

American Crisis: An Introduction

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1.

The American Crisis, by Thomas Paine, was published in Philadelphia in December 1776. Its purpose was to rally Washington's troops after their retreat at the Battle of Fort Lee. Paine wrote a total of thirteen such pamphlets, all collected under the same title, to boost morale and mobilize popular support for the Revolutionary War. In *Crisis* number IV, written after the defeat at Brandywine Creek, Paine invokes the medical etymology of his operative metaphor: "It is distressing to see an enemy advancing into a country, but it is the only place in which we can beat them, and in which we have always beaten them, whenever they made the attempt. The nearer any disease approaches to a crisis, the nearer it is to a cure: Danger and deliverance make their advances together, and it is only at the last push, that one or the other takes the lead" (148). A crisis, in this sense, is the decisive moment in the course of a disease; the physician is called upon to administer the treatment that will determine whether the patient dies or recovers (Kosselleck 361). As for the physical body, so for the body politic. Paine's cure for both lethargy and invasion is military action ("It is only those that are not in action, that feel languor and heaviness" [149]). Paine had no choice but to welcome the fight: British troops were already in Philadelphia. Nevertheless, he does so in a way that activates another, theological meaning of crisis which, according to Reinhart Kosselleck, exists side-by-side with the medical usage. The two meanings develop a revolutionary synergy in the eighteenth century. Those seeking to change the world embrace crisis because the "last push" can lead to what Paine calls "deliverance." Crisis, in this sense of the term, is more than an inflection point in a disease; it is a painful but necessary step in the path to secular redemption (Kosselleck 379).

Drawing on a long intellectual tradition, and useful for plotting antagonisms in relation to a climax, "crisis" established itself in the age of Atlantic revolutions as an apt metaphor for conflict. Kosselleck goes so far as to call it the "structural signature [even the 'supreme concept'] of modernity" (372, 376). Crisis was—and is—more than just a synonym for discord. The term evokes a teleological narrative

of history that determines the meaning of conflict in relation to its result (373, 376). Though crisis was suited to revolutionaries, conservatives invoked it as well. Thus it comes as no surprise that another pamphlet, also named *American Crisis*, appeared in London simultaneously with Paine's. Its author, John Knox, calling himself a "citizen of the world," argues that the American Revolution, conducted by those "vulgarly named patriots," would bring tyranny to America and Europe (20-21).

Whether or not that Armageddon came to pass is perhaps a matter of perspective. What is worth remarking, from a philological perspective, is that disagreements about the nature of this particular crisis did not detract from the general acceptance of the term. Crisis follows crisis from 1776 to the present. At the close of the War of 1812 an unnamed "Citizen of Philadelphia" published *The Second Crisis of America*—in the same city where Paine had published the first. It would be difficult to count the number of "American crises" since then, and it appears no one has tried.

By pointing out the ubiquity of the term, we do not mean to detract from its significance. Abraham Lincoln invokes the medical sense of "crisis" to great effect in the exordium of his "House Divided" speech of 1858. Four years later, James William Massie used the word in a similar sense in the title of his pamphlet *The American Crisis, in Relation to the Anti-Slavery Cause: Facts and Suggestions Addressed to the Friends of Freedom in Britain*. (At the same time John Waddington and John Lewis Peyton also used "crisis" to refer to slavery and its catastrophic consequences.) Besides the atrocity of slavery, "crisis" has been aptly applied to the Burr conspiracy, the Civil War, economic panics and recessions, both World Wars, anti-communism, Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, racism, police violence, AIDS, homophobia, the radical left, the radical right, opioids, sexism, terrorism, and various other forms of violence, corruption, discrimination, exploitation, and repression from 1776 (or 1619) to the present.

More abstract invocations, such as Jimmy Carter's famous "Crisis of Confidence" speech in 1979, are as evocative as they are legion. But it is worth noting that the term that Carter invokes in response to inflation is itself inflationary or infectious. Thus Stephen King's popular novel *The Stand* (1978, 1989) serves as a host for the germ of Carter's rhetoric, placing "crisis in confidence" in the mouth of a devil involved in exacerbating a global pandemic (1231). Some contemporary readers see King's novel as prophetic. Whether or not it predicts the current COVID crisis, it certainly shows that any text can incubate the term that both describes the course of a disease and spreads like one. Invoked by an evangel-

ical Christian president or a fictional devil, applied to the economy or to public health, “crisis” breeds crisis, calling the citizenry to arms in ways that divide the world and the historical moment into antagonistic camps: us vs. them, sickness vs. health, present vs. future, defeat vs. victory, life vs. death, damnation vs. deliverance.

A sample of contemporary book titles suggests that the crises are not abating. In 2005, Elinor Kelley Grusin and Sandra H. Utt invoked “crisis” to refer to 9/11 and its aftermath; in 2006 Wayne E. Baker brought out *America’s Crisis of Values. Reality and Perception*. Rebecca McLennan wrote about *The Crisis of Imprisonment* in 2008. Nine years later, during the Trump presidency, Alisdair Roberts brought out a book on *Four Crises of American Democracy*, which culminates in a discussion of China and climate change. A book edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton in 2016, *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, highlights the connection between violent police practices and BLM. Rebecca Solnit’s 2018 book of essays deals with a number of “American crises” including voter suppression, police violence, the carceral system, and the factors leading up to the #MeToo movement. In 2019 Cedric De Leon published *Crisis! When Political Parties Lose the Consent to Rule*, applying the term to the reemergence of populism. Andrew Cuomo brought out *American Crisis. Leadership Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic* in 2020. The same year *The Atlantic* published *The American Crisis. What Went Wrong. How We Recover*, focusing on, among other things, the threat posed by Trump. This year John Woodrow Cox addressed gun violence in schools in *Children Under Fire. An American Crisis*.

This issue of the *New American Studies Journal: A Forum* is devoted to discussing contemporary crises; however, the journal is also a product of our belief that “crisis” is not always a useful metaphor for thinking about conflict. Literary scholars David Simpson and Margaret Ferguson, in one of the interviews featured in this issue, remark that there are few forums left in the United States where people can disagree about politics in a civil way. We hope to provide that kind of forum, for political and cultural discussions, and we believe that dialogue is an effective treatment for some of the extreme forms of polarization that make crises so decisive, contagious, and disruptive.

The predecessor to the NASJ, the *American Studies Journal*, had a long history of promoting dialogue. The ASJ was a pioneer in electronic publishing in Germany, and among its innovations was a blog that remains an essential part of our format. The hundreds of articles appearing in 71 issues were composed with researchers, teachers, and a general readership in mind. They also addressed a range of critical

topics. The current editorial team will build on this inclusive tradition in ways made possible through the generous support of Göttingen University Press. This issue, designated 72 to mark its continuity with those that came before, features interviews with over 15 experts on topics ranging from constitutional law to literature to vaccine hesitancy. It contains the reflections of two novelists and contributions by four poets. Two of our contributors are former United States Poet Laureates. Two are past presidents of the MLA. One is a former president of the International Association of American Studies. We make a point of involving younger colleagues and contributors who do not work in academia or who work adjacent to it. Our aim is to model the kind of public discussion that we believe to be the best medicine against crisis.

2.

In *The American Crisis* number II, from January 1777, Paine deploys another set of metaphors that are closer to what we mean by “forum.” These metaphors are the “Republic of Letters” and, in the epigraph, the “public ear,” which Paine invokes to lodge a grievance against the letter’s ostensible addressee, Lord Howe. Public “ear” suggests a body, but it is a diffuse body without physical contours or boundaries. (This body *did* have a restrictive gender and ethnicity—something we will touch on below). Though “crisis” and “public” might be said to overlap at the locus of an imaginary anatomy, the difference between imagining conflict as a disease and imagining it as a body with attributes, demonstrates the limits of “crisis” as a political metaphor.

The public sphere is not subject to the same maladies as the body or even the body politic. The flaw in the medical (and theological) basis of the crisis analogy is *mortality*, which does not impact individuals and communities in the same way. There is no cure for mortality, but the public is not mortal in the same way a person is. A public can survive its individual members because it is not a body or an entity; it is a structure of relations. Thus the crises faced by a public tend to be relational or discursive rather than climactic. With the important exceptions of war (which is of course Paine’s concern) and extinction, public crises tend to be crises of inclusion rather than crises of survival.

Paine invokes the public in order to situate the American crisis in a context that is at once more durable and less tangible than the battlefield. His address to the “public ear” is decidedly not a private missive; nor is it a lawyer’s brief. The letter appeals to a Republic of Letters with no territory or jurisdiction. That does not mean that the republic is “fake.” Michael Warner has shown how the phrase

“Republic of Letters,” already a cliché in the eighteenth century, designated an emergent reading and writing public made possible by advances in printing and distribution technology. This public played a crucial role in the creation of representational systems of government (and the scientific community—more on this in a moment). The “we the people” of the Constitution can be understood as a perlocutionary act of that reading and writing public, which vests authority in itself through authorship (Warner 102–03). Paine would later invoke this linguistic aspect of liberty in the first part of the *Rights of Man* (1791): “The American constitutions were to liberty, what a grammar is to language: they define its parts of speech, and practically construct them into syntax” (492). The analogy between law and generative grammar makes freedom a speech act, and this—better than any account of sickness and recovery—explains the resonance of the metaphor “public ear.”

One way to think about the relation of *crisis* to *public* is to tease out the connections between the abstract Republic of Letters and the actual republic that formed in response to the British invasion. The initial planning was undertaken by the significantly named Committees of Correspondence, whose tasks involved establishing protocols of communication and decision-making. These protocols were refined and expanded upon by the Continental Congress and eventually in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Through dialogue and the codification of dialogue, public bodies grew to become more permanent governing bodies, which institutionalized their rules of debate as rules of law. These rules, or grammars of liberty in Paine’s usage, proved effective because they were designed to functionalize conflict rather than bring it to a crisis. James Madison’s formulation in Federalist 51, famous for distinguishing men from angels, demonstrates how the relations established through patterns of communication developed into the check-and-balance system: Because power will not check itself, “the defect must be supplied, by so contriving the interior structure of the government as that its several constituent parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places.” This “interior structure” of “mutual relations” did not yet exist in codified form at the time of Paine’s *American Crisis*. However, it already existed in embryo.

3.

It is when the rules and conventions functionalizing disagreement are called into question that the public is at risk. A public crisis is “a crisis of the republic” (to borrow a phrase from Hannah Arendt), which is to say a threat to the structures and relations making communication and the check-and-balance system possi-

ble. In our present issue 72, constitutional law specialist Joel Richard Paul makes this point in his conversation with Ellen Hinsey. Noting that social media fragments the public sphere by isolating partisan groups in their own echo chambers, he explains that a populist like Trump takes advantage of division by pitting the “real” nation or the “good” people, i.e. his constituents, against the antagonists he lambasts as foreigners or elites. (Populism is anti-pluralism that claims to speak in the people’s voice.) These epithets came together in the backlash against Barack Obama, whom Trump and other so-called birthers decried as elite *and* foreign (although he was born in the United States and thus qualified to serve as president). Novelist Jake Lamar, in his conversation with the director of the National Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris, Pap Ndiaye, suggests that the Republican party was open to such obvious falsehoods because it had already decided on a policy of total ideological obstruction. What makes the backlash against Obama a crisis is not the disagreement between Democrats and Republicans—that has long been a feature of the American two-party system. Rather it is the exclusion, through vilification, of one set of political actors by virtue of who they are (supposedly) rather than what they represent. Without communication there can be no compromise, and the only way forward is total victory or defeat.

The backlash against Obama was so extreme that it must be understood as a racist reaction to the first Black president. Lecia Brooks of the Southern Poverty Law Center points out in her interview that racism poses a threat both to its victims and to democracy because it undermines the basic principle of equality, and with it the possibility of what other contributors call civic dignity or civic respect. The public sphere can exist as a space of privilege in an extremely unequal society: the infamous 3/5 clause of the US Constitution is a tragic demonstration of this fact. The long history of dehumanization and exclusion, which has kept specific groups out of the public sphere, should serve as a warning against romanticizing the Founding Fathers and their vision of the republic. It also presents an organizing challenge. Brooks observes that those who have experienced discrimination are more receptive to the language of international human rights than to formulations like “all men are created equal.” The foundational words can seem hopelessly compromised by the Founding Fathers and their actions, making it difficult to look to the US American public (considered as an abstract body existing over time) for solutions to American crises.

Recent legal decisions recall some of the worst chapters in US American and North American history. Several contributors point out that the 2013 Supreme Court decision that dismantled the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was an early sign of backlash. More recently, the Supreme Court's support of Trump's "Muslim ban," or ban on travel from predominantly Muslim countries, has called into question both the role of an independent judiciary in the check-and-balance system and the democratic principle of equality. Joel Paul points out the irony of Justice Roberts' coeval repudiation of *Korematsu v. US.*, which admitted the Supreme Court's past failure and the injustice involved in the Court's upholding of the Roosevelt administration's decision to incarcerate Japanese American citizens during World War II. In this issue Andrew Majeske interviews Karen Korematsu, daughter of the plaintiff named in that notorious lawsuit. The Founder and Director of the Fred T. Korematsu Institute, she sees the "internment" in concentration camps of the 120,000 Japanese Americans living in the United States, 70,000 of whom were American citizens, as an extreme example of a long history of racism against Asian Americans that continues to the present day.

Several of our contributors draw attention to the ongoing and imbricated history of racisms (plural) in the United States. Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue, in his interview with Julia Nitz, points to The Page Act of 1875 and the slightly later Chinese Exclusion Acts to demonstrate that the "racial hysteria" behind the militarization of the US-Mexican border is hardly new. The "Remain in Mexico" program introduced in December 2018 by the Trump administration, was used to send nearly 70,000 migrants back to Mexico before being terminated by the Biden administration, and then once again reinstated. Those in favor of the program see the COVID pandemic as a crisis that justifies restricting the right to asylum. Nikki Thorne, in her interview with Maria Moss, draws attention to the gruesome discovery of mass graves at some of Canada's former residential schools. The residential school system, created by the Canadian government and run by Christian churches, forcibly removed 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children from their families, actively destroying their languages, their traditions, their cultural practices, and sometimes their very lives. The mass graves testify to the violent nature of forcible assimilation. This kind of cruelty, hidden from the public in the name of creating a homogeneous population, was not restricted to Canada.

Some of the poems featured in this issue draw attention to the ongoing history of discrimination over time and across geographical borders. Martín Espada's "Wake Up, Mario," tells the story of Mario González, who—drunk but unarmed—died after being forcibly restrained by the Alameda, California police. Part corrido and part elegy, Espada's poem narrates the tragedy of this death from the perspective of a

Mexican nanny working for the family who called the police. She dreams of Mario riding “along the coast to the deserts of Baja California, down mountain trails/off the maps of Yanqui generals and their armies, deep into the songs about/bandidos too clever to be caught.” The mythical bandido is never caught, but this poem does capture a brutal historical irony. Former police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murdering George Floyd in Minneapolis at the same time Mario dies at the hands of the police in Alameda. These horrible rhymes and resonances, enabled by poetry’s ability to yoke together seemingly dissimilar images and events, might be understood as a painful but necessary corrective to the fragmentation of the public sphere caused by racist and populist rhetoric. A similar kind of resonance is evoked by Robert Pinsky who points to an imaginary continuity of streets from his childhood neighborhood in New Jersey to the scenes of destruction in the Ukraine he witnesses on TV. He invokes personal memory as a counter to racism and blood-and-soil nationalism because, like lyrical voice, it insists on the importance of uniqueness, and therefore pluralism, over homogeneity. For Pinsky, poetry is pluralistic because it is personal, insisting—through its emphasis on lyrical or individual voice—on the civic dignity of the several voices offered up to the public ear.

The three poems by Rita Dove, printed with permission from her recent collection *Playlist for the Apocalypse* (2021), articulate cross-border violence in congruent ways. Through ironic invocations of the West as a cardinal point on the compass but also a political ideal, her poems suggest a continuity of conditions in “ghettoland,” or the string of ghettos stretching over space and time from Ferguson, Missouri, where protests erupted after police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed the 18-year old African American Michael Brown, to Terezín or Theresienstadt. For Dove, memory is unique (and therefore anti-totalitarian) because it is at once personal and interpersonal, with figures recollecting events that happened to others: “you’ll catch yourself before crossing,/stumble over perfectly flat stones,/skirt the worn curb to avoid a cart/rumbling past three centuries ago.” A similar cart, this time evoking families separated by US policies at US borders, makes an appearance in the poetic contribution by Ellen Hinsey. The poem connects this cruelty at the border to events that contributed to the anti-democratic momentum that would culminate in the attack on rule of law during the January 6 assault on the United States Capitol: “Remember also to inscribe how in summer—the fierce heat was upon them.//How under the vast, oracular sky, they watched as/innocents were taken from oaken carts, the young forever/ separated from their elders.” Hinsey’s poem recalls disparate

events in a deliberately impersonal voice. Dedicated to a historian, it articulates a decidedly public memory, avoiding first-person pronouns and enjoining its readers to “remember” as a public duty—and hopefully as a means of reinvigorating the public sphere.

A contrasting version of impersonal—or perhaps interpersonal—memory is suggested by Sandra Gilbert’s poem, which stages a dialogue between her dead grandmothers, one Russian Orthodox and the other Jewish Ukrainian, who come together beyond the grave (and in the same trench) to protest the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They end up repeating the same word as a grieving Ukrainian mother who appears on TV. This protest in unison is a version of the “third voice” Gilbert has always cultivated in her scholarship. Co-author with Susan Gubar of the groundbreaking *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and the recent *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination* (2021), Gilbert has actively cultivated the “we” of common experience, common writing, and common memory. This is a writerly but also a readerly “we.” Gilbert and Gubar are pioneers of a critical tradition that looks to literature for signs of the anxieties and experiences that bring women together even in their isolation—in attics, suburban homes, adjunct teaching positions without hope of tenure. Their work transforms exclusion into a “third voice” that insists on being heard, in public, as it remembers and accounts for the commonality of these experiences.

Several of our contributors here have endorsed the humanities for the education they provide in civics, recommending what Margaret Ferguson calls “slow reading” skills to uncover allusions and precedents. Michael Feldman, who began his career as a scholar of Modernist poetry and particularly of Ezra Pound, has applied close reading to the language of right-wing terrorists and white supremacists. He holds a degree in literary criticism to be the best training for anyone who wants to develop a critical expertise in the danger posed by right-wing extremists. These extremists form coterie with their own special jargons; it might even make sense to call them members of a counterpublic. Feldman guides us through his reading of the international network of nationalists who talk to each other, share organizing tips and arguments, and praise each other’s misdeeds. Lecia Brooks has observed that these networks actively recruit among young white men on college campuses. She argues that we have to find a way to invite this vulnerable demographic to join multiethnic coalitions if we want to win them back from violent counterpublics to the public sphere.

Barbara Elias, an expert in international relations, US foreign policy, national security, and political Islam, suggests that a sense of theater is essential to understanding the US American performance in foreign wars. Film, in particular, can help reveal the role that Americans expect allies to play—not for the ostensible purpose of winning wars, but to reflect a certain self-image back to officers, politicians, and policymakers. Providing a helpful reading and viewing list for those who might not have a background in national security, she insists that policymakers also have much to learn from the humanities.

4.

An advantage thinking about foreign and domestic conflicts in terms of spatial metaphors like publics, counterpublics, and the theater of war—rather than through the teleological narrative of crisis—is that spaces teach us to pay attention to the use of words in addition to their meanings. How particular metaphors and texts circulate in a given community says as much about that community as the metaphors themselves. Someone who repeats “stop the steal” may know very well that there is no evidence of voting irregularities in the last election; the catchphrase functions to declare his allegiance to those who use it like a secret handshake, expressing group membership rather than personal belief. By the same token, we might look beyond the body as metaphor for the body politic—as suggested by “crisis”—and instead pay attention to the actual distribution of bodies in public spaces. Babette Tischleder, in her conversation with Jane Desmond, draws attention to the way this scholar’s career has moved from dance, to thinking about the staging of bodies, to thinking about where the bodies of non-human animals are put on display and used. The body politic is an abstract and overly general expression for a collective space where some bodies are on public display (such as dancers on a stage or animals in a zoo), some are hidden (for instance in prisons or factories), and many are segregated according to skin color, gender, or sexual orientation. The bodies of animals raised to be eaten, rather than, say, invited into homes as pets, are not visible to the general public until they are butchered and wrapped in cellophane. Reading such arrangements in the way we might read the structure of a text, may tell us more about the public sphere than metaphors that conflate separate life trajectories into a unified narrative of sickness and recovery.

A similar attentiveness to bodies, and how they are treated, informs the work of sociologist Jennifer Reich, who is an expert on vaccine hesitancy. Reich points out that parents began selecting vaccines for their children at the same time the jogging and diet crazes took hold in the 1980s. This is a time when public health

announcements advised people to stop drinking, stop smoking, reduce calories, and take control of their own health. Much of this advice was good, but it also represented a personalization of public health at a time when personal responsibility was also being touted, for instance, in welfare reform. Telling people to stop smoking improves public health by modifying personal behavior; making sure all kids have clean drinking water addresses public health in a more collective way. These imperatives are not mutually exclusive, but the private seemed to take precedence over the public when government downsizing became the order of the day. Individuals who now claim that vaccination should be a matter of personal choice are turning away from the public in a manner prescribed by government policy and consumer trends. They also, in Reich's interview samples, insist on the importance of "doing their own research." This is significantly not research in a scientific sense. Reich argues that people have turned into consumers of health products, looking up the possible side-effects of vaccines in the same way a tourist might look up a restaurant or a hotel.

This turning away from science is a crisis of knowledge that rejects expertise for its supposed bias and elitism. Those who see science as just another biased opinion reject the check-and-balance system of the scientific method in the same way populists reject the check-and-balance system of government. Lorraine Daston has shown how the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters was instrumental in creating the scientific method, which can be understood as the codification of the protocols of an emergent scientific community. This story runs parallel to the one Warner tells about the US Constitution. Natural philosophers, as scientists were then called, communicated with each other through a transnational network that depended on letter-writing, print culture, and the mail. The community they formed was not objective in the sense of being the opposite of subjective; rather, it constituted an intersubjective network that pitted perspective against perspective in ways that corrected for personal bias. Scientists, in correspondence with likeminded individuals in other places and climes, developed experiments that could be repeated anywhere, anytime, and by anyone (Daston 369). This resulted in a "view from nowhere," which in our present circumstances appears to be the closest we can come to objectivity. Scientific truths are reliable because they are falsifiable by other experiments and scientists, and their falsifiability is a function of a system of checks and balances that codify the communication patterns of a particular community.

This special issue on “American Crises” is also a study of American publics and counterpublics. It is our hope that our forum will encourage public exchange in ways that meliorate some of the stark polarities reinforced by crisis rhetoric. We do not have the space to devote to all the pressing problems of our time. For instance, though several of our contributors have been active in LGBTQIA+ issues, we have not addressed the attacks on this community through new censorship laws designed to limit their participation in the public sphere.

Another topic we have not addressed, at least not in a systematic way, is the growing impatience with liberalism within traditionally liberal publics. The global warming crisis, caused by human consumption patterns but seemingly out of human control, has inspired some activists to call for scientists to take charge of decisions of global import. (There are of course other attacks on liberalism from the right.) Andrew Majeske posed this question to the writer Kim Stanley Robinson, whose latest novel, *Ministry for the Future*, imagines a UN commission in charge of preserving the environment for generations to come. Robinson’s answer can serve as the motto for our forum: “People should be in charge, science is a methodology.” This is an appropriate motto because it is reversible: by understanding the importance of methodology, checks-and-balances, and the rule of law, the people stay in charge. These structures are what turn the people into a public and the public into a *res publica* or republic, the public thing.

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