

## **Crisis as Art of Government**

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### **1. The Apparatus of the Crisis**

The concepts of crisis and conflict are inextricably linked to notions of modernity and draw on such heterogeneous disciplines as political sciences, philosophy, economics and psychoanalysis. Since this contribution is not the appropriate place to analytically unfold the history of the concept of crisis, I will not consider its applications in all the various contexts and semantic fields, but I intend rather to focus on the 'philosophical apparatus' that has allowed us to use the notion of crisis in an overarching, pervasive way.<sup>1</sup>

In the conclusion of his text on the concept of crisis, Reinhart Koselleck (1982) wraps up the etymological analysis of the term "crisis" and the twists that its meaning has undergone through the different eras and domains it has permeated. Compared to its Greek origins, it seems that the depth of its original meaning has been gradually fading, becoming somewhat vague in the modern era. Indeed, it would seem that the success and such wide diffusion of the term are due precisely to this indeterminacy. Koselleck's analysis of the concept of crisis reaches the following conclusion:

Not only can crisis be conjoined with other terms, it is easy to do so. While it can be used to clarify, all such coinages then require clarification. 'Crisis' is often used interchangeably with 'unrest', 'conflict', 'revolution', and to describe vaguely disturbing moods or situations. Every one of such uses is ambivalent (Koselleck 1982: 399).

The idea of crisis we have handed down from modernity is, therefore, mouldable according to its applications and to other concepts which in turn may be linked with it. The association conflict-crisis is a case in point: the concept of crisis would acquire the meaning of conflict and would be shaped and permeated by it. However, my intention here is to reverse this thesis. Not only that: I also argue that the diffusion and the pervasiveness of the term 'crisis' –a legacy of its passage through modernity– are not at all signs of semantic 'vagueness'<sup>2</sup>, but rather denote 'the highest effectiveness of its apparatus' –the highest effectiveness that is apparent nowadays, when the crisis has become the 'art of government' par excellence. It is

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<sup>1</sup> To outline the conceptual history of the term "crisis", it is necessary to refer to Reinhart Koselleck and to the various texts he devoted to the subject, on which I draw for this contribution. See at least Koselleck 1982; 1988 2002.

<sup>2</sup> "Thus the term [crisis] never crystallized into a concept sufficiently clear to be used as a basic concept in social, economic, or political language, despite – or perhaps because of– its manifold meanings" (Koselleck:367).

therefore from the analysis of the apparatus of the crisis currently at work that the dominant form of power can be defined. While the subject-people arose from 'a crisis of citizenship', and the working class established itself from 'a crisis of the Fordist economy', the current crisis does not resemble any of the historical forms taken on by the apparatus of the crisis in the past. Therefore, it is important to identify the nature of this crisis, in order to indicate what kind of political subjectification it makes possible and what kind of conflict it brings with it. If power in contemporary society and in the capitalist modes of production determines a biopolitical order, then 'the current crisis configures itself according to a biopolitical paradigm, and precariat is the form of life that has emerged from it'.

## **2. Krisis**

As a matter of fact, the current configuration of the crisis has very ancient roots. It seems appropriate then, in order to fully understand the semantic range of the word 'crisis' and its complexity, to begin with its Greek etymology. Koselleck also proceeds in this way. In Greek, *krisis* means 'distinctive force, separation, division', but also 'decision, resolution, judgment, election, choice'. Precisely from this semantic complex I draw the 'purest' configuration of the crisis: the 'choice' of one aspect rather than the other, between which the 'separation' of the *krisis* 'distinguishes' –in the attempt to 'solve' the crisis, to 'decide' about the crisis– is by no means a way out of the crisis, but it remains inside it as its constitutive element. This 'arrangement' of the semantic spectrum of the crisis comes to the surface in the different environments and contexts where its apparatus is applied and at work. Certainly, as Koselleck points out, we must carefully consider the 'historicity' of the concept, the changes and transformations it has undergone through the ages and the specific lexicons in which it was introduced. My suggestion is that it is precisely the introduction of the concept of crisis in these lexicons that has shaped certain areas and fields of knowledge in the modern sense, not vice versa. However, this is only a hypothesis. Yet, as I have said, it is on this assumption that I want to insist.

It is worth noting that one of the areas in which the concept of crisis appears most frequently today, economics, only began to absorb it in its lexicon as early as the nineteenth century. It is no coincidence that this happened at a time when economic knowledge was laying the foundations of its future hegemony. Nor can it be only a suggestion that –as proof of a 'matrix' that persists over time–the use in economics of the word 'crisis' recalls the medical meaning the term had when it first appeared in the Greek world: 'disease',

'imbalance', 'diagnosis', and at the same time 'prognosis'.<sup>3</sup> Still in 1754, under the entry *Crise* by Théophile De Bordeu in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, 'crisis' appears only as a 'medical' word, which draws on the juridical meaning of 'judgment'<sup>4</sup>—according to the definition proposed by Galen on the basis of the teaching of Hippocrates' school. In medicine, the 'judgment' concerns the course of an illness, which becomes 'critical' when it reaches the stage of the struggle, of the conflict between life and death:

Hippocrates calls *crisis* every change that leads to a disease. He also states that there is a *crisis* in a disease when it gets serious or decreases considerably, when it degenerates into another disease or ceases altogether. Galen claims, almost in the same sense, that the *crisis* is a sudden change of the disease for better or for worse; this has meant that several authors have considered the crisis as a sort of struggle between nature and disease; struggle in which nature can win or perish: they have also argued that death can sometimes be considered as the crisis of a disease (De Bordeu 1966: 471 [translation by D.G.]). And yet, in Greece the term "crisis" also appeared in the political lexicon, for example in some significant passages of Aristotle's *Politics*, such as the following one: "The virtue of justice is a characteristic of a state; for justice is the arrangement of the association that takes the form of a state, and the virtue of justice is a judgment [*krisis*] about what is just" (Aristotle 1995: 4). In the Aristotelian context, *krisis* is the "judgment about what is just" (and what is not) that involves the 'decision' aimed at establishing or maintaining the political order understood as balance, harmony, measure—in sum,— 'justice'. In analogy with his medical meaning, once an imbalance occurs in the body (organic and political), the crisis 'decides' the path to be followed in order to stabilize vital functions and restore order: diagnosis and prognosis, 'discernment and judgment'. The crisis thus involves the identification of a criterion that will save the individual and political body from death, restoring their 'health'. In the critical situation, 'distinction and division' determine the two possible courses of the disease: to death or to health. The decision is therefore mandatory: in favour of healing and recovery of health.

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<sup>3</sup> "From the 1840s on, the economically-based concept of crisis permeates the growing literature of social criticisms [...]"Crisis" was well suited to conceptualize both the emergencies resulting from contemporary constitutional or class specific upheavals, as well as the distress caused by industry, technology, and the capitalist market economy. These could be treated as symptoms of a serious disease or as a disturbance of the economy's equilibrium" (Koselleck 1988: 81).

<sup>4</sup> See Bordeu 1966: 471.

### **3. Marx' and Engels' Theory of Capitalist Crises**

Within the apparatus of the crisis, 'conflict' is a symptom of the 'disease' that has infected the order; yet it also represents at the same time the first stage of a possible recovery, since it entails discernment and distinction, in the critical condition, between a healing and a deadly path. Hence, conflict is the condition of the possible 'decision', which –this is the key point– cannot be but directed towards health, towards the preservation of life. The exit from the crisis –i.e. its solution– can only be a restoration of the order prior to the disease: health and life. It is through such semantic spectrum that the concept of crisis enters modernity, –i.e. already implying a certain idea of conflict–. In the etymological and genealogical reconstruction outlined in *Crisis*, Reinhart Koselleck writes that the "use of the concept of crisis is meant to reduce the room for maneuver, forcing the actors to choose between diametrically opposed alternatives" (Koselleck 1982: 370). The concept of crisis may offer no clearer alternative: life or death. Indeed, there is no alternative. If the 'normal' condition is health which crisis and disease jeopardize, to decide for life is to decide for the pre-existing order. It is this apparatus of the crisis –and the idea of conflict it implies– that is activated in the economic discourse: generally speaking, economic crises reveal in the highest degree the imbalance and the difference between a healthy and a sick condition of the market within the capitalist system, and therefore indicate very clearly their solution. The assumption is of course that safeguarding and strengthening the condition of health means allowing the survival and existence of the system and order.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels unmasked the apparatus of the crisis applied by the bourgeois-capitalist system:

The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented (Marx / Engels 1967: 226).

Without going into too much detail now, I will mention that Marx and Engels theorized the cyclical nature of capitalist crises and the vital role they play in the system's restructuring. However, Marx' and Engels' theory of the crisis also includes another aspect, which adopts the same apparatus of the crisis already at work in capitalism, yet overthrows its terms: the health of the capitalist system is already compromised, and disease has become its 'rule'. Capitalism is sick and its course leads inexorably to extinction; recovery from illness, on the contrary, does not follow the course of the recovery and return to balance, but leads to a new

order, to a new and different health condition. This passage from the *Grundrisse* almost sounds like a medical prognosis:

The growing incompatibility between the productive development of society and its hitherto existing relations of production expresses itself in bitter contradictions, crises, and spasms. The violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation, is the most striking form in which advice is given it to be gone and to give room to a higher state of social production (Marx 1973: 749 s.).

In short, the Marxian concept of crisis and the concept used by capitalism share the same 'lack of an alternative': its application is different, but the apparatus is the same.

#### **4. The Neoliberal Crisis**

Going back to the issue of the relationship between crisis and conflict, it is the concept of conflict that is shaped by its use within the apparatus of the crisis, not vice versa. Conflict is indeed 'governed' by crisis, since it aims at a 'decision' which is always already preordained. The decision is always in 'response' to the crisis, that is to say it cannot be separated from the functioning of the apparatus in which it is inscribed: the alternative posed by the crisis is fictitious –the choice is expressed when it is clear that there is no choice. Yet, since the concept of crisis has become part of the economic discourse and its apparatus has been absorbed within the capitalist system, a fundamental historical-conceptual shift has occurred: crises as a cyclical opportunity to restructure the system have cancelled even the fictitious alternative calling for the decision's answer. Every decision, as a matter of fact, leads to a new distinction and alternative, hence to a new crisis – and so on *ad infinitum*. The solution to the crisis is therefore indistinguishable from the very production of crisis. In this way, the conflict has no function within the apparatus of the crisis. This is the same conclusion that Koselleck comes to, although he attributes such evanescence to the concept of crisis rather than to the concept of conflict: "The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment" (Koselleck 1982: 399). Thus, the concept of conflict is fully neutralized. There is no need to propose an alternative to justify the fact that there is no alternative. The neoliberal revolution announced by Margaret Thatcher in the Eighties with the slogan "there is no alternative"<sup>5</sup> is now complete. And yet, before Thatcher's slogan—could characterize an apparatus of the crisis as a direct, immediate and affirmative art

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<sup>5</sup> Such was the success of this slogan that it became known by the acronym TINA.

of government,<sup>6</sup> we must record a further fundamental step, which was taken by neoliberal thought.

After the bourgeois Third Estate and the class party –outcomes of the most significant forms of previous crisis– the political party became defined in the name of life itself, as the "party of life". The expression comes from Friedrich A. von Hayek, one of the leading theorists of liberalism and Thatcher's reference thinker;<sup>7</sup> thinking about a name for his conception of liberalism that distinguishes it from previous ones, Hayek writes: "What I should want is a word which describes the party of life, the party that favors free growth and spontaneous evolution"(von Hayek 2011: 530).<sup>8</sup> Here for the first time life –its preservation and promotion– became the prerogative of a 'part', which by establishing a party turns life into a polemological criterion. The "party of life" considers life as a prerogative of its own part, offering itself –in the name of life– as an alternative and in conflict with other parts of society. However, it is at the same time 'impartial': there can be no alternatives to the party of life. The moment in which a politics of life takes on the form of a 'party', it produces and implies its opposite: the part or parts, the party or parties that threaten the survival of the political and social body. Once again, the part to be taken does not appear as a choice between alternatives which are really feasible. In the form of the "party of life", therefore, biopolitics acquires its most authentically neoliberal trait.

Michel Foucault clearly understood the diversity and comprehensiveness of the neoliberal project, and that it represents no political or governmental alternative, but a real apparatus of "biopolitical governmentality", whose peculiarity is the lack of alternatives:

I think this is why American liberalism currently appears not just, or not so much as a political alternative, but let's say as a sort of many-sided, ambiguous, global claim with a foothold in both the right and the left. It is also a sort of utopian focus which is always being revived. [...] Some years ago Hayek said: 'We need a liberalism that is a living thought. Liberalism has always left it to the socialists to produce utopias, and socialism owes much of its vigor and historical dynamism to this utopian or utopia-creating activity'. Well, liberalism also needs utopia. It is up to us to create liberal utopias, to think in a liberal mode, rather than presenting liberalism as a technical alternative for government. Liberalism must be a general style of thought, analysis, and imagination (Foucault 2008: 218 s.).

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<sup>6</sup> To give a recent example, in Italy, after the last elections, which did not secure a government majority, in order to justify the formation of a government called of 'broad agreements', i.e. including the main center-right and center-left parties –PDL and PD–, both the President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano and the new Premier Enrico Letta said that, in the light of such a political crisis and in the context of the economic one, "there is no alternative" to a government of this kind, called to suspend –if not to neutralize, we do not know yet– a political and cultural conflict that has lasted for twenty years.

<sup>7</sup> See Wapshott 2012.

<sup>8</sup> The term "party of life" employed by Hayek –it is worth emphasizing– has an important precursor in Nietzsche; Ernst Nolte gives special prominence to such Nietzschean notion, also contrasting the "party of life" with the Marxist "class party" (see Nolte 1990).

The recurring apparatus that revives the neoliberal utopia is the crisis,<sup>9</sup> a crisis that acquires its highest effectiveness when the point of convergence of the governors' action and the governed's consent is the absence of choice between life and death. For Foucault, indeed, the peculiarity of liberal governmentality is the "live dangerously" imperative – that is, to live exposed to the constant threat of death:

First, we can say that the motto of liberalism is: "Live dangerously." "Live dangerously," that is to say, individuals are constantly exposed to danger, or rather, they are conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, and their future as containing danger. I think this kind of stimulus of danger will be one of the major implications of liberalism (Foucault 2008: 66).

### **5. The Form of Life of Precariat**

If the current crisis is configured at a biopolitical level, then it is at this level that the processes of subjectification and the conflict that they activate in society should be thought: the precariat is the child of 'this' crisis, which, in exchange for survival, seems to condemn it to this condition with no alternative. Indeed, it is the 'life' of precarious workers that 'holds together' the broken fragments of their working lives, which often oppose each other and blackmail them into forced decisions, as if they were between life and death. Yet every decision produces new contrapositions without solutions –this is the life of the precariat– caught within the biopolitical apparatus of the crisis.

Is it, instead, possible to envisage a conflict immanent in life, which cannot be activated exclusively by this apparatus of the crisis? This would be a conflict which, although not reducible to the neutralization of the modern political or to the overcoming of dialectical synthesis, could not on the other hand be assimilated to the binary formulas that characterized much of the twentieth-century philosophy and politics (for example Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy criterion or the power/counterpower and subjection/subjectification relationships by Michel Foucault). These binary and dualistic formulas, indeed, make the life of a part dependent on the death or subjugation of the other –and not only– among the precarious workers or between them and other forms of wage labour, but also within the same precarious existence of the individuals, who must sacrifice parts of their lives to preserve others –work, leisure, affections. As a result, since it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the enemy to oppose as a class, as Paolo Virno *mutatis mutandis* argued with regard to the multitude, the conflictuality of precarious work is eventually turned against themselves –as a sense of guilt

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<sup>9</sup> For a re-reading of Foucault's interpretation of liberal governmentality, and its revision in the light of the current crisis, see. Lazzarato (2013).

and indebtedness<sup>10</sup>— and—in the form of competition— against those who share the same condition.<sup>11</sup>

The precariat cannot be exhaustively defined as a socio-economic class; precariousness is rather a "form of life"<sup>12</sup>. The art of the government of the biopolitical crisis does not offer those alternatives that in the past used to fuel class conflict. Today, however, the biopolitical crisis does not pose alternatives and, therefore, it forces such a conception of conflict into a function of government. Conflict should not therefore be conceived as an apparatus of 'division' and 'selective discrimination', which must let die in order to let live. How should we then think of a conflict that shapes life without subjecting it, and that, on the contrary, instead of juxtaposing one side to the other, reveals and enhances 'their being in common'?<sup>13</sup> How could we, in short, outline a conception of the conflict in keeping up with an affirmative biopolitics<sup>14</sup>?

One could conceive the 'con-flict' on the basis of the meaning of the term *fligo*. The Latin verb *fligere* derives from the Greek and means 'compress, squeeze, crush, press'. Can such 'being squeezed, pressed, crushed, compressed' indicate not only the pressure exerted by the economic system on the life of precarious workers, but rather the immanence immanent plane of life itself? Can it be that on this very plane of conflictual immanence precarious work enters politics without being subjected to the power or through the identitary logics of belonging? Can a constituent conflict be possible on this plane of immanence, a conflict not 'between' the parts any more, but 'of' the parts, a conflict not 'between' life forms, but 'of' the forms of life? Can the conflict therefore hold together, rather than separate, and keep tight life and its forms—*zoé* and *bios*— in the same plane? Can a politics of life—unlike a "party of life"— consist of this, a politics of precariousness? At this point, perhaps, it would no longer be precariousness that defines the form of life.

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<sup>10</sup> See Stimilli 2011 and Lazzarato 2012.

<sup>11</sup> This oscillation and ambiguity of precariat between conservation and innovation and between cooperation and competition is to be found in the analysis of the multitude that Paolo Virno (2005) carries out in 'Il cosiddetto «male» e la critica dello Stato'.

<sup>12</sup> It is on the definition of precariat in terms of class that I disagree with the analysis, though important in Standing (2011). For an analysis of precariat in the biopolitic context, see the essays collected in Chicchi / Leonardi 2011.

<sup>13</sup> I refer especially to Esposito 2004; 2011. Yet, the commons, although differently declined, are a fundamental paradigm in Giorgio Agamben and Toni Negri as well.

<sup>14</sup> See the perspective delineated by Esposito 2008.

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