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Crisis: Contexts, Processes, Subjectivity,
Emplacement, Embodiment

Crisi: contesti, processi, soggettività,
posizionamenti, incorporazioni

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Introduction

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“Crisis” is a polysemic concept which lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations that depend both on the types of ideological and cultural approaches used to give it meaning, and on the usage that has been made of it to make sense of historical events, institutional transformations, structural, material and cultural changes against diverse, volatile and often antagonistic social and economic environments.

While the term and the notion of “crisis” originate in ancient Greek culture, such accretion of usages and meanings has been steadily building up since the late modern period, becoming central, over the last two centuries or so, to many disciplines, practices and fields of knowledge. In recent decades, especially within the domain of politics and political communication, “crisis” has become an ever more instrumental cultural and rhetorical idiom and a productive metaphor, pivotal to “structuring, narrativizing and naturalizing cultural transformation” by means of “mini-narrations” and “ideologically charged plots” (Nünning 2012, 37, 62-63). Consequently, the term has pervasively permeated also the daily lexicon of public and interpersonal communication and is currently used to cover all sorts of occurrences and events. These deeply intertextured dynamics have eroded the criteria of unpredictability, extraordinariness, interruption and trauma associated with the traditional semantics of “crisis”.

As relevant scholarship pertaining to every branch of knowledge has long established and widely popularized, the word “crisis” derives from the Greek noun *krisis*, which originally marked a turning point in a disease, preliminary to either recovery or death (Koselleck 2006; Runciman 2016; De Cauwer 2018), and is related to the verb *krinein*, which means to separate, evaluate, discern. It is precisely in this sense that the term also intersects the semantic field of “criticism”, understood as a rigorous practice of investigation, discrimination and judgement

people resort to when confronted with factual or perceived conditions of enhanced instability and crisis. Paul Crosthwaite (2011, 1), among others, develops this nexus by discussing Paul de Man's assertion that "the notion of crisis and that of criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis" (de Man [1967] 1983, 8).

It is, of course, impossible to decouple contemporary understandings of the idea of crisis from Reinhart Koselleck's seminal account of its nature, emergence, development, inherent ambivalence and ambiguous positioning in relation to time and history – as a notion pointing to either "an acute moment of choice or bifurcation of possible futures", or "an ongoing state of uncertainty or potential peril" (Runciman 2016, 3-4).

As Roberta Garruccio thoroughly retraces in the collaborative essay inaugurating this collection, since the 1950s Koselleck has stood out as *the* conceptual historian of "crisis", moulding it into a tool of historiographic investigation and a way of interpreting historical time in modernity (Koselleck 1972, 2009, 2012; Gräf 2021). Over the years, the notion of crisis – with its extraordinary ubiquity and performativity, its ability to penetrate different areas of signification and morph according to the needs of multiple discursive and political agendas – has commanded the attention of many thinkers and intellectuals, as Andrea Ampollini cogently discusses in this issue. His essay puts into sharp focus the nexus of time and crisis and provides an in-depth analysis of "the history of the concept of crisis and its links with the main temporal models of European modernity, paying particular attention to Marxist thought and to some of the most significant critiques that have been addressed to it". Ampollini devotes expert attention, in the process, to Reinhart Koselleck's groundbreaking and lifelong work on crisis. At the same time, the author investigates the roles, in the development of the concept of "crisis" and its associations, of the Judeo-Christian tradition, of Marx's attention to "the existence of different temporal strata, within which 'crisis' does not produce any forced outcome", and of Friedrich Nietzsche's and Oswald Spengler's resistance to "faith in historical progress".

Among the intellectuals who have turned their attention to the concept of crisis, pride of place is often attributed to Antonio Gramsci, whose much quoted formulation of the concept has proved to be a decisive reference point in the development of the crisis paradigm, in particular within the domains of critical theory and political philosophy: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the

new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci [1930] 1971, 276). Recorded in his *Prison Notebooks* in 1930, Gramsci’s definition continues to speak to our times with undiminished topicality, highlighting our continuing difficulty in imagining the world anew whenever a new fault line fractures the plane of the present. In Stuart Hall’s later elaboration, “crisis” is further denoted as a moment “when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, ‘fuse in a ruptural unity’” (Hall and Massey 2010, 57).

In the wake of the revaluation of Gramscian thought within the field of cultural studies, worth considering is also Lawrence Grossberg’s elaboration on Hall’s definition of “conjuncture”, which, evoked as a theoretical frame also in Michela Bonato’s essay in this volume, cogently links the key notions of crisis and conjuncture in an indissoluble nexus of instability, contradictions, and “a sense of social crisis [...], often experienced as a kind of historical disruption or unsettling” (Grossberg 2015, 224).

Almost a century after Gramsci, as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, a time experientially and affectively perceived as fraught with risks and tensions, we must acknowledge that the term “crisis” has pervasively entered and colonized public discourse and the global imaginary, even though it is often used improperly or instrumentally to serve multiple and often clashing agendas, or to naturalize the feeling of “being at risk” to an inflationary and therefore banalizing effect.

Against the backdrop of anxious transformations and accelerations marking the transition from the end of the twentieth century to the opening of the third millennium, the idea of crisis has come to be actualized, and “spectacularized” (Chouliaraki 2006, 2013), as it were, by becoming indexed to specific “apical” events and thus acquiring canonical status under the rubrics of the “destructive sublime” or the “end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it” paradigm: such were September 11, the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, the global migration crisis, the crisis of western democracies, the demise of rational communication and scientific cultures, climate change and Covid-19, to mention but a few. In this sense, the term (and conceptual metaphor) “crisis” often came to intersect, cohabit with, and occasionally get the better of other politically charged and meaning-making cultural and rhetorical idioms (Furedi 2007, 242, 250), such as “war” and “risk”, which often act as affective cognates of crisis (as in the context of the “war on terror”)

within the discourse of the “world risk society” (Beck 1999), and, most conspicuously, during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the multi-symptomatic humanitarian, energy and environmental crises precipitated by the invasion war in Ukraine.

Today, “crisis” seems to refer to a conjuncture when a constantly changing and accelerated reality is always ahead of the analytical categories which are summoned to dissect it, understand it and come to terms with it, and when the proliferations of suffixes such as “pre-”, “post-”, “de-”, “neo-” are there to signify involvement in “momentous systemic change” while being “not sure what new state we have entered” (Crouch 2011, 3). The very meaning of the term “crisis” seems to refer no longer to a “turning point”, a paradigm shift towards disaster or a better life, but to denote a situation which seems to admit no way out and causes us to complicate the notion of crisis and associate it with the concepts of “emergency”, “risk”, “threat”, “danger” and “catastrophe”. The word “crisis” has in fact become so ubiquitous and multidimensional that, in particular when incorrectly used, it takes on an elusive and unstable – when not utterly confusing – meaning, the effect of which is to enhance the feeling that we are living in a constant state of crisis and “will have to get used to living with the crisis because crisis is here to stay” (Bauman e Bordoni 2014, 7). To borrow Giorgio Agamben’s words, “crisis” has become the “dominant paradigm” of global politics, or, less emphatically, the “motto of modern politics” (Agamben 2005, 2), not to mention Slavoj Žižek’s much quoted statement that permanent crisis has become “simply a way of life” (Žižek 2012, 32).

Such “low-definition” semantics of “crisis” – prioritizing associations with conditions of extraordinariness, exceptionality, and unpredictability to the detriment of its rich etymological potential – has been forcefully denounced by radical critical theory as being instrumental to fostering a mechanism of naturalization of (often unfocused) anxiety which serves as a nurturing ground for globalized and specific policies of governmentality. The origins and consequences of these processes – as well as the intellectual roots and the latest developments of critical resistance to these practices – are at the heart of Roberto Pedretti’s essay, in this issue. Building, among others, on Antonio Gramsci, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Sandro Mezzadra, Brett Neilson, and, in particular, on Grossberg, Pedretti argues that today the crisis shows its organic nature by characterizing itself as a permanent element, a background noise of varying intensity committed to constantly occupying the social horizon and political space, and providing, in this way, the ideal

environment for the emergence of a new form of normality, increasingly based on exception and emergency. Crises, therefore, require strong and immediate decisions, increasingly expressed in terms of prevention, control, prophylaxis, risk management, repression, which amount to a “sophisticated form of hegemony” actualized through “the de-politicization and naturalization of the crisis”. Such processes of trivialization and normalization, however, do not bar, according to the author, the possibility of producing the conditions to imagine incisive forms of resistance and opposition (Pedretti; our translation).

In addition to the perspectives of critical and political theory, cultural studies, history of philosophy, cultural history, hegemony studies, to mention but a few, addressing “crisis” (partly) as a discursive, imaginative, and affective construction is also a founding premise of analytical and ideological approaches to this category pertaining to the domains of linguistics, critical discourse analysis, narrative and metaphor analysis, political communication and literary studies. These aspects, which are further explored by Lidia De Michelis in the collaborative essay written with Roberta Garruccio in this issue, are essential to understanding how “crisis” comes to be rescued from its denotative instability and condition of latency through the inscription of narratological elements. Particularly relevant, in this context, is Colin Hay’s description of crises as “above all public constructions” (Hay 1996), that “require an active process of narration, in which the ‘raw materials’ of crisis are bound together and given meaning” (Hay 2010, 466) through forceful rhetorical cohesion and by evoking fearful imaginaries. Crises are, therefore, particularly productive in mobilizing public opinion and legitimizing unpopular, or at least controversial and opaque policies and practices (De Michelis 2017, 256).

Garruccio’s contribution draws, in particular, on a recent collection of essays that creates a dialogue between historians and political scientists to consider whether, and in what way, since the beginning of the twenty-first century the concept of crisis has triggered and nurtured new ways of thinking about politics, transcending the self-evidence of the concept and embracing also a *longue durée* perspective (Cuttica *et al.* 2021). The analysis has been inspired, as well, by recent research that merges memory studies and economic history in addressing the specific affective legacy and environments of financial crises (Cassis and Schenk 2021). Throughout the essay, American anthropologist Janet Roitman’s influential study *Anti-crisis* (2013) has provided an invaluable frame to illuminate how also our notion of normalcy is shaped and constructed

as a result of the events we refer to and experience as crises (Roitman 2013).

A review of multidisciplinary scholarly writing addressing the discursive functions and characteristics, the rhetoric, narrativity and manipulative potential of crisis as a political trope, is of course beyond the scope of this brief introduction. But, by way of a conclusion, mention must be made, at least, of some recent challengingly interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to the understanding and conceptual mapping of the elusive and multifarious geography of “crisis” that share, at least in part, an interest in the narrative, discursive, metaphorical, imaginative, literary and critical construction of crises. Some of these are discussed in greater detail by De Michelis in this issue, with a focus on the chronotopic approach elaborated by Maria Boletsi *et al.* (2021), which includes a fascinating analysis of the “grammar” and “genres” of crises, Ansgar Nünning’s chapter on metaphors and crisis in Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (2012), and the two interview-based books by Stijn De Cauwer (2018) and Poul F. Kjaer and Niklas Olsen (2016). They help to establish a compelling interdisciplinary conversation, inviting the readers, in Maria Boletsi’s words, “to consider how contemporary crises – economic, environmental, social, political, humanitarian – trigger practices of resistance, and how they foster or foreclose visions of the future” (Boletsi *et al.* 2021, 2).

The choice of “crisis”, and of the keywords “contexts”, “processes”, “subjectivity”, “emplacement”, and “embodiment” as the focus of this issue of *Languages Cultures Mediation – LCM*, stems from a seminar held in the Doctoral Programme in Linguistic, Literary and Intercultural Studies in European and Extra-European Perspectives of the University of Milan in November 2021, focusing on communicating and historicizing crisis in its multiple manifestations. As PhD students and colleagues overwhelmingly seemed to respond by prioritizing the crisis/Covid-19 nexus, a special issue of the online academic journal *Altre Modernità (Other Modernities)* entirely devoted to the novel coronavirus perspective was put into the pipeline, with a view, however, to launch a second call for papers meant to investigate, and start a conversation on, the notion of “crisis” through the lens of the manifold analytical, narratological, affective, literary, linguistic and discursive strategies which are being developed across different cultural, historical and geographical environments. At the same time, we suggested contributors could

rewardingly explore relations regarding process, affect, context, subjectivity, emplacement and embodiment, which we deem to be particularly relevant and fruitful axes intersecting and connecting diverse research areas and particularly apt to foster interdisciplinary developments.

This issue of *LCM*, hence, elicited essays pertaining to a variety of interests – such as, but not exclusively, cultural and literary studies, history, geography, anthropology, sociology, law – which might help shed new light on the processes of contamination, hybridization and globalization under way in contemporary society, as well as on the communicative, linguistic and cultural mediation dynamics on which they rely. Contributors were invited to highlight the cultural dimensions of “crisis”, or of particular crises, related to multiple geographical, historical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, both from the perspective of the present and within a *longue durée* framework.

Consequently, the authors participating in this issue explore different nodes and inflections of the semantic and ideological knots represented by “crisis”. Answering an open call – none of the contributors, to the exception of De Michelis and Garruccio were part of the original doctoral project –, they inevitably do not orchestrate their arguments according to a predetermined frame, neither do they exhaust the full range of thematic and analytic possibilities underlying the idea of crisis. Rather, they approach this interdisciplinary, open-ended conversation by offering probes and conceptual explorations of specific events, authors, ideas, and representations. Above all, they resist the unreflective use that many public discussions of “crisis” propose today and, through their literary, cultural, ideological, linguistic, and geographical contextualizations, respond to the risk that the meaning overload of “crisis” might translate into oversimplification and irrelevance. Although these contributions illuminate different angles and entail various approaches, we do, however, believe their rich diversity concurs to sketch a critical geography which is all but random and helps to broaden and complicate current takes on “crisis” across the disciplines. To begin with, they favour a dialogue between usually discrete sources and references. For example, while, on the one hand, the most authoritative sources – such as the conceptual tradition inaugurated by Reinhart Koselleck – form a shared archive and common point of departure for several essays (Garruccio; Ampollini; Della Marca), on the other, the popular tabloid *The Sun* – which in the “Winter of Discontent” of 1979 made fun of the then British Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan with a sarcastic headline, and made him ask with aristocratic candor “Crisis? What

crisis?” (Pedretti) – is legitimized as a culturally relevant and influential source. The geographical perspective is also worth considering, as four of the essays focus on today’s two main contenders for global leadership: the United States (Della Marca; Schiavini) and China (Bonato; Pezza).

The contributions to this volume also lend themselves to investigating crisis/crises in a diachronic perspective, moving between the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ampollini; Van Dam; Della Marca; González Palacios), and approaching their theme also from original perspectives – such as those of nationalism – through the historicizing lens of context-aware literary criticism or from the angle of necropolitics.

Daniel Palacios González’ essay addresses the divisive issue of the exhumations and commemorative practices since the year 2000 of the victims of the War and Dictatorship in Spain from 1936 onward. Thoroughly documenting the way that, in accord with what goes by the name of “forensic turn”, forms of memorialization and monumentalization based on honour and social recognition have given way to the more neutral and less controversial practices introduced by the scientific paradigm, the essay analyzes contexts and testimonies in the light of a crisis of the current memory policies.

Frederik Van Dam sheds light on a little explored aspect of Irish-Italian relationships by analyzing the impact of the Italian Risorgimento – approached as a geopolitical crisis – on Irish poetry during the Victorian Age. Paying attention to the ways in which culture and geopolitics are mutually constitutive issues, through nuanced and compelling close readings Van Dam documents and interprets how and why, unlike in the United Kingdom, the Italian struggles for independence did not meaningfully resonate in Irish literature, even though a few authors recorded the Risorgimento in their writings and poetry, often ambivalently.

Shifting the focus to the American environment, Manlio Della Marca takes his lead from Emanuel Leutze’s famous 1851 canvas *Washington Crossing the Delaware* to reflect on the forms and relevance of a sense of crisis underpinning foundational texts in American literature. Works as diverse as Thomas Paine’s *The American Crisis*, No. 1 – that Della Marca reads through the lens of Koselleck’s conceptual history –, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and David Henry Thoreau’s *Walden* are convincingly explored through a close reading of their articulations of the category of crisis.

Still within the domain of American literature, but turning the gaze to contemporary migration fiction, Cinzia Schiavini’s essay analyzes the failed promise of the American Dream against the backdrop of the 2008

financial crisis and through close readings of two ethnic immigration novels, *The Wangs vs the World* by Jade Chang and *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue. Building on Richard Gray (2011) and Arjun Appadurai (2016), this essay explores the impact of this critical nexus on the negotiations of new forms of transnational identity under the conditions of crisis.

The last two essays open a window onto Chinese public discourse, culture and literature. Drawing extensively on conjunctural cultural analysis and its ability to provide an account “of the relations between an organic crisis and the various narratives of it” (Grossberg 2019), Michela Bonato addresses the climate crisis, as conceptualized in the second decade of the twenty-first century in China, as “an act of framing nature as a problem space”. Building, as well, on cultural geography, discourse studies and urban planning, this essay highlights how crisis discourses in Chongqing reveal “the conundrum of redefining the commons in transitional times characterized by practices of redenomination of nature reserves and green objectifying high-end real estate advertisement”. In the process, Bonato also explores the way in which the digital environment allows for the expression and circulation of alternative narratives and the development of a sense of eco-social responsibility.

This issue is rounded off by Alessandra Pezza’s essay on “historiographical metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988) in avant-gard Chinese literature, with a specific focus on Zhang Kangkang’s short story “Collective Memory” (2000). Drawing, as well, on a number of other Chinese texts, characterized by intertextuality and metafictional reflection, which interrogate the role and truthfulness of memory, this essay engages with the questions posed by the literary re-elaborations and rewritings of “contested history” *vis-à-vis* what the author identifies as “the crisis of history in China”.

In line with the interdisciplinary and intercultural architecture of this journal, we would like to conclude by stressing the potential for emancipation and renewal embedded in crises, and we would like to do so by drawing on the cultural and linguistic tradition introduced by these last two essays. “The Chinese word for crisis is ‘danger-opportunity’, two characters juxtaposed. Within any crisis there is both dire peril and the opportunity to learn something new, and to rebuild creatively, something more innovative, more inspiring, and more robust” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2021, 1).

The inextricability of the crisis/criticism dyad testifies, also, to the positive potential of an ongoing conversation on crisis and is conducive

to the realization that every crisis teaches us “to think otherwise”. But how? Perhaps this was not the original inspiration for this themed issue, but it is the research question we can identify as most pressing today, as this volume is being published: how do we study crisis, how do we study crises? How are crises learned? (Roitman 2013). We believe that the contributions collected in this issue of *LCM* may help to provide at least tentative responses, and contribute to the ongoing conceptual mapping of this anxious condition which has become a defining characteristic of our “way of life”.

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