

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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Introduction

Anyone who has tried to think through the theoretical and empirical issues connected to the concept of 'crisis' will know that there is a lot of literature to get through and much conceptual undergrowth to disentangle. So, Tilman Hartley has done us all a service in pulling together some of the disparate strands and aspiring to place them within a testable theoretical framework. He is partially successful in this but there are a few constructive criticisms that can be made.

The Author's Main Arguments

Some issues of definition are clarified: the 'state' is dealt with in Weberian terms as that institution enjoying the monopoly of legitimate violence; 'crisis' itself relies on the dictionary definition of a 'turning point' that may lead to either better or worse outcomes. The article is primarily a literature review but the theoretical novelty is to posit a new typology which bifurcates established accounts of state crisis into those defined by their relation to, on the one hand, 'sufficiency', and, on the other, 'scarcity'. The latter is further sub-divided into crises defined as either 'shocks' or those subject to 'diminishing returns', mostly economic in nature. The overarching research questions concern both the causes and consequences of crises. The article's most ambitious goals concern the development of testable hypotheses about state crises which would have future policy-relevance.

Strengths

The typology posited seems useful and persuasive. The referent of the concept of 'state crisis' is global in scope so the author has done well to subsume so much material convincingly beneath the framework. It should prove a useful way for scholars to orientate their analysis amongst a plethora of sources. Some of the diagrams, specifically Figure 1, Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6, add value to the text and support the literature review function of the article. Generally, it is clearly written and well-structured.

Limitations

Crisis is a slippery concept and some of its nuances are side-stepped in this article. The dictionary definition is useful and necessary but partly because the social sciences seem to have no equivalent to a 'recession' in economics or an 'epidemic' in epidemiology. This means that it is difficult to disentangle the concept from its ordinary language usages.

Even so, the author oversimplifies; in particular, he elides the more individual, subjective, relativistic, and cultural aspects of crisis. A closer look at the Oxford English Dictionary definition reveals this: for crisis is not just a 'turning point' but originally possessed an individual and medical etymology which only later migrated into politics and economics as a sense of 'insecurity' and 'suspense'. Hence, crisis has a subjective aspect which may manifest itself collectively. This is partly what Jurgen Habermas and Jeffrey Alexander are getting at in their theories of crisis. For Habermas (in *Legitimation Crisis*) 'only human subjects can experience crisis'; whilst for Alexander (in *What Makes a Social Crisis?*), nothing is a crisis in and of itself but only insofar as specific cultural meanings (codes and narratives) become contingently attached to phenomena which are then subsequently constructed as a 'crisis'. These more cultural interpretations of crisis are related to the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony' (as developed by Perry Anderson and Ernesto Laclau): whether or not certain phenomena are to be regarded as a crisis may depend upon the extent to which a population's 'common-sense' can be provoked or pacified usually via media manipulation. This is also the constructionist rendition of crisis that Stuart Hall et al invoke in *Policing the Crisis*.

These more 'cultural' considerations suggest two implications for the article under review:

1. They could be considered marginal if the author was confident of a circumscribed definition of 'state crisis' which all of the literature he reviews subscribes to. But this is a tall order given the scope of the literature canvassed. The most circumscribed version is this: the state is a centralised political apparatus and crises occur when its territory is threatened, its population substantially grows or declines, or the legitimacy of its power is threatened. Although this sounds crisp, the precision quickly slips. Is the political apparatus the same as the *government*, elected in a democracy, or, to varying extents, authoritarian? Or is it the central *administrative* apparatus (aka, the bureaucracy)? Economic and power elites, the interventions of which for better or worse are significant for Tilman's analysis, could staff either or both. Or what about the *local* state, especially where local executives may be of different political persuasions to national ones? The problem here is that as the definition of 'the state' expands, as it must given the scope of the literature the author surveys, then it becomes less clear that the primary referent of 'crisis' is a bounded institutional entity. So, the question then arises about whether another typology is needed to separate out those societies of high socio-economic status - the rich capitalist democracies - which experience cultural, legitimacy crises, but whose command of the police and military are such that they rarely experience territorial crises, from those societies of low and medium socio-economic status that may be more vulnerable to such crises? Or is this distinction already incorporated into the sufficiency/scarcity bifurcation?

2. One of the processes which Alexander has recently identified is that power-elites in the rich nations can usually contain crises that are sector specific, i.e. confined to the government, or the state bureaucracy, or the high status professions. But these can become cultural, legitimacy crises if they escape into civil society and become the subject of moral panics or social movement protests. This slippage from state to civil society and the role of the media and social movement activism in causing or resolving crises, seems to be missing in the article. Again: is it something that is already covered by the sufficiency/scarcity distinction? Is it only relevant to the rich, capitalist democracies? Or is it not relevant to the concept of 'state crisis' at all?

The other main problem with the article is the ambitious goal of theory-testing and policy relevance. This could probably

be jettisoned and saved for a separate piece. This is because it would require a theoretical excursion into the philosophy of the social sciences (theory-construction, falsification, paradigms, models, ideal-types etc.) and more empirical coverage of the specific dataset (Global History Databank) that is only briefly alluded to. This could establish baselines for relevant empirical indicators related to economics, migration, population etc. Advancing the new typology is a sufficient intellectual goal for one article.

More minor criticisms are that the article requires a rigorous proof reading and some of the diagrams (Figure 2 and Figure 4) seem packed with so much detail as to be confusing. They could either be simplified or deleted.

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