

# THEME

## NOTE

**T**he word "crisis" fairly oozes with banality, so overused has it become by TV and the daily press. In selecting "the current crisis" as the first theme of *democracy*, there is a clear risk of being swamped by its familiarity. Part of the crisis is that pseudo-crisis has become a technique of governance and of social control that produces dependence while distracting attention from fundamental questions. Hardly a day passes without some government official, corporate spoke (our contribution to sexual linguistics), or media personality demanding that we worry about *the* crisis in energy, the money supply, the Middle East, inflation, teenage sex, or the missile gap. The natural mindlessness of television is particularly suited to a politics of pseudo-crisis because it can compensate for its lack of content by producing a charged atmosphere of near-hysteria, faked excitement, and phony drama that prepares the way for the soothing homilies of the fatherly commentator. The interminable crises of daily soap operas have their nightly counterparts in the political and economic crises produced in time for the six o'clock news.

The idea in the trivialization of crisis is that it should be made to appear as an "event," a specific happening that is being managed, first, by the protagonists, who are shown coping with the event or disclosing their plans for dealing with it, and, second, by the televised production itself that frames the event, reduces its scope to "highlights," and reassures the somewhat anxious viewer—who has become conditioned to need the very product that television is so glibly criticized for supplying, namely, "managed news."

One of the oldest meanings of crisis derives from ancient Greek medicine where it was associated with the turning point of a severe disease. *Krisis* referred to a developing general condition of the body, rather than to a specific ailment or organ. But it is precisely this general condition of the body politic that daily crisis-talk is designed to avoid. By dissolving crisis into discrete events, the idea is turned on its head and, instead of being the symbol of a fundamental disorder, it becomes a discrete event, specialized, speciously concrete, and the preserve of experts. Thus the managed news of crisis becomes an element in the legitimation of the crisis manager, the expert from the great castles of Washington, New York, and Cambridge. While the generality of crisis is trivialized and the crisis manager exalted, the citizen-viewer is diminished and reduced to resigned dependence. How can he or she *do* anything about these huge and complex problems except what their leaders constantly exhort them to do—pray.

Pseudo-crisis is when fundamental questions are defined as though they were policy questions and hence the business of an elite of policy "makers."

Policy questions are real and so are experts, but the fundamental questions provoked by a genuine crisis are not about policy and are not the monopoly of experts. They concern the basic presuppositions that determine who is to take decisions in the name of the society; how they come to have that authority; what standards of common well-being are to be binding on authorities; and what kind of people and society are supposed to be nurtured over the long pull. A genuine crisis appears when the presuppositions on which the society has based its existence and worked out its history for a fairly long time become incompatible, even contradictory. But these presuppositions were not themselves the work of yesterday or the discovery of the most recent issue of *Business Week*. A true crisis extends to the deep structure of historical existence. A crisis is not something that *is* but a condition that *becomes*. It is a gathering of the past and the present crystallized into opposing forces and ideas.

The contradictions have produced a political crisis, but we are dissuaded from reflection upon our political condition because virtually all of the authorities in the society insist that the crisis is economic in nature and that it will be responsive to policies of state action or inaction. This is, however, a false claim for the simple reason that "the economy" is a political creature—shaped by a long history of public actions and supported by astronomical sums of money ever since the birth of the republic. But it is a political economy that is implicitly and explicitly antidemocratic: it is governed by the few and for the few at the expense, moral and material, of the many. It contradicts the basic premises of democracy that ordinary human beings can govern themselves, take responsibility for developing and caring for a shared way of life, and deliberate about and choose among the social conditions that structure their lives and limit their choices.

**T**he first article attempts to identify some of the basic presuppositions of our national life and to trace their uneasy coexistence. This is followed by an analysis of some of the most important misunderstandings of our current condition. Then the question is posed of why we, as a society, have thought so little and so badly about how a democratic people can get itself (or selves) together and act in democratic ways. The final article in this section poses some troubling questions about one means of action—regulation by public agencies—that has enjoyed favor among liberals and even among many who have regarded themselves as democrats.

Many, perhaps most, of the questions posed in this issue of *democracy* are being taken up in a preliminary way. We hope to return to them in later issues and to explore them further.