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Protest Banner reading "Crisis" during Occupy London protests at St. Pauls Cathedral, Photo: Neil Cummings, London 16th October 2011, Source: flickr, License: CC BY-SA 2.0

"Crisis" in Contemporary History and Historiography

by Rüdiger Graf, Konrad H. Jarausch

Crises are omnipresent in the history and historiography of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since the global financial crisis of 2007, the use of the concept has further increased and, consequently, its meaning has become more elusive than ever. A quick search on Google Scholar turns up three million and fifty thousand hits.[1] In the media, the concept functions as a catch-all description for a broad range of complex political, economic, and social processes. There is constant talk of the refugee, demographic, environmental, climate, Syrian, Ukrainian crises or the crises of the prison system, government institutions, political coalitions, the euro and the European Union or our favorite sports clubs. Despite its ubiquity, however, even renowned sociologists such as Alain Touraine and Zygmunt Bauman have only recently used the term to draw attention to their social analyses and remedies.[2] The concept's semantic vagueness together with its power to dramatize complex chains of events makes "crisis" attractive for historians as well. Due to its seemingly universal applicability – crises have apparently occurred always and everywhere – crisis frequently serves as a title for lecture series or the focus of research centers.[3]

In the following, we will scrutinize how historians use the concept of crisis with respect to contemporary history, the twentieth century, and modernity in general. After briefly sketching the conceptual history of "crisis," this essay addresses the following questions. How does the concept structure historiographical narratives and how – by reference to which theories – do historians explain crises? What types of crises do they distinguish – often following contemporary diagnoses – and what, if any, explanatory work does the concept do? How do the increasing diagnoses of crises relate to our understanding of modernity and its discontents? Finally, considering its vagueness, suggestive power, and political instrumentalization, should we retain the concept or should we refrain from using it?

The Meaning and History of Crisis

The conceptual history of crisis has been covered extensively up to the beginning of the twentieth century in large part thanks to the work of Reinhart Koselleck. Linguistically, the English crisis, the German *Krise*, and the French *crise* stem from the Greek term *krisis*. According to Koselleck, the ancient *krisis* contained the meaning of both objective crisis and subjective critique.[4] Hence its origin already indicates that the notion of crisis is closely tied to human perception and subjectivity. As a technical term, in medicine, crisis signifies the crucial moment of a severe illness, deciding the patient's fate, whether the patient will recover or die. In military usage, it describes the moment of the battle in which all forces are employed and the decision over victory or defeat is brought about.[5] Thus, in its traditional and technical usage, the concept of crisis combines diagnostic and prognostic elements. It reduces the complexity of a historical situation, describing it as a moment of decision by relating it to two alternative and mutually exclusive states of the future.[6] These futures are existentially different, one marked as desirable and the other as harmful. The greater the difference, the deeper the crisis and the more urgent the demand to become active in order avoid the negative and to realize the positive option.[7] Many dictionaries, like the third edition of *Webster's International Dictionary*, retain this original meaning, defining crisis as the turning point of an illness or a decisive moment in politics while acknowledging that crisis can also refer to an unstable state of affairs in general.[8] In the latter sense, over the course of the twentieth century, it has also become customary to use crisis in a colloquial way as a synonym for "malaise," "deterioration" or "decline."[9]

Referring to the *Sattelzeit* around 1800, Reinhart Koselleck considered the concept of crisis as an indicator of as well as a factor in the formation of an explicitly modern era. In his analysis of the intellectual roots of the French Revolution, he stresses the philosophical criticism of the Enlightenment as cause of the ensuing political crisis.[10] Rejecting the optimistic faith in human progress, Koselleck describes the emergence of bourgeois society as a "pathogenesis," a form of disease that reached a decisive moment when the Ancien Régime was overthrown. Within the political struggle over the legitimacy of order, the notion of "crisis" became a *Kampfbegriff,* suggesting either continued progress or pathological decline.[11] Following its semantic diffusion, the concept of crisis became essential for Koselleck's diagnosis of a modernity in which critical intellectuals try to improve social, political, and economic institutions by envisioning better futures. In doing so, they widened the gap between the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation," opening the future as a malleable realm for human creativity.[12] This modern perception of time was epitomized in the collective singulars of "progress" and "history" and fueled the political ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Crises became the transitional but potentially disruptive phases in this generally progressive temporalization of history.[13]

Especially in Marxist ideology, crises played an essential role as phases of turmoil in which antagonistic powers struggled with each other until a new stage of historical development was realized.[14] Apart from its political usage, the concept of crisis gained wide currency in economics. For Karl Marx the "very

nature of capital" caused repeated crises, since the contradictions of capital led to speculative bubbles that inevitably burst. In the late nineteenth century, crisis became a technical term in the theory of business cycles, which various theories tried to explain. For example, John Maynard Keynes focused on insufficient demand as the principal momentum underlying the trend towards economic crises, since the business cycle tends to stall when production outpaces consumption. Yet, in general, crisis was more important as a popular description of economic malaise than as an instrument of theoretical economics.[15] Moreover, crisis also became a technical term in developmental psychology when Erik Erikson defined the "identity crises" as an essential developmental stage during adolescence when an individual has difficulties adjusting to the demands of adult life.[16]

In contrast to Koselleck's masterly conceptual history, the history of crisis in the twentieth century cannot be limited to encyclopedias, philosophical and social-scientific investigations. With the professionalization and scientization of society over the course the twentieth century, the number of "critics" and intellectuals multiplied, as did their diagnoses of crises. Widener Library at Harvard University holds more than 4,000 German books with the term *Krise* in their title and more than 23,600 books containing the English word "crisis" published in the twentieth century. A brief glance at the book titles already suggests an expansion of the semantic scope of the term crisis. In the German bibliography *Deutsches Bücherverzeichnis*, the index term *Krise* referred only to economic crises for the period from 1915 to 1920. Fifteen years later, it distinguished between books on the agrarian, financial, industrial, economic, capitalist, religious, political, revolutionary, cultural, national and world crises.[17] Book titles, of course, do not allow generalizations concerning the overall frequency of the term.

A little more precise, yet still very sketchy, is searching the contents of the millions of books scanned by Google. The Google Ngram Viewer shows a dramatic rise in the use of the term in both English and German, albeit with stark differences. English usage gradually doubled from 1800 to 1914, reaching a first high point during the war, then dropping again until 1925. It rose again before1936, declining thereafter until 1955, then rose to a new high in the 1970s and early 1980s before subsiding somewhat. In German, the word *Krise* began at a much lower level and stayed lower until World War I. After the war, however, the term's frequency rose steeply until 1934, far exceeding the English level. Afterwards it dropped until World War II. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the term's frequency rose again – most dramatically in the 1970s – until 1983, before declining once more. The numbers single out the 1920s and the 1970s as the periods in which the concept of crisis gained its widest currency, indicating an earlier use of the term in English yet a more widespread use in German publications.[18]

Looking at the 1920s and the 1970s as periods in which diagnoses of crisis flourished in particular, we can discern basic commonalities but also salient differences in the use of the term. On the one hand, there were relatively stable semantic subfields such as economics or – to a lesser extent – politics in which experts defined specific crises according to clear parameters and criteria. These

crises had a more or less definite beginning, depending on their definition as a crisis, and also a determinable end. Academic disputes notwithstanding, the *Weltwirtschaftskrise* – tellingly referred to in English as the Great Depression – began in 1929 and ended in the 1930s. The crisis of the parliamentary system in Weimar Germany started in 1930 and ended in 1933 when it was abolished by the National Socialist dictatorship. On the other hand, the criteria for the diagnoses of social, cultural, religious or other crises were not as clear and explicit. Accordingly, they had no determinable beginnings and ends. Moreover, in both the 1920s and 1970s there was a tendency to broaden the diagnoses of crisis, the issues as well as their temporal and spatial dimensions. German revolutionaries on the left and the right liked to describe the crisis of Weimar Germany in epochal terms as a crucial crisis in world history to be overcome by a new man in a new world. In the 1970s, environmentalists in particular rejected the notion of a "series of separate crises," diagnosing a "single basic defect – a fault that lies deep in the design of modern society," questioning the further existence of humankind as a whole.[19]

To a certain extent, this expansion of the diagnoses of crisis was inherent to the political logic of the term. In order to legitimize drastic measures, the crisis had to be as deep as possible. Due to the higher frequency and resulting redundancy of diagnoses of existential crises, it became a standard rhetorical move for intellectuals to acknowledge that earlier crises may have turned out less dramatic than initially feared yet claim that "this time is different".[20] Apart from these commonalities and general tendencies, the mood of crisis seems to have changed from the 1920s to the 1970s. In the 1920s, crises were generally diagnosed with their solutions ready to hand. Intellectuals needed crises to legitimize their agendas.[21] By contrast, the crises of the 1970s more often seemed to exceed the crisis-solving capacities of national governments, international organizations or even humankind as a whole.[22] Whether this was due to processes of globalization that led to the incongruence of identity space and decision space, as Charles S. Maier suggested,[23] or whether other social and cultural forces were at play remains to be seen.

Crises in Historiography – Narrative Structure and Explanatory Power

Crises loom large in historiography because they are generally more interesting than stability. One of the first to have reflected on the concept was the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt in his trying to make sense of the French Revolution. In contrast to "the gradual and lasting impacts and entanglements of great world trajectories," he defined historical crises as "accelerated processes […] in which developments which otherwise require centuries" take place within a few weeks. He distinguished between a normal condition and a disruption, which impacts more and more individuals, challenges social relations and overthrows the ruling elite. While the Swiss thinker pessimistically reflected upon the possibilities of restoring social order, he was also fascinated by the creative potential of "barriers being breached or flattened out."[24]

Crisis is a concept frequently found in historical sources and that lends itself to

analysis because it structures historical time. According to their classical definition, crises do not exist per se but are constituted by human beings, be it by contemporary observers or by later historians. No matter what the current state of affairs looks like, it becomes a crisis in the strict sense of the word only if it is defined as such: as the moment of decision between two mutually exclusive and existentially different future states which are not yet in the world but only in the human imagination.[25] The term offers a narrative structure that reduces a complex world to a binary opposition and a temporal sequence of normalcy, disruption and return to stability.[26] This is the main appeal the concept has for historians. Diagnoses of crisis in the sources dramatize a given situation, providing the historian with a ready-made template for analytical narrative. Transferring the historical diagnosis of crisis directly into the historiographical narrative, however, can easily be misleading as it totalizes one perspective on the past which was most likely formulated with specific interests. Considering the essential connection of crisis to human perception, the interpretative task is not so much to explain a past sequence of events by describing it as a crisis but rather to investigate who depicted it as a crisis for what reason and how this depiction figured in actual historical developments.

Even more problematic seems to be the historiographical tendency to treat crises not as phenomena that need to be explained but rather as events that can explain other developments. In this sense, for example, one or the other crisis has allowed historians to explain almost any process and development in Germany between 1918 and 1933.[27] Similarly, in narratives about the 1970s, the oil crisis of 1973–4 serves as a passe-partout to explain almost everything that occurred afterwards. In this vein, crises appear as building blocks within the causal structure of the world; as a result, their constitutive connection to human perception gets lost.[28] This, however, strips them of all explanatory power. Only establishing how the perception of a certain crisis made people think or act can be sufficient as a historical explanation. When employing the concept of crisis, historians mostly refer to international, political, economic, social or cultural crises

International Crises

The simplest historical use of the concept refers to such international conflicts, which even contemporaries described as crises. Specified with a spatial and/or temporal index, in this context crisis serves as a shorthand expression for a conflict between at least two opposing powers, short of an all-out war but possibly leading to military confrontation. There was a whole series of such confrontations before the First World War, from the Fashoda crisis to the Bosnia crisis, from the first to the second Morocco crisis, and from the *Daily Telegraph* Affair to the Balkan crisis that put Europe on the brink of war. In the interwar period, some conflicts such as the Sudeten Crisis of 1938 were temporarily contained by international mediation, while related instances like the Polish Corridor Crisis of 1939 led to another devastating world war. After the Second World War, crises over the blockade of Berlin, control of the Suez Canal or missiles in Cuba once again threatened destruction. By contrast, other historians also discern crises of international institutions, such as the endemic crises of the European Community or European Union, which may threaten their very

existence, or at least hamper further integration or expansion.[29]

The classic example of a fateful crisis is the July Crisis of 1914 that led to the outbreak of the First World War. The tangled series of events – from the Serbian assassination of Franz Ferdinand to the German blank check and Austrian's ultimatum that ultimately triggered Russian mobilization based on French assurances of help, which, in turn, provoked the German ultimatum – has been the subject of numerous monographs that have tried to assign blame to different nations or refute it. While the steps of escalation, from a local Balkan conflict to a continental war and from there to a worldwide struggle, are relatively clear, the decisions to go to war, often under pretexts such as the "Russian danger" in Germany or the "rape of Belgium" in Britain, remain controversial to this day. The key analytical question revolves around the reason for the failure to reach a compromise of the kind that had succeeded in containing previous confrontations.[30]

The most famous instance of a crisis that did not result in a war with potentially even more devastating consequences is the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, as the world seemed to teeter on the brink of nuclear annihilation. The discovery of a Soviet missile build-up in Cuba by U-2 spy-planes put President Kennedy into a quandary of having to choose the right response of either diplomatic defeat or armed interdiction. Disregarding the advice of military hawks, he settled on an intermediary course of imposing a "strict quarantine" around the island and informing the public of the threat, making it clear that he would consider the stationing of rockets an attack on the United States. This risky show of strength was accompanied, however, by secret negotiations that ultimately arrived at a compromise: the withdrawal of Soviet missiles when the U.S. promised to pull back its own rockets in Turkey and Italy.[31]

Group of women from "Women Strike for Peace" holding placards relating to the Cuban missile crisis and to peace, 1962. Photo: Phil Stanziola, New York 1962, Source: Library of Congress Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

The successful outcome soon made the Cuban Missile Crisis a paradigm case for the study of international relations during the Cold War.[32] As the concept of crisis became more closely attached to its negative outcome, as the prelude to catastrophe, more recent scholars have questioned its character as a real crisis.[33]

Political Systems in Crisis

A second type of usage refers to one of three things: to domestic conflicts within a certain government that threaten its existence, to the period after the fall of a government until a new government assumes power, or to a political conflict that may endanger the entire political system and where strong forces are calling for its replacement. For instance, Italian governments have been notoriously unstable, resulting in frequent cabinet-shuffles, or *transformismo*, in which political challengers are integrated into the existing system.[34] Similarly,

the French Third Republic was well-known for its recurrent crises that were resolved through a reshaping of coalitions, through a change of ministerial personnel, or by elections that shifted the balance of power from right to left or vice-versa.[35] At stake was usually access to political power that made it possible to implement a certain ideological program or, better yet, to pass legislation favorable to a specific interest group. Since most of these contests merely took place within the political classes, such crises were usually resolved rather quickly by bargaining.

An exemplary case for the crisis of an entire political system was the Weimar Republic, which was attacked by growing extremist forces from the right and the left who were eager to overthrow its parliamentary institutions. Surprisingly enough, the first German democracy survived its initial period of chaos created by communist and nationalist uprisings, hyperinflation and reparations disputes. However, after the onset of the Great Depression the breakdown of the government ushered in new elections that created an anti-democratic majority in September 1930. Under government rule without a parliamentary majority on the basis of President Hindenburg's emergency decrees, the Republic transformed into an authoritarian regime. At the turn of 1932/33 there seemed to be only one alternative: the declaration of a state of emergency or a government including the National Socialists.[36] Once in power, the NSDAP, even though in a coalition government, had no intention of returning to parliamentary principles, but quickly overthrew all democratic institutions, establishing a racist dictatorship. In a seemingly all-pervasive crisis, a parliamentary impasse effectively resulted in the overthrow of an entire constitutional system.[37]

Over the course of the twentieth century, systemic crises often revolved around the choice between democracy and dictatorship or more authoritarian forms of rule. One especially dramatic case was the Russian evolution from a modified form of tsarist autocracy, discredited through a losing war, to a liberal-democratic Provisional Government, which in turn was overthrown by a Bolshevik revolution that turned into a Communist dictatorship. Similarly, though less extreme, was the failure of interwar democracy to prevent the establishment of authoritarian regimes, by Admiral Horthy in Hungary, General Piłsudski in Poland, Generalissimo Franco in Spain, and António Salazar in Portugal. While Italian Fascism and German National Socialism had to be overthrown by war, the authoritarian systems of Greece, Spain and Portugal entered a stage of crisis in the 1970s and were eventually toppled from within. The crisis of Communism during the 1980s also gave democracy a new lease on life in Eastern Europe through mostly peaceful revolutions, though the transition was not successful in all countries.[38]

Economic Crises

In their diagnoses of economic crises, historians commonly depend on the theoretical and empirical work of economists. In premodern times, economic crises were either agrarian crises resulting from bad harvests or crises caused by speculation. With the advent of the capitalist economy, however, observers in the mid-nineteenth century like Karl Marx or the French physician Clément Juglar discerned a cyclical development of economic activity in which booms regularly led

to recessions. Crisis can refer either to the turning point from up- to downswing or to the whole period of recession and depression.[39] In the early twentieth century, there was already a wide variety of economic theories of crisis, which basically boiled down to two opposing camps. On the one hand, classical and neoclassical economists saw economic crises as exogenic shocks of the economic equilibrium that had to be avoided. Others, most prominently Joseph Schumpeter, argued on the other hand that business cycles were the normal form of economic development.[40] According to Schumpeter, the severity of the Great Depression resulted from the coincidence of the downswing of a business or Juglar cycle with a Kondratiev cycle, named after the Soviet economist Nikolai Kondratiev, who discerned long-term investment waves due to technological innovation.[41]

The *Weltwirtschaftskrise* or Great Depression that began in 1929 was the biggest economic disruption of the twentieth century and has occupied economic and general historians alike.[42] They begin by establishing the sequence of events in the crisis that started with the primary price collapse, gathered speed with the stock market crash on Wall Street, and eventually overwhelmed Europe with the rapid withdrawal of American loans that stalled the cycle of German reparation payments and Inter-Allied debt service, ushering in a drop in industrial production in Germany and United States by almost half and skyrocketing unemployment.[43] In addition, they debate the causes of the crisis as well as the effect of contemporary policies on its development, above all deflationary and austerity measures.[44] While these discussions depend on assumptions that are controversial in economics and economic policy, most historians do not go into the technical details and intricacies of economics. They are interested instead in the effects of economic crises on political, social, and cultural developments. For example, they describe the Great Depression as the prime cause for the rise of National Socialism and the destruction of the Weimar parliamentary system.[45] Moreover, the economic crisis has been held responsible for almost every social development and any kind of intellectual utterance during that period.[46] The same holds true for the economic crisis of the 1970s, which has recently become a focus for historians.[47]

Societies in Crises

Economists and economic historians refer to explicit theoretical assumptions and clear indicators in determining whether it is justified to describe a situation as a crisis, even though they may disagree about the interpretation and underlying causes. By contrast, past diagnoses of "social crises," which later historians have often reiterated, are vaguer and more diffuse. Social crises can dramatize problems involving particular subgroups (the bourgeoisie, the young, etc.), certain forms of living (the crisis of cities, of suburbia) and social practices (the crisis of gun violence) or the cohesion of society as a whole. Concerned about the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, intellectuals have found reasons to warn about the negative effects on and impending decline of virtually every social entity. In need of structuring narratives, social historians appropriate these crises as they see fit. Aided by Marxist theoreticians, the labor movement depicted the suffering of the working class as an ever-intensifying crisis, demanding reform or preparing the ground for revolution. After World War

I and hyperinflation, champions of the lower middle class likewise stressed the difficulties faced by artisans and tradesmen, threatened as they were by industrial production and department stores.[48] Moreover, with the Great Depression, professionals and academics developed a sense of danger, fearing a descent into the lower strata and describing themselves and their colleagues as being in a state of crisis.[49] Even the East Elbian nobility saw itself threatened by the lack of profitability of its estates. Judging by such complaints, the entire social order appeared to be collapsing at once, which led historians to diagnose a "total crisis" or a tightly knit tangle of crises (*Krisenknäuel*) that destroyed the Weimar Republic.[50]

As a rule, specific social groups clamored for special attention from the state, using the rhetoric of crisis to call for welfare measures and describing themselves as being under existential threat. Using the fear of truancy among working class children, leaders of youth organizations demanded financial support for *Jugendpflege* in order to keep the young off the streets. Similarly, feminists portrayed in dire colors the tribulations of working-class women, appealing for initiatives to protect mothers and advance women's rights in general. Understandably, veterans' organizations looked to government help in order to have their suffering compensated, especially if their injuries required medical help. Finally yet importantly, the increasing number of elderly asked for an increase in pensions to help them lead a more respectable life.[51] All of these petitioners requested government support as a way out of a crisis, suggesting that they would be doomed otherwise. As these crises fulfilled very concrete political functions, they cannot be easily transferred to historiography as descriptions of past realities but, rather, should be analyzed as rhetorical devices escalating a past conflict.

The same is true for crises in particular areas diagnosed by social critics who demanded remediation in order to strengthen society. Social reformers, for instance, called for replacing dingy tenements with airy apartment buildings surrounded by green space. The "housing crisis" became a high priority, especially after the devastation caused by World War II. A growing number of doctors not only ministered to individuals but called for public health to improve sanitation and hygiene in order to combat infectious diseases. Moreover, life reformers demanded parks and recreation areas to counteract the effects of urban neurasthenia.[52] More radically, pro-natalist advocates discovered a demographic crisis of failing reproduction in general and among academics in particular, calling for measures to increase fertility.[53] Finally, eugenicists nuanced the demographic crisis differently, suggesting that those groups of society they deemed inferior had too many children. They therefore advocated anti-natalist measures.

Cultural Crises

Diagnoses of a "cultural crisis" are even more elusive than social crises, despite their being frequently declared since the beginning of the twentieth century.[54] Often, cultural critics do not use the term in its original sense but employ it metaphorically, simply signaling their rejection or advocacy of certain trends. For instance, many defenders of the faith deplored the dwindling number of

worshipers and the general loss of religious observance caused by the process of secularization. Similarly, historians regard the 1960s and 1970s in particular as a period of "religious crisis."[55]

Pedagogues and experts on the educational system have always seen education and especially German *Bildung* in decline or, rather, in a state of crisis. For example, advocates of the humanistic gymnasium once complained about the replacement of classical heritage with modern languages. Arbiters of taste rejected the alleged crudeness of emerging popular culture while at the same time resisting artistic experimentation, seeing national music and art as undergoing a crisis. Champions of patriarchy worried about the dissolution of male authority due to the pressure of feminism – a crisis of the family, which gender historians have also transformed into a crisis of masculinity.[56] In general, traditionalists employed the trope of crisis to signal their defense of an inherited order or stability as such, which they saw as being increasingly imperiled throughout the twentieth century.[57]

Avant-garde artists, by contrast, bemoaned what they saw as crises of tradition in order to obtain greater freedom of expression and engage in experimentation. Fascinated with new discoveries and machines, technical enthusiasts looked to science to develop a more rational world-view. Progressive pedagogues sought to throw off the ballast of "dead languages," such as Greek and Latin, arguing that schools were in crisis because they did not prepare students for the modern world. After the shattering experience of the Great War, many artists considered traditional forms of artistic expression to be in crisis. They endeavored to break out of the stale conceptions of beauty represented by official academies and experimented with abstract or atonal styles. Finally, the new media of film and radio pushed the boundaries of accepted form and content.[58] These advocates of progress wanted to overcome crises by unleashing the creative potential of change.

References to a crisis of culture generally signaled a conservative backlash that sought to affirm or reestablish an order that seemed to be in a process of erosion. Many representatives of religion retreated into a polemical anti-modernism that insisted on a literal interpretation of Christianity. Defenders of high culture tended to denounce modern art as decadent and deplore its violation of the received artistic canon. Adherents of traditional gender roles tried to push women back into their accustomed roles revolving around children, the kitchen and church.

In general, the force behind these – to their minds – dangerous tendencies of decline and decay, two words which became almost synonymous with crisis, was an abstract understanding of modernity, of a set of rational principles that had changed the world since the French and the Industrial Revolutions. Especially in the first half of the twentieth century, they saw these modern tendencies embodied in emancipated Jews and developed a racialized and ultimately murderous form of anti-Semitism. At the same time, cultural elitists feared the rise of the masses as a threat to their cultural dominance, and therefore embraced the promise of strong leadership in authoritarian movements.[59]

A common feature of these different uses of the term "crisis," ranging from the

specific to the general, is that they dramatize "a perceived threat to an institutionalized pattern of action."[60] Framing a problem as a crisis regardless of its contents and origins, politicians and intellectuals try to conjure up an imminent threat, one that demands an immediate and drastic response.[61] The designation of any given situation as a crisis creates an exceptional state of emergency that requires unusual measures. It separates certain areas from the usual business of recursive politics in which actions may be overturned and remedied in the next election cycle. Due to the existential threat a crisis supposedly contains, the stakes in the political arena go up and the temperature of political conflict rises because decisions will supposedly affect future generations.[62] If the right remedies are employed, the concept suggests the possibility of de-escalation, reaching a new level of stability. The wrong choices, however, may lead to disastrous consequences. To echo these implications of a rhetoric of crisis in historiography would mean taking sides in past conflicts rather than analyzing them.

Crisis as a Modern Concept and the Crisis of Modernity

As shown by our typology, the concept of crisis is closely related to the travails of modernity. In their book on "Empire," leftist critics Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri even suggest that, from the Renaissance on, "modernity itself is defined by crisis, a crisis that is born of the uninterrupted conflict between the immanent, constructive, creative forces and the transcendent power aimed at restoring order."[63] If that's the case, modernity is always Janus-faced, as Detlev Peukert concluded for Weimar Germany, which he described as the "crisis years of classical modernity."[64] According to Peukert, the modern order had now, for the first time, been fully realized in social policy, technology, in the natural and social sciences, in the arts and architecture, while simultaneously entering a fundamental crisis because of its intellectual critique. Whatever the case, the conceptual history of crisis and our typology of crises in the twentieth century as well as the term's pervasiveness in intellectual discourses ever since the Enlightenment should allow us a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between the concepts of crisis and modernity.[65]

Since the *Sattelzeit* identified by Reinhart Koselleck, advocates of modernity have constantly constructed crises in order to justify their visions and programs for social, economic and political renewal. In their view, the traditional order was not able to deal with the requirements of a modern era. Once the process of modernization was set in motion, crises appeared as either necessary phases or temporary setbacks within an overall progressive development of history, sometimes even as substantial threats to the progressive temporalization of history itself. Seeing them as temporary setbacks or grave challenges depended not so much on the gravity of the problem but rather on the mood of the intellectual observer and the radicalism of the modernization scheme he or she proposed. The transnational ascent of the planning paradigm from the 1920s to the 1960s, however, changed the relation between crises and modernization yet again.[66] Technocrats now aimed for a continuous, crisis-free progressive development brought about by rational planning to which every sensible human

being would agree. Keynesianism, in particular, was an attempt to overcome the seemingly natural cycle of economic booms and busts by means of fiscal policies and deficit-spending. While the idea of rational planning was transferred to other policy fields after World War II, the modern dream to end all crises came to an abrupt end itself in the 1970s when, after the oil crisis, the simultaneity of economic stagnation and high inflation rates presented an insurmountable problem for Keynesian economists and policy-makers.[67]

Long before the so-called crisis of the 1970s,[68] cultural critics and pessimists had questioned and attacked the progressive spirit of modernization. Far from acknowledging the modernizers' claims to solve crises, they argued that these schemes and plans actually caused crises, destabilizing an economic, social or political order that had to be preserved. As cultural historian Thomas Nipperdey argued, these worries – shared by many intellectuals during the first third of the twentieth century – even amounted to the sense of a "crisis of modernity" as such.[69] Educated observers expressed their unease with the novelty and speed of industrialization, urbanization, increasing trade, and social transformations that upset the established hierarchical order and held rural society in high esteem. While the majority of middle class commentators seem to have been fascinated with progress and its products, including the benefits they enjoyed from it, there was a vocal and increasingly influential minority of cultural critics who saw the accustomed order dissolving, considered their status to be under threat and therefore denounced the entire process of modernization as deleterious.[70] In their eyes, the rapid advancements in science and technology – the telephone, radio, motorcar and airplane, or even improvements in medicine such as the efforts to overcome infectious diseases by Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch – were questionable at best, as they seemed to create a crisis of faith, clashing with religious precepts.[71]

Moreover, modernity also seemed to produce a structural crisis of the community and interpersonal relations. Many commentators complained about an increasing atomization of society in which traditional notions of solidarity seemed to have disappeared. Their frame of reference was often nostalgia for the paternalistic order of the countryside, which could no longer be found in the modern cities. Around 1900, emerging sociologists tried to grasp the societal changes occurring in the process of modernization, and has, accordingly, been described as a "science of crisis" (*Krisenwissenschaft*).[72] Ferdinand Tönnies distinguished between the natural "community" in the countryside where the individual is a holistic entity in a stable net of social relations and the artificial society of cities where human beings interact in restricted ways according to their set roles.[73] He thereby coined the vocabulary which many subsequent cultural critics used to express their discontent with the modern world throughout the course of the twentieth century.[74]
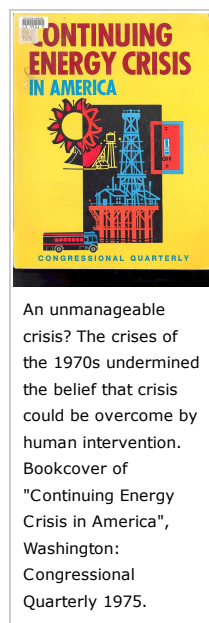
Finally, the rise of mass consumption and mass politics contributed to a feeling of uneasiness, since bourgeois liberals now had to fight a two-front battle against repressive autocracy and rising pressures from below. With the spread of literacy, factory and farm workers increasingly wanted to participate in political affairs. They organized in labor unions for economic gains and in political parties to push for an extension of suffrage in order carry out a variety of social

reforms. This growing pressure directly challenged received authorities, because the local notables could no longer command automatic respect, forcing liberals and conservatives to organize their own popular base to win elections. When the masses began to contest the power of the monarchs and demand constitutions, traditional elites turned more and more to populist politics.[75] Antonio Gramsci called this incomplete transition from liberalism to socialism in Italy an "organic crisis" in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born."[76]

The forces of modernization, however, presented conservatives in the twentieth century with a basic paradox by destroying the traditional order they by definition wanted to preserve. Whereas a simple return to the "good old times" may have been suitable as an object of longing, it was not a politically viable solution. Thus, many conservatives became "reactionary modernists" or even revolutionaries from the right, developing schemes to reconcile the necessity of progress with the need for community.[77] In this, their style of thought was not so different from the vilified modernists. They constructed crises that should and could be mastered by their plans and programs. At least for a while, they shared a progressive temporalization of history in which a present existential threat was capable of being overcome in order to attain a better future. Moreover, they shared a belief in the general malleability of social, economic and political institutions, as well as in the human capacity to implement change for the better.

Contrary to a commonly held view, this progressive or – if you will – modern temporalization of history did not end in the 1970s, giving way to a condition of postmodernity.[78] Affirmations of progress, together with the crises that have to be overcome in order to achieve a better future, are still frequent symptoms of the present.[79] Nonetheless, the transformations of the 1970s affected the notions of both progress and crisis.[80] While Reinhart Koselleck was developing his conception of the temporal structure of modernity, other sociologists and philosophers were busy diagnosing its dissolution. The belief in a coherent historical development with a sequence of crises determining change for better or for worse effectively lost its intellectual hegemony, being supplemented by other ways to generate the future, diagnose the present and order the past.[81] Especially since the 1970s, the rapidly growing popularity of the concept of risk opened the future as a spectrum of possible states with varying degrees of probability, thereby undermining the simple dichotomous logic of crises.[82] Moreover, a new emphasis on conservation in the environmentalist movement, but also in the widespread memory boom, tried to step out of progressive logic, in which crises fulfilled an essential function, and simply preserve what was there instead.

Moreover, the crises of the 1970s shattered the belief that crisis could be overcome by human intervention. With respect to the energy crises, for example, the European commissioner Guido Brunner asked in 1977 whether this was just a normal crisis or the "end of the malleability of things."[83] Faced with the second energy crisis in 1979, U.S. President Carter even told the public that there was very little the government could do about it, its root cause being a "crisis of confidence."[84] In addition, many observers argued that, sooner rather than later, natural resource limits would end the progressive development that humankind had experienced since industrialization, creating an unmanageable crisis. Similarly, the ecological consequences of progress and industrialization as well as population growth seemed to create a crisis that exceeded the problem-solving capacities of national governments, while international organizations were equally ill-equipped to deal with them. The most successful answer to the failure of macro-economic planning was to restrict state intervention to the regulation of money supply, extending market mechanisms to all other areas. In other words, anonymous market forces were supposed to solve the crisis, which economists and politicians were not able to adequately address.

An unmanageable crisis? The crises of the 1970s undermined the belief that crisis could be overcome by human intervention. Bookcover of "Continuing Energy Crisis in America", Washington: Congressional Quarterly 1975.

Analyzing Crises and Historicizing "Crisis"

Given its linguistic imprecision due to the ubiquitous use of the concept in various contexts in both history and historiography, it may seem advisable to refrain from using the term crisis at all. Its vagueness and political instrumentalization have already led most economists to abandon the term, speaking of more easily definable recessions and depressions instead.[85] Whereas this is a viable strategy for theoretically minded economists intent on acquiring general knowledge about economic processes that may be of use for governmental and entrepreneurial decision-making, the situation is different for historians. Crisis was simply too important a concept in the twentieth century, one that allowed people to make sense of their world, for historians to refrain from using it. Yet how can we employ it in way that illuminates rather than blurring our understanding of the past? As in any case of conceptual confusion, there are two possible strategies. On the one hand, we can scrutinize the ways in which historical actors themselves employed the concept of crisis and the effect that the rhetoric of crisis had under varying historical circumstances. On the other hand, we can turn crisis into an analytic concept, developing a precise definition that offers criteria to determine whether an economy, political or social system, or any other historical phenomenon was in crisis. Most likely, however, the latter cannot be done without the former. Due the concept's close relation to human perception, crises do not exist in the world until they have been conceptualized as such by contemporaries or historical observers.[86]

Trying to attain more precision and going back to the original meaning of crisis seem to be a helpful way to distinguish it from other concepts such as "problem," "impasse," "decline" or "deterioration." Helga Scholten, for example, defines crisis as "an exceptional state, which demands decisions to provide an opportunity to make something better or worse, or at the very least different."[87] This understanding presupposes the always dubious definition of a "normal state" endangered by an unusual problem, the solution to which returns us to a modified version of the original condition. The approach also implies a sequence of developments: origin, escalation, point of decision and resulting outcome. This may be a way to capture the much-discussed *Vereinigungskrise*, but it is questionable whether it can serve as a general model of crises. Any viable definition would have to involve assumptions of some kind or another about the normal course of events, an exceptional period of tension in which at least two different outcomes are possible, and a solution in the form of a new state of affairs.

In general, such a definition of crisis is attractive to historians because it offers a dramatic plot to structure the historiographical narrative. Yet clear definitions of crises that offer the means to analyze their origins, course and effects will most likely be attainable only for economic and political crises. Only for these systems is there is body of theoretical work from which parameters and factors of crises can be deduced. Yet even in these contexts, the applicability of the concept is disputable, depending on the normative assumptions about normal and exceptional states. Thus, describing something as a crisis should never be the end of historical explanation but has to be its starting point. Crises need explanation, because there is a fundamental difference between referring to an economic crisis of the kind we saw in the 1970s as a crisis caused by exceedingly high wages and low investment, as a fundamental shift from industrial to postindustrial society, as a crisis of Keynesianism, as a crisis of late capitalism, or even as the epochal break in the history of fossil-fuel exploitation. Since contemporaries and historians have conceptualized it in all of these ways, "the" economic crisis of the 1970s cannot easily function as an explanation for other phenomena.

As the concept of crisis is so closely intertwined with human perception, it would seem most fruitful for historians to examine the ways in which historical actors have employed the notion. No matter the economic indicators, the challenges a government faces, the social turmoil that occurs, and the cultural practices that get lost, a situation only becomes an economic, political, social or cultural crisis when it is defined as such. For much of the twentieth century, defining a given situation as a crisis meant, in most cases, diagnosing an exceptional situation in the present that calls for immediate action to avoid a bad outcome and realize a good one. Thus, the historiographical task is not to turn contemporary diagnoses into narratives but to analyze which historical actors defined crises in which ways with the aim of achieving which goals. Koselleck's assertion that critique generally predates the crisis already suggests that the discourse of crisis deserves our attention. Yet considering the transformation of the progressive temporalization of history since the 1970s, there is also a more subtle question. If invoking a crisis to legitimize political measures was a historical device that

emerged in the *Sattelzeit* and became universal in the twentieth century, is it not losing ground in a present in which policies are increasingly justified by the invocation of necessities and the assertion that there is no alternative?

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