

The Crisis

Julian Arloff

The world is going through a profound crisis – few surely would dispute that. What exactly this crisis is, however, and how we can think clearly about it – these questions are hardly posed but until a sufficient number of people can address them any discussion of what to “do” will be fruitless. Unfortunately, and this is exposed by the crisis itself, the capacity to think clearly in a fully human way has been almost entirely lost. In our time of facile answers the only way forward, it seems to me, is to propose some questions, not in the hope of finding answers but rather to establish a deeper state of questioning.

The word “crisis” is derived from the Indo-European root **krei*, which means to sieve, discriminate, distinguish (Calvert Watkins, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, p.45). We live in an age of confusion, where technology enables, even encourages, the dissemination of baseless rumour together with undisciplined and irresponsible speculation; an age in which anyone can pose as an authority on anything with the result that there is no real authority; an age in which countless “meanings” and “truths” are shared so that nothing has meaning and the very notion of truth has been undermined – in a word, an age of *nihilism* beyond the worst nightmares of Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. I mention the latter because in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the idea that “without God everything is permitted” resonates throughout the novel and is taken by different characters in different ways, but Smerdyakov, who lacks any human dimension, *enacts* it – with disastrous results. There are now countless Smerdyakovs with Facebook and Twitter accounts, blogs...

These are hardly the best conditions for thinking clearly about a situation in which the values of our “civilization” have been exposed and found wanting, values which inform every aspect of life and that have long been unexamined, such as: What is health? What do we really need? What is work? How should people, and states, relate to each other? What, ultimately, is life *for*? The questions seem without end. It is as though the protective skin has been removed from the body politic (in the widest sense of this word) exposing nerves, veins, muscles and bones in all their shocking vulnerability. Despite this, a spirit of questioning, even though it is the province of a small minority, may help to establish conditions where thinking can take place and it is in that spirit that I am writing this.

To begin with I will make some rather obvious remarks. First, this crisis has revealed the extent to which we all rely on essential workers who are for the most part poorly paid and ill-considered – nurses, care-home staff, cleaners, dustmen, supermarket check-out assistants... This realisation has even reached politicians, who make the requisite gestures, but what real difference will it make in the long term? Are we all (not just politicians) prepared to make the necessary sacrifices on their behalf once the immediate crisis is over? To do so, the entire socio-economic system would have to change. Second, the expansion in world trade over the past 40 years has resulted in a plentiful supply of cheap goods, from clothes to high-tech equipment. Occasionally we read that these goods are produced in third-world countries in appalling conditions, but it hasn't really troubled us has it? The impact on domestic production has also been considerable, transforming once prosperous regions into industrial wastelands. This crisis has shown the extent to which we depend on imports of essential medical supplies for example but, once again, will we all be prepared to make the necessary changes when things calm down? This is not a question of big (and rather vague) concepts such as "capitalism" but one of *values*. These fundamental changes (if they take place) will have an impact on all of us, especially the more privileged. Public health measures in the 19th century (such as assuring a good water supply and other sanitary reforms) were not the result of altruism: they came when the bourgeoisie realised that they too could die of cholera. This crisis is one of global proportions and will require, for example, the production and distribution of vaccines throughout the world. Without a complete transformation of third-world countries this will be ineffective because they will need not just the vaccine but also a distribution system, adequate storage, a reliable cold chain, qualified personnel, a public health system... Such a transformation will come at a huge price – and not just a financial one: the balance of power between the first and the third worlds will no longer be the same. These changes all depend on international cooperation at a time when international agencies are being undermined. I could suggest many more such questions but unless there is a fundamental reevaluation of the assumptions on which the world operates at present it is likely that there will just be a slide back to the *status quo*. It is these assumptions that are hard to address for the reasons I gave in my opening paragraphs.

Heidegger was fond of quoting two lines from Hölderlin:

"But where danger is, grows

The saving power also."

I take from this that the crisis through which we are living is a moment of extreme danger that *could* reveal a "saving power" – but this will require an effort that is beyond the vast majority

of people. Our technologically astute civilization is very weak when it comes to thinking: the so-called “sciences” will not help us here. We are living through a crisis of *values* and to address them adequately will make considerable demands on our latent possibilities – which must be rediscovered. My only hope, and it’s a tenuous one, is that a sufficient number of conscious individuals devote themselves to this. If this were to happen they could have an impact beyond the smallness of their number. It is in this spirit that I will end with two quotations from an unfashionable voice of the last century, which may point some of us in a direction of thinking.

“Supposing a bomb were put under the whole scheme of things, what would we be after? What feelings do we want to carry through to the next epoch? What feelings will carry us through? What is the underlying impulse in us that will provide the motive power for a new state of things...?” D.H. Lawrence, “Surgery for the novel – or a bomb?”, *Phoenix*, p. 520.

“It is no use trying merely to modify present forms. The whole great form of our era will have to go. And nothing will really send it down but the new shoots of life springing up slowly and bursting the foundations. And one can do nothing, but fight tooth and nail to defend the new shoots of life from being crushed out, and let them grow. We can’t make life. We can but fight for the life that grows in us.” D.H. Lawrence, Notes to “The Crown”, *Phoenix II*, p. 364.

These “new shoots” are *our* responsibility.