware because we take them for granted.[17] In a scientific sense, crises allow the critical researcher to draw attention to *underlying* states of affairs (forces, structures, mechanisms, logics of functioning, etc.), which, in some cases, do not require being uncovered, since, in extreme situations of predicament, they become more or less visible to everyone. We must not lose sight of the fact, however, that crises can also be *blinding*. This – epistemically less desirable – outcome is reflected in the fact that different actors react differently to different crises. In the wake of an economic crisis, some actors may blame the economic system (for instance, capitalism or socialism), others the economic policy of a government (for instance, monetarism or fiscalism), others the political system (for instance, liberal democracy or autocracy), and others may blame particular sectors of the population (for instance, foreigners, ethnic minorities, etc.). In other words, the same crisis may provoke very different reactions and lead to radically different interpretations.

Cordero, although he recognizes the *normative* ambivalence of crises, fails to put his finger on the *epistemic* ambivalence of crisis –which is, of course, also *interpretive* and, ultimately, *normative*. To the extent that crises can – as Cordero spells out – be instrumentalized by the powerful to push through their agendas, they can also – as Cordero does not acknowledge – be used by the powerless to blame particular – often even more deprived – groups for their misery. *The fact that we experience crisis does not mean that we understand its effects, let alone its causes*. A cursory look at the world-historical events of the twentieth century will suffice to demonstrate that epistemically misguided judgments about individual or collective experiences of crisis can have disastrous consequences.

4.14. Typology?

Cordero provides a thorough – and, arguably, unprecedented – analysis of the relationship between crisis and critique in the works of prominent social and political thinkers. What he fails to develop in his book, however, is a *typology* of these two concepts. Far from representing a merely scholastic exercise, such a typology is crucial in that it permits us to distinguish between key forms of crisis and key forms of critique, each of which has idiosyncratic features and each of which needs to be recognized in terms of its specificity.

For instance, *crises* can be classified as follows:

- objective, normative, or subjective
- behavioural, ideological, or institutional

- foundational, contingent, or ephemeral
- micro, meso, or macro
- structural or circumstantial
- existential or periodic
- real or imagined
- transformative or reproductive
- empowering or disempowering
- endogenously caused or exogenously caused
- social, economic, cultural, political, ideological, moral, organizational, technological, demographic, civilizational, personal, psychological, environmental, natural, etc.

One can think of similar ways to classify *critique*:

- ordinary or scientific
- spontaneous or reflexive
- rudimentary or elaborate
- radical or moderate
- transcendent or immanent
- hostile or sympathetic
- negative or positive
- implicit or explicit

If one reflects upon the relationship between crisis and critique in typological terms, then the following becomes evident: *different types of crisis can trigger different types of critique, just as different types of critique can trigger different types of crisis*. Unfortunately, Cordero's inquiry contains little in the way of a conceptual framework permitting us to differentiate between types of (a) crisis, (b) critique, and (c) crisis–critique relationships. Of course, one may argue that, given both its scope and its complexity, such an undertaking might have required Cordero to write another book. It would have been useful, however, if he had provided at least a tentative outline of such a typology in the final chapter, thereby paving the way for a worthwhile intellectual project, aimed at contributing to an even more comprehensive and fine-grained account of the relationship between crisis and critique than the one so skilfully developed in this study.

Conclusion

Crisis and critique is one of the most original contributions made to contemporary social theory in recent years. The previous analysis has sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of Cordero's study at several levels:

- The first part has made some general observations on the book's principal *strengths*. What stands out in this regard are (1) its coherent textual organization, (2) its impressive scope, (3) its analytical depth, (4) its accessible language, and (5) its remarkable contemporary relevance.

- The second part has given a brief overview of the book's *thematic structure*. The Introduction, the three main Parts, and the Postscript offer astute insights into the numerous implications of the fact that the dynamic relationship between crisis and critique represents a core concern in the works of major social and political thinkers.

- The third part has elucidated the book's *key arguments*. These relate to a wide range of intellectual issues, such as the following: (1) crisis and critique; (2) sociality and performativity; (3) abstraction and concreteness; (4) objectivity and subjectivity; (5) unity and divorce; (6) normalization and subversion; (7) reproduction and transformation; (8) construction and deconstruction; (9) relationality and fragility; (10) philosophy and sociology; (11) the sociology of concepts and the conceptuality of sociology; and (12) the tripartite challenge of critical theory.

- The fourth part has shed light on the book's most significant *limitations*. Whilst Cordero's study has made invaluable contributions to our understanding of the relationship between crisis and critique, the quality of his inquiry suffers from substantial shortcomings. In this respect, the following flaws are particularly noteworthy:

    1. its lack of *definitional precision*, especially in relation to central terms and arguments;
    2. its failure to cross-fertilize the conceptual approaches in question in a *systematic fashion*;
    3. its absence of ambition in terms of developing an *alternative theoretical framework*;
    4. its one-sidedly negative conception of *normalization processes*;
    5. its deficient understanding of the human experience of *crisis as a state of normality*;
    6. its idealistic portrayal of people's *sense of completion of the world as the norm*, rather than the exception;

7. its short-sighted *privileging of reflexive over intuitive forms of immersion* in the world;

8. its inability to account for the *simultaneous presence of objective, normative, and subjective dimensions in both experiences of crisis and practices of critique*;

9. its lack of engagement with the extent to which vital aspects, representations, and explorations of social life – far from being reducible to material and symbolic realms of openness and contingency – are shaped by considerable degrees of *closure and determinacy*;

10. its flirtation with *epiphenomenalism*, illustrated in its rudimentary grasp of the *relative autonomy of symbolic forms*;

11. its tendency towards *rationalist cognitivism*, expressed in its overestimation of the power of consciousness and its underestimation of the power of the unconscious;

12. its contradictory advocacy of both *anti-essentialism* (according to which the social world can be conceived of as a domain of relationally constituted constructs, constellations, and assemblages) and *essentialism* (according to which the social world can be conceived of as an interactional conglomerate that is divided into an epiphenomenal surface level of appearances and an infrastructural substance level of underlying forces);

13. its incapacity to scrutinize the reasons for, let alone the consequences of, the fact that experiences of crisis, as well as processes of critique, can be not only *enlightening* but also *blinding*;

14. its failure to develop (a) a *typology of crisis*, (b) a *typology of critique*, and (c) a *typology of crisis–critique relationships*.

Irrespective of one's assessment of the aforementioned limitations, it would be inaccurate to disregard the fact that, in his ambitious study, Cordero has made an unparalleled contribution to contemporary social theory. As such, it is likely to shape paradigmatic debates on the relationship between crisis and critique for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Cordero (2017). Unless otherwise indicated, all page references in this review article are to this book. With the aim of focusing on the key themes of Cordero's study, I shall quote mainly from the introductory chapter (1–12).

2. On this point, see also, for instance: Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010); Chiapello and Fairclough (2002); Fairclough (2002); Gadrey et al. (2001); Susen (2015), 201; and Turner (2007).

3. On this point, see, for instance: Habermas (1976); Habermas (1981a, 1981b, 2001). See also, for example: Susen (2007), esp. Chapters 1–4.

4. On this point, see, for example: Susen (2007), 93–4, 216, and 241; Susen (2015), 36, 42, 48, 95, and 112–13; and Susen (2016b).

5. On this point, see Susen (2014 [2012]), 184–5.4.

6. See also Boltanski (2009), 93: 'tout ce qui arrive'.

7. On this point, see also, for instance: Susen (2007), 246; Susen and Turner (2011), xxi–xxii.

8. On the concepts of *power* and *domination*, see, for instance: Susen (2015), esp. 15, 27, 45, 62, 71, 76, 116, 117, 118, 126, 133, 155, 156, 163, 166, 182, 196, 184, 188, 196, 198, 199, 200, 201, 216, 227, 243, and 266.

9. On this point, see Bloch (1959). See also Gunn (1987). In addition, see Susen (2015), 184–5.

10. See, for instance, Bazzano (2014).

11. See, for instance, Heidegger (1992 [1989/1924]) and Heidegger (2001 [1927]).

12. See, for instance: Boltanski (1990); Boltanski (1999–2000); Boltanski (2009); Boltanski and Honneth (2009); Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010); Boltanski and Thévenot (1991); Boltanski and Thévenot (1999); Celikates (2009); Susen (2011a); Susen (2014 [2012]); Susen (2014 [2015]); Susen and Turner (2014); Thévenot (2014).

13. On the concept of *determinacy*, see, for instance, Susen (2015), esp. 40, 42, 43, 71, 77, 82, 87, 90, 97, 99, 101, 138, 142, 173, 178, 180, 189, 264, 265, and 268. On the concept of *relative determinacy*, see, for instance, Susen (2015), 1, 39, 48, 65, 72, 74, 92, 233, 258, 265, and 278.

14. On this point, see, for instance, Susen (2016a), esp. 39–47 and 59–60.

15. For useful discussions of the *Marxist distinction between* '*base*' *and* '*superstructure*', see, for instance: de Lara (1982); Hall (1977); Labica (1982); Larrain (1991 [1983]); Weber (1995). See also Susen (2015), 90, 91, 97, 99, 100, 101, 265, 295*n*27, 298*n*31, and 300*n*110.

16. On the concept of *relative autonomy*, see, for instance: Susen (2007), 177, 188, 189, 201, 213, 244, and 285; Susen (2011b), 177, 178, and 186; Susen (2013b), 204, 207, 213, and 220; Susen (2015), 80, 81, 88, 99, 101, 105, 129, and 266.

17. On this point, see, for instance, Susen (2007), 139–40, 216, and 241.

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