

Review of: "State crisis theory: A systematization of institutional, socio-ecological, demographic-structural, world-systems, and revolutions research"

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Review of "State crisis theory: A systematization of institutional, socio-ecological, demographic-structural, world-systems, and revolutions research" by Tilman Hartley

This article synthesizes five schools of thought on state crisis, a term that refers to challenges serious enough to present the possibility that the governing apparatus controlling a territory and its population will not emerge from the ordeal in its current form. The author, Tilman Hartley, finds that these different theoretical approaches to state crisis are generally compatible and in fact complement each other because of their differences in focus. But they all ignore an important distinction: the causes and outcomes of these crises diverge depending on whether they take place during times of scarcity or times of sufficiency, when there is enough to go around. This distinction is a novel contribution to all five literatures synthesized herein.

One main contribution of this article is that, as the author argues, "a different set of theories is proposed to explain 'sufficiency crises' than to explain 'scarcity crises'." Once one considers the distinction, we see that the different hypotheses that the five literatures propose do not contradict each other but instead pertain to distinct conditions of crisis.

Another novel contribution of this research is the identification that among theories of state crisis that originate from scarcities, those that do not rely on shocks almost all involve diminishing returns. This extension of the idea of diminishing returns to include all instances of needing more inputs to achieve a given output is of course not new in itself. What constitutes a fresh insight is its application to unite seemingly disparate theories of state crisis related to population, complexity, pollution, depletion, expansion, falling profit rates, and overconsumption by elites.

These findings are presented in a new framework. This is the "synthesis" that systematizes the causes and effects of state crises. Conditions are divided into those that can beget crisis even when resources are sufficient, such as new ideologies, and those that cause crisis via scarcity, such as drought. Those involving scarcity are further partitioned into shocks (like natural disasters) and diminishing returns (like resource exhaustion). The characteristics of institutions, inequality, elite classes, and relations with external actors influence which of four societal responses result: reform, entrenchment, breakdown, or collapse.

The diagram of the framework, Figure 1, makes it seem as if a rather deterministic set of assemblages is proposed for

describing the state of a state's institutions in times of crisis. That is, each type of institutional arrangement—democratic and open, autocratic and closed, somewhere in between, or weak—looks as if it comes with a somewhat preset situation with respect to inequality, attitudes, external factors, and the dynamics of elite classes. But, obviously, these things do not always codetermine each other fixed ways. It is possible that in a dictatorship, elites might not rally to entrench themselves in a crisis, but that instead divided elites might prove fractious and bring about breakdown. The text and tables acknowledge the potential separateness of all these conditions by treating them in turn instead of as packages, so my hunch is that they are grouped in the diagram not as necessarily co-occurring factors but according to the societal response (reform, entrenchment, breakdown, collapse) whose likelihood of resulting is increased by the presence of that “influential factor.” So, I wonder if they could be presented visually in a way that makes clear that they are not to be thought of as packages.

It is not clear how the literature reviewed in the article was selected. I do not believe that the representative texts from each of the five schools of thought exhaust all the work in those schools that has addressed state crisis. That is, the review is less than comprehensive. That said, these texts do present a solid sample of the possible relationships between different conditions, influential factors, and outcomes of state crises. What's missing is only a brief explanation of how they were chosen and, more fundamentally, how the schools of thought were selected and constructed. Were other literatures excluded? Do the authors self-identify these works with the literatures to which they correspond or did the author do some work in the creation of categories? The review itself is quite explicit in its response to these sorts of questions of method, walking the reader through the construction of the proposed framework through examples from the literature. It is only the review's inclusion and exclusion of specific works that needs a little more description and defending.

I add here that I am not well read in this field and thus cannot judge whether the selected literature is sufficient or whether it is represented in a balanced and accurate manner. I hope other reviewers will comment on these matters.

I have one final critique of the framework. It comes with a caveat: addressing it will make the framework more complicated, which is not an attribute of good theory. The framework as it exists now produces testable and refutable hypotheses, and its abstractions are clear enough to make it an excellent starting point for further debate. That said, it is worth considering that the different conditions of crisis offered in this paper's framework—natural disasters, warfare, disease, pollution, growth, technology, moral decay, and so on, each categorized according to sufficiency or scarcity—occur together. One of these conditions alone does not normally constitute a crisis. Yet the framework in this article does not address their interaction. The manuscript, however, does include several examples from the literature(s) in which different categories of condition working together to create a crisis. I wonder how considering these interactions would change the linear thinking from conditions to crisis to influential factors to responses. What I am wondering, specifically, is if the particular mix of conditions behind a crisis has an independent effect on the outcome or response, something that is not discussed and could not be explained via the framework as it exists. These questions, like all the hypotheses in the paper, seem ripe for quantitative research, even if datasets and proxy variable will only ever provide partial evidence for and against the suggested mechanisms. Again, addressing this comment could come at the expense of the strength, elegance, and interestingness of the theory itself, spreading it into something approaching an all-encompassing, non-

falsifiable conceptual framework (see Healy 2017). In sum, the synthesis in this paper provides a framework into which old and new data can be inserted. Such further research will surely end in modifying the framework itself.

Healy, Kieran. 2017. "Fuck Nuance." *Sociological Theory* 35 (2): 118–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275117709046>.