Reconsidering the Declaration of 'Crisis'

While Living through One

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Abstract

What counts as a 'crisis'? How do we determine an 'emergency'? Who gets to do so, and what exactly is at stake? Scholarly examinations of 'crises', including, most notably, seminal work by Janet Roitman (2013), frequently underscores how the 'crisis imaginary' is employed to rapidly and unjustifiably expand State power. Certainly, State responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have amply demonstrated this critique, as was noted early on by both Agamben (2020) and Chomsky (2020). Nonetheless, regardless of its political manipulations, crisis can also be understood as a phenomenological state, as there exist moments during which we collectively experience being plunged into a radically different time-space that is perhaps best conceptualised as a 'collective critical event'. Such 'extraordinary' times have been denoted as events beyond the scope of narration (Briggs 2003); 'failure[s] of the grammar of the ordinary' (Das 2007); or moments of incredulity that surpass our capacities of narration. By focusing on the languaging of the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa/New Zealand, this Position Piece grapples with how to reconcile the insights offered by critiques of the political deployment of claims of 'crises' with anthropological and other phenomenological accounts of experiences of moments of profound upheaval.

Keywords

Crisis, Ethnography, Narration, Phenomenology, State of emergency.

Crisis declarations

Recent scholarship sheds light on how 'crises' are politically constituted. Much important work, both focusing on and pre-dating the COVID-19 pandemic, has underscored the ways that, in Janet Roitman's words, 'crisis' is 'mobilized' as part of national narrative-making (2013, 3). In her aptly titled book, *Anti-Crisis*, Roitman outlines how claims of 'crisis' and all the 'demands' they entail, i.e., the 'crisis imaginary', have been used to denote history-in-the-making. She explains, 'crisis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out or to designate "moments of truth"; … such moments … are often defined as turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology' (Ibid.). Drawing on the work of Reinhart Koselleck ([1972] 2006), Roitman reminds us of the intertwining of crisis and critique, not only as cognates, but through how 'crisis-claims evoke a moral demand for a difference between the past and the future' (idem, 8).

There have been many trenchant critiques of the general public's apparent willingness to accept the declaration of some events as crises while others remain firmly outside the spotlight, denied governmental 'mobilization' (for instance, the crises of COVID-19 versus the crises of homelessness) (see Agamben 2005; Chomsky 2020). Others have underscored how crises position some nations and/or leaders in a heroic mode, as 'saviours' in times of intense distress (Fassin 2012; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010).

While these works illuminate the political purchase of naming 'crises', they tend to overshadow the lived experiences of those undergoing times of intense upheaval. We need to critique the ways that public health services were woefully unprepared for COVID-19 (Roitman 2021); the crushing of public debate amidst the power plays of democratic governments over-extending their reach (Wynn 2021); and the necropolitics underpinning decision-making as to which communities are most likely to survive and which most likely to perish (Rouse 2021). At the same time, however, due to COVID-19 many of us around the globe have experienced extreme disruptions and reconfigurations of our daily lives and futures, played out to starkly different effect across, among other things, lines of class, ethnicity, biological vulnerability, citizenship, and vaccine status (Kelly 2021). To ignore the impact of the pandemic on our lived experiences risks putting us out of touch with how ordinary people in ordinary communities are living through what is rapidly becoming one of the most pivotal politically and socially manufactured and biologically constituted (noting the inseparability of these three) moments in contemporary history. It is thus urgent that we bring together understandings of how crisis is created and mobilised with ethnographic examinations of the lived, collective experiences of such moments of intense upheaval.

My interest in what we mean by 'crisis' was spurred by my fieldwork in Fiji over twenty years ago, when I unexpectedly found myself examining how the 2000 military coup transformed the lives of Indo-Fijians. For many of us, and I count myself here alongside my interlocutors, the events sparked by gunmen storming the Fiji Parliament instigated an extreme sense of disorientation, confusion, and sustained fear. They sliced time in two—suddenly there was life before the coup and life after it.

I was in the relatively unique position, for a researcher, of having been in situ for the 16 months preceding the 2000 coup, conducting PhD research on other aspects of Indo-Fijian social life, most notably on community and medical discourses about chronic pain. Unlike many ethnographers of political violence who enter communities that are either undergoing or have experienced conflict, I was not eliciting reconstructive oral histories, asking people to recount what the coup had been like—I lived through it alongside them. And while I have always viewed my experiences as necessarily distinct from those of my interlocutors due to my positionality as a foreign fieldworker, I gained crucial insights into the relationships between language and lived experience by being there as the ground shifted under our feet.

Since then, I have engaged with two facets of the experiential nature of moments to which we often attribute the name of 'crises'—namely, the phenomenological reordering of time, and the struggle to grapple with experiences that surpass ordinary categories of action, affect, and meaning-making (Trnka 2018; Trnka, forthcoming; Trnka, Correll Trnka, and Vyas, forthcoming). Veena Das has referred to these dynamics through the concept of 'critical events', or moments that seem 'almost hostile to the continuity of time' as people search for and 'invent' new interpretations of social dynamics (1995, 200). Crucially, critical events are collective. They are embodied, but also narrated and politicised. Indeed, I prefer to think of them as 'collective critical events' so as to underscore their shared dimensions and distinguish them from equally important turning points in our individual biographies, such as significant illness or the death of a family member (Trnka, forthcoming).

As ethnographers, we gain access to collective critical events through many analytical avenues, but it is significant that the double 'breakdown' of the political and the quotidian is often mirrored through the breakdown of language, requiring new vocabularies, but at times also exceeding our linguistic capabilities. Charles Briggs (2003), in his ethnographic examination of a Venezuelan cholera outbreak, artfully explains how crisis confounds storytelling, by shattering the connections provided by the chronological sequencing that is necessary for narrative. Das (2007, 8) has similarly shown how intense, collective upheaval, as experienced by

those targeted by State or ethnic violence, can cause 'a failure of the grammar of the ordinary', forcing reconfigurations of affect, experience, and evaluation. Roitman herself, in earlier work with Achille Mbembe, describes how people in Cameroon responded to a crippling economic crisis through popular expressions of incredulity, such as 'the crisis fell on our heads' and 'I've got the crisis' (Mbembe and Roitman 1995, 338). My work on State violence in Fiji examined how community news-sharing was stripped back to plotless, sometimes character-less, 'inventories of violence' when narrators knew something had happened, but weren't certain to whom, by whom, when, or where it had taken place (Trnka 2018, 144–45).

Here, I want to reflect on increasingly routinised moments of the recasting of language that nonetheless can enable us to grasp some of what is experientially at stake in living through the 'crisis' of the pandemic as it has played out to date in Aotearoa/New Zealand. During both the present COVID-19 pandemic and the 2000 Fiji coup, entire nations were thrust into a time-space where our understandings of 'everyday life' were reconfigured and, at various moments, our most fundamental sense of being able to rely on our own faculties to comprehend what was occurring around us was put into question. I have elsewhere examined the various modes of articulation we use to express affect and also to attempt to make meaning out of moments of intense collective distress, be it via humour, rumour, or storytelling, and the roles that State narratives and inter-personal relations play in these (Trnka 2011; 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic as lived out in Aotearoa/New Zealand provides another opportunity to look more closely at how and when State discourses of crisis are circulated, deployed, and pushed back against by the general public as well as what happens when such discourses fall short of providing a collective critical event with a convincing narrative framing.

Since February 2020, Aotearoa/New Zealand has, like many countries around the world, been grappling with not only how to cope with COVID-19, but how to language it. COVID-19 suspended regular—and often regularly contested—narratives of citizen–State relations and, some might argue, conveniently so. At times, the events of the pandemic appear to surpass language; at others, they instigate its reinvention, redeployment, or intensification. Let me offer a few examples.

Teddies

In the initial days of mobilising Aotearoa's first nationwide lockdown in March 2020, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called on New Zealanders to 'be kind' to one another. At the same time, she joined the nascent 'Teddy Bears in Windows' movement, declaring to the general public that her household would be displaying

a stuffed teddy in its front window. Ardern's move was widely welcomed as an act of 'caring' and 'kindness'—adjectives that at the time were frequently used by government officials, the media, and some members of the public to describe her overall pandemic response (Trnka 2020a, 2021), although these are now rarely deployed. Government posters appeared in public places urging us to 'be kind', at the same time that some of my university colleagues adopted the phrase 'be kind' as their lecture or email sign-off. In a survey conducted during the first nationwide lockdown in 2020, which garnered 3,644 responses, several respondents used 'be kind' alongside other government mantras to express their feelings about the pandemic: 'Take 1 day at a time, be kind to everyone and remember we are all in this together!' one declared (Trnka et al. 2021).

'Teddy Bears in Windows' was a masterful and, at the time, hugely effective PR attempt to soften both rising fears of infection and the government's first-ever nationwide, stay-at-home mandate and turn it into something soft and cuddly that we could all embrace. Teddy bears began to appear in windows around the country in their thousands. A short walk around my West Auckland neighbourhood a few days into lockdown (allowable as a form of exercise), showed that about a quarter of the houses had bears, other stuffed animals, or even toy figurines on display in their windows as part of the national 'bear hunt'.

Bears became symbolic of collective unity, though perhaps we should use the Prime Minister's preferred phrasing—'teamwork'—which suggested that, like a rugby game, lockdown would be a hard slog, but together we could withstand the pain. Akin to small children, New Zealanders needed to cast aside our fears, draw strength from the comfort of our teddies, and carry on together. (As a side note, one cannot credit Ardern with politicising teddies, given the political history of this toy, invented in honour of US President Teddy Roosevelt after he spared a cornered bear during an otherwise unsuccessful hunt in 1902.)

Figure 1. Paddington appearing as one of the many 'teddy bears in windows' on display. Image by Revena Correll Trnka. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 2. Sometimes 'bears in windows' didn't make it into an actual window. These were displayed in a plastic bag nailed on to a mailbox post, tagged #bearhuntnz. Image by the author.

During lockdown, the sea of comforting teddy bears New Zealanders created was punctuated by some displays of more ironic visions, such as an oversize bear in a bikini, seemingly on holiday during Level 4 lockdown when it was against the regulations to sit, much less lie, sunbathing at the beach (Trnka 2020b). Or my favourite: police bears, portraying the State as simultaneously comforting and surveilling.

Figure 3. Police bears gazing out at the public. Image by the author.

Bubbles

However, whilst teddy bears were occupying our line of vision, our speech was dominated by 'bubbles'.

When pandemic measures were first put into place, most Kiwis would not have immediately associated a 'bubble' with an exclusive social unit whose members are allowed physical contact. Nonetheless, from the start of the first lockdown, New Zealanders were ordered to 'stay in your bubble', with public messaging employing vivid cartoon images of how bubbles can protect, as well as be easily shattered.

Again, we have a soft, non-threatening image usually associated with children (Appleton 2020), employed to depict State regulations that many people initially found challenging to imagine, much less obey. In this case, the translation of bubbles into widespread public health measures, not only in Aotearoa/New Zealand but globally, was highly effective, both in terms of reducing levels of transmission (Leng et al. 2021) and ensuring lockdown regulations were generally easily understood (Long et al. 2020). Bubbles soon became part of everyday parlance, as people joked about, celebrated, or negotiated where the boundaries of inclusion lay.
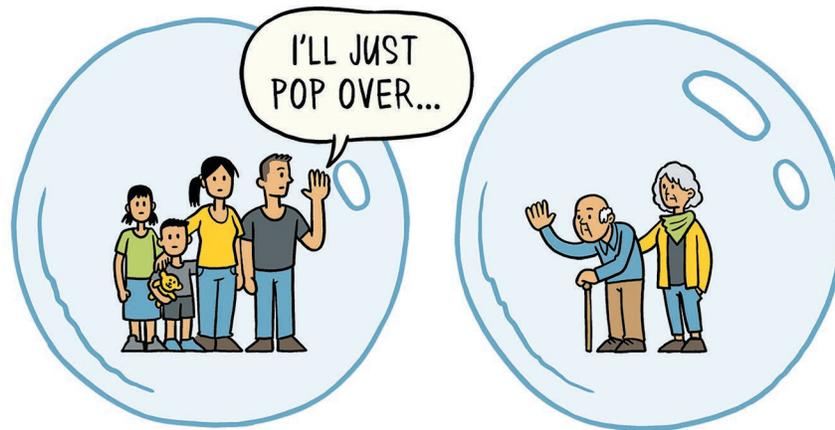
Figure 4. Bubble cartoons used to educate the public about anti-COVID-19 measures. CC-BY-SA.

The origins of the bubble concept were not widely publicised—indeed, it appeared during a March 2020 press conference as if the Prime Minister had just pulled the idea out of thin air. But it was later revealed that the imagery had been proposed by health researcher and disabilities activist Dr Tristram Ingham. Because many people with disabilities rely on carers who do not live in their households, Ingham recognised the need for a term that encompassed ongoing social contact that exists beyond a single household but could be kept within a restricted unit. As pandemic histories begin to be compiled—in Roitman's terms, articulating 'turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology' (2013, 3)—Ingham's contribution was overshadowed by the

heroic figures built out of the Prime Minister and Director-General of Health, Ashley Bloomfield, alongside selected medical experts who dominated the media. Whilst stressing the importance of protecting 'the vulnerable', a category that includes many disabled persons, the government missed a crucial opportunity to highlight how disabled persons were in fact part of the solution to the pandemic, and thus to further reinforce the ideal of unity (Trnka and Muir, forthcoming).

Teams

Moving on from teddies and bubbles to 'teams'—by now, the whole world has probably heard more than enough about the New Zealand government's attempts to transform the entire country into a rugby team. The most popular invocation was, of course, repeated referrals to Aotearoa's population as 'the team of 5 million'. Others include Bloomfield's comments in May 2020 that 'the worst thing we could do now is celebrate success early before the full-time whistle blows and jeopardise the gains we have made' (1News 2020) and Ardern's statement in early September 2021, that 'we are within sight of elimination, but we can't *drop the ball'* (quoted in Menon 2021; see also Kearns 2021). (We later definitively 'dropped the ball', giving up entirely on elimination as a strategy.) Robin Kearns has also suggested that the government's initial catchphrase for lockdown—'go hard, go early'—refers to 'an assertive style of play' in rugby (idem, 327). Similar to 'be kind', the language of 'the team of 5 million' was adopted by many New Zealanders who expressed pride in the collective unity it reflected (Long et al. 2020).

But as the pandemic progressed, both expressions and sentiments of collective unity began to fray. In 2021, the government's mantra of 'go hard, go early' morphed into the ill-fated 'short and sharp'. Announcing the move back into lockdown in mid-August that year, Ardern promised this lockdown would be 'short and sharp, not light and long'. It was a characterisation that came to puzzle many, as Auckland spent more than three months in a so-called short, sharp lockdown. Questioned in September 2021 about this promise, Ardern defensively deflected the question, noting that 'people have been through this process long enough to know that short, sharp, go hard and early, has been our response to when we see even one incursion [of COVID-19]. We move quickly while we ascertain what's happening' (Office of the Prime Minister 2021). It is significant that, in contrast to the new connotations attached to words like 'team' and 'bubble', the attempt to redefine 'short and sharp' as 'immediate and protracted' stands out as not only unscripted, but spectacularly unsuccessful.

Other languages

As some words took on new connotations, there was simultaneously an intensification of other forms of language. This includes the language of mental health. My current research with New Zealand youth suggests COVID-19, and lockdowns in particular, prompted a widespread intensification of self-care practices, such as actively questioning one's own mental health status and that of others. Arjuna, an Indian woman aged 19, echoed the sentiments of many when she asserted that since the pandemic, 'A lot of new [YouTube] channels were running programmes on how people were coping … promoting wellbeing and looking after yourself. That obviously trickles into social media and what people post and checking on your friends. So, that was very positive and opened up a lot of discussions on, "Hey, are you alright?" … making people feel like it's alright to check up on other people and going a bit beyond that superficial stuff, and being like, "Hey, are you actually alright? Like are you *sound*? How *are* you feeling?" It de-stigmatized that a bit. And because COVID is such a universal [experience], we've all gone through it.'

Some young people now regularly give trigger warnings or ask for emotional consent before describing their feelings. Part of this increased attentiveness to emotions and their impacts is due to the effectiveness of pandemic-inspired mental health campaigns as demonstrated by the number of young people who can recite the public health mantra that 'it's OK to not be OK' (see Keogh 2020). Other contributing factors are clearly the pandemic itself, spurring fears of illness and widespread death, along with lockdown regulations and the isolation they imposed. During lockdowns—and Aucklanders have experienced five, of varying durations—people of all ages found themselves facing new or intensified feelings of loneliness, purposelessness, and despair. Paul, an Asian man aged 22, recounted his deep loneliness, explaining, 'I'm quite introverted, so I don't really mind not meeting people. But at the same time, it gets to a point where you want to talk to people. And, you know, interactions with the corner dairy [corner shop] owner, you sort of get a lot more from that than you previously would, outside of COVID.' Like Paul, many of us experienced a shift in not only the specific words we were using, but *how* we were talking to one another and what we intend to achieve through acts of communication.

Not everyone, however, is finding what they need through professional and lay extensions of mental health support. Too often, the language of violence is filling in the gaps. New Zealand Police and the Women's Refuge both noted a 20 per cent increase in family violence-related calls during lockdown (Leask 2021; Kronast 2020). Street violence in urban areas has likewise increased. Reported crime in Auckland, the country's largest city, has gone up by 30 per cent since

2019, with some referring to the city's downtown as a virtual 'ghost town' due to the closure and boarding up of businesses and general inhospitability (Thomas 2022). Multiple factors have contributed to this feeling of emptiness: from the lockdowns to the increase in crime that has led to people avoiding downtown, to the shutdown of many businesses following loss of revenue, with no new enterprises opening in their place.

Unsurprisingly, predominantly working class, overcrowded, and underfunded areas of South and West Auckland have dominated media headlines over the course of late 2021 and 2022, not only in terms of violent events but also rising incidence rates of COVID-19. In my West Auckland neighbourhood, heightened fears of violence are palpable. You do not need to be a statistician or follow mainstream news to see and hear the police helicopter flying overhead.

On 3 September 2021, the police helicopter spent the day hovering over our house after Aotearoa/New Zealand experienced its second-ever terrorist attack, transforming our usually quiet, local shopping mall in New Lynn into a site of historic importance, in a crisis driven by the language of terrorism versus State power (Appadurai 2006). Two months later, in early November 2021, a few blocks away in New Lynn, there was a street-side shooting and murder. All day and into the night, the helicopter accompanied armed defenders searching the neighbourhood, hovering hour upon hour with seemingly no end. Over the next four days, it made regular, daily rounds, punctuating work, dinnertime, sleep. My 21-year-old daughter and I kept reminding each other that there is no reason to worry—it *isn't* a crisis, just the new normal of policing.

The *chop / chop / chop* of the helicopter is a language that is all too familiar to residents of other cities—perhaps other parts of this city, even—but it has not been commonplace to West Aucklanders until recently. But how long will 'recently' last? Does the increased street violence and police presence suggest the makings of a new language? How should we interpret the New Zealand Defence Force's 21-month stint running managed isolation and quarantine facilities from August 2020 to May 2022, or the police using fire hoses to disperse anti-vaccine protestors from their encampment outside parliament in early March 2022? These were previously unheard-of steps in a nation where the majority of the police force patrols were unarmed and the public is generally reminded of the military's existence only on ANZAC day (the national day of remembrance in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia, commemorating members of the military who have served and died in conflict), or during natural disasters. Violent altercations between police and protestors had not occurred at this level since the 1981 Springbok (South Africa rugby union team) tour. We have obviously moved a long way over the past two years from Teddy Bears in Windows, even the policing kind.

During the initial months of the pandemic in 2020, Ardern's government rallied around the image of 'the team of 5 million … united together' to 'fight' for the collective good. This rhetoric, however, began to teeter as the economy suffered and class disparities, coupled with racial prejudice, grew. Essential workers—including teachers, nurses, firefighters, and the police—found themselves under parallel pressures caused by increased workplace demands at the same time as government vaccine mandates led to many of those who refused to be vaccinated being forced to leave their jobs. This reduction in the workforce further increased demands on those essential workers who remained in post.

Shifting gears

Late 2021 saw the start of a growing swell of dissatisfaction against lockdown measures and vaccine mandates among various segments of the public, accompanied by widespread calls for the need to 'return to normal', echoing similar sentiments from abroad. And indeed, as virus variants changed and case numbers rose, lockdown restrictions progressively eased. But, as we have also seen from looking overseas, 'normal' doesn't look quite like it used to. As we continue to make our way through a crisis that has reconfigured our understandings of proximity, care, and governance, who gets to redefine what 'normality' will look like, and what terms they use, are vital questions we need to keep asking. Following Roitman and others, we should indeed examine the underlying political moves and motivations of governments and other agencies whenever a crisis is declared, but we must do so without losing sight of the experiential realities of those who live through the ever-shifting states between the seemingly normal and the strange.

As of February 2022, the New Zealand government radically shifted gear, eschewing the majority of its previous containment strategies while propounding narratives of personal responsibility rather than collective endeavour (Trnka, forthcoming). By then, however, the government's narrative was just one of many different ways of framing the crisis. Public narratives notably multiplied, with religious groups, Indigenous leaders, anti-vaccine activists, gangs, and left- and right-wing political groups all offering a different account of what constitutes the current crisis. What exactly will be the nature of 'the moral demand for a difference between the past and the future', of which Roitman speaks (2013, 8) is currently being determined by a multiplicity of voices and narratives that are vying for not only public acknowledgement but also for political might.

The languaging of crisis demands that we listen carefully to voices from various positionalities. We must do so both to ascertain what they aim to gain through their particular framing of crises as well as to endeavour to comprehend what is at stake for them as they experience suddenly losing their footing in the world—however

precarious that footing may have already been. Our own singular experiences as ethnographers cannot pretend to do justice to an undertaking of this size, but this does not mean they should be discounted as part of larger conversations. Rather, the task at hand is a more challenging one of bringing together the said and unsaid, of examining the experiential shock that reverberates through us as ethnographers and as positioned actors in the time-space of crisis, whilst painstakingly collecting and situating accounts of the ever-shifting experiences of others. While governmental discourses can indeed shape public perceptions and behaviours, our work (as both members of the public and researchers) must look beyond the intersections between public statements and governmental rhetoric to acknowledge the much broader terrain of the voiced and unvoiced lived realities of collective critical events. Indeed, rather than attempting to construct a single, much less a definitive, account of a collective critical event, ethnographic portrayals, such as the one I present here, can adopt as part of their remit the examination of various kinds of knowing.

Our experiences as human beings, as well as ethnographers, are always partial, but through their very incompleteness, they enable us to reflect on how others are similarly positioned. Above my house, the helicopter's punctuated presence creates a soundscape of tension and fear. Feeling ill at ease and uncertain, knowing both that something is occurring but not sure what that might be, is an important vantage point on how crisis is experienced through moments that might initially, or even permanently, lack articulation. Only later are they (perhaps) narratively unpacked by exchanging our own reflections with those of others, and by aligning or contraposing these against the statements of public figures and news media reports—which provide relief while also provoking concern over how much of the 'whole story' we are actually getting. But it is that initial, visceral response to the blades rotating above that tells you that all is not well (and that 'kindness' clearly isn't the rule), granting you a first glimpse at what is at stake in the constitution and breakdown of collective narratives as well as the limits of your own understanding.

Acknowledgements

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