Crises in a
Globalised World

# Cultures of Crisis – Perspectives from the Social Sciences

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Crises – and the accompanying crisis discourses – appear to be pervasive, something which happens and is discussed in all societies and at all times. Differentiating and understanding what crisis means, signifies, and does in different cultural contexts and societal settings was the aim of the workshop "Cultures of Crisis – Perspectives from the Social Sciences" that took place on 11-12 January 2018 at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) and kicked off the "Cultures of Crisis" workshop series organised by the Leibniz Research Alliance "Crisis in a globalised world." The workshop focused on the role crisis and crisis discourses play in (de-)legitimising rule and order in the context of different political systems, world regions and/or socio-cultural surroundings. By discussing the different uses and understandings of crisis and explicating when and why crisis narratives are effective, we wanted to break with the implicit Western understanding in much of the research on crisis and take a first step towards a broader understanding of what "crisis" can mean and do in different contexts. The discussions will be taken up again at the next two workshops, which will deal with perspectives from the humanities (July 2018) and "crisis managers" (December 2018).

The main findings from two very intense days with experts from all over the world are gathered in this brief report, which first summarises the three main panels – titled "Concepts of Crisis," "Crisis and Political Regimes," and "Dealing with Crisis" – before it gives voice to the participants of the workshop to highlight some of the more specific insights they contributed to our discussions.

**Concepts of Crisis**

Overall, there was agreement in the first panel that crisis is an embedded term that is bound to geography and history, i.e. actors' perception. The crisis discourse attracts intellectuals because it stresses the peculiarity of a certain time, development, or event. Most participants viewed crisis as a reflexive concept, and nearly everyone agreed on the importance of Koselleck's reconstruction of the term. Nevertheless, there was disagreement as to whether this reconstruction ties the concept to a Western understanding and whether it is more useful to always contextualise the concept in a more culturally specific way, acknowledging nuances and interpretations. Another important line of discussion was whether "crisis" should be reserved for the analysis of acute situations where a certain state of affairs is completely at stake or whether a "slow-motion" (John Keane) or "routinised"/"latent crisis" (Wolfgang Merkel) should also be included in the analysis.

John Keane was the first to stress that "crisis" – in addition to the connotation of danger – also always comprises an optimistic aspect, the moment of opportunity arising in reaction to the consciousness of a critical situation. This is particularly so with regard to the more action-based use of the term in China, as Baogang He explained. In a crisis, things that were not conceivable before become possible. Hence, the disruptive event requires taking a

decision ("an emergency that requires action" – Fabiano Santos). The opposite of crisis, then, is stability. This also implies that crisis is always about (individual and collective) judgement. There is no global or objectively fixed understanding of what constitutes a crisis in a certain situation and also no ex ante predictability regarding how people behave in times of crisis.

The next major line of discussion on this first panel on "Concepts of Crisis" was the usage of crisis as an analytical term vs. its strategic/political uses. As an example, when it comes to globalisation and deadlocks in international negotiations, the term "crisis" is used ubiquitously. The term is used in an instrumental way, and it often becomes an empty threat and loses its analytical value (Amrita Narlikar). Designations of crisis are becoming part of the political game, as Fabiano Santos explained by analysing whether or not high levels of violence in Latin America are labelled as a crisis. Amrita Narlikar proposed that in order to uphold the value of crisis as an analytical concept – with regard to the crisis of globalisation – the term should be used only if severe deficiencies with respect to three dimensions coincide:

- Legitimacy: The adequacy of institutions and negotiation formats is seriously called into question.
- Efficiency: Established institutions have repeatedly been unable to deliver.
- Norms: The ideas and normative frameworks that underpin globalisation are challenged.

A question related to this understanding was whether – in a Habermasian sense – there is a certain sequence of deficiencies in different dimensions that must occur in order to speak of a crisis (Wolfgang Merkel). A certain threshold of socio-economic and political consequences might have to be crossed in order to speak of a "crisis" and not just a mere challenge. Also, if a crisis is considered to be the constant state of affairs, actors might not perceive it as a crisis anymore (Elísio Macamo), which led Amrita Narlikar to ask whether crisis is a first-world term.

Another proposal to circumscribe what is needed in order to speak of crisis in an analytical sense came from Oliver Ibert, who stressed that the following preconditions must be met in order to delineate crisis discourses from other kinds of challenges:

- Self-reflexive mood of the crisis community
- Widely shared idea of order and disorder
- Assumption that our decisions matter/will have a chance to make an impact
- Sense of undetermined future: "in a system of crisis we can change the future." A crisis is not a fate.

Crisis maximises the feeling of risk. Yet as Fabiano Santos stated, if one has an analytical interest in "crisis," the challenge is that it is not a deterministic concept. For measurement, one could look at events – triggered by internal and external factors – that decisively configure constellations. However, the fundamental problem remains that the framing of crisis is crucial and that this will also always be a strategic act.

**Crisis and Political Regimes**

In the second panel we focused on how legitimacy crises are dealt with across various political regimes and societal contexts. Two main questions structured our discussion: What constitutes a legitimacy crisis in the context of different circumstances? And how do state and non-state actors invoke issues of legitimacy during crisis events?

Regarding the first question on the specifics of legitimacy crises, Heiko Pleines outlined how in the post-Soviet region regime elites often try to avoid questioning of the regime's legitimacy by stating that legitimacy crises are problems of Western democracies. Especially in the more authoritarian states, regimes attempt to diminish internal troubles by outlining how they are preventing a situation of chaos and mistrust. Dire conditions thus have to be endured, since political stability is preferable to the political and social uncertainties that plague Western societies.

Baogang He stressed that the comparison to Western developments (pluralism and decline) also constitutes an important strategy in China's efforts to shore up regime legitimacy. But he also pointed to some further factors more specific to China, especially a strong belief in separating good governance from the form of governance (output is crucial, stability the most desired outcome) and the belief that legitimacy is not coupled as strongly with procedural instruments but arises from a mix of variables that also include elements such as traditional authority and being part of a web of elite relationships. Dina El-Sharnouby and Elísio Macamo stressed that in Africa the categories of legitimacy and of crisis are less intertwined than in Western countries. Crisis is experienced as something more permanent, something that is a condition of politics rather than a failure of a certain type of government or elites (in the discussion Christian von Soest also pointed out the low legitimacy levels that are common and persistent in many African states and that these are often not dealt with as indicators of crisis in the public discourse). Elísio Macamo therefore suggested making only limited use of the concept of "crisis" in the African context since its implications of temporality (turning point) and regime change fit less than in other contexts. Instead he proposed analysing different sources of stress and addressing those important for system stability. Dina El-Sharnouby agreed with this reconfiguration but added that the recent revolutionary experiences in northern African states made clear that the resilience of authoritarian regimes is weaker than previously thought and that discourses of crisis are contagious once elites lose their discursive power.

Finally, John Keane made a more universal point regarding crisis and political regimes when he laid out how nagging, slow-motion legitimacy problems have become as important as single crisis events. Combined with the realisation that there is no single form of government that has an ultimate claim to legitimacy (something long viewed in the West as democracy's claim) we are today experiencing a political reality where crisis and legitimacy are set apart. Neither crisis nor the loss of public trust leads to systemic breakdowns as reliably as theoretically expected, nor are regimes (democratic or authoritarian) as inherently stable as they hope to be. Instead we can detect cycles of instability that keep regimes of all kinds in a constant mode of reshaping. Different regime types, therefore, are becoming more similar in how they deal with crisis and how dependent they are on public support. This point was further strengthened by Wolfgang Merkel, who pointed out that hybrid regimes are today the most numerous and quite well equipped to find their own equilibrium (instead of being closer to transformation, as was long expected in the research literature).

The second focus of the section was the way state and non-state actors invoke crisis. Here Latin America constituted a special case, which was discussed in detail by Fabiano Santos. Focusing on Brazil, he showed how the inclusive politics championed by Lula came to an end with the economic crisis, giving way to a broad sense of crisis. The crisis allowed right-wing actors to seize power, and even to ignore many legal requirements. But since the new non-

elected government did not even bother to address the sources of the crisis, the sense of crisis did not ebb away. Like others before him, dos Santos pointed out how crucial tight control over the media and over the framing of a situation is for elites in order for them to make use of crisis narratives and survive the dynamics of a crisis situation. A changing media landscape in which the number of broadcasters increases and fragmentation becomes the norm therefore constitutes a challenge for all kinds of political regimes – from democracies to the post-Soviet region, Latin America, and China – and is one of the issues that all systems react to strongly. A special case in point, as Brian Milstein pointed out, is the US public sphere, which has become so toxic and interspersed with commercial interests that it has intensified the legitimation crisis the political system is experiencing.

Further talking points of the discussion included the need to distinguish between groups of actors more accurately and to lay out how they specifically gain or lose in crisis situations (Oliver Ibert, for example, pointed out the changing role of experts and expertise when crisis hits, while Brian Milstein made us think about the need to research the challengers, such as social movements). In all these regards a global comparative perspective was considered to be lacking at the current time.

Generalising our knowledge about how crisis situations unfold in different contexts and how certain actors make use of crisis claims proved to be difficult but promising.

**Dealing with Crisis**

The third and final panel focused on how institutions and political actors engage with crisis and crisis discourses. In institutional terms, the discussion centred on the question of how different institutional settings contribute to tackling impending or actual crises; concerning the (strategic) use of crisis discourses, the panel discussed whether crisis discourses are common at all – and to what extent state authorities exploit crisis discourses for their particular interests.

What became quite clear right from the beginning of the discussion was that institutions actually do matter. Fabiano Santos made the point that in the Brazilian case crisis – as a permanent topic in politics and society – has always been connected to the institutional framework of the political system. Crisis was a permanent issue in times of military rule (1964–1985), as in times of democratisation or even under the new democratic constitution of 1988. In the case of the 1988 constitution, the political system itself generated political crisis phenomena by connecting presidentialism to proportional representation in Congress, which, together with a deficient party system, led to permanent crisis discourses and (usually unsuccessful) reform efforts. Seen through this lens, the origin of political crisis in Brazil lies not so much in misguided elite behaviour but in a defective institutional setting. However, crisis discourse has also been exploited for political aims. Crisis in the Brazilian case has always created an opportunity to shape the political agenda, and crisis discourses have been instrumentalised to advance specific political objectives. The current corruption crisis in Brazil – which was used as a trigger to remove a left-wing president from office and to push a radical right-wing agenda that, as a side effect, brought more power to non-elected actors such as the judiciary and public prosecutors – is one of many historical examples of this. Interestingly, discourses about democratic decline do not play a major role in crisis discourses in the rest of Latin America (at least not in elite's discourse framing, as Sabine Kurtenbach elaborated. Instead, in addition to security issues, questions of social crisis dominate the discourse: hyperinflation and economic instability, socio-economic inequality, and social exclusion/inclusion.

The notion that political actors exploit political crisis to further their own agendas was confirmed for the other world regions as well. Sometimes this exploitation is targeted at

external actors while addressing the domestic audience at the same time. One telling example is the Chinese Communist Party's peacocking about the crisis of Western democracy, as John Keane pointed out. Hinting at the alleged crisis of Western democracy, Chinese leaders are highlighting real-world crisis phenomena in the Western world to obscure homemade domestic crises. That there are indeed severe crisis phenomena in contemporary China was marked especially by Baogang He, who reported on all kinds of such phenomena, from profound crisis events on an everyday basis to the contradictions and inconsistencies between ideological claims and actual policies (including a severe crisis of legitimacy belief among the Chinese people) or the big question of the survival of the communist system and its leading party. According to He, the ruling regime's answer to these crisis challenges is twofold: On the one hand, the autocratic leaders are looking systematically for new technological methods to monitor and control China's citizens (big data, face-recognition tools, capture software). On the other hand, they are trying to prevent crisis phenomena from expanding by implementing democratic components at the local level (petitions, public debates, citizen's assemblies, citizen jury systems, etc.). The citizen juries and public consultation processes have turned out to be especially effective tools for addressing societal and/or political problems or issues that threaten to become severe crises.

This discussion indicates a basic difference between democratic and autocratic systems when it comes to critical events. While democratic systems possess built-in institutions to process and handle crisis phenomena, autocratic systems have to find other ways to deal with unfolding crises. In a way, they have to demonstrate to an even greater extent that they care for "their people," as Heiko Pleines argued for the Russian case. Vladimir Putin's "call the president" broadcast, where he pretends to solve even the day-to-day problems of his citizens, is a telling example here. What became clear from the discussion was that autocratic regimes' need for "counter-crisis discourses" depends in particular on two factors: the way the regime itself is able to manage expectations of its citizens and the question of whether or not de-legitimising alternatives to autocratic governance are on the table. If there are no "better" alternatives to the status quo and if dissidents have to fear repression from the regime in the case of anti-regime action, it is highly probable that crisis discourses in society will not lead to a crisis of regime stability.

In the discussions about crisis discourses in democratic and/or autocratic settings, the bottom line was that political and social crisis phenomena are often reinterpreted through the lenses of vested interests. What from an outside perspective appears to be a crisis of representation, nationalisation, or democratisation (as in the Egyptian case of the Arab Spring) may appear from the inside to be a crisis of military power and authority. In the end, as Wolfgang Merkel pointed out, it appears to be all about who determines the discourses, who is able to use "cultural hegemony as [the] road to power" (Gramsci), and whether or not the "thoughts of the rulers are the ruling thoughts." The most relevant question, then, is concerned with the main actors in crisis events and discourses: Who is able to frame the crisis discourse? Who possesses the power to escalate or contain a crisis (and the discourse about it)? And what are the main interests (and the goals and objectives) of the relevant actors in this context?

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