Crisis and Critique: A Discourse on the Method

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On the 10th of June 2018, the Aquarius, a ship operated by SOS Méditerranée and Médecins Sans Frontières, which was used as a rescue vessel for migrants trying to reach Europe on makeshift boats, was denied permission to dock in an Italian port. It had 629 people from sub-Saharan Africa on board, including 123 unaccompanied minors, 11 young children and 7 pregnant women. The fact was remarkable as it indicated a complete reversal of Italian and, more broadly, European policies regarding migrants in distress in the Mediterranean, since 5 years before, the Italian government had launched a naval and air operation called Mare Nostrum to search and rescue wreck survivors and was considered to have saved the lives of 150,000 people. Italy's decision, against the rules of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, to deny the Aquarius access to its harbors signaled the ultimate step in a process that had swung from expressions of humaneness to the criminalization of humanitarianism.

This decision was taken by the newly-appointed minister of the interior, Matteo Salvini, whose self-proclaimed "populist party", *La Lega*, had campaigned on an aggressive anti-immigrant platform. As Malta and France also refused to receive the ship stranded at sea with its exhausted passengers, among whom several had health issues, the Socialist Prime Minister of Spain, who had been in office for only a week, offered to take in the Aquarius. The ship eventually arrived in Valencia seven days later. In the meantime, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, had accused the Italian government of "cynicism and irresponsibility" for not assisting the survivors, and in response, the Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, had called the French head of state "hypocritical" for having turned back 10,000 migrants at its border in the previous months. Taking advantage of these tensions, the German minister of the interior, Horst Seehofer,

had called for the creation of an "axis of the willing in the fight against illegal immigration" with Italy and Austria, thus undermining the coalition in power in his country led by the Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had resolutely championed a *Willkommenskultur* since 2015. But beyond Germany, the anticipation of this "axis of the willing," which added to the earlier mobilization of the "Visegrád Group" composed of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, all anti-immigration hardliners, was regarded as such a peril for the European Union that its president, Donald Tusk, convened in emergency a meeting of its 27 heads of state.

The agreement reached on the 29th of June was almost exclusively dedicated to the hardening of external and internal borders' policing, with measures to stop migrants from crossing of the Mediterranean as well as asylum seekers from circulating across Europe. It also announced an extended externalization of immigration control in African countries and Turkey, and the confinement of migrants on their arrival during the time of the examination of their situation. In the document, asylum was subsumed under "illegal migration." Praised by the Italian government, the agreement was described by commentators as having salvaged the European Union. But the cost was high as its policies had been aligned on the populist program of its most intransigent members. This meant in particular weakening the precedence of international law, renouncing values for which the European Union received the Peace Nobel Prize in 2012, and endangering even more the lives of people in search of protection, whose death toll in the Mediterranean already amounted to 15,000 since 2014. But the most noticeable – and yet little noticed – fact about what was regarded as the climax of the "migrant crisis" in Europe, is that it occurred at a time when the flows of people reaching Italy, Greece and Spain had spectacularly plummeted: 10,000 per month, that is, 20 times less than in 2015, and approximately the levels observed in the early 2010s; to make an unusual but meaningful comparison, it corresponded to only half the number of residence permits delivered to US citizens in Europe during the same time. "What crisis?" asked a senior analyst on migration and asylum at the Open Society European Policy Institute. Contradicting the Italian minister of the interior, who had declared earlier that his country would not become the "refugee camp of Europe," the mayor of Lampedusa – an island long considered to be the frontline of migrant arrivals from the South – declared: "It's been the quietest time since 2011."

If crises have been said to be "revelatory" in the sense that they expose fundamental traits of a given moment within a given society, I would like to take this episode as revelatory more generally of what is at stake when one thinks of a particular state of the world in terms of crisis. In the present case, there are actually several crises: a humanitarian crisis, with the closing of ports to rescued boat people; a diplomatic crisis, with the feud initiated between France and Italy; a political crisis, with the compromising of the stability of the German government; an institutional crisis, with the subversion of the regulation of the Schengen space regarding free circulation; a legal crisis, with the disrespect of the principles of the Geneva Convention on Refugees; a moral crisis, with the withering away of reputedly foundational common values and sentiments in Europe; and more arguably, a demographic crisis, which seemed to be fantasied rather than documented but was definitely real in discourses and representations.

So, what lessons of general significance can we learn from this series of crises following the refusal to let the Aquarius dock? First, crises create both a temporal and a symbolic rupture: they provoke an acceleration of time implying a need for urgent action (the transformation of immigration policies); and they generate meanings influencing the course of events (the idea of an imminent menace due to the unstoppable flow of migrants). They therefore provide a contrast with the normal order of things, which they simultaneously uncover and alter. Second, crises have an objective and a subjective component: they are produced by a number of actual determinants (security, economic and environmental factors are responsible for population displacements); but they are also constructed by a variety of social agents (politicians, activists, journalists, scientists contribute to make them exist and to give them the form they have). They consequently should neither be taken for granted nor be dismissed as mere deception. Third, crises have social and political functions: they can dramatize or, on the contrary, resolve a situation, whatever this resolution is (the danger incurred by migrants crossing the Mediterranean is laid bare whereas the façade of unity of European countries is restored); and they serve interests and are therefore instrumentalized for goals independent from what they are supposed to be (populist parties get electoral advantages from the disorder created). They thus tell much more than what they may indicate at first sight. Fourth, they obscure as much as they unveil: they manifest a certain state of contemporary societies (the success of far-right ideas

and the power of their proponents, which come down to the legitimization of state xenophobia); but they also mask certain of their realities (the alleged migrant crisis is in fact a crisis of asylum). There are indeed always multiple layers to crises, opening to multiple interpretations. In sum, crises are complex objects, through which it is possible to make sense of the world.

One striking fact about them is how much their presence has invaded both our public and private lives. An online search, which I conducted in *The New York Times* Archive one day of August 2017 as I was beginning to reflect on this topic, and which I limited to the articles published in the newspaper during the previous 24 hours, provided 36 occurrences of the word either in the title or in the description of articles. They included a "diplomatic crisis" ongoing with North Korea, a "political crisis" in Venezuela, a "cash crisis" in Yemen, a "refugee crisis" in India, a "citizenship crisis" in Australia, an "opioid crisis" in the United States, a global "doping crisis" in track and field sports, and even a mention of the "identity crisis" of a character in the television series *Game of Thrones.* This list, which is more evocative of Jorge Luis Borges' fictitious Chinese encyclopedia with its hilarious classification of animals than of material for a potential research program, should however not be taken lightly. The word "crisis" is part of the common vocabulary and shared imaginary of contemporary societies. One can regard it as a sign of the times, this expression being understood in its literal sense: it signals something about the present. We thus live in a world *of* crises. But does this mean that we also inhabit a world *in* crisis? We should certainly be prudent in establishing an equivalence between the two – between the world and its representation – and rather think in terms of correspondence.

So, does the ubiquity of the notion of crisis, its self-evidence, its rhetorical effectivity and its social success signify a new "age of anxiety," in the words of W. H. Auden' 1947 eponymous eglogue – anxiety about the world and us, which remains to be specified? I will address this question from a dual perspective. I will first propose a philological exploration of the development and intersection of the two notions, showing the relevance of such exercise to unpack the historical link between crisis and critique. I will then turn to a sociological and anthropological inquiry, suggesting ways to address critically the dual question of a world of crises and of a world in crisis.

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The word “crisis” has its origins in the Indo-European root *krei*. In particular, in ancient Greek, the verb *κρῖνω* (krinō) means to separate, to distinguish, to choose as well as to judge, to decide, to resolve, to interpret (Bailly 1935: 1137). It thus implies a dual aspect of discrimination among ideas, things, people, and of determination in front of a situation, a conflict, a crime. It has an analytic dimension (to separate) and a normative one (to judge). Derived from it, the noun *κρίσις* (krisis) means the act of distinguishing and of deciding as well as the crucial phase of a war or of a disease, the two meanings being closely connected: it is at this dramatic juncture that the right judgment and relevant action prove determining. Two elements are therefore linked and frequently confused: the existence of a pivotal moment in the evolution of an event (we would describe it today as critical, in the sense of qualifying a crisis) and the evaluation of this event in order to adjudicate (we would also define it as critical, but this time in the sense of developing a critique). From an etymological perspective, the critical event calls for a critical interpretation.

According to Reinhart Koselleck’s classic essay in conceptual history (2006), there were three contexts in which the verb *κρῖνω* (krinō) or the noun *κρίσις* (krisis) were generally used: legal, religious and medical. In the legal realm, they meant balancing the pros and cons, differentiating between good and bad, and settling the case, which could concern an offense, an election, a battle: they carried a positive value associated with justice. In the religious field, they generally referred to the Last Judgment of the Christian doctrine, with the idea that the ultimate determination between salvation and damnation could be anticipated by one’s conduct during one’s life: they consequently involved both individual conscience and collective destiny. In the medical domain, as represented by the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, they indicated simultaneously the juncture in the development of an illness that could result in life or death for the patient and the decision made by the physician which could influence this outcome. Both could be recurrent as the disease developed.

From ancient Greek, the word “crisis” was eventually adopted in the various European languages but it is only from the seventeenth century on that its meaning was progressively extended beyond the religious and medical realms. The introduction of the term to describe

political events in the eighteenth century is remarkable as it signals the emergence of a philosophy of history, which offers numerous variations. It points out to the acknowledgment of moments of transition when the breakdown of the present marks a rupture with the past and announces changes for the future, with possible teleological implications. In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1979: 158) wrote in a premonitory way that "we are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolutions." Seventeen years later, the French Revolution started. This event became the paradigmatic case of a crisis leading to a drastic transformation of the state of the world, in which Thomas Paine, whose journal was titled *The Crisis*, optimistically saw the promise of the end of tyranny and oppression, while Edmund Burke mournfully deplored the destruction of the traditional social order and legitimate political institutions. Interestingly, the use of the word to designate economic events, which has become so widespread today that it sometimes does not even need to be specified by an adjective, occurred relatively late, in the nineteenth century, with the parallel rise of capitalism and political economy, the former being accompanied by recurrent crashes, the latter being used to explain them. Whereas the new idea of the cyclical character of economic crises became commonplace among theorists, their reading of them differed radically. For liberals, such as Julius Wolf, they were necessary events with positive effects as they corrected the deficiencies of the system. For Marx and Engels, on the contrary, they signified the demise of capitalism and rendered the coming of revolutions inexorable. Finally, in the twentieth century, the word "crisis" pursued its generalization, with a dissemination in the moral and intellectual worlds, especially during the interwar period, with, most notably, Paul Valéry's (1977) *Crisis of the Mind* and Edmund Husserl's (1970) *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* offering tragic perspectives on the values and knowledge of their time, respectively. But, as mentioned earlier, almost any human activity or social fact can today potentially be described as being in crisis.

As was shown by Nietzsche, philology has much to teach us about our present, and notably about the buried meanings of the words we use and of the imaginaries we share. With respect to crisis, what can we therefore learn from this outline of the etymology of the term and the development of the idea? At least three things.

First, the original meaning of the word indissociably links a critical moment and the critical assessment of it, or said otherwise, crisis and critique. Contemporary crises inextricably associate the two dimensions: there is an actual situation, which is considered to be problematic, and there is the account of it, which makes it exist through various forms of argumentation and representation. Both these processes are crucial: the evidence of the crisis has to be established but the crisis has to be exposed to become imaginable. The ecological crisis is thus made possible by the conjunction of the emission of greenhouse gases causing global warming and inadequate policies aggravating it, and of the measurement and interpretation of the phenomenon by scientists, the production of a language, of tables and graphs, of images and narratives.

Second, a tension that traverses the religious and medical uses of the word develops into the modern age between two philosophies of history, with two contrasted representations of crisis as a unique decisive moment or as multiple and possibly recurrent events. The first version, teleological, in its secularized variations regarding the economic realm offer opposite views on the fate of capitalism: the millenarian *Grand Soir* and the Second International's *Lutte finale* promise its irremediable collapse, whereas the assertive "end of history" announces its ultimate victory. But it has more mundane expressions through the definitive diagnoses formulated by so-called declinists, for whom crises signal the inevitable termination of an era when things were better. The second version, pragmatic, is typically illustrated by the notion of cyclical economic crises that are supposed to regulate the flaws of capitalism and ultimately improve its efficacy and profitability. It operates as a normalization of the repeated phenomena of crash or recession, thus avoiding major changes in the system responsible for them and trivializing their human consequences. As shown by Adam Tooze, the shock of the 2008 financial crisis has been profitable in the long run to banks, companies and shareholders, while its effects in terms of eviction, pauperization, and marginalization of vulnerable populations remain largely ignored. Today, not only does the periodic foretelling of a new coming crisis not generate political responses to prevent it, but deregulatory policies even tend to precipitate it.

Third, the contemporary understanding of the word and the idea of crisis is the result of relatively recent developments. In this sense, viewing the state of the world in terms of crisis, that is, of dramatic ruptures into the normal course of things that will bring about serious disorder

and call for urgent solution, would be a signature of Western modernity. However, the lack of a term does not necessarily indicate the absence of the notion that it names, and we have too little knowledge of the way dramatic moments such as the 1348 Great Plague in Europe or the 1521 fall of the Aztec Empire were experienced and represented to be certain that a sense of crisis was absent. But in fact, what authorizes most contemporary scholars to affirm that crisis is a modern concept is that they indissociably connect it with critique. And they do so in two ways.

In Koselleck's (1988) *Critique and Crisis*, the development of critical thinking is the far-reaching consequence of the ascent of absolutism to put an end to the wars of religion, as was already argued by Hobbes, since a separation was then established between individual conscience and sovereign power. But instead of remaining in the private domain it had been assigned, critique progressively expanded into the public sphere, thus shifting from moral judgement to political contestation, eventually provoking a crisis, which is epitomized in France by the 1789 Revolution and the decapitation of the monarch. In Michel Foucault's (2003) "What is Critique?", conversely, it is the crisis caused by the excesses of the practices of governing by the King as well as by the Church and the discontent they generated which is at the source of critique as the art of not being governed in this way. This approach is explicitly inscribed in the lineage of Kant's "What is Enligthenment?" which is a protest against the restrictions on freedom of his time and a call for the emancipation of human beings from their state of minority. In other words, we could say that, for Koselleck, critique preceded crisis and was destructive, while for Foucault, crisis called for critique and was productive. The opposition between the two is in part methodological, as the Begriffsgeschichte of the former is quite distinct from the genealogical approach of the latter, and in part ideological, as one denounces the Enlightenment while the other one praises it. One could however wonder with Talal Asad (2013) whether making critique a signature of Western modernity is not ignoring older traditions, from Diogenes the Cynic to Étienne de la Boétie, as well as traditions elsewhere, for instance in the rich heritage of Arab and Farsi thinking or Muslim and Jewish theology.

Thus far, the etymological and genealogical approach has mostly allowed me to explore the complex relations between crisis and critique, their concomitant emergence, the lasting traces of their original meanings, and their problematic interaction in modern times. But I have

yet to show how critique can help us apprehend better what we call crises. A sociological and anthropological approach will contribute to this endeavor. Indeed, we can assume that sociology will contribute to our comprehension the world *of* crises (plural), that is, the existence of crises in the world, whereas anthropology will advance our understanding of the world *in* crisis (singular), that is, the centrality of the language of crisis in the world.

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So, a world of crises. According to our philological inquiry, in order to exist, 1 a crisis must logically combine two elements: the presence of a situation that disrupts the supposedly normal order of things and its recognition as such. Let us call the former an objective fact and the latter a subjective one. As a general statement, we can say that any crisis can be analyzed from the dual perspective of its social production (what caused the problem?) and its social construction (how did it come to be a problem?). In many cases, the two anticipated elements – the problem and its problematization, to use Foucault's wording – are thus combined to engender the crisis. But what happens when it is not the case? What happens when the problem is not problematized, or when the problematization does not correspond to an actual problem? Think, in the crisis of the Aquarius, of the lack of mention of the thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean by the European Council document, and conversely, of the dramatization of the arrivals of migrants contradicted by statistical data. In the first configuration, that of an alarming situation which does not get recognition, can we still speak of a crisis? That is, can a crisis be considered to exist without being named or perceived? In the second configuration, that of an alarming imaginary which does not rely on a matter of fact, what does such disconnection tell us about this crisis? That is, how to interpret a crisis with no evident ground? To answer these two series of questions, we have to take seriously the making of crises. Through which processes, involving which politics of truth, do crises come, or not, into being?

The relevant concept here is that of authorship. In his *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, Émile Benveniste (2016: 429-430) traces the Latin meaning of the word *auctor*, the one "who founds, who guarantees, and finally who is the author," with the primary

sense of "cause to appear," and he adds that "this is how the abstract *auctoritas* acquired its full force" as "a gift which is reserved to a handful of men who can literally 'bring to existence'." Indeed, "every word pronounced with *authority* determines a change in the world." But according to Alain Rey (2006: I, 265), *auctor* also gave *auctorare,* to guarantee on the basis of this authority, and from there, to allow, to legitimize, to authorize. In the case of crises, to interpret the first configuration, that of crises made invisible (drowned migrants in large numbers, for instance), one has to ask who has the authority to declare the existence of a crisis, and who does not, whereas to analyze the second configuration, that of crises grossly fabricated (exaggeration of the reality of immigration, for example), one has to ask what the affirmation of the existence of a crisis authorizes, and conversely, what it censures.

Consider the problem of police violence as an illustration of a crisis made invisible. 1 When I conducted an ethnography of law enforcement and more specifically of anticrime units in the banlieues of Paris (Fassin 2013), I could hardly ignore it, not only for its empirical presence during my fieldwork, but also because I started my research a few months before the 2005 riots erupted in the whole country in reaction to the death of two adolescents chased by police officers and ended it a few weeks before the 2007 more local but more fierce riot started subsequently to the death of two youths run down by a police car in what looked like a deliberate accident. In fact, since the 1980s, nearly each time someone was killed as a result of an interaction with law enforcement agents – this someone being almost always a young man of African origin – urban disorders occurred. By contrast, in the United States, where multiple serious episodes of civil unrest had taken place in the 1960s in Watts, Detroit, Baltimore or Newark, the situation had apparently been pacified in disadvantaged neighborhoods during the past half century, with the notable exception of the 1992 Los Angeles riots after the acquittal of the officers who had assaulted Rodney King. The remarkable dissimilarity between the two countries led several renowned scholars to elaborate hypotheses to account for it. Then, in August 2014, Michael Brown was shot dead by a police officer. The Ferguson riots started, the Black Lives Matter movement developed, and as the killing of mostly young African American men by law enforcement agents made the news on a quasi-daily basis, protests and sometimes riots multiplied across the country. The crisis in policing became a major issue, leading to public

debates, federal investigations, reform proposals, and defiant reactions from police departments and unions. Studies revealed that on average more than three people were killed by law enforcement agents every day. But beyond these tragic events, the experience of a majority of black people, especially men, with the police was one of ordinary physical, verbal and moral abuse, with harassment via stop and frisk, humiliation by demeaning comments and racist slurs, recurrent citations and summons for low-level offenses generating fines, fees and sometimes jail for non-payment. Prima facie, we could think that the police crisis in the United States typically combines the two elements previously evoked, objective and subjective: a situation of multifaceted violence and its identification by the society at large. And we could argue that there was no such crisis before Ferguson because there was no problematization of the problem or, to put it straightforwardly, no perception of the issue. But this reasoning would ignore the fact that, as multiple testimonies reveal, this awareness did exist among African American communities long before it became mainstream knowledge. It existed through literature, organizations, intellectuals, and multiple other channels – but was simply ignored by the majority. African Americans often expressed their surprise that people would suddenly discover what they had always known by experience: the banality of police abuses against them. The problematization of the issue had indeed been socially and racially segmented.

The question therefore becomes: Who has the authority to name a crisis? Obviously, not everyone does. Indeed, the recognition of a situation as crisis can be disregarded on the grounds that it comes from a minority who has little access to the public sphere. But evidence of this disparity in authorship over the word crisis, that is, in the ability to bring a crisis into existence, is not limited to inequalities within countries; it is also true for inequalities between countries. In 2015, at the height of the so-called migrant crisis in Europe, one country had more asylum seekers than the whole European continent. It was South Africa, whose number of persons applying for refugee status exceeded one million, the largest proportion being from Zimbabwe. Relative to its population it was 10 times more than Europe. But who ever heard about a migrant crisis in South Africa? Yet, in the research I carried out there during that period (Fassin, Willelm-Solomon and Segatti 2017), I realized how critical the situation was for the authorities of the country, torn between respect of international law and flare-up of xenophobic violence, and

above all for the migrants, who illegally occupied abandoned buildings, survived with the meager sums obtained from begging, and constantly feared police raids in their squats and harassment in the street. But neither the South African government nor the Zimbabwean asylum seekers could make their crisis come into being in the global public sphere. They did not have the authority to do so. A critique of crises should therefore not only question the conditions of possibility of crises, but also their conditions of impossibility. What are the unsettling or harrowing situations that never come into being for lack of an authorized agency? One task of the critic is to give voice to those who do not have authority to have their crisis acknowledged and to thus contribute to bringing to existence untold crises: the crises of the dominated.

But symmetrically, there are crises that are fabricated by the dominant, in the sense that they do not rely on the facts that are allegedly at stake, either because they merely do not exist or, more often, because they are distorted. On the 14th of July 2001, the French President Jacques Chirac began the ritual televised interview for the celebration of Bastille Day by a long evocation of what he described as a major rise in crime and violence, declaring that it had reached an unbearable level as people in cities and even the countryside lived in "fear", a word that he uttered seven times. Speaking of "people being assaulted and young women being raped," he interpreted this situation as a consequence of the "lacking authority of the state," and called for a "tolerance zero" policy. This interview is considered to have launched and definitely oriented the presidential campaign, which for the first time under the Fifth Republic was focused on "insecurity." Yet, remarkably, there did not exist any statistical evidence of an increase in crime, for which several indicators even showed a decline over the years. Only anecdotal facts abundantly covered by the media and commented by right-wing politicians could explain the sudden progression of the so-called "sentiment of insecurity" among people who, for most of them, had never been personally exposed to any such violence. Rather than the famous Tocqueville paradox according to which the more an unpleasant phenomenon declines, the less it is accepted, as many commentators suggested, it was more trivially a matter of mere manipulation of the opinion for political purposes. And the promotion of fear that had been initiated had the expected effect: the President was reelected. Significantly, his first campaign, five years earlier, had been on what he had designated as the "social fracture" between the poor

and the wealthy. The shift from inequality to insecurity marked a crucial transformation in the public sphere. As economic disparities, which had been deepening since the 1980s, were not addressed by the government, the latter turned to the war on crime. Law and order substituted for social justice. During the following decade of right-wing government, prison population increased by 52 percent leading to an extreme overcrowding the appalling consequences of which I have analyzed in my ethnography of a correctional facility (Fassin 2016). This dramatic evolution in incarceration rates is not, however, equitably distributed across the social spectrum. There is an increase in convictions for minor offenses such as marijuana possession, driving with suspended license and misdemeanor, while convictions for economic and financial crime decline. Thus, the social categories affected by the growing economic disparities are the same that are specifically targeted by the new policies. The declared security crisis had consequently for effect the invisibilization of inequalities, the criminalization of the disadvantaged, and ultimately the substitution of the growing penal state for the waning welfare state.

The general question that can be drawn from this case is therefore: What does the naming of a crisis authorize, and what does it censure? The fact of not only labeling it but also interpreting it gives the power to transform the representation of the world and act in consequence according to one's interests or to the interests of the group with whom one is allied. Those who are granted such authority define the problems, decide the stakes and determine the solutions. By doing so, they discard alternative ways of construing, explaining and responding to the situations faced. An interesting case is that of humanitarianism whose language has imposed itself in recent years as an effective way of characterizing crises. Describing a situation as a humanitarian crisis can justify a military intervention, as was the case in Libya in 2011 when the newly voted United Nations doctrine called Responsibility to Protect was invoked for the first time as Benghazi was allegedly the theater of a forthcoming massacre – a threat later known to have been forged. Conversely, it can avoid to take side in a conflict, as is the case today in Yemen where the depiction of the civil war as a humanitarian crisis, which it is undeniably, allows Western states to affirm their neutrality while eluding their own responsibility in the massacre of populations – since they actively support the coalition's deadly operations. Speaking of a humanitarian crisis calls for immediate responses and gives a moral tonality to the politics deployed. More generally,

referring to a situation as a crisis always brings into play both a temporality, that of urgency, and an affectivity, which can take a wide range from empathy to fear. Both this temporality and this affectivity generally serve interests and strengthen powers. It is therefore another task of the critic to wonder who benefit from the crisis and what their hidden agendas are.

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So much for the world *of* crises. But what about the world *in* crisis? It would seem strangely contrarian to deny that there is today a general sense that the present moment offers certain particular traits in terms of the quality, intensity and spread of its crises, whether one considers the late recognition of human imprint on the planet's sustainability, the amplification of forced migrations caused by conflicts, persecution or poverty, the multiplication of radical religious, ethnic or nationalist movements, the deepening of inequality within and across societies, the questioning of knowledge, truth and simply facts associated with the dissemination of conspiracy theories, the rise of xenophobic populism and its electoral successes. But should we assume that all these crises have a common denominator, let alone a common determinant? Can their multiplication be reduced to a sort of meta-crisis that would encompass the variety of specific crises discussed until now?

There is a double paradox here: one semantic, the other epistemological. First, while crises have been construed on the background of and in contrast with normalcy (a crisis is a rupture in the normal order of things), a world in crisis would imply the normalization of crisis (there would be no outside of crisis, it would become the new normal). Second, whereas I have argued that crises were the result of a social construction (critique should therefore uncover what is at stake in the process, in particular in terms of power relations and hidden agendas), the idea of permanent crisis would tend to essentialize it (as an immanent production of contemporary societies). The critical theory of the Frankfurt School has attempted to surmount these paradoxes by thinking in terms of "social pathologies" rather than "crisis" and by giving those what Axel Honneth (2009: 21) calls "an explosive charge" derived from their "socially effective rationality" and therefore potential for change. To remain in coherence with my

approach up to this point, it is however a different path – critical social science rather than critical theory – that I will follow.

The ubiquity of the representation of the world in terms of crisis can be seen as a form of life in the sense that Wittgenstein gave to this phrase, that is, an agreement in the ordinary language that allows human beings to share common understandings in most of the situations they encounter. When we speak of crisis, we think that we comprehend something of the world and that this comprehension is shared. When we hear journalists, politicians, social scientists or lay people describing a given situation as a crisis, we apprehend more or less what they are talking about. From the perspective I propose, the question, then, is less to wonder whether what they say about a specific crisis or a possible general crisis is true, or not, than to question the sort of truths that are delivered through their enunciation, as Janet Roitman (2014: 94) writes in her *Anti-Crisis*. Critique resides indeed in the deconstruction of crisis as a given. It goes further than what Jacques Derrida writes in the context of the economic recession of the early 1980s: "The representation of crisis and the rhetoric it organizes always have at least this purpose: to determine, in order to limit it, a more serious and more formless threat, one which is in fact faceless and normless. By determining it as crisis, one tames it, domesticates it, neutralizes it." While the naming of a situation as crisis can have this reassuring function of cognitive appropriation of uncertainty, it also has other social and political functions. Understanding who has the authority to articulate the existence of a crisis, and who does not, and what this diagnosis authorizes, and with which purposes, allows us to recognize that some of the most serious issues of our time are not phrased in terms of crisis, on one side, and that the making of crises obey logics having little to do with the problems at stake, on the other. Thus, to better apprehend the contemporary crisis, I suggest three methodological precautions.

First, we should avoid the singularization of crisis, which comes down to subsuming all crises under one single phenomenon. It seems more heuristic to specify distinct crises and analyze how they relate with each other. If the United States is considered to be confronted to a major crisis of its governance and even identity under the present administration, we have to go beyond this immediate apprehension and connect the democratic issue, which is characterized by the disenfranchisement of 6 million citizens, the abstention of half of the constituency, the

financialization of election campaigns, the representatives' dependency on lobbies, and the politicization of the judicial institution; the social question, which is expressed through the deepening of inequalities in all aspects of life, the marginalization of minorities, and the stigmatization of immigrants; and the flourishing of the economic and financial system, which mostly benefits a powerful minority. The crisis is neither general nor universal, and the election of the current President did not create, as is often said, but instead revealed the democratic issue and social question by turning them into a crisis.

Second, we should caution against presentist tendencies, which manifest themselves in the implicit idea that we live a unique moment when our societies are facing one ultimate crisis. There is a long history of such moments, and the twentieth century, with two world wars, several genocides, a brutal decolonization, a major financial crash, has had its share of them. Definitive diagnoses and gloomy predictions abound in the writings of intellectuals repetitively depicting a tragic present and announcing a crepuscular future. There are certainly specificities in the present moment to which we must remain attentive, with the threats of climate change over the most vulnerable populations, the seemingly inextinguishable greed of capitalism, and the progress of nationalist and xenophobic ideologies, but they do not call for a teleological reading.

Third, we should beware of an ethnocentric perspective, which has been all too common in the conversation on crisis in the Western world. Most interpretations of the perils of the present moment came after two unexpected events, the vote for Brexit in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, concomitant with the rise of authoritarian regimes in Europe, while the so-called migrant crisis was exclusively seen from a Western perspective as if the global South was on the verge of invading the global North. But what do we know about the crisis lived in African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or the Central African Republic, where civil wars have caused millions of victims? How can we think of crisis in places where people say that they have not experienced anything else for decades, such as Argentina which has recurrently been confronted with economic instability for most of the past 80 years or Palestine whose inhabitants have been under Israeli occupation and oppression for 70 years? And how should we reflect on contexts in which the discourse on crisis is censured as is the case in China? We therefore need to provincialize the Western crisis, and for instance

remember that 9/11, before being a tragic attack in the United States in 2001, had been in 1973 a military coup which terminated democracy in Chile and had received the support of the government of the United States. A crisis can sometimes conceal another one.

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With these three caveats in mind, we can understand how difficult it is to answer in a non-disappointing way the question of whether we are entering one of these delicate moments in history when "the old is dying and the new cannot be born," in Gramsci's words? Social scientists are neither oracles nor prophets. They can only scrupulously examine the world as it is, faithfully account for what people have to say about it, mindfully formulate what they have understood of it, and ultimately open their analysis to public discussion.