CRISIS: DIALOGUES ON RUPTURE

SYNOPSIS

Anchored in the historical sciences of IAKH and with collaboration across the humanities, CRISIS aims to unpack the phenomenon of crisis through a multi-temporal and transdisciplinary approach. With a common understanding that "crisis" as concept comes with a dense genealogy follows a notion that labeling events, change or ruptures as "crises" inevitably involves certain a priori judgements that in turn affect interpretations as well as responses. By analyzing different ruptures - past and present - and bringing these into dialogue with each other, this project will conduct an excavation of the concept of crisis, metaphorically and literally, to ask: what do we do when we term something as crisis, and how does this frame our understanding of past and present phenomena – and in turn, our abilities to respond?

INTRODUCTION

"Crisis" is a term that is ever-present in contemporary society, not only in popular discourse, but also in academic debates. As stated by historian Randolph Starn in the aftermath of World War II, "notions of crisis have cropped up everywhere" as signs of dramatic ruptures and shifts in ideological paradigms.[1] However, while the phenomenon of crisis has become ubiquitous to analyzes and vocabularies of historical change, the concept's genealogy and political implications have remained curiously under-theorized. Referring to this sociologist Andrew Simon Gilbert even speaks to a conceptual blindness in that "framing events as crises allows one to read judgements into reality as if they are independently objective."[2] Denoting something as crisis, however, is not a neutral way of describing past or present events, but is already a way of framing and interpreting the world. In the words of anthropologist Janet Roitman, the term crisis brings situations "under conceptual control," but always at the cost of making "certain things visible and others invisible."[3] Crisis, thus, is a concept that *produces* rather than *represents* meaning.

The weight of the term "crisis" is rooted in its etymology from the Greek *κρίση*, signifying "rupture" or "turning point". After the concept transferred from medicine to politics, it retained both descriptive and diagnostic qualities.[4] Hence, labeling something as a crisis not only defined a problem, but also carried suggestions of how to solve it. This conflation of the "naturalness" and the diagnostic aspect of crisis persists in current ruptures, such as the omnipresent crises of democracy, masculinity, energy, capitalism or climate. As a result, "using a concept like 'crisis' is always in part a political act"[5] which suggests a certain urgency. As argued by historian Reinhardt Koselleck, this often implies a denunciation of processes of negotiation and compromise.[6] In other words, identifying a condition as a crisis often involves framing it as *unprecedented*, as detached from possible historical roots or parallels, and furthermore, as a condition that needs instant *solving* rather than *scrutinizing* and negotiation.

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[1] Starn, "Historians and 'Crisis'," 14-19. Citation at 14.

[2] Gilbert, *The Crisis Paradigm*, 11.

[3] Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 39.

[4] Koselleck, "Crisis," 369.

[5] Gilbert, *The Crisis Paradigm*, 218.

[6] Koselleck, "Crisis,"

Departing from this tradition this project proposes to "slow down" and to uncover the phenomenon of crisis from a multi-temporal, global (comparative) perspective and through a transdisciplinary approach that connects all of HF's institutes. To be clear, we do not question the reality of current crises and it is equally not our aim to undermine the urgency they propose upon human societies globally (and Western societies and the global North specifically). What we do propose, however, is *an archaeology of crisis*, so to speak, in literal and metaphoric terms. The aim of this project is to analyze what we do when we term an event, a development or a recurring pattern as crisis. What aspects are highlighted and what features are rendered invisible in this process? And how does the notion of crisis frame our understanding of past and present phenomena – and in turn, our abilities to respond? Our approach responds to current calls in academia for "slow science" suggested for example by Isabelle Stengers[7], not in the literal sense of the term, but as an opposition to positivistic quick-fixing and technophilia. The methodologies of the humanities and the deep time perspectives of the historical sciences are essential, we argue, to understand the stratigraphies of current crises and for envisioning viable responses and alternative futures.

CASES, OBJECTIVES AND PATHWAYS

In order to undertake this project, and to actually uncover the complex stratigraphies of crises, it is crucial to approach the topic through a wide variety of case studies. First, these should encompass different fields, ranging from acute *political* and *economic* upheavals to challenges relating to *environment*, *sustainability*, *migration, identity politics* and more. Second, the cases chosen should represent variations along a temporal continuum where both *abrupt* events and *long-term* processes are addressed and juxtaposed. Hence, rather than pre-selecting the case studies in minute detail, CRISIS wishes to leave this as an open invitation, directed to researchers and research groups at IAKH and at HF more generally. Many of the research groups at IAKH and several milieus at HF are already working on crisis-related topics, directly or indirectly. Uniting these efforts through a common strategic vision is both viable and potentially invaluable in terms of research outreach and results as well as visibility to the broad range of societal, non-academic stakeholders. What will be of significance, however, in order to synergize the different cases, milieus and projects is to offer *common pathways* for research/project development and *unifying platforms* for dialogue and exchange. This, CRISIS will offer through three components: **a)** a common twofold objective; **b)** four different pathways of exploration, and; **c)** a strong project organization with focus on creating and upholding a network between projects and milieus through regular platforms for dialogue, feedback and exchange.

Objectives

CRISIS offers an overarching twofold objective, which unifies the different case studies and project components. These are:

1) **Conceptual excavation:** Through a transdisciplinary and multi-temporal approach a central objective of CRISIS is to unfold the complex infrastructures of the concept of "crisis" in past and present, and the ways in which this concept molds our judgements/interpretations of events, change and responses through time.

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2) **Historical dialogue:** There is a tendency to see contemporary crises as unprecedented and different from crises set in the distant past, while past ruptures simultaneously become interpreted through modern measures. A second objective of CRISIS is to undo such presentism to instead bring different times and different geographies into constructive dialogue in order to also enable alternative visions of current responses and possible futures.

Pathways

Summoned under the umbrella of the overarching twofold objective CRISIS will approach its field via four thematic and interconnected pathways. Each of these addresses a key issue in this conceptual field:

P1: Time

Crisis is a chronotopos. Time related issues play a major role. When does a crisis begin and end? When does a mere shift escalate into a crisis? How does this temporary state of exception transform or regress into stability again? How long can crises last – weeks (as in an illness), years (as in a war), decades (as in a climatic anomaly)? Does their declaration follow a (human, societal, ecological) rhythm? Is the association between modernity and crisis (cf. Marx, Koselleck, Beck) justified? How do perceived crises syncopate the flow of time and historical change? How pertinent is the notion of the modern era as a "constant crisis" characterized by "crisis ordinariness" (Berlant), where ruptures seemingly become a permanent condition? This pathway will conduct both empirical and conceptual studies of crisis as timescapes. Some potential partners here are the IAKH and ILN/ILOS research groups Materialities, KLIMER, ECOLIT, Temporal Experiments, the IKOS Lifetimes timelines group and the RITMO.

P2: Power

Being able to declare a crisis (and end it again) is intricately linked to power. This power can be political and material or merely communicative, performative, contextual. Without that power even extreme societal events and collective suffering might never be identified as a crisis. With it, minor irritations can be flagged as crises requiring immediate intervention. Questions posed through this pathway include: How do power imbalances contain and control what is accepted as critical? Why do notions of crisis often reaffirm hierarchies and serve elite interests, despite promises to the contrary? Is there a link between increased political participation and the proliferation of crises in democratic societies? The group will also trace potential shifts toward new groups of experts over time and media. It will also explore which toolsets, constellations and forms of material or cultural capital enable protagonists to declare the beginning and end of a crisis. Some potential partners here are the IAKH and IFIKK research groups on Violence, Capitalism, Nordic Civil Societies, Science and Democracy as well as The Northern Enlightenment.

P3: Representation

As societal artifacts, crises are contingent on recognition, memory and remembrance. This pathway will explore how crises are commissioned and decommissioned into cultural memory. Which events are remembered, and which are not? How are crises with their material and immaterial remains forgotten, both actively and passively? What does the process of committing a crisis to literature, into a museum or into a townscape say about the ideas of pasts and futures in circulation? What does the abandonment, repression or reinterpretation of critical experiences afford the societies in question? How do crises initiate and sustain utopian thinking and new imaginaries of the future? This pathway

will explore crises as (difficult) heritage. Some potential partners are: HEI, IAKH/conservation, the ILOS research group Cultural Memory Studies, the center for museumsstudies, KHM and the ERC CoFUTURES.

P4: Infrastructures

Socionatural infrastructures can contain and escalate crises, they can also host and embody them. Agrarian systems, ecological entanglements, transport links, media systems can all be read as materialisations of crises past and present – both in their presence and in their absence. This pathway will ask: How do the material embodiments of crises correspond to immaterial sets of actions, conflicts and collaborations? Can these entangled infrastructures offer fresh insights into crisis formation, adaptation, and ignorance? Do they reveal calculations and imaginations of past and future risk that might otherwise remain invisible? How do new infrastructures such as "AI" networks create and contain crises? And is their impact indeed different from earlier critical transformations in media, industry or consumption? This pathway will focus on infrastructures as contact zones of conflict, crisis, and coping. Potential partners here include: The IAKH/ILOS/IFIKK research groups KLIMER, Materialities, Violence, Critical Historiography, Border Readings, Nordic Modernism and the ERC B4COPY.

Platforms

This last component is focused on synergizing the CRISIS network and providing platforms for research communication, exchange and feedback. This synergizing rests on the following constituents:

Working Group: The executive organization of CRISIS will be in the hands of a working group of approximately XX members representing the different participating disciplines. The role of chair will be held by two permanent staff members at IAKH, and these will shift during the project period. It is essential that working group members are assigned workhours for their contribution. The working group has the role of setting the agenda for the different CRISIS events, producing announcements for CRISIS positions, and selecting from applications to seedling-money (see below).

Research Assistant: A research assistant (50% position) with academic background (e.g. a MA student in archaeology/history/conservation) will work closely with the working group and handle the daily execution of the project (announcement of meetings, events, website, communication with publishers for research output, and mediation with research administration at IAKH).

2x PDF positions: Two postdoctoral positions of 3,5 years (??) will be announced during the 1st year of the project period, each set within one of the above *pathways*. The postdoctoral fellows will become central partners, members of the working group and will participate in the execution of the overall project. Through their teaching obligation the pdf's will contribute to the synergy between research and teaching and will (together with the working group) develop two interdisciplinary courses related to CRISIS topics (see further below).

Brown bag seminars: A regular platform for research output and feedback will be the monthly Brown Bag seminars. These will be organized as low threshold lunch seminars offering a venue for research output and feedback. Presenters will come from within and beyond the CRISIS network (mainly), external academic guests and non-academic partners.

Reading group: Another regular platform for dialogue will be the monthly reading group. These will be run by the working group, members will take turns in organizing the seminars, selecting readings

and chairing the discussions. The reading group is also seen as a venue for idea-development and a ground for establishing collaboration across disciplines.

Workshops and conferences: during the project period CRISIS will offer a start-up conference accompanied by a cross-HF match-making event, followed by a closed retreat (year 1) and a public workshop (year 3) for each of the four pathways. After the startup phase CRISIS will organize a mid-way conference that reaches out to governmental stakeholders involved in crisis preparedness. The project will conclude with a closing conference that synergises several of the deliverables (below).

Combining research and teaching: Two interdisciplinary courses related to CRISIS topics will be developed through the project period, and existing courses will also be connected to CRISIS research. This will also include MA research projects.

Keynotes: Four keynote speakers will be invited to speak at UiO during the project period, each connected to one of the pathways above. These will be world leading scholars in the field of crisis research. Events will be kept open to the public and speakers and topics will be selected with this in mind.

Seedlings: Part of the budget will be assigned to „seedlings", which are small scale projects/events that are suggested and organized by individual participants in the CRISIS network. Applications to seedling money can be sent to the working group and will be handled on a running basis.

RESEARCH OUTPUT

Research output will be extensive and will include:

- **Two edited volumes** will be published towards the close of the project period. These will be based on the workshops, Brown bag seminars and conferences, and will assemble a range of research topics responding to the two objectives. Editorial work will be in the hands of the two PDFs and the working group.
- The two PDFs are expected to publish **min 2 peer reviewed articles each**
- **Co-writing** will be encouraged through the reading groups, the Brown bag seminars and workshops and peer reviewed output is expected to result from this
- **Two special issues** in leading academic journals will published, each uniting two of the pathways
- The working group aims to be active in **public outreach** by responding to current topics in media (in speech and writing)
- A **podcast series** on crisis will be produced in collaboration with Norges Historie

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HOST DEPARTMENT AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

IAKH, with its deep time perspective, is an ideal host department for this project. It unites a broad scope of crisis-related research fields (economies, ecologies, materialities, medias and perceptions). This breadth will make it easier for other research groups across HF institutes and beyond (STS, anthropology and the natural sciences) to collaborate and co-create with CRSIS. Importantly, this also involves non-academic collaboration with societal and governmental stakeholders and actors involved in contemporary crisis management. This is a link we regard as fundamental.

ORIGINALITY, IMPACT AND SIGNIFICANCE TO THE CALL

The originality of this project is nested in the multi-temporal approach and the explicit aim of bringing ruptures of different periods and contexts into dialogue with each other. Contemporary crises tend to be viewed as unprecedented phenomena. What CRISIS proposes is to juxtapose these omnipresent challenges with historical cases in order to bring further depth to understandings, responses and critique. Equally original is the explicit aim of combining a conceptual and pragmatic approach by bringing together disciplines and empirical cases from e.g. archaeology, history, conservation, literature studies, memory studies, and more. Through its focus and approach CRISIS responds to UiOs Strategy 2030 on several levels. This includes the aim of **addressing contemporary major societal challenges** and contributing to **sustainable responses** and developments. CRISIS equally speaks to the call for **social relevance** and and will through public outreach also spur **social engagement** and knowledge exchange beyond academia. Through addressing cases related to AI and digital technology CRISIS will also respond - through critical engagement - with UiOs emphasis on **digitalisation**.