



# **Exploring the Crisis. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Investigations**

Edited by Andrea Borghini and Enrico Campo

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# A Reassessment of the Category of Crisis: Some Reflections from the Social Sciences

ANDREA BORGHINI

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century the term “crisis” has represented a fundamental category for social sciences; however, this no longer seems to be the case. As happened to other categories once considered pivotal for social sciences (such as Modernity, Time, or Ideology), “crisis” seems to have lost its heuristic power and the semantic richness it was once characterized by.

Actually, if we situate this term in the specific historical and cultural frame we are currently experiencing, we can discover *who killed the category of crisis*<sup>1</sup>, that is – who flattened its meaning, conforming and sterilizing it until it became a commonly used notion, unable to elicit a positive emotional response and only evoking acquiescence, addiction and passive waiting. Reductionism, especially the economic one (to which the term was subject over the years), seems to have us believe that the only way to face this kind of crisis is to adopt policies of economic austerity and social spending cuts. The actualization of the term, deprived of its original polysemy and historical depth, led to its loss of any defining boundary, to its assuming impersonal traits, becoming unable to signify a transition period. Crisis is now no longer identified as a category, it has become just a common word from everyday language; the preponderance in the latter of economic terms resulted in the progressive identification of the “crisis” with the economic crisis,

<sup>1</sup> The locution recalls an analogue expression used by the philosopher of science Karl Popper in its autobiography, when he was discussing the death of logical positivism. Cfr. Karl R. Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*, London, Routledge, 1992.

losing along the way its other important dimensions (religious, political, and so on), thus handing over our times and contemporary humanity to the laws of the market and global economy.

The logic of capitalism and neoliberalism bears a great responsibility for the decay and impoverishment of this concept, as Pietro Barcellona poignantly observes in one of his latest works – works committed on the one hand in proposing the importance of the recovery of the deep historical sense of words, and on the other in highlighting their common and instrumental contemporary use. In fact Barcellona states, among the other things, that today the term “crisis” denotes a «genuine crisis of indifferenciation destroying the space of alterity». Furthermore, he adds: «the plague, like earthquakes and every disaster apparently not due to human actions, puts the statute of the necessity of destiny at the center of the representation of life: you just have to submit and abandon yourself to the survival instincts»<sup>2</sup>.

How to restore legitimacy, dignity, and authority to the term “crisis”? In this work we will try to answer this question by proposing some reflections and following a specific path.

We chose to retie the thread of the story, identifying some authoritative voices – between the many that brought about the debate about the category of crisis – committed to witness the path of the term.

Following this historical path we can observe how, between the other things, the preponderance of the economic dimension, now indisputable, did not belong to the classics; or how the category of crisis need not be reduced to a monolithic and reductive dimension with no way out – except resorting to drastic public sector cuts, or surrendering to fatalism and resignation.

By problematizing the concept, linking it closely to a historical, social and critical dimension, identifying the voices that have mostly been able to highlight its richness and ambivalence, we can rediscover its vocation toward a comprehensive interpretation of the modern age, and reveal the true sense of the crisis we are living today, as well as the potential ways out of it.

Which authors to choose among the many who dealt with these issues? There are several narratives gathering important voices that took part in this debate, from the Frankfurt School to Habermas to Parsons<sup>3</sup>. We chose two authors from the classics, and one from the “new” classics. The first ones are R. Koselleck and I. Wallerstein. In his *Lexicon* of the fundamental terms of the language of historical and social sciences, the former offers a deep and sharp reflection about the cate-

<sup>2</sup> Pietro Barcellona, *Parolepotere*, Roma, Castelvecchi, 2013, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> For a synthesis of this debate, see G.E. Rusconi, voce, *Crisi sociopolitica*, in *Enciclopedia delle scienze sociali*, Torino, Treccani, 1992.

gory of crisis. Starting from its original etymology and going through some major historical milestones, Koselleck helps us understand the reasons of the *crisis* of the category of crisis. We choose him precisely because his reflections allow us to recover the original richness of this category.

The latter author has been chosen to show the possibility of a peculiar use of the category of crisis. Wallerstein, a sociologist with a Marxist background, considers the crisis as a systemic crisis, a crisis of the social and economic system built over time by the capitalist economy. This perspective about the crisis may in some respects appear similar to the current prevalent one; however, the originality of his reflection is proved by the quantity and quality of the links it shares with systems theory and with the theory of dissipative structures developed by the Russian chemist and physicist Ilya Prigogine. Wallerstein restores “crisis” as a proper category, deep and wide, not as the simple concept devoid of any historical richness, the ultimate horizon of our times, it represents in common understanding. He considers the crisis as part of a complex and powerful historical fresco; the crisis it is not the last stage of humanity, but it contains in itself – and in the historical and social reasons that generated it – the elements for its own overcoming.

We consider Pierre Bourdieu to undoubtedly play a major role among the “new” classics. Today he is much studied, especially outside of Italy; loved, but also criticized, he testified with his own biography the aversion against academic subdivisions of knowledge and, above all, the firsthand struggle he carried out against the neoliberal drift of our societies. Here we intend to highlight his contribution to the theoretical demonstration of the performative power of words, in the wake of authors as Austin on the one hand and Foucault on the other. Bourdieu develops this analysis by critically focusing on a category, “family”, as fundamental as “crisis” in the construction of our society’s imagination. In other words, Bourdieu’s *lectio*, albeit applied to a different subject than the crisis, helps exposing the common mystifying mechanism that transforms words in immediate acts with substantial, often penalizing consequences, inducing people to assume certain behaviors on the basis of the prescriptions inherent in that words – especially leading them to take for granted that, in the specific case, the crisis is an untranscendable horizon of our time.

Drawing from the reflections and the theoretic systems of the mentioned authors, we hope that the discussion about the crisis will be led once again on fully historical terms, far from ideological and mystifying visions, restored to the dignity it deserves – free from that *Heideggerian* background noise that it seems to be doomed to. We can expect to find ways out of the crisis only by taking this path, a path to be followed also for the analysis of other words in our lexicon (such as Globalization). Only a true understanding of the historical significance of this category and, at the same time, of the reductionism of which it is currently the victim, will be able to bring it back in all its richness. Social and historical knowledge will help individuals

to understand what kind of crisis we are talking about when we talk about crisis, and to find ways out of it – or to seize the opportunities contained in it – without resorting to panic, falling into resignation or nurturing the idea of entrusting their fate to charismatic leaders or institutions that can solve problems in their place.

## 2. Etymology

As is well known, the word crisis comes from the Greek *krisis*, which means changing, but also judgment. Bordoni holds that the word covers meanings ranging from “judgment, result of a trial, turning point, selection, decision” to “contention” or “quarrel”, «from which to derive *criterion*, “means for judging”, but also “ability to discern”, and *critical*, “suitable to judge”, “crucial”, “decisive”, as well as pertaining to the art of judgement»<sup>4</sup>.

Such a semantic richness seems to have been today reduced to just define the economic crisis *tout court*, which, as stated by Bordoni, «frees individuals from any involvement and refers to an abstract entity sounding vaguely sinister»<sup>5</sup>.

An example of how today the crisis is almost exclusively reduced just to economic references can be taken from the Einaudi Encyclopedia, which explains the *lemma* in these terms: «in everyday language, often the term economic crisis just designates a deterioration of the economic situation»<sup>6</sup>, assuming that the word crisis must be declined mainly, if not exclusively, in economic terms.

The contemporary version of “crisis”, in its monistic version of economic crisis, seems to have impoverished and deprived the concept as it was historically and etymologically formed, originally designating among other things a positive, optimistic passage. As Bordoni claims

it involves a change, and may be a rebirth after a break-up. It indicates separation, certainly, but also choice, decisions and therefore the opportunity to express an opinion” to the point of becoming the sign of a personal or socio-historical status change: “In short, it is the predisposing factor to change that prepares for future adjustments on a new basis, which is by no means depressing, as the current economic impasse shows us”<sup>7</sup>.

In our opinion, the disease of semantic reductionism and linguistic simplism today is a pandemic. We need just to think about what is happening in a field only apparently different from the one we are dealing with: the fight against crime in

<sup>4</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, Carlo Bordoni, *State of Crisis*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> T. Kowalik, voce, *Crisi*, *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, Torino, vol. VI, pp. 128-179.

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, Carlo Bordoni, *State of Crisis*, cit., p. 3.



the USA, as described by a prominent American criminologist, Jonathan Simon<sup>8</sup>. The use of war metaphors and words drawing from the military repertoire mobilizes the population and prepares it to identify the enemy of the moment. The discursive rationality outlines the features of a great American penal experiment, Simon states, going from Nixon's 1968 *law and order* presidential campaign, to the various campaigns against crime and terrorism, from Reagan to George W. Bush. The use of expressions like *war on drugs*, *war on poverty*, *enduring freedom*, *zero tolerance*, *war on crime* is not classifiable as a reference to neutral media slogans; it's rather the basis of ways of describing and prescribing reality that correspond to specific rationalities, technologies and practices of government.

These are not linguistic games played for their own sake, but powerful performative metaphors inducing certain social behaviors and certain psychological conditions, behind which are hidden specific political interests, aimed at criminalizing certain social behaviors (and classes) over others.

What is happening today to the term "crisis" corresponds to what Bourdieu claimed about the political use of some words, or even categories – in his case, "family". Just by evoking this term, the collective imagination gets populated by fears, guilts<sup>9</sup>, and gets ready to renounce critical reason to rely on the alchemies of European functionaries and national governments.

### 3. The Contribution of Reinhart Koselleck

The contribution of the historian and philosopher Reinhart Koselleck to the discussion about the crisis is a focal point for the understanding of the meanings the term assumes today.

We know that Koselleck's work straddles many disciplines – from history to philosophy and sociology – and he has dealt with many different research topics, reflecting about the Enlightenment, about the genesis and crisis of the State, about Modernity. Here we will focus on his *Lexicon*<sup>10</sup> of the fundamental concepts in historical and social sciences, where the historical analysis of the "crisis" is featured prominently. We refer here to a 1982 text, though Koselleck wrote much about this topic and discussed it in various public interventions, providing us with a precious genealogical perspective.

<sup>8</sup> J. Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> E. Stimilli, *Debito e colpa*, Roma, Ediesse 2015.

<sup>10</sup> The edition we quote by is the edition of 2006; the Italian introduction, edited by G. Imbriani and S. Rodeschini, is by 2012. See also reference at the end of this contribution.

First of all it should be noted that the analysis of the category of crisis in Koselleck is substantially tied to his biographic experiences of an intellectual that lived first hand the tragedy of the Second World War – as a German soldier he was captured in Russia – and the crisis of modern liberal societies sparked by the conflict. As for his coeval Elias, we can observe the influence of existential conditions in Koselleck's choice of research topics, although he developed his reflections from a peculiar perspective – using the topics to investigate the different ways in which an age understands itself. This aim is not achieved by the mere use of historical documents, but by the «concrete use of language in social, political and legal life»<sup>11</sup>. The language used by a society to describe itself returns us that society's self-image. The editors of the Italian translation of Koselleck's entry on *Crisis* for the *Lexicon* wrote: «the perception of events – allowed by the cognitive tools by means of which they are conferred a meaning – and what is expected from the future become the pattern through which the maturation of modernity and of its contemporary metamorphoses are interpreted»<sup>12</sup>.

The term *crisis* becomes a way to traverse time and to observe how the crisis has been the vehicle for the expression of «an experience of reality and an attitude toward the future»; and, furthermore, «coming to show what it was able to indicate, it puts to shame as well the effect of confusion that its own semantic expansion generated in his successful history»<sup>13</sup>.

We witness a long and erudite historical reconstruction that, starting from the awareness of the contemporary inflated use of the term, identifies the semantic models determining its use at any given time, abandoning the original characterization belonging to the religious, juridical and medical literature to become a term capable of encompassing the idea of a transition period, a watchword, distinctive feature of modern times, continuing «to demonstrate the ongoing novelty of our epoch»<sup>14</sup>. In the last phase of the historical parable bringing us close to the present day, “crisis” becomes synonym with radical transformation of the quality of the historical time; an acceleration, shortening, and at the same time closure toward the present and opening toward the future.

We will return to this in our conclusions.

We already presented the Greek use of the term *crisis*, which included – on the basis of a reference to medicine – sharp alternatives, such as right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death; later the term expanded its meanings, although

<sup>11</sup> G. Imbriano, S. Rodeschini, *Introduzione a Koselleck R., Crisi. Per un lessico della modernità*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2012, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Crisis*, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 67, n. 2 (2006), p. 398.

with the passing of the centuries these original senses kept coming back in greater or lesser extent. It's the case, as the author notes, of the religious dimension evoked by the formula «the Last Judgment», used in a secularized form to indicate revolutionary processes – drawing the outline of a rich and ambiguous category, to the point that «in our century, there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this concept with its inherent demand for decisions and choices»<sup>15</sup>.

We can thus schematize the various steps: from the Greek use, the term entered the socio-political language, keeping the meaning of stark alternatives, «right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death»<sup>16</sup>.

The analysis of the penetration of the term in different national languages shows how its use as a political, social and economic concept is attested, at least in the Germanic world, only after the French revolution; its diffusion was slow, as was its reception in everyday language. Only in 1931 the centrality of the concept of crisis in the economic sense is attested in Germany, as a result of the great upheavals of 1848 and 1857.

Crisis, Koselleck concludes, struggled to become a fixed, fundamental concept precisely because of its semantic richness; it became a watchword, although it could be used to describe emotional states and moods that reached semantic centrality right in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the advancement of the term in the economic and politic language.

At that time, the history of the term “crisis” got more complicated – and often its outcomes became harder to follow – conditioned as it was by historical turmoils, by the occasional prevailing of the common language use with its load of emotive mobilization, as well as by the return of the medical and religious semantic.

Essential, four meanings of the historical concept emerged:

- «Following the medical-political-military use, crisis can mean the chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required;
- In line with the theological promise of a future Last Day, crisis may be defined as a unique and final point, after which the quality of history will be changed forever;
- Crisis as a permanent or conditional category pointing to a critical situation which may constantly recur or else to situations in which decisions have momentous consequences;
- Crisis to indicate a historically immanent transitional phase. When this transition will occur and whether it leads to a worse or better condition depends on specific diagnosis offered. All of these possibilities reveal at-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

tempts to develop a single concept limited to the present which to capture a new era that may have various temporal beginnings and whose unknown future seems to give free scope to all sorts of wishes and anxieties, fears and hope. Crisis become a structural signature of modernity»<sup>17</sup>.

Through Rousseau, the first to give a modern content to the term – considering it capable of providing a prognosis about the future in the context of a philosophy of history – “crisis” fully became a term of modernity. Among the many thinkers, Comte and Herder applied it to the historical dimension, leading the term to gradually lose its medical connotations; until the economic turmoils got labeled as “crisis” and the term became synonymous with economic crisis, starting from the original English meaning and reaching the German one. The recurrent crises caused by the downfalls of capitalism made “crisis” a global term, in the wake of the capitalist productive system becoming a worldwide phenomenon. And here, of course, we cannot forget Marx’s lesson Koselleck extensively refers to.

In conclusion, Koselleck states that the last phase of this historical parable shows how the term progressively lost its vital, ambivalent connotations, coming to merely indicate arbitrary alternatives. The term “crisis” was inflated by the media, it became synonymous of «unrest, conflict, revolution», just as the expression, relatively vague, can refer to emotive situations or present circumstances. One thing is certain, Koselleck concludes; «such a tendency towards imprecision and vagueness, however, may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot as yet be fully gauged. This makes it all the more important for scholars to weigh the concept carefully before adopting it in their own terminology»<sup>18</sup>.

The rich and complex narration of the historical evolution of the term “crisis” leads to some concluding remarks, aimed at securing specific theoretical and historical articulations:

The lemma “crisis” arises in a definite historical context, with a specific medical, juridical, religious characterization. These three dimensions accompany it in its historical trajectory, never completely abandoning it – until the threshold of contemporaneity. The emergence of the political dimension and, later, of the economical one (that, it should be noted, Koselleck tends to match historically with the diffusion of the term in common, everyday language) seem to cut every tie with the past, sterilize every structural ambiguity, channel the term toward its current inflated use. Economic reductionism spread after the 1857 crisis, monopolizing the term with an exclusivity that is a faithful mirror of today’s *reductio ad unum*. Secondly, the connection of the term with historical processuality, with the quality of historical time and with its collective and individual perception, taking out the original disci-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 400.

pline-bound meanings – even if with a recursion never failing to make its appearance – led to its contemporary use, to its becoming a sign of the age. But today, in this very age characterized by time compression and very short-term perspectives, “crisis” seems to have lost any heuristic capacity, merely indicating a definitive and basically bleak horizon, about which every possibility to indicate alternatives loses its value, and where the only possible choice is not to distinguish but just to decide.

In conclusion, Koselleck’s clearly outlines the passage from the rich, polysemous, complex and even ambivalent version of “crisis” to the current weak version of an undifferentiated and univocal term. This situation suggests it may be necessary to replace the word “crisis”, given the *crisis* of the notion of crisis, with a synonymous yet to be determined.

#### **4. Wallerstein and the Concept of Systemic Crisis: Cycles and Trends**

We cannot fully present here Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of World-System. It will suffice to say that it represents one of the rare examples, in the recent history of social sciences, of a wide-range system of thought offering a contribution to the understanding of the origins, development and crisis of the western capitalist system (namely the World-System)<sup>19</sup>.

Wallerstein draws from a wide repertoire of classic authors (including Braudel) to describe the features of the development of western society as well as the development of the very concept of development, using the notion of World-System. The World-System, emerging around the late 1500s, structures the planet according to three areas distinct but subject, at the same time, to a strong dynamical drive: core, periphery, and semiperiphery. In particular, the dynamic consists of the semiperiphery tending toward the core, and the periphery occupying the place formerly occupied by the semiperiphery. These movements are not unidirectional, also including phases of oscillation, with the core keeping the semiperipheric countries in their position.

The systemic philosophy underlying Wallerstein’s approach makes it *omni-comprehensive*, as it manages to incorporate all contemporary phenomena – such as sexism, racism, nationalism, religious ideologies, marginalization of women and so on – as results of the capitalist world division; this systemic dimension represents the appeal, but at the same time the main limit, of this approach.

<sup>19</sup> For a short list of bibliographical references concerning the World System Theory see the references at the end of the contribution.

Why are we taking into account Wallerstein's thought in our reflection about the crisis? Besides the fact that he is part of the canon of authors offering a fundamental contribution to the discussion of that category, his perspective is especially useful in the context of the reasoning we are developing here, for two main reasons:

- it offers a suggestive interpretation of the notion of crisis, somehow recovering the line of thought considering "crisis" a concept that coincides with an age of change, opening toward new scenarios;
- within the rich conceptual universe painted by Wallerstein, the crisis notion assumes the outlines of an elevated concept, borrowing from scientific theories such as the one by Prigogine – offering a structural, stratified version of "crisis", in radical antithesis with the current understanding of the term as a horizon that cannot be escaped, if not by relying on the market. Wallerstein's lesson goes in an opposite direction: it's the market that generates the crisis, and to overcome the crisis it's necessary to get away from the market.

We noted that, in the rich landscape of authors and theoretical-empirical perspectives Wallerstein draws from – we already cited Braudel – there is the outstanding presence of the physicist and chemist Ilya Prigogine, Nobel prize in Chemistry in 1977, from whom Wallerstein draws the concepts of bifurcation, unstable equilibrium and dissipative structures. Let's follow Wallerstein's reasoning in an excerpt from *Unthinking Social Science*:

«Dissipative structures, in contrast to equilibrium structures, are those that are maintained by the constant dissipation of energy and hence manifest self-organization. Prigogine argues that dissipative structures studied in physical and chemical systems evolve over time»<sup>20</sup>. What can social sciences learn from Prigogine's idea of "order through fluctuations"? That the true order can be found in dissipative, far from equilibrium structures rather than in equilibrium structures. Between the conclusions that can be drawn from this vision, the fact that the *systemic crisis* we are experiencing must be read according to perspectives of bifurcating turbulence, and that «although we are indeed in a systemic crisis, this crisis is a long one that is unfolding at a visible but less hasty pace than we might wish»<sup>21</sup>.

Prigogine and the "Brussels School" represent one of the most significant research experiences, having transcended the intellectual limits that allowed the understanding of physical phenomena only on the basis of "eternal" and "linear" laws, overcoming these limits with the intuition of the fundamental role of complexity and time in physical systems. Rather than disowning the heritage of New-

<sup>20</sup> I. Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-century Paradigms*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 31-32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

tonian physics, Prigogine proposes to overcome and extend it: it's the discovery of a world where reversibility and determinism can be applied just to simple and determined cases, while irreversibility and indetermination are the rule.

Irreversibility and entropy, considered by classical science as disturbing factors, are now treated as active and constructive parts of reality, because the process that brings disorder is the same that brings order in the system.

The very fact that is necessary to talk about a universe in evolution, being this the only way to describe the observed facts, it's a proof that time directionality is not a human construct, but it's inherent in nature. Past and future play different roles and there is a historical evolution of systems, producing entropy: near the equilibrium condition we find stability and fluctuations regress; on the contrary, far from equilibrium the non-linearity associated with positive feedback leads to new space-time structures (called "dissipative structures"). A probabilistic process including a choice between alternative possibilities takes the place of the deterministic process.

Starting from this formidable theoretical-empirical perspective, the research groups created by Wallerstein and his collaborators focused their activities – since the establishment of the *Fernand Braudel Center* – on the study of "cyclical rhythms" and "secular trends" characterizing historical social systems.

Assuming the unit of analysis of the World-System, and paying attention to the multiplicity of "social times" as indicated by Braudel, the starting point is the idea that «a historical system is both systemic and historical. That is to say, it has enduring structures that define it as a system – enduring, but not of course eternal. At the same time, the system is evolving second by second such that it is never the same at two successive points in time. That is to say, the system has a history, and it is what it is at any given moment not only because of its enduring structure but because of its particular (indeed unique) historical trajectory»<sup>22</sup>.

We can distinguish between three processes in the historical life of a social system: its genesis; a (relatively) long period of normal functioning; and its demise, that may be considered as a transition toward one or more new historical systems<sup>23</sup>. The evolution concerns the period of normal working, when a cyclic model that tends to restore a (relative) long term equilibrium is active, adjusting imbalances and bringing them back within the mainstream of its own historical structures.

However, cycles never return to the starting point, and structural change is inherent in cyclical change. The contradictions possessed by every system are determining these secular trends: they are the product of the constraints imposed by

<sup>22</sup> T.K. Hopkins, I. Wallerstein (edited by), *The Age of Transition - Trajectory of the World System, 1945-2025*, Zed Books, London, 1996, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> I. Wallerstein, "The Modern World-System and Evolution", in *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Volume 1, Number 19, (1995) p. 2.

the structures of the system, under which a certain set of behaviors is optimal for the actors on the short term, while a different set of behaviors – if not an opposite one – may be optimal on the medium term. In this way the “cyclical rhythms” (the result of the solution of short term problems) gets transformed into secular trends (that are consequences, on the medium term, of these solutions).

Inside this relation between cycles restoring the “equilibrium” and trends pushing “far from equilibrium”, whatever the specific rules, what remains is the contradiction between the medium term solutions to conjunctural problems and the possibility to use these solutions in the long term.

In the historical trajectory of a human social system there is a “point of no return” when it’s no longer possible to implement the needed adjustments to the structures, and when the paralyzing effects of the contradictions can no longer be contained. Then, a time range starts when small inputs, usually absorbed by the system, cause instability and oscillations that, whatever dimension they are measured along, become wider and more irregular.

When this happens «we may talk of a crisis, a real “crisis”, meaning a turning point so decisive that the system comes to an end and is replaced by one or more alternative systems. [...] It happens only once in the life of a system, and signals its historical coming to an end. And it is not a quick event but a “transition”, a long period lasting for a few generations<sup>24</sup> during which “the degree to which free will prevails over necessity, expands»<sup>25</sup>.

According to Wallerstein, nearing a crisis «we are therefore approaching a “bifurcation” (to use the language of the new science) whose outcome is inherently indeterminate, which can push us in possible alternative directions that are quite different from each other»<sup>26</sup>.

If there is a crisis of the World-System and a transition is in progress, according to Wallerstein what we can do is «analyze the dimensions of the structural crisis itself and try to perceive the directions in which the systemic crisis is taking us»<sup>27</sup>: the study of the institutional vectors, their trends and the oscillations being produced around them represents the fertile ground to «assess the likelihood that we are approaching a bifurcation (or are already in the midst of one)»<sup>28</sup> in order to make projections about the trajectory of the World-System in the next years.

Among the others, two elements stand out from this short description: firstly, the systemic nature of the crisis, result of decades of a research that owes much to

<sup>24</sup> T.K. Hopkins, I. Wallerstein (edited by), *The Age of Transition*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> I. Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science*, cit., p. 235.

<sup>26</sup> I. Wallerstein, *After Liberalism*, New York, The New Press, 1995, p. 85.

<sup>27</sup> I. Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, London, Verso Editions, 1983, p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> T.K. Hopkins, I. Wallerstein (edited by), *The Age of Transition*, cit., p. 9.



other disciplines contributions – to the point that Wallerstein invoked the opening of social sciences, the abandoning of the fences between disciplines, in the wake of a reconciliation between natural sciences and human sciences already prophesied by Prigogine with the term *Reenchantment of the World*. Facing an inherently uncertain universe, the new sciences need to recover a meaning of the idea of culture in a general sense, where nature and society «both form part of a single universe framed by the arrow of time»<sup>29</sup>; where no truth is more valid than any other, because if we can know the world through our vision of it, it's still a human vision; where, finally, a rational substantiality, considering the realistic and possible choices, takes the place of the abstract and universal rationality.

Secondly, the systemic crisis may be followed by new phases that need to be explored using intelligence and critic rationality, at the same time learning to cope with uncertainty without considering it «an insurmountable obstacle to knowledge but rather as an incredible opportunity to imagine, to create, to search»<sup>30</sup> – something that, according to Wallerstein, can be experimented in the “middle ground” represented by social sciences, that may assume a new centrality in the world of knowledge – provided they open up to the evidence that «our geohistorical social systems are complex; indeed, they are the most complex structures in the universe»<sup>31</sup>. To open the social sciences is a hard but necessary task in order to build knowledge structures suitable to the transition, be it a systemic one or a simple social change, toward something new, unprecedented, different, toward a world that will have problems unsolvable and unclassifiable within the old *liberal-marxist* dogma.

This transition phase, lasting 25-50 years, built on the basis of the trends and events occurred in previous decades, has no fixed outcome. Hopkins and Wallerstein in their *The Age of Transition* draw a program of what could happen in the next 25-50 years and, in spite of the vagueness of the predictions, that program represents at the same time a specific challenge we must be able to face. We will not dwell further on these predictions since they would lead us away from the topic of our discussion, but the fact remains that many of Wallerstein's insights have proven accurate, from the increase in environmental costs to the crisis of the United States as a hegemonic power, from the massive investments in China and Russia to the widening of the gap between the north and the south of the world, to the migration issues – linked to the enormous demographic increase in the south

<sup>29</sup> I. Wallerstein, *Open the Social Sciences. Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences*, 1996, p. 75.

<sup>30</sup> I. Wallerstein, “The Heritage of Sociology, The Promise of Social Science – Presidential Address, XIVth World Congress of Sociology, Montreal, 26 July 1998, in *Current Sociology January*, vol. 47 no. 1 (1999), p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> I. Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science*, cit., p. 148.

of the world and its decrease in the north. In 2025 the immigrant population in Japan, USA and EU could represent about 25-50% of the total population; the lack of political rights for immigrants will result in waves of riots, paralleling the situation created in Europe in the 1930s and solved with the liberal paradigm.

The outcome of the bifurcations is unpredictable. However, the chaos will be followed by a third period, a new order, something unprecedented. Everything depends on the decisions human will take while waiting for the transition: there will be those who don't want to change and those who dream, like in the past, a more egalitarian, just and democratic world: the aim for which the old antisystemic movements, annihilated in 1989, had always fought. Certainly after 2050 and 2075 we will not live in a *capitalist world system*. We will live in some different historical system (or systems), but it's still too early to say it with certainty. The importance of collective participation and culture, as well as historical science, is ultimately confirmed by Wallerstein: «we shall probably know once again relative peace, stability, and legitimacy. But will it be a better peace, stability, and legitimacy than we have hitherto known, or a worse one? That is both unknown and up to us»<sup>32</sup>.

Concluding this short presentation of Wallerstein's perspective about crisis, we can draw the lesson that the crisis we are living today is a systemic one, but also a crisis that can be overcome with recipes opposing the ones we are being currently suggested – certainly not by relying on the same market laws that caused it.

## 5. Bourdieu and the Performative Role of Words

As is well known, in the last stage of his intellectual path Bourdieu devoted many of his energies to the critique and militant struggle against the neoliberal globalization. This is proven by a book like *The Weight of the World*, where the French sociologist collects testimonies of the effects of global capitalism on different social classes, in particular after having conducted fieldwork for three years about the conditions of production of the contemporary forms of social misery: peripheries, schools, temporary jobs, the working class and the underclass, the universes of white collars, farmers, artisans, and the family. All of these “places” affirm the suffering whose truth is testified by those who endure it.

Here we would like to refer to *The Family Spirit*, appendix to *Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field* added when the essay was re-published in 1998 as a chapter in *Practical Reason*. We think the reference is useful for its description of the use of words in a performative fashion. We are convinced that

<sup>32</sup> I. Wallerstein, *After Liberalism*, cit., p. 45.

Bourdieu can be coherently inscribed in a theoretic reflection about the crisis for the reasons presented above, for his militancy, and because he is able, like few others, to show the performative effects of language and of some of the social constructs that are imposed upon the social actors' consciences, without constrictions, only by means of the *doxa*.

He didn't explicitly write about the crisis concept, so we are using his reflection about "family" as an example of this role of language that can be applied also to "crisis", also being used as a watchword to induce specific behaviors.

In *The Family Spirit* Bourdieu reflects about the family, considered – together with the school – as a channel of socialization, an institution that can transform, build, and condition the mental structures of individuals on behalf of the state, an entity whose nature Bourdieu describes with accents quite different from those used in classical analyzes – not just in its juridical-formal-normative form of a principle of external order, but as an internal, molecular institution. The family is seen as part of the organizational structure of the state. The state is responsible (guilty?) of a codification accompanied by real social and economic effects (like, among others, child benefits), aimed at promoting a specific organization of the family, at supporting who is willing to comply with it, and encouraging the moral and logic conformism – namely the adherence to forms and views of the world – of which the family is a keystone. Just like the social public identity, the family is *built* inside society by the state through many acts (such as Marriage Acts) which tend to legitimize it as the real form, the real social unit, and where, more than in other fields, the mix between public and private is most evident, all to the benefit of the state – as the penetration of the public in the private sphere makes the private a public matter. Family becomes «a fiction, a social artifact, an illusion in the most ordinary sense of the word, but a "well-founded illusion", because, being produced and reproduced with the guarantee of the state, it receives from the state at every moment the means to exist and persist»<sup>33</sup>. Family, as a well-founded illusion, has already a performative function in the term that identifies it. It is a term that «while seeming to describe social reality, in fact constructs it»<sup>34</sup>. And further on, Bourdieu claims that «if it is true that the family is only a word, it is also true that it is an active "watchword", or rather, a category, a collective principle of construction of collective reality. [...] We tacitly admit that the reality to which we give the name "family", and which we place in the category of "real" families, is a family in reality»<sup>35</sup>. By putting together objective and subjective structures,

<sup>33</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason. On the Theory of Action*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

the miracle is accomplished, «nothing seems more natural than the family; this arbitrary social construct seems to belong on the side of nature, the natural and the universal»<sup>36</sup>.

Applying this line of reasoning to the theme of crisis, to its normalization and its adoption into everyday language, we may observe how Bourdieu's analysis, though applied to a different object than "crisis", allows us to reveal the same dynamics.

Koselleck showed us how the crisis, in its sense of economic crisis, became part of the lexical repertoire thanks to its use becoming common. However, Koselleck attributed a value to the term. The annihilation of any alternative, the crisis being considered as an untranscendable horizon, made it an ordinary word – but at the same time made it a word that orders, that induces behaviors and produces effects on individuals and populations. The reflection of Barcellona in this sense is exemplary. In fact, according to the recently deceased philosopher, "guilt, sacrifice, contagion" are the terms currently used to describe the crisis, equating it to an outbreak of plague. The monolithic and uni-dimensional vision of the crisis leads to consider the requests of the markets as inescapable and their measures toward citizens as binding. A political and media offensive pushes individuals to identify a scapegoat (in this case the weakest link, Greece), and to break any relation of solidarity, encouraging diffidence, enmity, selfishness. Barcellona adds: «the presence of alternatives is excluded in principle, because the regime of the plague is a regime of necessity, subtracted from every judgment of possibility and from every distinction»<sup>37</sup>.

How can we exit from this linguistic trap? Becoming aware that the monetary plague is the fruit of the deliberate action of historical individuals, concrete subjects, means taking the first step toward salvation. The tendency to consider the market as the only interpreter of common sense must be opposed: it produces at the same time resignation and the consciousness that the alternative to the confidence of the markets is a catastrophe.

Family in Bourdieu's example and crisis in the one used by Barcellona seem words that prescribe behaviors and induce opinions and attitudes. In the case of "crisis", however, an even more dangerous and deceitful mystifying mechanism is at work because, as we tried to show with some historical examples, today the crisis is "cleaned" of any historical reference and, being reduced to the economic crisis, it becomes a lemma in everyday language that while may seem to be just describing the world, is actually prescribing it.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> P. Barcellona, *Parolepotere*, cit., p. 96.

## 6. Conclusions

In our short trip we touched some meaningful intellectual milestones. From them we drew elements that certainly represent lines of work to be developed in the future, especially if we want to go *beyond* the crisis.

What are the most significant elements to highlight in these short concluding remarks?

Koselleck offers a historical fresco of the complex intricacies binding the category of crisis to modernity, showing how the term assumed its current, everyday language meaning, especially in its economic sense. Wallerstein reveals how the capitalist mode of production produced a systemic crisis from which is difficult to escape without hypothesizing particularly daring trajectories, straining our predictive capacities. Lastly, Bourdieu reveals – in the neighboring semantic field of “family” – how words can become watchwords to which we obey without the awareness that this obedience does not take us away from the abyss of crisis, but contributes to deepen it and to increase the social misery and the inequalities of our society.

Listening to the voices of the mentioned authors, we discover a double path. On one side, “crisis” as a historically deep and polysemous concept, to address which is even necessary to “bother” the natural sciences and revolutionize the epistemological framework of social sciences (Wallerstein *docet*). On the other side, as modernity advances, the “crisis” term loses its breadth and its value. As those once majestic rivers whose course is progressively dried up through locks, dams, and illegal takings, and which are reduced to smelly rivulets or small waterways in the desert as they approach the sea, the “crisis” concept loses its historical dignity and, precisely because of the economy of which it has become a prisoner (and, at the same time, as a manifestation of its own limits) it presents itself as a crisis of indifferenciation, as a word now devoid of history. Under the noble and high version of the “crisis” concept its poor and monotonous version is hidden, only able to repeat the mantra of austerity and prescribing behaviors that bring closer to the abyss instead of getting us away from it.

From this point of view the last two authors we dealt with, Bourdieu and Barcellona, insist much on this reductionism and its dangers and try, each in his own way, to offer solutions for getting out of the dead-end where humanity seems to have come. According to Barcellona, for example, «the theme of the economic and political crisis needs to be read as a social crisis of the connective tissue of society, whose main victims are the productive middle class and the working class: we need to understand the tendency toward change of this social, psychological, and economic reality, transforming individual aspirations in collective resources capable of having a real effect»<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 113-114.

However, apart from the possible solutions, we feel it would be difficult to restore the meaning that “crisis” once had, because the historical and social conditions we are living in, and the times we are going through, are profoundly poor – as if assaulted by a *un hiver de l'esprit* that seem to advance inexorably. Nevertheless, it's necessary to struggle with the weapons of the word and the pen, because intelligence can hope to identify the causes that led to the impoverishment of the current notion of crisis only by drawing from history and knowledge, and it's from here that may start again a process returning to crisis the dignity of category it deserves, despite the difficulties of the times we are living in. As Barcellona correctly states, «to reflect on the lexicon of our historical moment means to contribute to make visible the conflict between those who hold power and those who are forced to suffer its consequences. To rebuild the places and the ways of the fight for words means returning to seek the roots of a denied conflictuality, now made invisible»<sup>39</sup>.

We may then conclude by quoting the words of Koselleck, according to whom the advent of crisis in modern world marks a change in the quality of the historical time, increasingly accelerated and foreshortened. And even if he imagined an open future, at the same time he was aware that the ongoing mutation of the concept of crisis obliged the intellectuals to engage strictly, opposing in historical and political terms the impending nightfall and seeking an answer to the crisis.

However, time is foreshortening...

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