A STATE OF EMERGENCY, A STATE OF TRANSITION: HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC MAY HELP RECONCILE HISTORICISM AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CRISIS

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ABSTRACT
The incongruence between Bourdieu’s historical sociology and the ahistorical structuralist theories of Levi-Strauss’ students has often contributed to a complete disregard for the historical significance of cultural meaning on the one hand and the role of structural dichotomies (i.e. us vs them) and the phenomenon of the myth on the other. The crisis events of the 2020 Global Covid-19 Pandemic offer a unique opportunity for anthropologists to reconcile historicism with theories of ahistorical (or exceptional) phenomenon. In particular, the linguistic coding of the pandemic as a “crisis” reveals a two-fold, cultural understanding of the term. Crises entail some repetitive structural element (such that we recognize a given event or state as a crisis) but the structure repeated is, in fact, a sudden, novel change in the field of practice experienced as an “unprecedented time.” Comparing contemporary circumstances to other events coded as crises in the United States, I argue that the (perceived) catalyst of the ongoing rupture in social and economic order is best understood through Douglas’ lens of pollution: an external threat to the structural dichotomies and myths that define the boundaries of the social body. What emerges from considering repetition and rupture at once is a new understanding of crisis as a reoccurring phenomenon characterized by an incongruence between doxa and habitus—a state of liminality wherein the previously accepted myths, symbols, and dichotomies at the foundation of citizens’ habitus and society’s structures are suspended. This incongruence is resolvable by two mechanisms: either crisis-era praxis is integrated into habitus (providing the practical basis for a new set of myths, structures, and doxa), or the suspended schemata are reintegrated in a way that account for the expansion of what is considered possible according to pre-crisis doxa. In this way, a symbolic purification of the social body is enacted by the application of new or extant myths to changes within a field during the crisis-era. Bourdieu’s historicism can thus be applied to the anthropology of crisis alongside structuralist theories by treating crisis as a kind of transitional state of social doxa, not via inductive reasoning or extrapolation from historical phenomenon.

KEYWORDS
Crisis, pandemic, historicism, Bourdieu, social theory.

INTRODUCTION
The role of history as a methodology in the social sciences has long been debated; proponents often treat history as an analytical frame capable of revealing perpetual, timeless mechanisms of human behavior, while critics relegate history to a purely descriptive study and caution against its use in generalizing structures of social interaction. Concerning the history of crisis, it would certainly be problematic to assume all crises emerge, function, and result in the same conditions. To do so would disregard unique, temporal situations, inadvertently assuming, for instance, that the technology, communication, and class structures of the United States during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic parallel those of the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. The collapse of what is— at least as it is perceived from superficial observation—with theory potentiates fallible, circular arguments based on
confirmation bias and induction (Popper, 1968). This, of course, brings us to the root of anthropology: attempting to determine what is, not the absolute, philosophical account of what is real, but an interpretation of that which exists culturally and in unique systems of understanding.

The construction of these unique systems of understanding was of particular interest to Pierre Bourdieu, whose notions of field and habitus allowed him to mediate the epistemological divide between objectivism and subjectivism in anthropology. Effectively, the spaces of social interaction, composed of posts in which the agents act, constitute fields of practice. Bourdieu postulated that as long as the individual maintains the proper perceptual dispositions to act within a field, the field is given meaning. The schemata for understanding and perceiving which constitute individual habitus are informed by these objective structures in the field and are referenced when the individual acts within that field. The existing exigencies within the objective structure of a social field demand action, and the agent’s action is subject to their habitus.

The reification of these perceptual schemata via practice within a field produces a doxa, or the sets of beliefs taken to be self-evident and objective; the doxic situation emerges when the perceptual understandings dictating habitus are congruent with the observed organization of the field. What is perceived as possible action, in the positive sense, is thus limited to the boundaries of the practices of that field’s organization. The organization of the social realm is taken as commonsensical and natural.

A mutual influence exists between habitus and field: as the actions informed by the habitus give the field its meaning, and the field informs the habitus, some prior congruence between field and habitus (doxa) must be assumed. That is, if we are to say that doxa changes over time as a result of this mutual influence, two states exist: the pre-change doxic state and the post-change doxic state. The continued interplay between action of individual agents and observed, objective structures of the social field would explain historical changes in doxa. The antecedent doxic states assumed here introduce a historical element to Bourdieu’s work, and one which allows us to analyze crisis as a state conducive to transition without applying inductive reasoning to assume that change will inevitably occur.

Thus, regardless of the role which history is to play in anthropology, a comparison of historical antecedents with the present allows for the analysis of change and transition. An analysis of the (Western) history of crisis offers insight into the cultural delineation of “crisis,” the conduct of a community in a crisis state, and the role of crisis in revealing a community’s system of meaning – though perhaps it is not as useful for predicting and alleviating threat when compared to disciplines more closely related to specific crisis conditions. In this paper, I will mediate between Douglas and Turner’s structuralism and the historicist assumptions of Bourdieu’s social theory by examining the linguistic coding of “crisis” in the United States, changes in practice which emerged with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the cyclic nature of previous theories on crises.

THE LINGUISTIC CODING OF CRISIS

To the anthropologist, noticeable changes in linguistic symbols often signal a shift in cultural focus and reveal the relationship between the linguacultural fabric and individuals’ frame of reference for action (Kroskrity 2009). From the onset of the pandemic, the phrase “unprecedented times” has appeared in numerous communications from businesses, educational institutions, and within the media. This phrase signals changes to anticipated conduct within that field of action or, in the case of alarmist rhetoric, reveals the existence of conditions which may undermine the integrity of current practice. An email from DoorDash advertising a $0 delivery fee reads “In this unprecedented time, it’s important that we work together.” Another example is an email from Emory University’s Pre-Health Advising: “We know we are in unprecedented times . . . and we want to be here to support you.” However, a direct reference to Covid-19 in either correspondence was notably absent.

The usage of this phrase suggests two
particularly curious lines of inquiry: [1] how (or perhaps, when) the term “unprecedented times” became synonymous with the global pandemic, and [2] the symbolic and temporal nature of the word “unprecedented” in historical context.

Upon returning to my home state of Colorado from university, I listened to myriad comparisons of the current pandemic to the 1918 Influenza, the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, and even to 2005’s Hurricane Katrina. In conversation, the events were coded as the metonymies “Spanish Influenza,” “9/11,” and “Katrina,” indicating a shared familiarity with a system of meaning: the date “9/11” becomes a symbol for the terrorist attack rather than the date itself; the “Spanish Influenza” refers to the pandemic rather than the disease, and “Katrina” to the aftermath of the hurricane in New Orleans, rather than simply the name or the event itself (Geertz 1973, 25).

The comparison of the current crisis to these historically held crises seemingly juxtapose the present understanding of Covid-19 as “unprecedented;” how can something be both familiar and entirely new? That these two interpretations of the crisis can be held and applied commonsensically in the same culture reveals a dichotomy in how “crisis” is understood. That is, there appears to be both an understanding of crisis as a recurrent experience, while this recurrent experience maintains an element of uncommonness and irregularity.

**CRISIS EMERGES FROM INCONGRUENCE BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL HABITUS AND SOCIAL DOXA**

Understanding crísis as a sudden, unexpected change in a given environment is certainly not novel. In their deconstructions of crises into developmental stages, Barry Turner and Steven Fink characterize the origins of crises as unexpected and hazardous and examine the means by which the affected parties identify, classify, resolve, and integrate the hazard in comparison to a prior system of beliefs. That is, both Fink and Turner identify the first stage as one of pre-crisis and the final stage as one of cultural readjustment (Fink 1986; Turner 1976). By expanding this model of crisis in stages (beginning with certain set of commonsense beliefs and ending with a readjusted set of commonsense beliefs) in the context of Bourdieu’s social theory, parallelisms emerge between the commonsense beliefs and doxa, the scope of the beliefs and field, and the application of the beliefs as habitus.

When observing the changes in actions that emerged with the growing concern of the coronavirus, it quickly became apparent to me that shifts in the field of practice were incongruent with individual habitus and a degree of uncertainty in how to act emerged. Under the limitations of prior doxa, the notion of wearing a face covering in public was not readily accepted by the public; that is, the natural practice in the field of public spaces did not include taking precautions to limit the spread of a pathogen, as there was no widespread element in the environment requiring such a practice. Here, the notion of a practice being required in this sense must also be addressed. There appears to be an element of pollution similar to that addressed by Douglas (1991) that occurs on the level of both the individual and social bodies. The pathogen itself has emerged as a pollutant to the purity of the individual body, while the pathogen’s disruption of the schemata which inform the actions of the community agents pollutes the social body.

Institutional dichotomies, like “essential” and “non-essential” worker, were introduced to provide a frame of reference for individuals to adhere to when deciding whether to self-isolate or continue the practice of going to work. Such delineations were determined according to an emergent, structural myth of “necessity:” work directly correlated with immanent needs (food, water, communication, sanitation, electricity, health) and work which contributes to the maintenance of economic stability.

These new practices disrupt the old doxa, for the incompatibility between individual habitus and the action demanded by the field resulted in a suspension (or adaptation) of previous symbols and dichotomies in favor of new ones. The threat to a cultural institution which mediates a dichotomy emerges parallel to an incongruence between doxa and habitus. For instance, the liminal state of college mediates the dichotomy between childhood and...
adulthood. Yet this mediation collapses when education occurs in the home; the “college culture” field of practice adapts to the new location and regulations of that setting.

This confrontation of inconsistency between the field of practice and the schemata dictating action appears to be a repeated occurrence. When asking my grandmother to elaborate upon her comparison between Covid-19 and the attack on the World Trade Center, she told me, “things were never the same after 9/11, and things aren’t going to be the same after this [pandemic] is over.” For her, the terrorist attack was as sudden as the gravity of Covid-19 had been, and grocery stores were “raided” in similar ways. In her eyes, a sense of uncertainty and fear characterized both situations. In both crisis states, the imagination before the crisis – that is, what was considered possible according to prior doxa – was called into question, and the scope of that which was taken as natural had shrunk until a new “natural” had taken its place. The attack on the Twin Towers introduced uncertainty to the security of public workplaces and the availability of household necessities – the possibility of attack (or war) was an anticipated, readily imagined pollutant, much as the novel coronavirus has become.

How then can a crisis state be “unprecedented?”

CRISIS AS A STATE OF TRANSITION FOR SOCIAL DOXA
I assert that a cultural phenomenon of transition is revealed by deciphering the characteristics which make the Covid-19 pandemic “unprecedented”—that is, by identifying what element of cultural existence is undergoing a noticeable change, and identifying how the changes, explanations, and organization of the observed world are novel. In what follows I analyze how the interpretation of social existence as “unprecedented times” produces a new doxic state as the linguistic, institutional, and individual practices Bourdieu (1990) refers to as “praxis” are integrated into individual habitus.

Before attempting to identify the catalyst for doxic change, it is important to consider the temporal implications to discern when the practice of referring to the ongoing situation as “unprecedented times” began. A quick search reveals that the use of the phrase in relation to the epidemic began as early as February 27th. This date precedes government containment efforts but emerges with my family’s increasingly frequent decisions to forgo ordinary daily activities and to practice self-isolation. The term’s usage also proliferated with changes in institutional policies (including the shift from in-person to remote learning) as well as in individuals’ actions to adjust commonplace activities and adopt self-isolation practices. Recently, I discussed the delay of rent payments with a young, academia-affiliated friend, and she justified the suspension of this economic practice simply as an adaptation to “unprecedented times.” The use of this phrase emerged independent of political directives but still signaled a shift in some people’s belief of how community members were expected to act.

This notion of “unprecedented” reveals that the crisis state is one of suspension – that is, practice during the crisis state is different than practice before. The cyclic nature identified in theories of crisis such as Fink’s and Turner’s, show the pre-crisis belief stage of a crisis is simply the post-crisis belief stage of another. This offers an ahistorical model which can be applied in the relative frame of the Covid-19 pandemic. The cyclic process of adapting new practice to a belief system under question is even revealed by crisis events within the pandemic leading to panic, such as the frequent change in theory behind the protective properties of face coverings and subsequent changes to the practice of when and which masks to wear. Thus, the attempt to classify crises as ahistoric becomes problematic in the unique practices which are confronted by the threat – the habitus schemata specific to the doxa pre-crisis.

TRANSITION IN THE FIELD OF PRACTICE
It is in this state of suspension that Douglas’ theory can be reconciled with the historicism of praxis – in the broadening of what is considered nature through myth and the delineation of the margins of the social body. While noting that understanding dichotomies as somehow natural is contested by Bourdieu’s theory of practice, agency, and power, there seems to be a place for these dichotomies in the reconstruction of doxa. For instance, essential
essential and non-essential workers are introduced in the Covid-19 pandemic, and the distinction is dictated by a quasi-natural understanding of necessity. The old habitus is threatened as the individual is confronted with the ambiguous nature of its associated doxa and replaced with a new, temporary habitus. In this case, our agency to go into public (old habitus) is confronted by the threat of spreading the novel coronavirus (ambiguous doxa); thus, one can go into public but should wear a mask (temporary habitus). This change in habitus in response to the change in field of practice can be equated with the suggestions made by academic researchers, public health officials, and healthcare professionals, which reveals an implicit authority and power with institutional education.

However, the political dictation of practice and divide in acceptable action across political boundaries suggests that the crisis only served to further entrench extant schemata. In this case, pre-crisis and post-crisis doxa would appear unphased. And yet, the simple act of explaining the change in field with existing habitus demonstrates a reintegration of individual schemata into one’s actions within the field. In other words, while the doxa remains unchanged, the crisis state was introduced by some sudden threat which undermined the doxic state. Thus, it appears the “crisis” acts as a transitional phase—that which is taken for granted shrinks, and the practice-theory interplay that is called into question is suspended, evaluated, and either adapted (a change in doxa) or reintegrated (no change in doxa). The boundaries of what is considered possible either changes or expands. The two seemingly contradictory notions of “crisis” (historically repeated or recognizable while unique or “unprecedented”) are reconciled by considering crises events as liminal states of transition. First, the field of practice before and during the event do not match; this incongruence between old habitus and new doxa creates a characteristic sense of uncertainty. Next, the liminal state: the purification of the social body and re-integration of suspended dichotomies. Lastly, the field of practice after the liminal state is historically observed to have changed or in response to a similar threat.

**Reintegration of Crisis-era Myth into Doxa**

The doxa has shrunk in the face of temporary instability (Moore 2019, 236); new doxa has taken its place. The symbolic, lingual codes of “9/11,” “Katrina,” and “Spanish Influenza” mark these events as extraordinary. Thinking with Douglas’ lens of purity, it becomes clear that in each of these situations the constructed social self was under attack by something outside, polluting the social body and threatening the integrity of its constituent dichotomies (Douglas 1991). Turner’s (1986) suggestion that this threat is often rectified by curated ritual becomes particularly applicable here, where the previous frame of reference for action is suspended and a new regulation is set in place to purify the social body (Turner 1970): counterterrorism operations adapted quickly to 9/11, the US rallied to provide relief for Katrina victims, and individuals adopted a similar “self-isolation” in the wake of Spanish Influenza.

However, what emerged after these liminal states is what Bourdieu would recognize as a change in practice, for commonplace practices were no longer taken for granted. Many of the adaptations which emerged to “purify” the social body in the liminal state were adopted permanently, concreted through practicing, and eventually formed a new habitus in the individual (Bourdieu 1990). If these practices are rejected under the pretense of existing schemata for action—along political boundaries in the case of Covid-19—the imagination is expanded to consider similar crises a possible extension of this schemata as well.

While individuals no longer anticipated a large-scale or total war scenario after the initial shock of 9/11 subsided, the assumption that public space was secure was no longer taken for granted. The dichotomy of safe versus dangerous spaces (security versus threat) was thrown off balance by terrorism. It was eliminated in the initial aftermath of the attack (when all places seemed unsafe) and ultimately reestablished along slightly different parameters after new counterterrorist efforts were developed: a new “stability” arose with the emergence of a new field of practice.

As a disease, Covid-19 threatens the individ
ual body. Yet, it is also an event—a crisis—understood to threaten to the social body; the health and illness dichotomy of the social body becomes ambiguous as the state of “illness,” or pollution of the social body, becomes associated with the number of cases, the death rate, and the disruption to the schemata informing action within the economic, political, and social realms of practice. The margins of the social body become clear during attempts to purge it of the pollutant, particularly through the ritualistic practices of self-isolation and the closing of state borders (Douglas 1991). The disease—and its vectors—are kept “outside” the margins of the social body. What is doxically considered part of the “community” evolves with practice.

CONCLUSION
To say the doxa will undeniably change would be a hasty judgment based on inductive thinking—a logical fallacy I warned against at the start of this paper. However, to recognize Turner’s liminal states as transitional states blends the structuralism of unquestioned dichotomies with the socially defined systems of meaning in doxa. This synthesis allows us to see how some Western cultures understand “crises,” like the Covid-19 pandemic: as [1] a contamination of a social body (through a blurring of accepted dichotomies) by a threat deemed to be from the “outside,” and [2] a liminal state of transition deemed extraordinary, which is characterized by the incongruence of doxa and habitus from which a new doxa emerges.

WORKS CITED


