

Routines of Crisis – Crisis of Routines

The 37th Congress of the German Sociological Association (GSA) will take place at the University of Trier from October 6th to 10th 2014 and is dedicated to the topic „Routines of Crisis – Crisis of Routines“.

1. Contemporary Crises

We live in times of crisis. Crises can be seen everywhere: The list of crisis scenarios covers everything from the financial and debt crisis, crises of the state, legitimation and energy, the crises of family, crises in education and media sector, to the looming demographic crisis. In addition, other crises have already been declared long ago –a general political crisis, crisis of parties and democracy, the public sphere and institutions. This impression of overarching trust crises, expectation crises and system crises is accompanied by a continuous compulsion to act politically. Inevitably associated are biographical crises as well as crises of the subject.

We have entered a novel constellation of crisis that is growing even more acute in Europe under the label of the *Euro-Crisis*: It is feared that solidarity will be lost among countries of a continent that for centuries were at war. It is also suspected that European countries could now experience renationalization and ongoing structural breakdowns, which manifest themselves for example through social disparities and (global) migratory movements. Considered from a global perspective we see crises in the trouble spots in the Middle East, but also the humanitarian crises in certain countries in South America and Africa. The omnipresence of crisis thus affirms clearly the old statement of Reinhart Koselleck, that crisis has become a “structural signature of the modern age”.

Several crisis-laden phenomena are currently being documented: the dangerously high unemployment rates among youths; the detachment of generation-specific desires and expectations; decreasing chances of social independence especially for young generations; the fear of loss of both public and private systems for health and welfare of the elderly; the experiences and daily impositions of precarity; ecological dangers; an increasingly political populism and so on. Without denying processes of social erosion, sociology in this context must point to the *longue durée* of socio-historical processes as this approach allows a diachronic as well as a synchronic comparison. Especially sociology, which from the beginning understands itself as a science of crisis, is familiar with the permanent presence of the crisis topos. However, the impression of an extraordinary constellation of crisis collides with an ordinary routine of crisis. Accordingly, the crisis of the routines as well as the routines of crisis have become a main theme for sociology.

If anything, the continuous consciousness of crises have led to a crisis of perception. The omnipresence of the ascertained crisis contains the implicit risk of getting used to crisis. The contention that in history there was hardly a time that did not identify itself in terms of crisis is a valid one – and this in turn relativizes the diagnostic value of any crisis formula. Nonetheless, the necessary de-dramatization of crisis diagnostics should not lead to indifference in the face of profound and accelerated social changes, in the face of threats to

social infrastructures, in the face of uncertain futures, in the face of structural blockades of political and social reforms and the de-routinization of social forms of action. Rather, for recent structural analysis comparative historical research should be critically sharpened. Sociological analysis of crisis can only be improved, if the discipline firstly, empirically contours the situations that are labeled as crisis-laden, secondly, in a comparative perspective carves out potential peculiarities and, thirdly, asks the question concerning the appropriateness and interpretative potential of the semantics of crises.

In general, every crisis can initially be understood as a result of precedent events and as an approach of difficult decisions to be made in the future. Thus, this implies that – in a timely sequential regard – the realization of a current situation as a crisis also presents an understanding of the present as a transitional stage with respect to an open future. Situations of crisis can therefore unsettle the assumption that there is no alternative to given social structures. For this reason, interpretations of crises open up options for critique. Continuous proclamations of times of crisis can also lead to antipathy in the face of overly routinized crisis-laden interpretations of present conditions. Accordingly, the public discourse of crisis and protest scenarios that continuously flare up stand in a strange contrast to a widespread attitude of a simple “and so on”. The perceived crisis – as a permanent state of transition – then goes along with a remarkable continuity of forms of action, judgment and decision.

2. Sociology of Crisis

Sociology is related to the diagnoses of crises in a very particular way. Due to its origin as a discipline in the course of the epochal revolutions during the end of the 19th century, sociology historically constitutes itself as a science of crisis. In addition, sociology has always understood itself as a seismograph of social change. In this sense, sociology participates in the changes of historical semantics: The concept of crisis is a concept of the modern age and as such a main metaphor for social self-perception under the signs of an intensified modernity.

From the beginning, the history of sociology hosted different diagnoses of crisis, which take on very different accentuations. Analyses of modernity by Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber have exemplarily stood for this. Starting with economic changes, Marx calculates the costs of the process of modernization in terms of exploitation and alienation. The Trier born Marx sees crises as a necessary part of a capitalist economy. He regards the constant fluctuation between prosperity and crisis as an immanent structural law of capitalism. Durkheim, on the other hand, interprets things in terms of cultural normativity and points at anonymization and demoralization processes in the course of social modernization; he identifies these tendencies especially in an excessive individualism that erodes the socio-moral rules of social cohesion. In contrast, Weber’s analysis of modernity stresses institutional-political aspects. He emphasizes the loss of meaning and freedom in the framework of the pluralization of value spheres that is characteristic for modern societies. He also focuses on the increased reflexivity in modern societies on the one hand and “a steel-hard casing” (the “iron cage”) of their bureaucracies on the other. Thus, the three classic sociological diagnoses of modernity anticipate the three most effective types of criticizing modernity relating to crisis: the economization of the social realm, the crisis of orientation and the bureaucratization and juridification of society.

In the face of the history of sociology it is surprising that the inflationary use of the term crisis has scarcely led to its sociological reflection. Certain sociological concepts have served as ciphers for the term crisis, terms such as social paradoxes, social contradictions, ambivalence, social dialectics, the risk or even the problem of peripheral consequences. Looking at the other commonly used metaphor “catastrophe,” it is apparent that crises are at the same time neither necessarily nor exclusively understood as catastrophes. The latter insinuates decline, dissolution or demise, while crises, as transformational processes, are constantly understood concerning their productive aspects as well. Scenarios of crises open up “opportunity structures” and describe an ever-ambiguous relationship between continuity and discontinuity. This poses the question whether crises should not primarily be understood as significant threshold concepts that imply the course and direction for future developments.

Systematic sociological work on the concept of crisis is still largely missing. Basically, a number of deficits can be identified in the way sociology has dealt with the concept: (a) in the discipline itself there is hardly any debate on why the term crisis is used and what it applies to; (b) it is not clear as what – and how – a crisis can be sociologically described; (c) methodological reflections concerning the heuristic value of the term for theoretical as well as empirical research remain missing; (d) with a view towards a critical diagnosis of contemporary society, the analyses of the current crisis scenarios must be deepened and (e) it lacks comparative analysis.

3. Times of Crises

The congress’s main theme “Routines of Crisis – Crisis of Routines” has three dimensions:

Firstly, the theme directly addresses the way sociology has historically been understood as a science that constantly and critically examines its own principles and methods in the context of ever-changing social constellations and for this reason can often appear fickle. In this sense, the tension which is expressed in the congress’s theme “Routines of Crisis – Crisis of Routines” relates to sociology in its reflexive understanding of science requiring a long-term clarification of the discipline’s empirical and conceptual basic principles.

Secondly, the congress’s title addresses the currently re-emerging debates on the crisis of the self-understanding of sociology as a discipline. Historically, sociology has been heavily affected by European philosophy, macroeconomics and the cultural focus of the humanities. In contrast, the differences and points of contact with the economic sciences, historical sciences and ethnology have remained relatively unclear in the past decades and need to be adjusted. At the same time, in light of new challenges raised by the life-sciences and neurosciences the debate on the self-understanding of sociology as a discipline must be deepened.

Thirdly, the congress’s theme focuses on the current political, economic and social erosion processes, as well as the current state of their everyday, non-scientific and scientific interpretation and application as a crisis. Hence, the congress’s overall theme accepts the currently dominant interpretation of the general framework of society as a whole being crisis-laden. Historically the sense of crisis during the age of enlightenment was flanked by the

certainty of a possible, utopian striving. In contemporary society one can assume an opposite scenario: The certainty of crisis is identical with the uncertainty of the future. In this way the inflation of crisis points to the abolishment of its opposite: the routinized, social normality.

These current constellations pose a special challenge for societal actions as well as for scientific reflection: the 37th Congress of the German Sociological Association will attempt to meet this challenge in Trier in the year 2014.

4. Questions of the Congress

Given what has been discussed thus far, the main questions the congress in Trier wants to pose can be bundled into thematic perspectives:

Processes of the origin and the handling of crises

What causes of and reasons for social crises can be identified? Who or what is responsible for these crises? Are individual actors responsible – or are there structural causes? What kind of responses to crises can be identified? What transformation options can be considered regarding crisis scenarios? Who provides the interpretations? What kind of role does education and respectively the educational system play for the production as well as solution of social crises? Based on what set of criteria do some count as losers and some as winners of a crisis?

Crisis perception and communication

How are crises communicatively produced? How do crises function as legitimation strategies for political actions? Are there diverging perceptions of crises depending on differences in social classes and milieus and what do these differences mean for the societal view and treatment of these diverging perceptions? In what contexts do crises become apparent, how do crises create and change these contexts, and in which scenarios do they manifest themselves? How and where are crises negotiated and solved? What differences can be seen between the perception of crises by contemporaries and the ex post designation of situations as crises? By what means and on the basis of what criteria do relevance horizons of perception and thinking about crises historically shift? To what extent do perceptions of crises themselves turn into a routine? Under what requirements is this routine, this normal case of a crisis, then understood as a crisis itself?

Actors in (of) the crisis

Who are the acting parties in a crisis? To whom is such “crisis-expertise” attributed? Who has the interpretative power to proclaim that something is a “crisis”? To what extent do perceptions of crises differ from the (political, economic, cultural) elites on the one and popular “public opinion” on the other hand? What kind of interpretative power do professions hold? In what way are social crises perceivable as biographical crises and how do they become part of corporal modes of experience and routines? How do individuals attempt to process experiences of crises by means of specific corporal practices?

Socio-historical processes and structures

How are crises identifiable as disruptive social change, historical structural changes, or social structural failures? To what extent is a focus on crises tied to a cyclical conception of social change? When is a crisis labeled as a transition period, after which allegedly better times are to follow? And when does this not happen?

Discussing these questions during the 37th *Congress of the German Sociological Association 2014* in Trier is supposed to define the contours of a “sociology of crisis”. The multidimensionality of the term crisis, its ever-changing reference along short-term events as well as long-term changes and its openness for socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural constellations, must be analytically refined. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the term and the tensions between crises and routines will give sociology the chance to rethink the relationship between diagnosis and prognosis.

Guest Country

Poland is serving as the guest country for the Congress of the German Sociological Association in Trier. Not only because of its most recent history, Poland is connected with Germany’s history more than with that of almost any other country in Europe. It is not least the wars, occupations as well as political, economic and social crises that connect the historical and topographical spaces of both countries. The more recent sociological reflections in Poland are affected by this history. Thus, choosing Poland as a guest country does not only further develop the congress’s theme and the scientific cooperation between both countries, but it also aspires to further strengthen this transnational cooperation in a European perspective.