

In Times of Crisis

Since the millennium, contemporary history has unfolded in a series of crises. Even as the fireworks hung in the air, successive humanitarian crises continued the grim trend of the twentieth century. The Second Congo War (1998–2003) saw mass rape and up to 6 million deaths. The US-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001–) and Iraq (2003–) cost hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian lives. In Sudan, the ongoing Darfur genocide (2003–) and South Sudan conflict (2011–) killed millions. The Syrian civil war (2011–) continues to rage, with an estimated 12 million people displaced.

At the same time, the new century was rocked by a string of financial and economic crises. Argentina (1998–2002), Turkey (2001), Uruguay (2002), and Venezuela (2002–2003) experienced the contortions of financial disaster before the Global Financial Crisis in 2007–08 precipitated a worldwide recession and a cascade of national economic and sovereign debt crises in Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Latvia, Spain, Cyprus, Iceland, Russia, and elsewhere.

In January, an article published in the journal *BioScience* and signed by 11,000 scientists, announced ‘the climate crisis has arrived’, ‘more severe’ and ‘accelerating faster than most scientists expected’. Now, Covid-19 has inaugurated a global medical and health crisis that will ignite a chain of further economic and political crises in the decade to come. Not to forget the social crises that continue to plague the contemporary world: pervasive and severe inequality of wealth and opportunity and systemic oppressions of class, race, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, and gender identity, disability, age, and belief.

In the twenty-first century, crisis appears as the fundamental engine of history, whether understood as caesural crises punctuating the stream of history, or else history itself as a seamless, ‘ongoing crisis’, as Poul F. Kjaer and Niklas Olsen recently put it. The trouble with this sense of ‘crisis’ is that it implies a profound helplessness: we watch powerlessly on as a blind, deterministic history plays out its cataclysms. Locked into

this understanding of history and crisis, we are like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, impotent observers to 'wreckage upon wreckage' of historical 'catastrophe': starving children, exploded rubble, refugee camps, lunatic demagogues, doomy statistics, melting glaciers, bulldozed forests, police murder and the suppression of peaceful protest. Like the Angel of History, we 'would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed', but 'this storm irresistibly propels [us] into the future [...] while the pile of debris before [us] grows skyward'. In the face of overdetermined and intersecting global crises, it is easy to despair. As my friend, the novelist and professor Louis Armand, recently said to me: 'The old metaphor of being tied to the front of a rollercoaster to hell seems somehow no longer very exotic nor even very metaphoric'.

But this quietism, this resignation to clinging on for the terrifying ride, is the effect of a particular understanding of crisis and its relation to both history and human agency. There is another sense of 'crisis' that can help us reframe our thinking, restore our collective nerve in the face of disaster and, perhaps, give us the courage and the belief to intervene and repair what has been smashed. To recover it, I want to turn to the work of the post-war German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck.

Born in 1923 in Görlitz in east Germany, Koselleck was drafted in 1941, serving initially in the artillery before being transferred to radar work in Germany and France following a foot injury. In May 1945, he was captured by Soviet soldiers in Oderberg, near the Polish border. A week later, under Russian command, Koselleck and his fellow captives began the long march by foot to Auschwitz, over 500 kilometres away. After hard labour at Auschwitz, he was transported to a prisoner of war camp in Karaganda (present-day Kazakhstan), remaining there for 15 months. Koselleck was only able to return to Saarbrücken, where his mother lived, thanks to a doctor and family friend who obtained a discharge for his foot injury.

This biographical detail explains Koselleck's decision to study history at the University of Heidelberg. Motivated by his experiences as a soldier during the war and in Russian captivity between 1941 and 1946, Koselleck attempted to make sense of the defining crisis of the twentieth century. At Heidelberg, he came under the influence of Karl Löwith, from whom he

took a deep suspicion of the idea of history as a monological, progressive process. German readers know Koselleck for the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, a colossal, eight-volume encyclopaedia of social and political concepts, edited with Werner Conze and Otto Brunner. Koselleck's entry for 'Crisis', published in the third volume of the encyclopaedia in 1982 but not done into English until 2006, reveals the concept's fascinating history.

Koselleck returns to the originary notion of *krisis* in ancient Greek, which 'had relatively demarcated meanings in the spheres of law, medicine, and theology' that all converged on decision-making in response to an important event. The etymological root *krinō* meant: to 'separate', to 'choose', to 'judge', to 'decide'; as means of 'measuring oneself', to 'quarrel', or to 'fight.' In essence, *krisis* denoted a point of 'decision' in two senses. Firstly, it described 'the sense of reaching a crucial point that would tip the scales', that is, a critical stage in the development of, say, a seismic political struggle, a key military battle, or the development of life-threatening symptoms. Secondly, *krisis* was used 'in the sense of reaching a verdict of judgement'. This meant that 'two domains of meaning [...] were 'covered by the same term': *krisis* meant 'objective crisis' and 'subjective critique'; the pronunciation of a crisis and the collective decision taken to do something about it.

For the Greeks, *krisis* was crucial in the context of the law and was used to animate 'electoral decisions, government resolutions, decisions of war and peace'. The dual function and meaning of *krisis* achieved 'high constitutional status, through which the individual citizen and the community were bound'. It provided a code that 'define[d] the ordering of the civic community' because 'only one who participated as a judge could be a citizen'. In this way, *krisis* was 'necessary for the community': 'a central concept by which justice and the political order could be harmonized through appropriate decisions' in law, politics, and society. In other words, every crisis was met with judgment and action. Individuals enjoyed the rights and privileges of citizenship only insofar as they contributed to collective action to manage and resolve crises.

Unsurprisingly, the original spirit and meaning of a 2,500-year-old-idea got lost along the way. In the Septuagint, the juridical, decision-making sense of *krisis* was carried over but crucially theologised. Christianity

effectively outsourced crisis management to God and imposed an apocalyptic teleology – that is, eschatology – on history. With God in the driving seat making all the judgment calls the ‘promise of salvation’ appeared, but ‘true justice’ would have to wait for the Reckoning, thus denuding *krisis* of the emphasis on collective human agency. The concept was adopted into Latin, and thence into the medieval European national vernaculars as a medical term denoting a crucial stage in the development of an illness. In the early modern period, ‘crisis’ was eventually applied to ‘the domain of social and political language’, to ‘indicate that point in time in which a decision is due but has not yet been rendered’.

The seventeenth century saw a medically-inflected, constitutional sense of crisis applied to a newly charged notion of the body politic. At this point, we need to turn to Koselleck’s earlier work, which was concerned directly with the history of crisis in early modern and Enlightenment Europe. His doctoral thesis of 1953 was published in German in 1959 but not translated into English until 1988 as *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. It was not only foundational to Koselleck’s later work but profoundly important in its own right as a critique in the mould of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Koselleck traced twentieth-century totalitarianism back to the Enlightenment’s ‘corrosive rationality’. But he also offered a history of the ‘state of permanent crisis’ that defined modernity. After religious wars lacerated seventeenth-century Europe, a new mechanism of decision-making authority was needed to resolve future crises. At the time, absolutism looked like a good solution – after all, monarchs were God’s anointed deputies on earth. For Thomas Hobbes:

It belongeth therefore to him that hath the Sovereign Power, to be Judge, or constitute all Judges of Opinions and Doctrines, as a thing necessary to Peace ; therby to prevent Discord and Civill Warre.

Hobbes’s leviathan, tasked with ‘protecting’ the state from ‘Faction, and Civil war in the Common-wealth’, was the ‘Judge’ with the authority ‘to compel men to obey his Decisions’ in a time of crisis. In return for saving

Europe from ‘Discord’ and protecting against the war of all against all, the god-like sovereign gathered to itself a universal decision-making authority. The influence of Koselleck’s mentor Carl Schmitt’s theory of the ‘state of exception’ is clear. But Koselleck shifts the focus from the sovereign to the people. Absolutism created a powerless private ‘society’ of reflective individuals – artists, writers, philosophers, lawyers, theorists – distinct from the ‘state’, represented by the sovereign. The ‘objective crisis’ was no longer the domain of collective action but confined to sovereign jurisdiction alone.

According to Koselleck, an increasingly disempowered, increasingly enlightened European society began to do what it did best: engage in ‘critique’, a discourse and a disposition opposing total state control and asserting the moral superiority of the intellect over material power. In time, intellectuals began to frame the opposition between private reason and state power as a crisis. In 1627, Benjamin Rudyerd, the English poet, politician and friend of Ben Jonson, declared ‘the Crisis of Parliaments’, as tensions mounted between the commons and Charles I. Drawing on the medical meaning of crisis, he warned: ‘we shall know by this if Parliaments live or die’. Thomas Paine entitled his pamphlet series on the American Revolution *The American Crisis*. Following the Austrian War of Succession and the rise of Prussia, the German jurist Johann Schmauss diagnosed a ‘crisis created by a declining balance among European powers’.

As bourgeois intellectuals increasingly counterposed their notions of private liberty and the free conduct of reason against authoritarianism, apolitical moral intellectualism developed into radical political critique, leading ultimately to 1789. However, far from reviving the spirit of *crisis* to resolve the crisis of absolutism, the French Revolution paved the way for imperial dictatorship, which in turn led to the world wars. As Bo Isenberg says: ‘The space for consciousness which Hobbes’ blueprint left untouched became the focal point of the dictatorship’. Whereas the Hobbesian contract contained a lacunae in which autonomous private morality could be cultivated into critique, modern dictatorial regimes sought to govern and control the citizen conscience itself. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau tellingly put it: ‘The most absolute authority is that which penetrates to the interior of man.’ Koselleck goes on to say that:

Applied to history, ‘crisis’, since 1780, has become an expression of a new sense of time which both indicated and intensified the end of an epoch. Perceptions of such epochal change can be measured by the increased use of crisis.

The ‘modern concept of revolution’ was also formed at this point, rebranded and ‘into a historicophilosophical concept’ that no longer meant a return to the origin but its opposite: an unprecedented (sound familiar?) ‘transform[ation] of the social structure’; a radical break with the past and a headlong flight into an unknown future. Combined with a secularised version of history in which eschatology is replaced with progress – ideological, economic, cultural, political – the French revolution, far from defeating absolutism, in fact ‘perfected the terror by substituting permanent war for permanent revolution’, to borrow Marx’s phrase. In time, a certain type of consciousness took hold as crisis appeared as ‘an immanent, permanent condition of the world’:

The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment. Such a tendency towards imprecision and vagueness, however, may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot yet be fully gauged.

In the long mutation of ‘crisis’, from the spark of community decision-making to a dull and paralysing fudge of ‘uncertainties [...] ‘tend[ing] towards imprecision and vagueness’, the Greek notion of *krisis* was lost. But in the twenty-first century, there are signs that collective action can once again be mobilised in the face of crisis, and that the spirit of *krisis* is reviving. Only history will prove whether Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, and other mass actions can slow or reverse the ‘wreckage’ of contemporary history and avert their respective crises. But what they all have in common is a basic refusal to be cowed into helplessness and a belief that crises demand collective judgment and intervention by the community. Indeed, these movements explicitly

invoke the classical rhetoric and meaning of *krisis*. In a speech to the UK parliament in April 2019, Greta Thunberg used the word ‘crisis’ eight times: ‘We have to start treating the crisis like a crisis’, she said, and ‘unite’ to ‘act even if we don’t have all the solutions’.

An official Black Lives Matter statement following the June protests declared: ‘Our fight for liberty, justice, and freedom continues. Together, we can – and will – transform. This is the revolution. Change is coming’.

Perhaps it is: US city councils, government officials, scientists, academics, and journalists have lined up to declare racism a ‘public health crisis’, both a threat to life and a disease of the body politic. Combining the language of ‘crisis’ and ‘revolution’ with obligatory collective judgment and action, movements like Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion imply a revival of *krisis*: the sense of reaching a tipping point at which difficult decisions must be made collectively, rather than by the feckless few in power. The refrain of the Black Lives Matter protests was ‘silence is violence’: passive inaction is not neutrality but active complicity. To sleepwalk through a crisis is nothing less than to abdicate the responsibility each of us has as a citizen to join in with collective action to avert disaster. The same idea is at the heart of the Greek understanding of *krisis*, in which every citizen has a responsibility to support community action in a time of crisis. I believe *krisis* can be repurposed for contemporary political agency and supply a model of communitarian solidarity. Viewed in this way, *krisis* can guard against quietism and offer hope in the face of our century’s ever-proliferating catastrophes. It is difficult to know where to begin. One place is back at the root *krinō*: choose, judge, decide, measure yourself, quarrel, and fight back together.