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Critique without Guarantees: Thinking with Stuart Hall in a Time of Crises

Abstract: The past twenty years have witnessed an accelerating cycle of crises. While this historical moment calls for the deployment of our sharpest critical weapons – first and foremost, to reconstruct the organic and contingent connections that may or may not link each crisis to the next – critique is undergoing its own crisis, most clearly manifested in the debate on “postcritique.” In this chapter, we address this problematic by thinking with Stuart Hall. We begin by discussing a number of discontents voiced by proponents of postcritique, including the reduction of critique to a set of theoretical and ideological automatisms and its potential convergences with the structure and content of conspiracy theories. We respond to these discontents by turning to Hall’s work, especially the collaborative volume *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). We read Hall as a quintessential critical thinker of crisis while also emphasizing his insistence on practicing a critique radically open to its objects and conscious of its potential pitfalls: a critique “without guarantees” which already addressed some of the problems highlighted today by proponents of postcritique yet without calling for an abandonment of critical practices. Based on this reading, the chapter ends with a discussion of two critical responses to the Coronavirus crisis, by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and African American journalist Steven Thrasher. In this context, we argue in favor of a critique without guarantees that must remain open to the specific nature of its object and clearly distinguish itself from conspiracies.

Keywords: critique, postcritique, crisis, Stuart Hall, Coronavirus

1 Introduction

The past twenty years have witnessed an accelerating cycle of crises, from the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the subsequent “war on terror,” to the 2008 financial crash, the 2011 wave of revolutionary movements across the Arab world and their contradictory aftermaths, including the Syrian civil war and the so-called “refugee crisis” in Europe, up to the global Coronavirus crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the current Israeli war on Gaza. While these crises, among many others, call for the deployment of our sharpest critical weapons –

first and foremost, to reconstruct the organic and contingent connections that may or may not link one crisis to the next – critique itself is undergoing its own crisis. In trying to grasp the relation between “the critique of crisis” and “the crisis of critique,” Ghassan Hage (2015) argues that critique seems to have lost its capacity to activate change in the face of today’s crises, and that such capacity must be recovered. Hage’s diagnosis may be right, but it opens other questions. What is the change that critique promises to activate? What is exactly the relation between the experience of crisis, the practice of critique, and the horizon of social and political change? And how can critique be rescued from its crisis, if crisis is precisely the object that critique is supposed to unravel? In this chapter, we propose to tackle these questions by thinking with Stuart Hall.

Our discussion begins by showing how the crisis of critique has been registered and announced – at times even enthusiastically – within critical fields of study. We address Eve K. Sedgwick’s (2003) discontent with critique’s tendency to rely on automatisms and routines and Bruno Latour’s (2004) reading of critique as akin to conspiracy theory, converging in the more recent debate on what Rita Felski (2015) has termed “postcritique.” One would not expect Stuart Hall – a key figure in cultural and postcolonial studies and a critical public intellectual *par excellence* – to figure prominently in these discussions. However, David Scott (2017) has offered a “postcritical” reading of Hall that grasps something essential of Hall’s critique: a distinct openness and “attunement” to its objects. From this vantage point, we proceed to unpack Hall’s critical practice through a reading of Hall et al.’s *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). We argue that at work in this analysis of mid-1970s British society – a context marked by economic recession, the crisis of social democracy, postcolonial migration and racism, and the rise of neo-liberal authoritarianism – is a paradigmatic critique of crisis yet one “without guarantees,” that is, a critical practice radically open to its object and conscious of the potential pitfalls of critique. Building on this discussion, we conclude by returning to the present and we critically address two readings of the contemporary Coronavirus crisis, by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and African American journalist Steven W. Thrasher.

2 The crisis of critique

For the past two decades, the opinion has been uttered from many quarters that critique has run its course. Possibly the first and main participant in this debate was Bruno Latour, who famously claimed, in the context of science and technology studies, that “critique has run out of steam.” Latour (2004) has been enor-

mously influential in criticizing critique and advocating for a “*stubbornly realist attitude*” (231). Around the same time, queer literary scholar Eve K. Sedgwick (2003) argued along similar lines that those who follow in the footsteps of the “masters of suspicion” – Marx, Nietzsche, Freud – assume “a paranoid critical stance [that] has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant” (126). More recently, Rita Felski has collected these discontents and advocated for the need to rethink or even move past critique, especially in the field of literary and cultural studies. For Felski (2015: 19), all those frameworks that “eventually yield ground to postcolonial studies and queer theory, to New Historicism and cultural materialism” share a number of problems:

a spirit of sceptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on [their] precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical. (Felski 2015: 2)

Against the protocols of critique, Felski (2020) puts forward “postcritical” modes of interpreting cultural objects that do not rely on “concepts such as ideology, discourse, and representation” (21) and are attentive to “the many ways we can become attached” (27). Felski’s project of postcritique encapsulates not only earlier and ongoing discontents with the practice of critique, but also alternatives to it that have emerged in the study of culture and society, such as Sedgwick’s (2003) own reparative reading and Latour’s (2005) Actor-Network-Theory (ANT).

In the current discourse on the crisis of critique, a dissatisfaction with critique’s negative or even destructive force is upfront. But often overlooked are the political preoccupations that underpin such postcritical discourse in the first place. In this respect, it is remarkable that two “inaugural” texts of postcritique – Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” (2003) and Latour’s “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004) – open with a tale about conspiracies. Latour’s piece is largely a *mea culpa* about his own career devoted to critically dissecting the activity of scientists and arguing for the social construction of scientific facts. In a post-9/11 era dominated by the distrust toward facts across the political spectrum (from climate change deniers to those trying to locate a US conspiracy behind the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers), Latour wonders to what extent the critique that he and his colleagues have long practiced can be truly distinguished from the epistemological structure of conspiracy theories:

Should I reassure myself by simply saying that bad guys can use any weapon at hand, naturalized facts when it suits them and social construction when it suits them? [. . .] Or should we rather bring the sword of criticism to criticism itself and do a bit of soul-searching here: what were we really after when we were so intent on showing the social construction of scientific facts? (Latour 2004: 227)

Latour's rushed conclusion is that academic critique has a lot to share with conspiracy theories and that in the face of such a troubling convergence, we should thoroughly rethink the very idea of "facts" and its place in our intellectual practice.

Perhaps more cautiously, Sedgwick begins her piece by recalling the words of her friend and activist Cindy Patton about the origins of HIV and the rumours around it in the late 1980s. According to Patton,

even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes [. . .] – what would we know then that we don't already know? (Sedgwick 2003: 123)

Sedgwick mumbles over this last question because it suggests, in her view, that a critique and a politics aimed at unmasking conspiracy plots is not the necessary or only task for the engaged intellectual. Following Patton, her suggestion is for critics to take a different path than the one aimed at determining whether a piece of knowledge is true or not. Thus, while Felski's project of postcritique does not explicitly address the problem of conspiracy theories, this preoccupation is foundational to the debate on the crisis of critique. Even authors who defend and reaffirm the value of critique, such as Didier Fassin (2017) and Lorenzo Bernini (2020), suggest that one contribution of postcritique (or the "critique of critique") is its problematization of the drift toward conspiracy.

Another concern underpinning the current crisis of critique is that, in the eyes of its critics, critique has often become automatic gesture, academic jargon, and void routine. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour (2005) carries out his most sustained polemic against the "master narratives" p. 189 (social constructivism, critical sociology, poststructuralism, etc.) and "all-terrain entities" p. 137 (society, norms, capitalism, etc.) that pervade critical approaches to knowledge. For Latour, such narratives and entities – let us call them *abstractions* – hinder rather than promote the production of knowledge. Similarly, Sedgwick advocates for the dismantling of "routinizing critical projects" (Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 496) as one of the necessary steps for overcoming paranoid modes of reading. Felski herself denounces the ossification of critical practices that have by now turned, she argues, into quasi-dogmatic protocols. According to Felski (2015), while at an earlier moment "the explosion of literary theories and critical methods was irresistible" (18), today their "spirit of ceaseless scepticism and incessant interrogation" is over and "we are left nursing a Sunday morning hangover and wondering what fragments, if any, can be retrieved from the ruins" (15). Felski questions the

scope of critique by exploring what else it can do apart from rehearsing exhausted tropes and analytical generalizations.

Felski's latest work *Hooked* (2020) focuses on those approaches to literature and culture that escape, in her view, the protocols of critique. Somewhat surprisingly, she identifies one such approach in Stuart Hall's work (148–149) – to be more precise, in Hall's "voice" as discussed by David Scott in *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (2017). According to Scott, Hall exemplifies an intellectual disposition that he terms "listening self" and that differs from the "critical self" in that it remains radically "attuned" to unpredictable shifts in culture, society, and politics which might reorient what one thinks one already knows.¹ Scott develops this reading based on Hall's insistence on thinking conjuncturally, his complex (indeed, critical) relation with Marxism, and his engagement with the emerging politics of race, gender, and sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s.² As Scott (2017: 54) puts it, in Hall's work we find "more an engaged *disposition* toward the concrete than an abstract set of formal propositions ready-to-hand."

Felski (2020: 148) reminds us that "Scott is less interested in Hall's views than in his way of having views." Yet, as Bruce Robbins (2019) points out in a sharp review of postcritique, a focus on Hall's "way of having views" divorced from its content can be reductive and distorting. Scott's postcritical reading is, for Robbins, a "project of depoliticizing Hall," for it obscures the complex politics informing Hall's work and, in so doing, it gives in to the neoliberal demand to void criticism of its transformative and emancipatory potential. Robbins is right in highlighting the risks and limits of postcritique. Critique has been configured at least since Kant as an oppositional gesture aimed at contesting what a religious or political authority holds to be true (see Foucault 1984). In the face of the present crisis of critique, proponents of postcritique seem unable to fully address the question of what relations between intellectual work and political practice might emerge from a revision of the practice of critique.³

At the same time, Robbins is perhaps too quick in dismissing the concerns raised by postcritique in general, and Felski's and Scott's postcritical reading of

1 In *Hooked*, Felski (2020: 41–78) discusses "attunement" at length as one of those forms of attachment, together with "identification" and "interpretation," to which a postcritical mode of reading should pay attention.

2 For a discussion of the relations among these elements in Hall's work of the 1970s and 1980s, see also Colpani (2022).

3 For a discussion of the politics of postcritique, especially in connection to what Roderick Ferguson (2012: 191) calls "minority and minoritized knowledges," such as gender and postcolonial studies, see Habed (2020, 2021).

Hall in particular. Scott's portrait of Hall as a "listening self" grasps something essential of Hall's intellectual and political disposition, which can help us navigate the present conjuncture between the crisis of critique and the need for critique in a time of crises. In the next section, we return to Hall et al.'s early work *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978) to show this peculiar disposition at work in the analysis of a specific crisis. Our reading suggests that the practice of critique deployed in *Policing the Crisis* anticipates and already works through some of the concerns raised today by postcritique.

3 Reading *Policing the Crisis*

In *Policing the Crisis* (1978), Hall et al. analyze a moral panic about mugging which spread across Britain in the mid-1970s. The term "mugging," borrowed from the context of the United States and associated with black male youth, began circulating in the British press in 1972 allegedly to describe a new type of street crime. Hence came a media campaign about "black crime," an escalation of conflict between the police and black communities, and exceptional sentences handed down to muggers by the courts. *Policing the Crisis* interprets this moral panic as the high point of accumulation of multiple social contradictions that could no longer be managed within the frame of the post-war social democratic consensus. According to Hall et al., the fixation on "mugging" at that time signaled, indeed, a profound *crisis* of that consensus.

Policing the Crisis is about crisis and transition in more than one sense. First and foremost, it identifies a crisis of British social democracy and anticipates the imminent transition toward Thatcherism. The notion of "authoritarian populism," which Hall would fully elaborate in the following decade to describe key features of Thatcherism as a political and ideological project, appears here for the first time (Hall et al. 1978: 305). Simultaneously, race is conceptualized as a "relatively autonomous" social relation. This means that neither can race be reduced to other social relations, such as class, nor can be understood apart from them. This anticipates Hall's later work on race and class in postcolonial social formations (Hall 1980) and his analyses of black diasporic popular culture (Hall 1992, 1996). Finally, *Policing the Crisis* marks a turning point in Hall's complex relation with Marxism. For him, the crisis of British social democracy and the emergence of Thatcherism coincided with a crisis of Marxist theory, which he began to address

from this moment onward through a sustained engagement with and reworking of Gramsci's theory of hegemony (e.g., Hall 1986, 1988a, 1988b).⁴

These elements come together in Hall et al.'s interpretation of the mugging panic as a symptom of the crisis of one hegemonic formation – the post-war social democratic settlement – and the attempt to establish a new one. The guiding principle of this interpretation is the notion of the “relative autonomy,” not just of race, but of all social elements and all levels of the social formation: the economic, the political, the ideological. Thus, even as *Policing the Crisis* reads the panic about mugging as a complex response to a crisis of hegemony, it emphatically avoids reducing it to a *direct effect* of that crisis:

The reaction to mugging has its own “inner history,” within the juridical and ideological spheres: crime control, the police and courts, public opinion and the media. If it relates to the “crisis in hegemony,” it can only be *via* the shifting balance and internal relations between different state apparatuses in relation to the management of crisis. (Hall et al. 1978: 305)

This approach is best illustrated by the discussion of the role played by the police in the production of the moral panic. According to Hall et al., the police – like the media – contributed to amplify popular anxiety and to associate mugging with black male youth. However, this argument is grounded not on the assumption that the police, as an apparatus of the state, simply works as an agent of the dominant ideology, but on an analysis of its internal dynamics and history. Throughout the 1960s, the British police became increasingly specialized, which resulted in the formation of special squads dealing with specific crimes (Hall et al. 1978: 46). From this process, the London Transport Police Special Squad emerged, which was quickly mobilized against mugging in 1972 and helped produce a discourse of emergency that would *later* enter the media and translate into a wave of popular anxiety (39–40). The specialization of the police further contributed to the mugging panic, if more indirectly, by weakening the links between the police and the community (46). This erosion of police-community relations was especially relevant to the moral panic because of the ideological location of mugging within *specific*, black urban communities.

⁴ As Colin Sparks (1996) critically notes, *Policing the Crisis* was meant to synthesize the past five years of theoretical work at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Yet, while these were the years that witnessed an appropriation of Althusser's structural Marxism in cultural studies, Althusser's theory plays only a marginal role in *Policing the Crisis*, for “the real centre of attention is on developing aspects of Gramsci's work on the winning of consent” (88).

Thus, the relatively autonomous role played in the moral panic by a transformed practice of policing was further inflected and amplified by the racialization of mugging. But racialization itself has its inner history. Hall et al. observe that the economic crisis and the rise of unemployment in the 1970s had a special impact on the black labor force present in Britain:

In the early 1950s, when British industry was expanding and undermanned, labour was sucked in from the surplus labour of the Caribbean and Asian subcontinent. [. . .] In periods of recession, and especially in the present phase, the numbers of immigrants have fallen [. . .] and a higher proportion of those already here are shunted into unemployment. (Hall et al. 1978: 343)

While this explanation might suggest a direct relation between the vicissitudes of British capital and the flow of postcolonial black labor in and out of British industry (and Britain itself), Hall et al. (1978: 343) insist on the mediations of that relation: “what has *regulated* the flow is, of course, legislative (i.e. political) action. And what has prepared the ground for this use of black labour as a fluid and endlessly ‘variable’ factor in British industry is the growth of racism (ideology).” So, Hall et al. suggest that inserting race into Marxist analysis as an element of the structures is insufficient: black labor recruited from the former colonies cannot be simply understood as a structural element of post-war industrial expansion. Political and ideological elements mediate this process without *reflecting* as much as *converging* with one another.

Importantly, this convergence is itself mediated and inflected by struggle, because race becomes “a key element in the class struggle – and thus in the *cultures* – of black labour” (Hall et al. 1978: 347). In a context of economic crisis and widespread racism, racial identification becomes an integral component of the way black communities experience their social position and potentially mobilize to transform it. In parallel, strategies of survival other than wage labor, including crime, begin to emerge in the interstitial spaces of black urban neighborhoods that Hall et al. term “*colony society*” (351), becoming part of the material conditions for the formation of a black collective consciousness. Once again, this process was neither mechanical nor spontaneous, but mediated by the reception of anticolonial and Black Power ideologies as well as black cultural formations such as Rastafarianism (356–357). All these elements articulated the material conditions of black urban life – including the recourse to different types of crime in the face of structural unemployment – and turned it into a potentially oppositional consciousness. Not surprisingly, this contributed to the deterioration of police-black relations.

The analysis thus comes full circle: the formation of a black class fraction within the British working class and the emergence of postcolonial racist ideolo-

gies in the 1960s converged to produce black urban communities peculiarly affected, in turn, by the rise of unemployment in the 1970s. This provided the material ground on which the moral panic about mugging installed itself as an ideological articulation of a more general crisis of hegemony. Different apparatuses of the state, such as the police, helped identify the black neighborhood as a key site of crisis and a threat to law and order, at the same time as the crisis in those segregated urban spaces began to take the shape of an emerging black consciousness and culture. While the analysis comes full circle, Hall et al. do not circumvent but emphasize the gaps and mediations between the different elements involved: the vicissitudes of British capital, the regulation of migration flows, the rise of postcolonial racism, the muggers who mugged, the police who policed, the media that amplified the moral panic, the courts that handed down “deterrent” sentences, and the formation of black consciousness. Each element is located within a relation of relative autonomy and articulation to the other elements.

More than forty years later, Hall et al.’s analysis resonates not only as a genealogy of the present – including the proliferation of new authoritarianisms within the folds of contemporary crises – but also as a response to the crisis of critique. *Policing the Crisis* was consciously written as a critical work that must avoid the pitfalls of critique, notably its potential convergence with the epistemological structure of conspiracy theories and the deployment of theoretical abstractions and analytical routines that obliterate rather than illuminate their object. This is especially clear in Hall et al.’s critical engagement with Marxism. Against a liberal theory of society that uncritically accepts a clear-cut separation between state and civil society and the formal separation of powers within the state as an accurate description of how power functions, a prominent Marxist line of critique has elaborated an “expressive view” according to which the different levels of the social formation reflect each other as expressions of the economic structure. For Hall et al. (1978: 207), this view tends to “exaggerate the *coincidence*, at all times, between the state, the needs of capital, the ruling class and the law” and is “driven back to a conspiracy theory.” Against the expressive view, Hall et al. refuse to approach the mugging panic as “simply a ruling-class conspiracy” (182) and *critically* reconstruct the production of mugging as a *real* social fact.

In a later essay, Hall (1986) terms his own critical disposition “Marxism without guarantees.” For him, the economic level of society cannot function as a theoretical guarantee for two reasons: on the one hand, because political, ideological, and cultural formations are relatively autonomous from the economic structures, they possess their “inner history”; on the other hand, because of the “necessary ‘openness’ of historical development to practice and struggle” (43). Hall argues that positing the economic as a guaranteed determination of historical processes has helped cultivate the illusion of predictive capacity and theoretical certainty.

Such an illusion, for him, “represents the end of the *process of theorizing*, of the development and refinement of new concepts and explanations which, alone, is the sign of a living body of thought, capable still of engaging and grasping something of the truth about new historical realities” (43). Thus, Hall et al.’s critical contribution to a Marxist theory of the state in *Policing the Crisis* could also be understood, more generally, as the elaboration of a practice of critique that already addressed some of the discontents voiced today by proponents of postcritique. What *Policing the Crisis* offers in the face of the crisis of critique is not its abandonment but, more ambitiously, a critique without guarantees. Against the incompatibility posited by Latour between critique and “facts,” Hall et al. suggest that critique is *necessary* to apprehend social facts in their multiple determinations, provided that critique abandons its investment in the guarantee of stable conceptual grounds and remains open, instead, to the unpredictable social life of facts. In the next section, we further unpack this insight by turning to critical readings of the contemporary Coronavirus crisis.

4 Two readings of the Coronavirus crisis

In April 2020, at the onset of the global pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2, Arundhati Roy (2020) published an opinion piece in which she called the pandemic “a portal.” With the novel Coronavirus having already infected more than one million people and claimed over 50,000 lives worldwide in the span of a few months, with most countries caught socially, economically, and infrastructurally unprepared to face the crisis, and with some governments initially unwilling to recognize the magnitude of the crisis – notably, Narendra Modi’s in India, Jair Bolsonaro’s in Brazil, and Donald Trump’s in the United States – Roy argued that the worse we could do is trying to go back to “normality”:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy 2020)

Roy’s call quickly went viral among those who are critical of the status quo. But what kind of portal was the pandemic for critique itself? Should critics walk through the crisis without the weight of old, “dead ideas”? Certainly, critics sometimes tend to stare into crises looking for nothing but the shiny reflection of what they think they knew all along. In this respect, as we have argued so far, the prac-

tice of critique would benefit from a change of attitude. At the same time, if critique is to play any role in understanding a new crisis, critics cannot afford to simply renounce their ideas. In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss how this tension played out in the context of the Coronavirus crisis, particularly in the interventions by two critics: Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and African American journalist Steven W. Thrasher.

On 26 February 2020, as the first government measures were being implemented in Italy in the hope of limiting the spread of SARS-CoV-2 across the country, Agamben published a short opinion piece on the website of his Italian publisher, Quodlibet, titled “The Invention of an Epidemic.” This was the first in a streak of sharp interventions – among them, “Social Distancing,” “Medicine as Religion,” “Requiem for the Students,” and “The Face and the Mask” – which are now collected, with a few additions, in the book *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics* (2021a). Agamben’s reading of the crisis overflows with hyperbolic rhetoric, such as his repeated analogies between the pandemic context and Fascism. In one piece, he argues that the only difference between Nazi Germany and the Italian government’s management of the pandemic is that the latter established a state of exception not through a totalitarian ideology but through “a sanitation terror and a religion of health” (8). As education moved online, he attacked teachers themselves: “The instructors who agree – as they have done *en mass* – to subject themselves to the new online dictatorship and to hold all their classes remotely are the exact equivalent of those university professors who, in 1931, pledged allegiance to the Fascist regime” (74). Elsewhere, he compares the Italian vaccine pass to the yellow star that Jews were forced to wear under Nazism (Agamben 2021b).⁵

Besides the absurdity of these analogies, Agamben provides a biopolitical reading of the pandemic rooted in his influential concepts of the “state of exception” and “bare life” (Agamben 1998).⁶ He argues that the prolonged state of exception established in Italy in the face of the Coronavirus crisis marks a transition out of bourgeois democracy – founded on constitutional rights and the separation of legislative, executive, and judiciary powers – toward a paradigm of “biosecurity,”

5 Only once Agamben suspends this analogy, and spectacularly contradicts himself, in order to question the use of the term “denier” by those criticizing positions like his own: “Those who use it [‘denier’] incautiously equate the current epidemic with the Holocaust, demonstrating (consciously or not) the antisemitism that runs rampant in both Left and Right discourse.” (Agamben 2021a: 58).

6 To be sure, Agamben’s strident analogies between the pandemic context and Nazi Germany should not be entirely divorced from his biopolitical reading of the crisis, for those analogies partly find their logic in Agamben’s own conceptualization of the concentration camp as a “paradigm” of biopolitical modernity (Salzani 2021).

which dismantles those rights and collapses those powers (Agamben 2021a). This transition, in turn, is dependent on a partition between social and biological life and a reduction of life itself to its biological dimension, hence humans to “bare life.” For Agamben, these shifts dramatically materialized during the crisis when the “right to health” was quickly transformed by decree into “a legal obligation to be healthy” (60) and it became obvious, at least to him, that Italians sacrificed “their life conditions, their social relationships, their work, even their friendships [. . .] when faced with the risk of getting sick” (17). In Agamben’s view, this biopolitical transition was well underway when SARS-CoV-2 appeared. The crisis simply accelerated the process and confirmed his own critical theory.

Many have noted that Agamben’s critique is virtually indistinguishable from conspiracy theories (e.g., Bratton 2021; Delanty 2020; Salzani 2021). In the book, Agamben anticipates this charge and invokes Foucault to establish a distinction between conspiracy theories and what he calls the analysis of “objective conspiracies.” This notion means, for him, that while there might be no identifiable agent behind a crisis, there are agents exploiting it to their advantage: “As Foucault showed before me, governments that deploy the security paradigm do not necessarily produce the state of exception, but they exploit and direct it once it occurs” (Agamben 2021a: 27)⁷. However, the characterization of the pandemic either as an outright “invention” or an “opportunity” exploited by governments remains ambivalent in the book. The reason why Agamben does not clarify this matter, and even seems to take pleasure in contradicting himself and misleading his readers, is probably, quite simply, that he does not care. As he states, “the powers that rule the world have decided to use this pandemic – *and it’s irrelevant whether it is real or simulated* – as pretext for transforming top to bottom the paradigms of their governance” (7, emphasis added).

Indeed, even prior to its convergence with the structure and content of conspiracy theories, the main problem of Agamben’s critique is a distinct indifference to its object. He admits as much:

In the Babelic linguistic confusion of our time, each group of people follows one particular logic, disregarding all others. According to virologists, the enemy is the virus; for doctors, the only goal is recovery; for the government, it is all about maintaining control – and perhaps I’m also doing the same, when I reiterate that we must refuse to pay too high a price. (Agamben 2021a: 27)

⁷ Agamben’s deployment of Foucault’s ideas should not be taken at face value. As Daniele Lorenzini (2021: S44) points out, “Foucault’s work on biopolitics is more complex, rich, and compelling for us today than what it appears to be under the pen of those who [. . .] misleadingly utilize it to talk about the state of exception and bare life.”

This rare moment of self-critical reflection reveals a particular view of the critic's task. Agamben suggests that critics can ignore the specific nature of their object, disregard the field of specialized knowledge concerned with it, and use that object to advance their own critical agenda.⁸ As Lorenzo Bernini (2020) rightly observes,

In these texts, the well-rehearsed critical apparatus that [Agamben] has assembled over the years by originally reworking concepts drawn from Foucault, Arendt, Benjamin, and Schmitt (biopolitics, bare life, state of exception), is deployed to comment on the reality of the pandemic yet without really examining it, without participating in it (as if this were possible at all).⁹

Bernini emphasizes that Agamben's pandemic writings betray a troubling indifference not only to the object of critique, but also to the collective human experience of death and grief during the crisis. Accordingly, Bernini (2020) argues that "next to paranoid suspicion and narcissistic arrogance, lack of empathy should be mentioned" among the gravest symptoms of the current crisis of critique.¹⁰

However, critique *can* and *must* do better than this. On 12 June 2020, as the movement for Black lives took to the streets again in the United States and globally to denounce the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Steven W. Thrasher published a piece titled "An Uprising Comes from the Viral Underclass" (2020). As Thrasher points out, Floyd's autopsy revealed that the novel Coronavirus was present in his body when police officer Derek Chauvin choked him to death, and that Breonna Taylor, killed by the police in her home two months earlier, worked as an emergency medical technician with patients infected by the virus. This is no simple coincidence: "The virus didn't kill either of them; police did. But both Floyd and Taylor are part of the *viral underclass* – a population harmed not simply by microscopic organisms but by the societal structures that make viral transmission possi-

⁸ Some of Agamben's most generous critics imply the same. One reviewer states that "it seems advisable for us not to ascribe too much weight to Agamben's assessment of the corona crisis as far as it concerns his medical expertise. With regard to the danger of exceptionalism becoming the rule rather than the exception, however, his critique deserves to be taken very seriously" (van den Berge 2020: 5). This could mean, at best, that Agamben's critique of the pandemic has nothing specific to say about the Coronavirus and that its value resides in the reiteration of Agamben's critical theory. If this were the case, one could read Agamben's philosophical work and ignore the poor iteration of the same ideas in his pandemic writings. At worse, the same passage could mean that the value of critique can be recovered by disjoining it from the distorted picture it offers of its object.

⁹ The translation from Lorenzo Bernini's (2020) piece is ours. See also Bernini (2022).

¹⁰ Bernini's (2020) piece acknowledges the crisis of critique yet defends it from a strong version of postcritique, arguing – like we do – that the best arguments advanced by proponents of post-critique should be taken as a measure to distinguish between good and bad critique, not as a reason to abandon critique altogether.

ble.” Thrasher’s core argument is twofold. On the one hand, there exists a relation of convergence and mutual determination between viruses and social formations: “vulnerability is manufactured for certain kinds of people such that they’re susceptible to viruses” while “viruses themselves can [. . .] shape vulnerable populations.” On the other hand, the racialized underclass peculiarly affected by the convergence of viral exposure, institutional racism, and class oppression is best placed to lead an expansive political struggle against the combined impact of multiple crises. As the subtitle of Thrasher’s piece puts it, “the Black Lives Matter movement could be the vaccine the country needs.”

As a journalist, Thrasher began noticing in 2014, as he traveled to Ferguson to report on the police killing of Michael Brown and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement, that the maps recording the spread of HIV/AIDS and the impact of racist police violence in the United States tended to overlap. Through those maps, Thrasher understood that HIV infection and police violence disproportionately affect the same populations, which he began conceptualizing as a “viral underclass.”¹¹ The spread of SARS-CoV-2 was no exception to this rule: “When we follow a virus – HIV, SARS-CoV-2, hepatitis B or C – we find all the fault lines of the society it is infecting.” It is precisely the knowledge of earlier and ongoing crises – HIV/AIDS and racist police violence – what allows Thrasher to offer a distinct reading of the Coronavirus crisis. In this sense, when confronted with the new virus, Thrasher, like Agamben, carries the weight of old ideas. Yet, while the pandemic seems to function, in Agamben’s account, as a confirmation of what the philosopher knew all along, Thrasher’s analysis emphasizes the conjunctural convergence of old and new phenomena which, by virtue of their present articulation, speak to the critic in new ways.

Thrasher’s critique is animated by a distinct curiosity about the biological and social life of viruses, which he argues can be best understood from the standpoint of those most affected by them. This standpoint takes center stage in his book, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll when Inequality and Disease Collide* (2022). Here, Thrasher expands his discussion of the viral underclass primarily through personal stories: from Michael “Tiger Mandingo” Johnson, a young Black gay man accused of “recklessly” infecting others with HIV, taken to trial in Missouri in 2013, and facing

¹¹ Thrasher also recounts that he first heard the notion of the “viral underclass” deployed in relation to HIV/AIDS by activist Sean Strub to highlight how the state helps reinforcing stigma by incorporating it into the law, producing “a viral underclass of persons with rights inferior to others, especially in regard to their sexual expressions” (Strub qtd. in Thrasher 2020). Thrasher reworks and expands this notion to offer it *both* as a name for the populations experiencing the compounding effects of social marginalization and viral exposure *and* as a theory of how these processes converge and shape each other.

thirty years in prison at the time, to Zak Kostopoulos, the Greek HIV-positive queer activist and drag queen killed in Athens in 2018 by a mob of civilians and police men, to Lorena Borjas, the Mexican-American “mother” of the transgender Latinx community in Queens, New York, who died of COVID-19 in March 2020. Empathy-inducing story telling is the main trademark of *The Viral Underclass*.

Thrasher’s deployment of empathy sets his critique apart from Agamben and grants his book much of its beauty and strength. However, at times it seems to curb its analytical power. For example, the book specifies yet simplifies the mutually determining relation that the earlier article had posited between viruses and social formations, so that now “it is social structures that are the *drivers*, while viruses merely amplify” (Thrasher 2022a: 12).¹² In its effort to do justice to those who are made most vulnerable to viruses, Thrasher’s critique risks doing less justice to the unpredictable ways in which viruses spread and contribute to the making and remaking of social formations.

Agamben and Thrasher offer two different readings of the Coronavirus crisis. While Agamben’s biopolitical critique is indifferent to the specific nature of its object and virtually indistinguishable from the conspiracy theories that spread since the inception of the crisis, Thrasher’s analysis is driven by a distinct curiosity about the social life of viruses. Additionally, by focusing on the compounding effects of multiple crises, Thrasher foregrounds their differential effects across stratified social formations. This stratification is foreclosed by Agamben’s insistence on a universalizing and abstract partition between bare life and *bios politikon*: between the biological and the social dimensions of humanness (Butler 2004: 60–68; Illetterati 2020). This difference between the two critics is amplified by Thrasher’s empathetic privileging of the standpoint of the viral underclass. Nonetheless, we also argue that Thrasher’s empathy-driven critique risks curbing its own analytical power by reducing the social life of viruses to the social formations with which they interact.

5 Conclusion

We began this chapter by situating the current crisis of critique – most vocally articulated by proponents of postcritique – in a historical moment characterized by multiple crises. This conjuncture requires that we identify a form of critique

¹² In the book, Thrasher identifies twelve social vectors for viral transmission: racism, individualized shame, capitalism, the law, austerity, borders, the liberal carceral state, unequal prophylaxis, ableism, speciesism, the myth of white immunity, and collective punishment.

able to apprehend the crises that confront us while overcoming its own. We turned to Hall for one such form of critique, which we proposed to term “critique without guarantees.” We thus returned to the present and discussed two critical readings of the Coronavirus crisis. Our discussion suggests that neither empathy alone nor any specific concept – biopolitics, the viral underclass, or moral panic – can guarantee a “good” critique.¹³ What sets different forms of critique apart from each other is theoretical practice itself. Commenting on Marx’s method, Hall (2003: 131) reminds us that, for Marx, theory “must ‘rise from the abstract to the concrete’ not vice versa.” In other words, theory should not start from the empirically given and strive to represent it by way of abstraction and generalization, looking for common essences behind concrete differences. Instead, theory should produce concepts that can appropriate the concrete while preserving its differences and determinations. This is why, Hall argues, “we need concepts that *differentiate* [. . .] in the very moment that they reveal hidden connections” (118). This theoretical practice is paradigmatically at work in *Policing the Crisis*, which proceeds by adding layer over layer of determination without ever reducing one layer to another or the mugging panic to any one of them. While Agamben moves in the opposite direction, staring into the pandemic and looking for nothing but the reflection of his own critical categories, Thrasher offers the viral underclass as a concept able to theoretically reconstruct the conjunctural convergence of multiple crises. However, his analysis is partly haunted by a desire to drive that convergence back onto stable ground, reducing the nature of the Coronavirus crisis to the social formations with which it interacts and losing sight of the relations of relative autonomy and mutual determination that exist between them. The best lesson we can learn from Hall, in a time of multiple crises and in the face of the crisis of critique, is how to practice a critique without guarantees that needs no stable grounds – in fact, must *avoid* the search for stable grounds – in order to account for its object.

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¹³ The opposite is also true. For instance, in response to Agamben’s writings on the pandemic, some critics have emphasized that the concept of biopolitics must not be abandoned, but rethought in light of the failures of Agamben’s critique (e.g., Bratton 2021; Sotiris 2020).

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