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1 Undertaking a New Interpretive Effort

Constructing Crisis is about an idea, and that is the idea of crisis. What do we mean when we use or hear that term? What suggestions or thoughts are communicated when our leaders deploy the word? And how does that deployment impact the dynamics that unfold within our business organizations, our communities, and our societies?

Most usually, the idea of crisis conjures up images of threatening events, occurrences that present a serious risk. A business crisis, for instance, may take the form of a public revelation of maleficence on the part of key executives or flawed product design that led to injuries or deaths. Unwelcomed takeover bids and serious financial losses might also trigger what we refer to as a crisis. Will the business survive? In that way, we may understand crisis to be not just a risk but also an existential threat, placing the very future of the company in jeopardy.

We also understand the need to think about the possibility of crises that threaten our communities: an out-of-control wildfire racing toward our homes in California, or the devastating aftermath of a Category 5 hurricane on our island territory. Whole continents may come under threat in periods of great migration sparked by nature, perhaps, or war.

We may take a more conceptual approach to the idea of crisis. Perhaps it isn't a specific social unit or institution at risk. Crises, rather, may be seen as threatening to abstractions: democracy, the rule of law, liberal capitalism, even civilization itself. There is, even in such cases, an event – perhaps an accumulation of events – that is said to trigger the threat.

The variety of events prompted in our thoughts by the use of the term "crisis" is virtually endless. Acts of nature, acts of humans, and acts of humans in response to acts of nature can all generate a crisis, we think. So can system breakdowns, global dynamics, and economic downturns. In all their variety, however, the idea of crisis suggests events that objectively and undeniably pose a threat.[1]

[1] The idea of crisis can also be deployed in a more individualistic sense: mid-life crises, identity crises, developmental crises, anxiety crises, and the like. *Constructing Crisis* will not be examining the use and implications of the idea at this level.

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Our common notion of what is meant by the idea of crisis carries our thought process even further. We are convinced, for example, that we live in a time – right here and right now – that is especially, even uniquely prone to these types of traumatic upheavals. And as we are buffered by these seemingly endless disruptions, we expect our leaders to step up, navigate the tumult, and help ensure that we emerge, once the crisis has passed, stronger and more resilient than ever. It is precisely this capacity to navigate through crisis, in fact, that we suppose separates the great leaders from the middling or incompetent ones. Leadership, *great* leadership, is forged in crisis.

When crisis hits, those of us who are not leaders have a role to play as well. We rally together, following those heroic leaders as well as responding as a community. We know that not everyone will go along, get on board, and pull together. When US presidents declare a state of war – for example, the country has been attacked and must respond – we tend to respond with support; national unity; and, let's admit it, more than a bit of intolerance for naysayers.[2] And when the CEO of our corporation insists on the need for an urgent response to a threatening situation, employees receive the message loudly and clearly: it's time to join together. Business organizations aren't democracies, after all, so for employees who are not willing to contribute to the leader-defined crisis response, perhaps they should consider leaving. Get on the bus or get off.

It is a powerful idea, in other words, this idea of crisis. The explicit intention of *Constructing Crisis* is to upend these ideas, each and every one of them. Crises are no more, or less, frequent now than at any other historical moment. Crises are not events. Events have no objective meaning. Leadership is not something that is forged in response to crisis. And the leader-follower dynamic that unfolds in the face of crises declarations can be unhealthy, even potentially dangerous.

It's an argument built on a single assumption, that ideas have consequences. How we conceptualize a subject influences how we react and behave in relation to that subject. Given that the proposition that ideas have consequences has become the major theme of my work, it is worth exploring just how it is that ideas generally come to matter. And given that I am offering a new interpretive effort of the idea of crisis, it is also worth asking "how and why might such a reinterpretation of an idea so old and often examined as crisis have value?"

[2] It is true that the US Constitution reserves the right to declare war to the Congress, not the president. But as Michael Beschloss has shown, that provision is more often violated than heeded. See Beschloss, *Presidents of War* (New York: Crown, 2018).

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In a culture and context in which empiricism is expected and application is preferred to interpretation – that is, the context in which I work at the contemporary university and, with even greater emphasis, at a professional school of management – the governing norm is that ideas should either be grounded in data or have immediate utility. Preferably both. Otherwise, who cares?[3]

And yet, the undertaking of *Constructing Crisis* is not grounded in data. Nor does it offer any suggestions for how to apply in an immediate way lessons to practice. So again, why should anyone care?

Just to be clear, what I am presenting here is a new interpretative effort of the idea of crisis, one that intends to upend traditional notions of a crisis and of the role played by leaders in responding to urgent situations. In doing so, my goal is *not* to offer immediate utility. I do not provide a deep dive into some big database or offer a "new-and-improved" how-to formula to help leaders negotiate urgent situations. Yet, I still insist that, yes, ideas have consequences and matter to both other scholars and practitioners.

This is, I realize, a suspicious posture to assume. Why bother, for instance, with an idea that doesn't directly, even immediately impact practice? Just asking that question reflects a current that runs deeply throughout American thought: an ideology of usefulness.[4]

The Ideology of Usefulness

Consequences and usefulness are not precisely the same notions. Consequences may be long term and indirect, with no immediate or obvious payoff. Certainly, consequences are not necessarily positive. Usefulness, on the other hand, speaks to a far more utilitarian impulse, the desire to apply thought directly to action, to make an immediate difference in practice. That difference is assumed to be positive: to repair a damaged image and to help improve performance at the individual and/or collective level.

A utilitarian impulse, although not confined to any one culture or single country, has deep and significant roots in American thought. It is a belief system that evolved within a specific temporal and historical context, so it is important to appreciate the interplay between that context and that belief system.

[3] Murray S. Davis, "That's Interesting! Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology," *Philosophy of Social Sciences* 1 (1971), 311.
[4] The term is from Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

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All too often, we take widespread and generally accepted constructs for granted, mistaking historically influenced assumptions for commonsense wisdom, or even more problematically as the "truth." To sidestep that trap, I visit the historical forces that both shaped and amplified that profound preference for the "useful" over the "useless."

The Dominance of Practicality

A doctrine of practicality runs deep and wide through American culture, a conviction forged on the western frontier and in the pervasive mythology that shaped Americans' understanding of that frontier experience. The land that lay beyond settled America helped mold not just a country but also that country's mythology. Frontier settlers engaged in a process of "perennial rebirth" as they moved westward.[5] That was the observation of Frederick Jackson Turner, the prominent frontier historian and popularizer (although not necessarily the originator) of the American frontier myth.

Myths are stories intended to help explain the world and the human condition within that world. They may be accurate, but not necessarily. Turner's frontier myth, though highly distorted as history, communicated how entry into and settlement of the frontier became the ever-unfolding origin story of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America and its prevailing culture. The myth went like this. The vulnerability of settlers within the wilderness demanded an immediate response from them. And they were nothing if not practical, these hardy settlers. On the frontier, the guiding question was "what works?" With self-constructed implements, the pioneer emerged as a crude farmer, clearing and fencing in land, building a home with available materials, and raising enough crops to allow for subsistence. These folks did what was necessary, nothing more or less.

Pioneer ideals focused not on what settlers *should* do (that is, normative values), but on what they *could* do (that is, practical lessons) to survive and thrive. Past traditions and previously formed heuristics were abandoned. In shedding old concepts and adapting to new realities, the frontier myth insisted, pioneers created a new country. In that way, the practical nature of a unique and exceptional American character was formed at the juncture of settlement and wilderness.

The idea that settlers left all mental baggage behind when they crossed the Mississippi River is, of course, a myth laden with much

[5] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt, 1920), p. 2.

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distortion.[6] As white Americans set a westward course, their preestablished beliefs and values persisted.[7] While aspiring to expand the empire ever westward, Americans maintained an abiding belief in the innocence of their project.[8] They were not conquerors, they believed; rather, settlers were taking advantage of opportunities for self and national improvement. And it was that belief that erected a profound blindness to some not-so-innocent realities. Westward settlement involved more than improvement and opportunity. It inherently required the trespassing on and ruin of occupied land and established institutions and led to the deaths of more than 50 million indigenous people, chiefly through the spread of diseases carried by those pioneers to an unprotected population.[9]

Building empire by ever-westward expansion necessitated violent conquest, in particular, white conquest over Native Americans and Mexicans. Far from adapting to the "new" land, American settlers imposed upon it racial, ethnic, and gendered assumptions. Those prejudices significantly reduced contact with the native population that might have produced wise practical advice for survival based on generations of experience. Rather than shedding ideology and embracing unencumbered practicality, American pioneers carried predetermined views concerning how the world should work.[10] And yet, the myth persisted. Americans accepted the curated narrative of western settlement and, with it, adopted practicality as a foundational principle.

An Undercurrent of Anti-intellectualism

In that adoption of the myth of frontier utilitarianism, it is possible to locate a residue of anti-intellectualism. The ideology of usefulness conveyed a disposition to suspect and resent the output of an active but not immediately practical mind.[11]

[6] I am using the Mississippi only metaphorically here. Well before the 1820s, the frontier consisted of lands east of the Mississippi: the Berkshire Mountains, Atlantic tidewaters, Shenandoah Valley, and Mohawk River, for example.
[7] Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), p. 36.
[8] Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 1.
[9] Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: Norton, 2018).
[10] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Margaret Walsh, "Women's Place on the American Frontier," *Journal of American Studies* 29 (1995), 241–255.
[11] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1966).

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Consider this oration delivered at Yale in 1884 where undergraduates were told,

> The age of *philosophy* has passed and left few memorials of its existence. That of *glory* has vanished, and nothing but a painful tradition of human suffering remains. That of *utility* has commenced, and it requires little warmth of imagination to anticipate for its rein lasting as time, and radiant with wonders of unveiled nature.[12]

In the main, Americans took their stand with utility and its proclaimed radiant wonders rather than with fanciful ideas whose practical usefulness was not readily apparent.

Glorification of utility hardened over time into "unreflective instrumentalism": a devaluation of thought, or at least any forms of thought "that do not promise relatively immediate practice payoffs."[13] Pervasive instrumentality worked to erode any passion for critical reflection on the ends to which useful actions were aiming. That thinking seeped into institutions of higher learning as well.

Universities and the Embrace of Utilitarianism

In their continuous need to subdue the wilderness, American settlers relied on the "school of experience."[14] A popular frontier maxim – "Any fool can put on his coat better than a wise man can do it for him" – captured a fundamental unease with educated and detached wisdom. In their desire to be taken as something other than remote cloisters of wise people with little to add to the pursuit of daily life, American universities adapted.[15]

Although often denounced as elitist institutions that functioned in ivory-tower isolation from the "real world" – crossword puzzle clue: "place removed from reality," answer: "ivory tower" – universities became carriers of the same ideological bias for useable truth and against useless imagining that defined the broader culture.[16] That was a trend most prevalent at professional schools such as business colleges attached to universities, but it was also apparent in liberal arts and humanities

[12] Ibid., 239.
[13] Daniel Rigney, "Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter," *Sociological Inquiry* 61 (1991), 444.
[14] Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 271.
[15] This was a trend that worried Turner. The university must be allowed to be "left free . . . to explore new regions and to report what they find; for like the pioneers, they have the ideal of investigation, they seek new horizons" (Ibid., 287).
[16] That clue and answer appeared in the *USA Today* daily crossword of September 9, 2018.

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departments that proclaimed their connections to and support of the national economy.[17] The ideology of usefulness triumphed.

Usefulness expected "applied research" intended to address and solve real-world problems. This is research that, by definition, seeks to improve an existing system. To be sure, applied research can and does offer possibilities for advancement in how diseases are treated, for instance, or how to better measure transaction costs across firm boundaries. It is *not* designed to question the system itself.

"Flights of imagination" that might provide researchers with a less embedded view of systems and practices do not sit comfortably within the applied research paradigm.[18] The work of imagining intends to undermine accepted reality and create counter-narratives. That's what imagining does. Yet, American universities created a climate where such acts were largely marginalized.

It should be no surprise, really, that utilitarianism came to dominate the culture of American universities. Business titans provided the lion's share of university endowments. Nineteenth-century tycoons including Cyrus H. McCormick, John D. Rockefeller, and Marshall Field "took a particular interest in higher education."[19] The end game of a university education bent toward teaching the skills that would repay corporate generosity and help develop the future in a way that supported industrial growth.[20]

In the period roughly spanning 1870 to 1930, academic leaders fundamentally reorganized their institutions to promise upper- and upper-middle-class families that their children, mainly sons, would be well trained for entry into the world of commerce.[21] To enhance the appeal of college life to the "sons of wealth" as well as their (it was surely hoped) philanthropically inclined parents, the university experience was

[17] Alan Hughes et al., *Hidden Connections: Knowledge Exchange Between the Arts and Humanities and the Private, Public, and Third Sectors* (Cambridge: Arts & Humanities Research Council, 2011). I purposefully provided this citation – a survey of British universities – to suggest that the turn toward usefulness even among liberal arts schools is hardly unique to the United States.

[18] Rigney, "Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism"; Nils Roll-Hansen, *Why the Distinction between Basic (Theoretical) and Applied (Practical) Research Is Important in the Politics of Science* (London: London School of Economics, 2009).

[19] Daniel Wren, "American Business Philanthropy and Higher Education in the Nineteenth Century," *Business History Review* 57 (1983), 324.

[20] Henry Giroux, *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007); Mark Learmonth et al., "Promoting Scholarship that Matters: The Uselessness of Useful Research and the Usefulness of Useless Research," *British Journal of Management* 23 (2011), 35–44; James March, "A Scholar's Quest," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 20 (2011), 355–357.

[21] Harold Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977).

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reshaped to be "more athletic, more masculine, and more fun."[22] The sciences and the professions would be counted on to supplement classic studies associated with a traditional university education to fulfil the mission co-defined by business sponsors and willing administrators.

Writing in the late 1960s, Alvin Gouldner worried that utilitarianism had begun to erode the space allocated to less obviously pragmatic roads of academic inquiry. It was his concern that the ideology of the useful would do more than find a place within the academy; it would drive out more abstract theorizing that provoked his warning of a "coming crisis." And it was not, in Gouldner's telling, a new or even uniquely American phenomenon.

Taking a broader view than Turner's frontier thesis, Gouldner traced the ideology of usefulness back to the eighteenth-century overthrow of aristocratic privileges in Western Europe. "With the growing influence of the middle class in the eighteenth century," Gouldner wrote, "utility emerged as a dominant social standard."[23] And, to be fair, there was much to celebrate in the glorification of middle-class achievement over aristocratic privilege that marked this transformation.

The rise of a European middle class brought with it an assumption that society's rewards should be allocated not "on the basis of birth or of inherited social identity," observed Gouldner, "but on the basis of talent and energy manifested in individual achievement."[24] Usefulness became more than a philosophy. It was a value system: a deeply entrenched notion, reinforced by a newly emergent middle-class culture, of what *ought* to be. What individuals accomplished rather than their parental lineage became the central tenet for judgment. Utility "became a claim to respect rather than merely a basis for begrudging tolerance," Gouldner noted.[25]

Looked at with the perspective of the eighteenth-century middle class, usefulness represented a liberation from aristocratic privilege. But there was – and is – a rub. "In focusing public interest on the usefulness of the individual," worried Gouldner, the emerging ideology favored "a side of his life that had significance not in its personal uniqueness but only in its comparability, its inferior or superior usefulness, to others."[26] This would inevitably result in a contest over who was *more* and, by implication if not explicit condemnation, *less* useful.

Any tournament that seeks to separate winners from losers must have some metric, some ribbon to be burst through at the end point of

[22] Mitchell Stevens, *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 248.
[23] Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, 61. [24] Ibid., 63. [25] Ibid., 62.
[26] Ibid., 64.

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the race. There could be no capacity to construct measures unless and until "usefulness" was defined. But defining use*ful*ness leads to a residual construct, one that identifies use*less*sness as its counterpart. Fortunately, we have folks who are willing to do the hard work of identifying uselessness for us.

Take the Golden Fleece awards. Between 1975 and 1988, William Proxmire, the Democratic senator from Wisconsin, presented monthly "awards" – really nothing more than acts of public humiliation – to government-funded university professors said to be conducting useless research at taxpayer expense.[27] Projects investigating emotions, the relationship between sexual arousal and marijuana use, and prisoners' motivation to escape were among the many singled out for ridicule. A renowned behavioral scientist studying biological causes of aggression sued Proxmire for damages (and won) after being mocked for researching "why rats, monkeys, and humans clench their jaws."[28] The jeering continued for thirteen years, a testament to the powerful appeal of identifying useless activities unfolding in the ranks of university researchers.

Beyond the inane posturing of a politician, definitions of "useful" and "useless" must be amenable to some sort of comparative assessment that allows for differentiation. If the definition of usefulness is measurable – show me how you improve individual income, overall productivity, streams of innovation, and so on – so much the better. The Obama administration supported a measure of university educational effectiveness that calculated the relationship between the cost of a college degree and the impact on future earnings of each student.[29] What could be more useful than an improved return on investment?

The "B" School Experience

Professional schools of business management, which appeared in the United States concurrent with the emergence of a managerial tier asserting itself between "worker" and "owner," bought enthusiastically and unapologetically into the ideology of usefulness.[30] In the early days, experienced executives taught business school classes: "good ole boys" who dispensed "war stories, cracker barrel wisdom, and the occasional

[27] Occasional awards went to government agencies said to be engaged in wasteful spending unrelated to university research.
[28] Robert Irion, "What Proxmire's Golden Fleece Did for and to Science," *The Scientist* (December 12, 1988).
[29] Kelly Field, "Obama Plan to Tie Student Aid to College Ratings Draws Mixed Reviews," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 22, 2013). These recommendations were not implemented.
[30] Martin Parker, *Shut Down the Business School* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

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practical pointer."[31] Even when appended to elite, rarefied Ivy League universities – Dartmouth, the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard initially in the United States – business colleges operated as sanctified trade schools, emphasizing the transference of competencies and skills.

Early pioneers of management theory – Frederick Winslow Taylor, Mary Parker Follet, and Elton Mayo among them – sought to "solve any problems companies and administrative organizations might possibly have."[32] They and their students were meant to be organizational doctors, tending to the health and well-being of their institutional patients. That was the assumed payoff of their applied research: helping practitioners solve real-world problems with their specialized knowledge.

Academics at business schools can and often do act as consultants to business. Oxford University provides a helpful Internet portal that invites outsiders to seek out "experts from all disciplines" who are "available to work with you as consultants through Consulting Services at Oxford University Innovation. We also have specialized consultancy services in statistics and museums and collections, as well as free student and researcher consultancy services."[33] See, even an institution as esteemed as Oxford generates useful knowledge that can be applied to practice.

There is a perfectly legitimate *raison d'être* for applying knowledge to practice: to "provide solutions to problems that are presented to us, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached."[34] I'm quoting here from Michael Burrawoy, who added that the academic expert can and should supply "true and tested methods" and even conceptual frameworks as a way of orienting thought and legitimizing conclusions. It is a relationship that can be enacted with rigorous attention to constructed knowledge, awareness of prevailing theories, and personal (and interpersonal) integrity.

It is, however, an engagement that unfolds within parameters defined by the client. The end game of applied research and collaborative engagement is to improve organizational performance.[35] The implicit foundations of both parties as well as their relationship are not scrutinized, critiqued, or reconceptualized. Performance is defined by the organization and its agents, a definition that is not up for debate and amendment.

[31] Warren Bennis and James O'Toole, "How Business Schools Lost Their Way," *Harvard Business Review* 83 (2005), 98.
[32] Barbara Czarniawska, *Writing Management: Organization Theory as a Literary Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.
[33] www.ox.ac.uk/research/innovation-and-partnership/expertise-and-knowledge/find-academic-consultant?wssl=1.
[34] Michael Burawoy, "For Public Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 70 (2005), 9.
[35] André Spicer et al., "Critical Performativity: The Unfinished Business of Critical Management Studies," *Human Relations* 62 (2009), 537–560.

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