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TWO TYPES OF CRISIS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Overture

In contemporary public discourses, the term “crisis” is often used. Anything and everything might be named or categorized as a crisis. Thus, the term seemingly becomes devalued. I, however, argue that after some differentiation, it is possible to speak about crisis in regards to our societies in Central and Eastern Europe.

In social theory, the term "crisis" is currently used not primarily to describe one particular societal phenomenon, but rather the entire area of today's society and culture. Crisis, for social theorists, seems to be the fundamental phenomenon which serves as a main theoretical framework to understand the contemporary societal transformations.

The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory—published in 2009 and edited by Bryan S. Turner—intended to offer a comprehensive view about the main issues of social theories, by maintaining that we need to acknowledge crisis in/of society and theory as well. The crisis in the social sciences is caused by some fundamental changes in (Western) societies. It is about more than increasing or declining particular data in society. A paradigmatic change is at stake, which has a profound impact on every social dimension and definitely provokes a new way of thinking, e.g., a new theoretical framework for an appropriate interpretation of contemporary societies. It is believed that “we can connect this crisis in social theory with the rise of postmodernism, the collapse of world communism, the globalization of neoliberal economics, and the attendant transformations of social life.”¹

Turner is one of the leading scholars of sociology in the United States and editor of the above-mentioned handbook and below, he lists the most important characteristics of this crisis. It involves:

(1) the fragmentation of social theory into cultural theory, film theory, critical theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and so forth; (2) the widespread abandonment of or

¹ Bryan S. Turner. *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 5.

skepticism towards classical theory; (3) an increasing dependency on (continental) philosophy, literature, and humanities for inspiration; (4) a deepening divorce between theory and research; (5) an inability to provide much insight into major modern issues such as environmental pollution, low intensity warfare and civil unrest, terrorism, famine, and global slavery; and finally (6) a tendency for social theory to become narcissistic, thereby leading to theory about theory or theory about theorists.²

The main dimensions of the contemporary crisis of (Western) societies are described by Turner as follows:

Suffice it to say that the neoliberal revolution in economics has produced societies that depend increasingly on market mechanisms rather than social capital and trust, and give pronounced emphasis to individualism and choice over collective solutions to social issues. Many public institutions are in decline—state universities, public libraries, public broadcasting, public health systems, public transport, and so forth—leading to societies that depend more on voluntary agencies and charities rather than states. The social is being eroded along with social citizenship as the social glue of civil society. In modern societies, more and more social activities are deregulated, outsourced, or privatized, leaving little scope for accountability and little hope of universalism in provision. Even military activities, for example in Iraq, are outsourced to private agencies, with the result that citizens are at risk from military actions for which these private companies are not wholly accountable.³

Speaking about crisis does not at all mean a catastrophe or a dark-painted prophecy, because, as Turner argues, a crisis can also be, as in the case of a threatening illness, a turning point—where there is a resolution for existing dangers and the emergence of new opportunities for growth and development.

With this preliminary account about the term, crisis, in social sciences and in (Western) societies, I am arguing there are two different types of crisis.

First and Second Type of Crisis

If we take seriously the analyses of contemporary social theories concerning the fundamental phenomenon of crisis and the respective turn from modernity to post-modernity, it seems best to make a distinction between the crisis in the modern paradigm and the crisis in the post-modern paradigm. The first kind of crisis could be described as a rapid and deep turn

² Ibid., 6.

³ Ibid., 9.

from one order to another order, different from the former. The second kind of crisis characterizes more of a turn from the order of the modern age to the disorder of the postmodern age. The first one could be described by using Victor Turner's theory of social drama, and the second one with Zygmund Baumann's concept of fluid modernity.

Victor Turner's Description of Crisis (First Type)

Victor Turner (1920–1983), a British anthropologist, developed a model of crisis inspired by Gennep's *rite de passage*. Turner in his early career studied the Ndembu tribe in Central Africa. In his *Schism and Continuity in African Society* (1957), he developed a threefold structural model of societal crisis he called "social drama." The three phases of the drama comprised of the pre-liminal phase (separation), the liminal phase (transition), and the post-liminal phase (re-incorporation). Crisis refers to a discontinuity and for Turner, the liminal phase was especially very important. In this phase of transformation, former rules, social statuses, and orientations lost their relevance and a temporary system then evolves, which Turner called *anti-structure*. The experiences and emotions of this fundamental change would create a special kind of community, which Turner labelled as *communitas*.

By definition, 'crisis' implies the inability to envision the future and it is, therefore, a time that can only be lived as uncertain. (...) The main lesson conveyed by the rites of passage model is that any temporal discontinuity in which present saturation is involved, is solved by formulating transitions into new states. However, the ritualization of transition in lifecycles crises presupposes a socially recognized order.⁴

Baumann's Liquid Modernity (Second Type)

An important protagonist for rethinking modernity, Bauman introduces the category of 'liquid modernity' in his publications. He reflects on the fundamental dimension of *globalization* on one hand, and *uncertainty* and *tentativeness* of the post-modern thinking on

⁴ http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Victor_Turner.

the other. Bauman also defines important characteristics of contemporary societal perceptions and hermeneutics for the analysis of the CEE region. The main aspect of liquid modernity is a shift from the taken-for-granted dimensions and skills of the past decades into paradigmatic challenges and adventures of uncertainty. Challenges are definitively faster than the capacity of understanding; therefore, people and societies find themselves in a permanent time lag and miss the certainty of being able to control proceedings. It is useful to quote Bauman for a deeper understanding of what he is arguing for.

In the time of modernity, people can build up long-term plans, but in the time of liquid modernity, it is no longer possible.

Collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting, and the disappearance or weakening of social structures in which thinking, planning and acting could be inscribed for a long time to come, leads to a splicing of both political history and individual lives into a series of short-term projects and episodes which are in principle infinite ...⁵

Time as such has in liquid modernity a totally different rhythm than before. People today are no longer able to make serious decisions, because their biological and intellectual capacities are no longer suited to understand the incredibly great amount of information. “Into a condition in which social forms (...) can no longer (...) keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them set.”

Therefore, flexibility seems to be the absolutely important virtue today. “The virtue proclaimed to serve the individual's interests best is not conformity to rules (which at any rate are few and far between, and often mutually contradictory) but flexibility ...”

More dramatic for individuals is that they are left alone with the responsibility not to be false and with all the consequences of their mistakes. “The gradual yet consistent withdrawal or curtailing of communal, state-endorsed insurance against failure and ill fortune

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. (Cambridge, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

deprives collective action of much of its past attraction and saps the social foundations of social solidarity.”

Two Types of Crisis in Sum

As mentioned earlier, I am arguing there are two types of crisis. The first one was explained by using Victor Turner theory of social drama and the second one by using Zygmund Bauman's theory of liquid modernity. The short table can summarize the most important differences between the two kinds of crisis.

Modern crisis	Post-modern crisis
Crisis as extreme	Crisis as normality
Perception of the order	Perception of uncertainty
Solution is the main aim	Flexibility is the main aim

Excursus: Time-lack in Shakespeare’s Dramas

While I am aware of my absolute lack of knowledge concerning the dramas of Shakespeare, before I turn to the description and analysis of the social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, I am unable to resist the temptation of making an off-topic remark. The stories of all Shakespearean dramas happen within a very short period of time. Not one character has information and enough time to make a serious decision. This lack of time plays a crucial role in the rapid development of the conflicts as well as in the alternative-less solution of the crisis by using violence. In that regard, Shakespearean dramas maintain the theories of social sciences concerning crisis. The main difference between the time of Shakespeare and our own time is perhaps, not that we don't have dramas, but we still live in never-ending dramas. I beg for the understanding of all Shakespeare experts and now I will quickly leave this unknown terrain and turn to my own topic.

Two Types of Crisis in Central and Eastern Europe

In Central and Eastern Europe, the communist regime fell in a short period of time and very rapidly around 1990. Although the general characteristics of communism were different in each society, in the contemporary common discourse at that time, clear antagonisms were used to explain the main idea about the change of the system—oppression/freedom, communist internationalism/national interests, command economy/market, Warsaw Pact /NATO, Soviet Union/European Union, East/West, etc.

Perhaps nobody had at that time a clear idea about the concrete future of these post-communist societies, but all main actors during the crisis of the system's change had two general visions, one of the communist order and one totally different—the one of freedom. Led by this vision, all political actors worked on the solution for establishing the new order. Round-table discussions have become well-known. In the weeks and months of that time, the entire public was inspired by the uniqueness and openness. All people were motivated and the discussions were full of clear criticism of the past and rosy dreams for the future. Our basic experience was that we all are part of one historical moment and this kind of experience had created among us one *communitas*—using Turner's term.

After this first wave of freedom, after the first type of crisis in the region, all societies have a different basic experience, which I call the second wave of freedom, and which is characterized by a different type of crisis—a permanent one. People are disillusioned with democracy, freedom, and market economy. They are totally involved in never-ending political discussions. They observe the rapid widening gap between the rich and the poor. The basic experience is no longer hope in the future, but hopelessness.

The period today, at least in societies of Central and Eastern Europe—but more and more in other parts of the continent too, I am afraid—is a second type of crisis, characterized by post-modern phenomena. There are no different orders with clear concepts and contours

any longer, but only fluid shapes and permanent adventures. Flexibility can promise success and is the main virtue. If this description is fair and correct, there is no doubt indeed that we live in fluid modernity in Central and Eastern Europe, but—and that seems to be for me the crucial tragedy of our time—we still think according to the logic of the first type of crisis. People are longing for peace, security, clear circumstances, stable order, so in short, they want to have a time which has already vanished without a trace.

Coda

To round down this short and rough explanation regarding the two possible understandings of the term crisis, I would like to draw the important limits of my picture. The main idea is just to point at the importance for acknowledging the profound difference between the first and second wave of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe via disjunction between two types of crisis. Societies have a lot of different concrete crises, but it is more important to understand that this time, crisis is the main or basic fact of contemporary societies of the region. I focused only on Central and Eastern Europe although the description can be more or less relevant outside of the region too. I am fully aware of how contemporary politics use and abuse the deep need of people for stability and security by promising never achievable successes. The description of this political dimension, though, would go beyond the boundaries of this short presentation and would only increase the crisis.

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