



## **Cultures of Crises. Workshop II: „Globalising the Concept of Crisis in the 20th Century“**

*June 21/22, 2018 – Center for Contemporary History, Potsdam*

*Organization: Rüdiger Graf, Riem Spielhaus*

Within the Leibniz Association an interdisciplinary research network scrutinizes “Crises in a Globalizing World”. For 2018, its working group on “Concepts and Theories of Crises” is organizing a workshop series that explores the global proliferation of the description of societies, political institutions and economies as being “in crisis.” In January, a first workshop bringing together experts from the social sciences asked how crises legitimize both the persistence of certain forms of political rule and their change. At the second workshop, which will take place at the Center for Contemporary History, Potsdam, we aim to shed light on the global conceptual history of crisis as well as the discourses and knowledge systems that surround the diagnoses of crises in different parts of the world in the nineteenth and, in particular, twentieth centuries.

Linguistically, the English crisis, the German Krise, and the French crise stem from the Greek term krisis. According to the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, the ancient krisis contained the meaning of both objective crisis and subjective critique. As a technical term in medicine, crisis signifies the crucial moment of an illness that decides the patient’s fate. Thus, the concept of crisis combines diagnostic and prognostic elements. It reduces the complexity of a historical situation, describing it as a moment of decision by relating it to two alternative and mutually exclusive future states. These futures are existentially different, one marked as desirable and the other as harmful. The greater the difference, the deeper the crisis, and the more urgent the demand to become active in order avoid the negative and to realize the positive option. Today, many dictionaries, like the third edition of Webster’s International Dictionary, retain this original meaning, defining crisis as the turning point of an illness or a decisive moment in politics while acknowledging that crisis can also refer to an unstable state of affairs in general. In the latter sense, over the course of the twentieth century, it has also become customary to use crisis in a colloquial way as a synonym for “malaise,” “deterioration” or “decline.”

As Koselleck has argued, in its traditional sense, the concept of crisis played a crucial role in the emergence of a new and quintessentially modern understanding of time and history in the so-called “Sattelzeit” in Europe around 1800. At our workshop we want to explore if and how this concept of crisis, which was closely connected to a specifically European modernity, proliferated in other parts of the world. Was the concept of crisis translated into other languages and cultures in the course of European expansion and imperialism? Did indigenous languages have

descriptions for situations and constellations within societies that are comparable to the European notion of crisis? How did these descriptions differ from the concept of crisis and did they change in processes of translation and interpretation that came about through asymmetrical cultural exchange? We will invite experts to talk about the notions of crisis in Africa, the Middle East and Arab World, East Asia, and the Americas.

## **Program**

**Thursday, June 21**

*13:30 – 14:00*

**Welcome and Introduction**

**Rüdiger Graf / Riem Spielhaus**

*14:00 – 16:00*

**Crisis – The Globalization of a European Concept?**

Questions:

- a) In your area of research, do you find an explicit reception and appropriation of the European concept of crisis in the Koselleckian sense sketched above? Was crisis introduced as a loanword into local languages?
- b) Are there paradigmatic works by scholars of politics, economy, society or culture that helped to proliferate the concept of crisis? Was there an emblematic event/process to which the concept was ascribed that later served as a paradigm for crises?

*16:00*

**Coffee Break**

*16:30 – 18:30*

**Alternative Concepts for Processes of Crises**

In its traditional meaning the concept of crisis signifies transformative periods within a generally progressive temporalization of history, moments of decision in which the future of society, economy or culture is open but this openness is about to be reduced.

Questions:

- a) In your area of expertise, do you find this perception and at which moments did it occur?
- b) Which other concepts were used to describe these periods? To what extent did they differ from a European/Koselleckian notion of crisis as sketched above?

*19:00*

**Dinner**

**Friday, June 22**

*9:00 – 11:00*

**One Concept Fits All? “Crisis” in Politics, Economics, Society, and Culture**

Crisis is a ubiquitous catch-all concept the meaning of which may differ according to context as well as over time.

Questions:

- a) In your area of expertise, can you define a singular concept of crisis or was its meaning case-sensitive differing when applied to politics, the economy, culture or society? How would you describe these differences?
- b) With the increasing use of the concept recently, many authors in Europe and the United States argue that the concept of crisis has lost its original meaning signifying solely a deterioration of current states of affairs. Do you perceive a similar conceptual change in your research field?

*11:00*

**Coffee Break**

*11:30 – 13:00*

**How to Use the Concept of Crisis: Historicization – Analysis – Narrative**

Questions:

- a) Considering the multi-faceted and ubiquitous use of the concept in various historical circumstances, should historians, social scientists and scholars from the humanities confine themselves to historicizing the concept, exploring its use and function in specific situations? Or can we turn “crisis” into an analytic concept? What would the explanatory value of the concept of crisis be?
- b) If you consider “crisis” to be an analytic concept: How would you define it and what explanatory work can it perform in your field of research? Is crisis more than just a convenient narrative device to reduce complexity?