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Ewa Antoszek, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland
Małgorzata Rutkowska, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland

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Introduction

In a speech in 1959, then Senator and future President John F. Kennedy said: "The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger – but recognize the opportunity" (as cited in Zimmer, 2007). Since the 1960's, this rhetorical statement has been evoked countless times, not only by American politicians but also by businesspersons, motivational speakers and authors of self-help books. Such positive attitude to challenges may stem from historical experiences, which have taught Americans to look beyond the time of crisis and consider advantages that any major change may bring. In his book, aptly titled *A Nation Forged By Crisis* Jay Sexton (2018) argues that in fact the USA grew in strength and significance as a state and nation after each major crisis (p.10).

In American history and culture, crisis seems to be a common theme. The first monumental crisis was the Revolutionary War, when a rebellious colony decided to fight for its independence from the British king. Arguing for the need to take immediate action, Thomas Paine wrote in December 1776:

> These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value. (p. 11)

Paine articulated the existential stakes of the conflict, portraying it not just as a struggle for independence, but as a struggle for the universal principles of liberty and human rights. By framing the revolution as a sacred cause, Paine's words helped to sustain the revolutionary spirit and persuade many wavering colonists to support the fight for independence. These words have endured as an important

Ewa Antoszek, Katedra Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki, Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4a, 20-031 Lublin, Phone: 004881 5372654, ewa.antoszek@mail.umcs.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2714-3031
Małgorzata Rutkowska, Katedra Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki, Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4a, 20-031 Lublin, malgorzata.rutkowska@mail.umcs.pl, http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7962-3320

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component of American political and historical culture as they forwarded the conviction that one needs to take advantage of windows of opportunity as they appear.

In crises, Americans have manifested resilience, adaptability, resourcefulness and the power to unite. Following the Revolutionary War, the young United States faced significant challenges, including internal tensions between states. The delegates gathered in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention in 1787 drafted the U.S. Constitution to resolve the crisis of ineffective governance. For all their regional differences, the Founders "shared the belief that reforming, innovating, and empowering their constitutional system – however difficult that task might be – was more desirable than risking the fate of political fragmentation and Old World recolonization" (Sexton, 2018, p. 52). Thus, the Constitution, the first one of its kind and a unique document in world's history, became a lasting testimony to their vision of a great republic.

The most serious political crisis in American history erupted less than a century after the American Revolution and culminated in a bloody Civil War (1861–1865). The domestic conflict over slavery "was a wrecking ball that demolished the social, economic, and political institutions that held the Union together" (Sexton, 2018, p. 52). Not only the United States territorial integrity, but also its founding principles were at stake in the war. In the famous Gettysburg address Lincoln expressed these fears: "our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure" (as cited in Burgan, 2006, p. 33). The nation endured, the North won, slavery was abolished and the Union was saved, but the price was immense. According to Davis, the war "cost the Union side more than $6 million and the Confederate states about half that much. The number of war dead was equal to nearly 2 percent of the population at the time" (Davis, 2002, p. 238). After the Civil War, the American South faced significant challenges as it sought to rebuild itself and recover from the devastation of a conflict. The era of Reconstruction (1865–1877), aimed to bring the Southern states back into the union, was fraught with difficulties because of continuing racial tensions and the region's weakened economy and infrastructure. After the Reconstruction, despite the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which guaranteed equal protection under the law and due process to all citizens, Jim Crow laws were introduced in Southern states. These laws were a means of enforcing racial segregation and white supremacy in order to maintain social and economic hierarchies.

Northern and Western states also became transformed after the Civil War, in part due to the massive waves of immigrants coming to the United States in search of their American dream. In the 1860's over 2.3 million immigrants of various ethnic and religious backgrounds arrived in the United States, in the 1880's the

number increased to 5.2 million (Sexton, 2018, p. 109). The influx of immigrants helped to boost the population and contributed to the country's economic growth by providing a significant labor force for agriculture, manufacturing and mining. American culture also profited from the arrival of immigrants, as their diverse cultures and traditions enriched the nation's identity and strengthened the concept of American society as a melting pot.

"The times that try men's souls" came again during the Great Depression. In fact, 1929, the year the stock market crashed, became synonymous with "the great American trauma" (Rothbard, 1972, p. xxxv). What distinguished the Great Depression from previous periods of economic recession and depression was its long duration – eleven years – and its shockingly high rate of unemployment. In 1931 the unemployment surpassed 20% and it remained above 15 % until the outbreak of WWII (p. xxxv). Millions of Americans lost their jobs and savings. Many families had to abandon their farms and homes, faced with financial insecurity, poverty and a lack of prospects. While the historians and economists may differ in their diagnosis as to how and why the Great Depression started, it was certainly the longest and the most profound economic crisis that Americans have experienced.

To combat the crisis, under the "New Deal", President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced a number of reforms, regulations and legislative initiatives between 1933 and 1938. The aim of the "New Deal" was to stimulate the economy by establishing new federal programs and agencies and introducing broad reforms. These included a government-run pension through Social Security, as well as economic relief for farmers, the unemployed, and the elderly (Berkin et al., 2011, pp. 629–632). As a result, the New Deal

> restored a sense of security as it put people back to work. It created the framework for a regulatory state that could protect the interests of all Americans, rich and poor, and thereby help the business system work in more productive ways. It rebuilt the infrastructure of the United States, providing a network of schools, hospitals, and roads that served us well for the next 70 years. (Winkler, 2009, p. 5)

While there are debates about how effective the New Deal was in ending the economic crisis, there is no question that the period produced significant changes in government programs and benefits for the U.S. society.

The end of WWII created conditions for the emergence of "the most productive industrial economy the world had ever seen" (Sexton, 2018, p. 138). The seeds for the expansion of the economy had been sown during the war, as the war effort had led to the growth of American industry and the increase of the labor force, including women.

> The US economy […] provided 60 percent of the Allies' munitions and was responsible for 40 percent of the arms produced in the world by 1944. The numbers were almost unbelievable to

> contemporaries who had grown accustomed to the bleak economic reports of the Depression years. The US industrial machine churned out 2,383,311 trucks, 299,293 aircraft, 88,410 tanks, 6.5 million rifles, 40 billion bullets, and, not to be forgotten, 2 atomic weapons. A new merchant marine – an immense armada of 5,777 "liberty ships" – departed fully loaded with war material from American ports on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. (p. 138)

Millions of jobs were created in this industrial boom. New businesses were started and new technologies developed to support the war effort, while the average earnings of the lowest paid workers grew considerably. As Sexton (2018) points out "the nature and geography of the war gave the United States a fortuitous head start on its future nemesis. The Soviet Union ended the war confronting a colossal reconstruction project; the United States emerged from the conflict primed to exploit its economic dominance on the world stage" (p. 138). Thus, in the Cold War years the American economy boomed, and the general prosperity of Americans improved markedly. But at the same time, the 1950's were also a time of deep anxiety about the future because of the looming threat of another world war.

1960s and Onward

George Packer, in his analysis of the American society entitled "How America Fractured Into Four Parts" (Packer, 2021), marks the 1960s as the turning point – a crisis – in the evolution of national narratives. He insists that "[t]hrough much of the 20th century, the two political parties [the Republicans and the Democrats] had clear identities and told distinct stories". In the 1960s the situation reversed and "[b]y the turn of the millennium, the Democrats were becoming the home of affluent professionals, while the Republicans were starting to sound like populist insurgents" (Packer, 2021). Consequently, as Packer (2013) argues in another analysis of American contemporary crises, *The Unwinding: Thirty Years of American Decline* (2013):

> If you were born around 1960 or afterward, you have spent your adult life in the vertigo of that unwinding. You watched structures that had been in place before your birth collapse like pillars of salt across the vast visible landscape – the farms of the Carolina Piedmont, the factories of the Mahoning Valley, Florida subdivisions, California schools. And other things, harder to see but no less vital in supporting the order of everyday life, changed beyond recognition – ways and means in Washington caucus rooms, taboos on New York trading desks, manners and morals everywhere. When the norms that made the old institutions useful began to unwind, and the leaders abandoned their posts the Roosevelt Republic that had reigned for almost half a century came undone. (p. 3)

When we look at the titles of canonic books describing the transformations of the 1960s, they illustrate the unwinding described by Packer, and they reflect two aspects of the definitions of crisis – understood both as "a condition of instability or danger . . . leading to a decisive change" and as a turning point (dictionary.com). On the one hand, there is Isserman and Kazin's *America Divided: The Civil*

War of the 1960s (2000), which suggests that the changes taking place in the 1960s were comparable to those of the earlier major crises in the history of the United States, and with equally significant consequences. Taylor Branch's famous trilogy chronicling the civil rights movement, *Parting the Waters America in the King Years 1954–1963* (1988), *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963–1965* (1998) and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–1968* (2006) compares subsequent stages of the movement to the momentous events in the history of the Israelites described in the Bible.

Ruth Rosen, who depicts the transformation of the situation of women in *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (2000), also suggests that these changes not only divided the society, but led to its complete reconstruction. For some, these transformations were a challenge – a crisis – that could not be overcome, as it dramatically altered the world that they had known. For others, the crisis of the 1960s was a turning point that finally allowed a major part of the American society to speak out and make their voices heard. As Packer remarks, "with the civil-rights movement, the biggest barriers to equality were removed" (Packer, 2021).

In looking at the titles of the autobiographies written by those who participated in the transformations of the 1960s the crisis of this era is perceived as bringing about a shift to a better future. Myrlie Evers Williams, the wife of civil rights leader Medgar Evers assassinated in 1963, recollects her story as the story of the movement in *Watch Me Fly: What I Learned on the Way to Becoming the Woman I Was Meant to Be* (1999). John Lewis, another civil rights icon, provides a "rare insight into the movement and the personalities of all the civil rights leaders – what was happening behind the scenes, the infighting, struggles, and triumphs" (gooodreads.com) in *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (1998). Maya Angelou chronicles the transformations of the 1960s in a seven-volume autobiography with the titles, including *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1993), *The Heart of the Woman* (1984), or *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1987), which all suggest this necessity to challenge adversities and move forward. In this way the 1960s are a witness to the major changes that led to transformations in decades that followed. The revolution(s) that started in the 1960s have had consequences throughout the rest of the 20th century and into the present one.

The civil rights era shared a common denominator with two other movements from the period – the women's liberation movement and the protest movement against the Vietnam War: they all mobilized large numbers of American people to fight against against inequalities and injustices, faced by their fellow citizens. Following up on these mobilizations, subsequent crusades for social justice ensued at the end of the 1960s, including The Chicano Movement, The American Indian Movement, and the Stonewall rebellion. With those crises, more and more people who were once disenfranchised were gaining their rights and their voices became

a far greater part of the national discourse. It has to be noted though, that the door to equality these events opened was ajar, but not completely open. Similarly to the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the Union Emancipation Proclamation that ended slavery, but did not change the factual situation of black people in the South considerably, the movements of the 1960s did not eradicate racial discrimination completely, either. However, what is significant is that the fight against social injustice morphed from a civil disobedience approach with Martin Luther King Jr. as its leader to Black Panthers' and Malcolm X's more militant approach – the dichotomy which will be reflected during the battles and protests in subsequent decades throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, including the Watts riots or Black Lives Matter movement.

It is also important to remember that the political transformations of the 1960s were taking place at the background of the continuing Cold War, which led to internal tensions within American society, as various aspects of this conflict of superpowers, such as arms race or landing on the moon, had a direct influence on the American people. Finally, the 1960's were also times of counter-culture, initiated by the Beats, who protested against Moloch of capitalism, consumerism, and opportunism devouring "the best minds of their generation", as Allen Ginsberg wrote in "Howl" (1956) as the anthem of the Beat Generation. The anti-mainstream sentiments culminated in 1969 in rock festivals in Woodstock, New York and Altamont, California. It needs to be pointed out, though, that apart from anti-mainstream slogans the Beats also propagated pro-environmental rhetoric, which both drew attention of the audiences to environmental issues and became inspiration for ecological movements at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The next decade in American history, the 1970's, is also a decade of different crises, some of which are analyzed in this volume. First of all, the social movements of the 1960s continued throughout the following decade, bringing new actors and new agenda to the scene. Combined with other momentous events in American history, including the end of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, the U.S. faced significant political and social turmoil. At the same time, the economic situation marked by "stagflation" contributed to a widespread economic crisis. Past approaches failed to solve the problems, resulting in declining well-being for many people and contributing to the downturn of many American cities. Numerous places witnessed rising crime, decaying infrastructure, and increasing poverty. The U.S. position on the international arena was in turn influenced by the 1973 oil crisis (followed up by the second crisis in 1979) and the Iran Hostage Crisis, which lasted into the 1980s and forced consecutive governments to reassess U.S. foreign policy and military strategy. These crises collectively contributed to a sense of instability and change in American society. They also paved the way for subsequent political and cultural transformations. Once again the crises that originated in one decade would carry into the years to come and shape the structure

of the society even into the next century, because certain problems that the U.S. are facing today have their roots in these previous crises. Packer comments on these developments and argues:

> The 1970s ended postwar, bipartisan, middle-class America, and with it the two relatively stable narratives of getting ahead and the fair shake. They have roots in history, but they are shaped by new ways of thinking and living. They reflect schisms on both sides of the divide that has made us two countries, extending and deepening the lines of fracture. Over the past four decades, the four narratives have taken turns exercising influence. They overlap, morph into one another, attract and repel one another. None can be understood apart from the others, because all four emerge from the same whole. (Packer, 2021)

Therefore, it is important to note that the crises of the 1970s reinforced societal divisions that are clearly visible nowadays.

Apart from that, the 1970's played an important role in the transformations that took place in the next decade, the 1980's, since, as Packer maintains, "Just as there would have been no Roosevelt revolution without the Great Depression, there would have been no Reagan revolution without the 1970s" (Packer, 2021). There are numerous great American writers who worked during this decade, depicting the problems Americans were facing. For example, the general atmosphere of helplessness, futility, and resignation related to the growing income inequality is well-reflected by Raymond Carver's Kmart realism. Susan Sontag's powerful short story, "The Way We Live Now" (1986), addresses the HIV/AIDS epidemic and resulting stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999) provides a space for marginalized voices to speak, drawing drawing attention to those who live in the shadow of both literal and metaphorical borders. The disparities between the rich and the poor grew considerably during Reagan's era, since, as Packer notes, "The majority of Americans who elected Reagan president weren't told that Free America would break unions and starve social programs, or that it would change antitrust policy to bring a new age of monopoly, making Walmart, Citigroup, Google, and Amazon the J.P. Morgan and Standard Oil of a second Glided Age" (Packer, 2021). What Packer calls "crony capitalism" (Packer, 2021) of the 1980s would have a significant impact on the developments within American society that would culminate in several serious crises of the 1990s.

When talking about major crises of 1990s, U.S. foreign policy was dominated by the Gulf War and its aftermath. As in the case of other crises, the end of the combat phase did not resolve all the issues, which left the region unstable and the question of Iraq and the Middle East to reappear in the wake of the 9/11. Similarly, the internal situation was also becoming more intense, as the 1990s witnessed three major acts of domestic terrorism, including the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and Columbine High School

Massacre in 1999. These events adversely affected citizens' sense of security, furthering a debate centered on gun control and 2nd Amendment rights that is still taking place in American society today, particularly in the wake of increased mass shootings from the 2000s to the present.

The 1990s led to renewed discussion about racial discrimination. Video evidence of Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King drew significant news coverage, leading directly to riots in 1992. This event furthered discussions about racial profiling in law enforcement, and concerns over violence experienced by African Americans and other minority groups. Moreover, public and academic communities devoted new attention to injustices in the criminal justice system. The 1990s proved that racial discrimination did not end with the 1964 Civil Right Act and racial issues were still tenuous and contested subject in the American society.

Finally, at the end of the1990s American presidency faced a reputational crisis, which had lasting political ramifications, when President Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives (and later became acquitted by the Senate) after the affair with Monica Lewinsky.

The 21st century has already witnessed its share of crises. The attacks of 9/11 are the events that mark the turning point in the American history of the 21st century, setting the tone for the politics of the next two decades. As immediate examples, the U.S. established the Department of Homeland Security in 2002 and implemented the USA Patriot Act in 2001. The War on Terror followed the attacks and included two major conflicts, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The two wars further contributed to social inequalities, since, as Packer argues,

> The cost for Americans fell on the bodies and minds of young men and women from small towns and inner cities. Meeting anyone in uniform in Iraq who came from a family of educated professionals was uncommon, and vanishingly rare in the enlisted ranks. After troops began to leave Iraq, the pattern continued in Afghanistan. The inequality of sacrifice in the global War on Terror was almost too normal to bear comment. (Packer, 2021)

The post 9/11 period has contributed to a sense of unease, insecurity, and anxiety that has shaped politics ever since. The consequences of the War on Terror were far-reaching, as the war itself triggered ISIS activity all over the world and subsequent terrorist attacks, including the ones in the U.S. Combined with increasing cases of domestic terrorism (such as, for example, Boston Marathon Bombing in 2013) the attacks aggravated a sense of insecurity in ordinary citizens and brought back to the discussion the question of gun control. At the same time, these incidents opened the door for populism and gave rise to the appearance of demagogues with populist slogans on their banners. Many politicians took advantage of the situation and exploited each such case for their own purposes. The national debate ensued, who was a real patriot, as Barbara Kingsolver aptly recounted in her essay "And

Our Flag Was Still There" (2001). That discussion in turn triggered an argument who was entitled to be called a real American – the dispute that is continuing with the growing anti-immigrant sentiments as its inherent part.

The internal crises became aggravated already at the beginning of the 21st century by the financial crisis of 2007–2008, which led to the Great Recession, marked by foreclosures, unemployment and general downfall of economy. The crisis was the effect of long-lasting risky practices of big financial institutions and yet it was ordinary people once again who paid the price for these speculations – losing their jobs, houses and money. Many became poor practically overnight, and the disparities within the American society escalated, as household incomes for some decreased dramatically. This was also the moment when several financial reforms were introduced, yet for some it was too late, as their situation did not improve significantly afterwards. From a perspective of an outsider this particular impasse was a prelude to the crisis of American democracy that became more and more apparent in 2010s and 2020s through such events as George Floyd's, Michael Brown's and Eric Garner's murders at the hands of the police and the protests that followed these incidents. Moreover, the 2016 presidential election marked a dramatic shift in U.S. politics and rise in political polarization, including increased hostility toward members of the opposing political party. The attack on the U.S. Capitol reflects this period of heightened political division. Adding to that, natural and man-made disasters brought about by climate change, the opioid crises, the challenges of immigration policy, ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, all together reflect the uncertainties of this present period in U.S. history.

The upcoming 2024 presidential elections render the situation even more tenuous. As Packer concludes his analysis of a fractured America, "It's common these days to hear people talk about sick America, dying America, the end of America. The same kinds of things were said in 1861, in 1893, in 1933, and in 1968", but, as he adds, "Neither separation nor conquest is a tenable future" (Packer, 2021). Therefore, the questions: "Where will these crises lead? Which trajectory and direction will the U.S. take?" cannot be answered unequivocally and as such they remain rhetorical questions driving further discussions and debates on the status quo of the U.S.

The authors in this volume analyze individual American crises focusing on their various and diverse aspects. Anna Bendrat analyzes the crisis of HIV/AIDS epidemic, as presented in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*. She does that through the examination of various aspects of fear and their influence on human relationships. Toni R. Juncosa undertakes the issue of HIV/AIDS epidemic and reminds us how deeply gay black communities in the United States were affected by the AIDS crisis in the last two decades of the 20th century. Even though the effective treatment for HIV is now available, the virus continues to be seen as an ongoing crisis that evokes "images of disease, death, and decay, even among new

generations". Thus, Juncosa proposes to read Danez Smith's poetry collection *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) thorough the lens of post-memory, claiming that the poet's response to the HIV is imbued with the traumatic memory of AIDS in the 1980's and 1990's. Brygida Gasztold tackles the question of the validity of the concept of the American Dream in the 21st century. She examines contemporary rendition of the American Dream as well as its challenges based on Imbolo Mbue's novel *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). Małgorzata Martynuska analyzes the situation of contemporary ethnic families in the U.S., as presented in Naima Coster's *Halsey Street* (2017). She does so with a particular focus on the processes of gentrification in American cities and its influence on the communities who used to live in the (now) gentrified spaces. Ewa Klęczaj-Siara addresses in her analysis a particular aspect of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is #OwnVoices literature intended for children. She examines the role this new subgenre plays and its functions based on *Because You Matter* (2020) and *We Shall Overcome* (2021). Anna Gilarek's article is devoted to Kim Stanley Robinson's political science fiction novels *New York 2140* (2017) and *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) that offer visions of societies going beyond current capitalist structures. Recognizing systemic failure of capitalism, Robinson develops some alternative scenarios for postcapitalist future of our world, frequently based on solutions that have already be implemented on a small scale. In his novels, the radical political and social changes are aimed at protecting the Earth and its climate, replacing the power and influence of global capital with bottom-up non-capitalist practices, international cooperation and legislative intervention. In the same vein, Felix Purat starts his analysis of selected novels of Philip K. Dick with the premise that "crisis and catastrophe were […] constants in Dick's life". Reading the books in the context of political science-fiction as well as regional tropes and myths of California, Purat focuses on three different manifestations of crisis in Dick: political, spiritual as well as apocalyptic each of which may lead to a social catastrophe. In her research Carla Rocavert combines reality television studies and insight into American politics with a view of dissecting Donald Trump's media identity. She is especially interested in unravelling the correspondences between Trump's role in the early 2000s reality show *The Apprentice* and his subsequent presidential role, claiming that the reality show may be treated as "the key textual construct which precedes and informs the 'crises' associated with Trump's political career".

The editors of this volume hope that readings and conclusions arising from the research presented below will contribute to the further understanding of challenges and opportunities each American crisis brings.

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