The concept of crisis and the permanent state of exception

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Organized and chaired by Judith Beyer, Universität Konstanz

Introduction

Crisis is a temporal concept, indicating a turning point (from the Greek *krisis*). Its use suggests that it alternates with stable states of being-in-the-world that are predictable and calm. Whereas the anthropological literature of the 1950s and 1960s analysed crisis and conflict in congruence with models of harmony, anthropological research in the last decades has emphasised war, violence and trauma as "existential experiences." In this body of literature, attention has shifted away from understanding "mounting crisis" as a phase in a sequence of events aimed to restore social equilibrium (Turner 1972). Rather, recent approaches discuss the "ontological alienation" of persons whose bonds "to the everyday world have become stretched, distorted, and even torn; sometimes irreparably so" (Lester 2013). Zygmunt Bauman and Carlo Bodoni (2014) have recently classified "the present crisis" as a crisis of agency and of territorial sovereignty. So is crisis a concept of particular Western thinking and acting – an expression of modernity? Eric Wolf (1999) approached crisis differently, arguing that crises are part and parcel of social life everywhere and that the distinction between normality and crisis is to a large extent fictitious.

Drawing on classical and recent anthropological analyses of crisis for our own research, this workshop seeks to explore the equivalents of the concept from emic points of view. How do our informants conceptualise and word their often precarious ways of living? When do they experience moments of "judgment," "separation" and "choice" (all synonyms of crisis) in their personal lives? And how do their personal or collective "crises" relate to a more permanent state of exception that increasingly presents itself as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics (Agamben 2003)

Presentations and Abstracts

Annett Bochmann
Universität Siegen

State of Exception versus Local Accomplishments: Producing a Public Bureaucracy during Distributing Rations in a Refugee Camp
Based on audio-visual data I examine practices of the ration distribution in a Burmese refugee camp in Thailand, looking at how food is distributed and how camp inhabitants themselves generate the 'distribution event' as a form of a public bureaucracy in its strict sense and miniature examination. These practices exemplify how camp residents generate and maintain a stable social order and rules for the camp.

Patrice Ladwig
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Dystopia, future-Buddhas and messianistic thinking. States of exception in Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist millennial movements
By analyzing historical and contemporary material from Buddhist millennial movements in mainland Southeast Asia and their backgrounds in Buddhist cosmology, this presentation discusses possible connections between concepts of states of exception and Buddhist millenarianism as a sign of social crisis.

Theodoros Rakoupulos
University of Bergen

From a "crisis" concept to a concept in crisis? The solidarity economy in Greece
The uses of solidarity as a concept have been exacerbated by the crisis but its analytical validity has not undergone thorough solidification. The rise and current hibernation of the solidarity economy movement is the main case in point to unpack the tensions in the interplay between the local and theoretical aspects of the notion. Referring to my ethnography, I shall elucidate this interplay and explore the movement's prospects, especially in the current, more friendly, political framework.

Dorle Dracklé
Universität Bremen

Crisis and insecurity: politics, bureaucracy and virtual economy
 "Há crise" ("We are living in a crisis") expresses a general feeling in southern Portugal. In this poor region, people see their lives threatened by the current changes. "*Há crise*" describes precisely this moment of insecurity and menace, vacillating between various political, bureaucratic and economic strategies and plans for the future.

Tommaso Trevisani
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

From *rasval* to *restrukturizatsiya*: Metamorphoses of workers' identity crises in Kazakhstan's former Soviet steel town
Since early post-Soviet years of disruption and hardship, industrial workers' sense of crisis underwent a change towards more individualized discomfort with their social conditions and work identity. Today's workers' understandings, reactions and choices, show discontinuity with the past crisis.

Monica Vasile
Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

The Crisis: rhythm and turning points
The paper will explore crises as turning points in relation to rhythm. Lives and work can be perceived as rhythmical, but the rhythms are seldom regular over long spans of time. Taking the example of timber traders in the Romanian Carpathian Mountains, it will be shown how the economic crisis that peaked in 2008 changed trade practices.

Silke Oldenburg
Universität Basel

Crisis - everywhere or nowhere? Goma's 'normal state of exception' as horizon
Goma in Eastern DRC is a context where critical events have turned into 'critical continuities' (Vigh), where crises and ordinary life seem to be interchangeable. This is the background for young people's comments who often state that they either don't know "real peace" or that the situation is "just normal".