

Towards a sociology of crises?

Crises and transitions

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Keynote

"All transitions are crises", said Goethe according to Grimm (Grimm 1873, cited by Koselleck 2006, p. 367). Since the theme of the Congress is transition, it seemed to me necessary, in these times of widespread talk of crisis, to reflect upon the use that can be made in sociology of the ill-defined concept of crisis and its relationship to that of transition.¹

The notion of crisis shares with that of transition the idea of change, of a modification of a state, which takes place over time. But can we not consider transitions as evolutions, or even mutations, that do not pass through critical moments or phases? And is the opposite true? Are all crises transitions?

As Koselleck has demonstrated in the "Crisis" entry of his *Basic Concepts in History* (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*; Engl. trans.: Koselleck 2006), it was in the eighteenth century that the term crisis took on the meaning we give it today. The Greek term κρίσις (krisis) comes from κρίνω (kri-nô), which means to separate, choose, judge, but also to decide, hence the link with "criticism", which Koselleck explored in his 1969 book *Kritik und Krise* (Engl. trans.: Koselleck 2000). Until then, the term had been used in the fields of law and medicine. When the concept was transposed into Latin, Koselleck (2000, p. 361) noted a "metaphorical expansion into the domain of social and political language": it became what he called a *Verlaufsbegriff*, taking on a "transitional or temporal" meaning which, as in a legal trial, leads towards a decision.

With the transition to vernacular languages – French, English, and then German – beginning in the fourteenth century, the term's usage broadened and its transposition to the body politic was confirmed. The political sense predates its transposition into the medical field, which only occurred in the seventeenth century, drawing from its original meaning, since it refers to the critical phase when the physician must decide on a treatment that is likely to cure the patient or hasten their death.

These uses sometimes borrow the dual medical meaning of an objective condition whose diagnosis is the subject of discussion, and sometimes a state of illness that presupposes a healthy state to be restored. In the eighteenth century, Leibniz used it in French at the time of the emergence of the Russian Empire in the Great Northern War: "Momenta temporum pretiosissima sunt in transitu rerum. And Europe is now in a state of change and crisis, where it has never been since the Empire of Charlemagne" (cited by Koselleck 2006, p. 363). As Koselleck explains,

¹ I would like to thank Frédérique Matonti, Alessandro Stanziani, and Loïc Wacquant for comments on a previous paper on Bourdieu and crisis (Sapiro 2022), which helped me rethink this problematic.

The spectrum of political applications thus ranged broadly. 'Crisis' marked external or military situations that were reaching a decisive point; it pointed to fundamental changes in constitutions in which the alternatives were the survival or demise of a political entity and its constitutional order; but it could also describe a simple change of government. (Koselleck 2006, p. 369)

In the last third of the eighteenth century, the term became, according to Koselleck, an "epochal concept" (*Epochenbegriff*) referring to a critical period of transition after which many things, if not everything, would be fundamentally different. Rousseau used the term in 1762 in *L'Émile*: against faith in the durability of the present social order, he put forward the idea that it was exposed to crises – revolutions – a traditional cyclical model of the overthrow of power.

Although the use of crisis in economics came after its uses in politics, it was mainly economists who theorized the concept in the following century. Historians in turn started using the notion of crisis in two senses that share a common uncertainty about the future: either the confrontation with an alternative whose outcome will be decisive (which refers to the older meaning), or uncertainty about the future without any clear alternative solutions emerging (as Droysen used it).

In sociology, Durkheim applies it in particular in relation to economic crises in both *De la division du travail* and *Le Suicide*, but replaces it with the concept of anomie. This term has been criticized because it presupposes a nomos and may seem functionalist, but the nomos can be understood here as the laws and regularities that enable us to navigate social life, so I suggest not rejecting it. However, anomie refers to a state or situation without implying, as the notion of crisis does, the need for resolution, which leads to political decisions. Moreover, if economic crises are cyclical, due in particular to overproduction as Marx explains, can the crisis still be described as *anomie*? Or does its recurrence become the rule?

The notion of anomie should, furthermore, not obscure the efforts made by individuals to perpetuate a certain social order. What Spinoza defines as *conatus*, that is, the tendency to persevere in one's being, is neither inherent to social structures nor mechanical. Continuity does not only result from the structural inertia of institutions – what Bourdieu and Passeron call (1971, p. 76) "perfect self-reproduction" – but also from strategies of reproduction that are implemented by social agents, especially those occupying dominant positions in these structures and seeking to perpetuate their domination, or strategies of active resistance when these institutions are threatened (Bourdieu 2000a, p. 140, 144).

A crisis can be defined, minimally and provisionally, as the upheaval of a social, political, or economic order, a disruption of the ordinary course of collective life, which leads to a loss of bearings and uncertainty due to the impossibility of predicting the future. I should point out that, following Bourdieu, I use the notion of social transformation rather than that of change. The notion of transformation implies that changes occur within an existing structure, through "processes" that unfold over a shorter or longer term, such as the division of labor described by Durkheim, Max Weber's rationalization process (in which the emergence of capitalism is embedded), or Norbert Elias's civilizing process. Bourdieu's structural approach takes into account both invariants and variations, continuities (of institutions and categories of classification) and ruptures, but also the metamorphoses of systems of differential gaps (unequal distribution of species of capital).

This allows us to analyze more precisely how crises disrupt or upset the structure of social space in a way that is not functionalist as in Edgar Morin's analysis (Morin 1976). Bourdieu's concept of "field" helps us consider crises occurring in certain sectors of society, as well as the phenomenon of synchronization that, according to him, characterizes "critical moments". In his theory of political crises,

which expands Bourdieu's analytical model of crises, political scientist Michel Dobry (2009) defines the effect of this synchronization as a "desectorization" (of fields).

After examining the relationship between crisis and transitions, I shall propose a typology of crises, along three dimensions: spatial, temporal, and social. I will then develop conceptual tools to study the symbolic struggles that intensify in times of crisis around the diagnosis of its causes, especially the notion of prophecies and the concept of *axiological operator*.

Crisis and transition

We can agree with Goethe that many, if not all, transitions are crises. For example, the construction of the modern state through – as described by Elias – the double monopolization of taxes and means of coercion (in Tilly's words) went through critical phases of confrontation with the population or feudal principles. But the reverse is not necessarily true. Indeed, while all crises are potentially transitions, since they challenge order and regularity, they are not always effective transitions, because a crisis can end with the restoration of the previous order – or a return to "normal," as we say (normal meaning routine, not "the" normal). A successful revolution opens up a transition to a new regime, while a failed coup d'état (as in the US in 2021 or in Brazil in 2023) does not bring about a transition, but the crisis did occur, with a moment of uncertainty about the outcome, and the restoration is never complete: the crisis leaves traces (as we see with Trump's election or with Bolsonaro's trial).

The crisis opens up a moment of uncertainty, the outcome of which is not predictable, whereas the transition can have two meanings: either it assumes that we know where we are going, or at least what we aspire to; or it is an ex-post projection by the researcher, who retrospectively observes that there has been a transition between two states of society (whether in terms of the regime, social organization, etc.), but in this case, this use is problematic because it implies a teleological approach.

We can also consider transition as a state following a crisis, such as periods of transition after the fall of a regime, for example what are known as "democratic transitions," or transitions after a war or genocide, i.e. the judicial procedures put in place to try war crimes are known as transitional justice. Thus, the idea of crisis, even if we have not yet entirely defined the concept, cannot be absorbed into transition.

As Koselleck has clearly shown, when it took on the meaning we give it today in the eighteenth century, the notion of crisis became tinged with connotations borrowed from the medical field, with the idea of normality and pathology of the social body. However, it is not necessary to adopt this normal-pathological scheme in order to use the concept of crisis. It can instead be seen as the disruption or even upheaval of an order or regularity, leading to sufficient uncertainty about the consequences to call into question behavioral routines and prevent people from projecting themselves into the future.

Of the four uses identified by Koselleck, two depart from the original theological or medical meaning. The first (the third in Koselleck's analysis) is "crisis" as a category of duration or state, which nevertheless refers to a process, to critical situations that recur perpetually, or to situations that lead to decisions. Alternatively (the fourth use in Koselleck), "crisis" serves as a concept of transition immanent in history, in which the outcome of the transition period, for better or for worse, and its duration depend upon the diagnosis.

For our reflection on forms of transition, we can consider, as Goethe did, that all transitions are crises, but this statement may have two meanings:

- 1) the transition itself constitutes a crisis because it is a critical situation that requires decisions to be made in the face of necessary changes;
- 2) or the crisis precedes the state of transition, which would then refer to the process ending the crisis, and which would depend on the diagnosis of the crisis. These crises may result from epidemics, natural disasters, climate change, or war, which require measures to be taken, i.e., the implementation of policies and changes in routines – ways of thinking and ways of doing things altogether.

Both meanings can be retained, provided that they are distinguished and specified. The concept of political crisis refers to both meanings (unlike the concepts of climate crisis or disasters), as it implies decision-making and human intervention. If it refers to a state of transition that requires critical decisions, any transition out of a crisis of any kind (epidemiological, climatic, economic) can be considered as a conjuncture of political crisis.

A crisis is due to the upheaval of the social order implied by the transition from one form of sociation or from one social configuration to another, and the drastic choices to be made, the consequences of which are not always known. The crisis implies an opening up of unexpected possibles leading to a loss of bearings, reinforced by the impossibility of predicting the outcome on the basis of past experience and therefore of projecting oneself into the future: choices must be made, decisions must be taken, but they constitute a “gamble” that involves “risks.” For example, France’s defeat in 1940 by Nazi Germany and the occupation of half of the country led the Republican government to abdicate and to give full powers to Marshal Pétain, who soon after established an authoritarian regime. In any case, a crisis must be resolved by specific measures that will either bring the former state back or lead to a change.

Koselleck notes that the diagnosis of crisis often serves as “a title of legitimization for political action.” As so often since, “this diagnosis of a crisis became a formula legitimizing action” (Koselleck 2006, p. 368). This is why the diagnosis of the crisis becomes an issue at stake in social and political struggle

To continue with the same historical example, granting full powers to Pétain did not resolve the political crisis, because the principle of the armistice and, even more so, that of the collaborationist policy decreed by Pétain were contested by General de Gaulle, who declared that the war had not ended and formed a government of Free France. Inside the country, this situation generated the conflicts of loyalty among citizens that Koselleck discusses in relation to civil wars. While it seems that other countries, including among the Allies, had arbitrated in favor of Pétain by recognizing the Vichy Regime as legal, de Gaulle managed, as the power relation in the war changed, to progressively impose his alternative vision of the war as legitimate and himself as the charismatic prophet challenging the allegedly legal domination embodied by Pétain, to use Max Weber’s categories.

To be able to use “crisis” as a scientific category, it is necessary to clearly distinguish it from the emic description of the way it is used by social agents, which is of course part of the analysis of the struggles surrounding the diagnosis. For instance, the so-called “migratory crisis” is an indigenous category used by the media to designate migratory flows and has been politically instrumentalized by those who want to combat it. While these migratory flows are due to local or national natural, political, or economic crises (for instance wars such as the present offensive against Ukraine, or the repression exerted against their opponents by authoritarian or illiberal regimes such as the current regimes in Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, or Turkey), it is the rejection of these migrations which produces the “crisis” (when Merkel hosted a large number of migrants in Germany, it was not perceived as a crisis for the country, it was discursively constructed as such by her opponents).

Geography and temporality of crises

Let us now attempt a typology of crises. Crises vary in duration and space, they can affect particular groups, specific institutions, or the whole society.

Firstly, they can be classified according to their territorial scope. Crises can be local, linked to a natural disaster (an earthquake, a fire), an epidemic, a major accident. They can be caused by a false rumor such as the Orléans rumor (about young women kidnapped by Jews to be sold into the white slave trade; Morin 1969), but also by the bankruptcy of a firm which impacts the workers and the population in the area. Some are national, such as a ministerial crisis, coup d'état, revolution, or civil war. Others are trans- or international: for instance, a diplomatic crisis, war, or symbolic and scientific revolutions.

Of course, a local crisis is susceptible to spread from the local to the national level: Timothy Tackett (2008) showed the role of the Dauphiné as a model in the municipal mobilization of the provinces preceding the French Revolution in 1788–1789. It may also spread to the transnational or international level, as the transnational circulation of the May 1968 movement in Europe and the US (Holtey 2008), as well as in Africa (Blum 2014), illustrate. Conversely, as Durkheim noted, periodic economic crises can lead to “an increase in those local and limited crises that are bankruptcies” (Durkheim 1996, p. 362).

These examples concern short-term crises, and in fact one might be tempted to conceive of crises as short-term phenomena, contrasting them with slow, gradual transitions, the gradual passage from one state to another, which is one of the two meanings of the concept of transition (the other being simply the passage from one state to another). However, some social crises can unfold over time, even in the *longue durée*: for example, what Bourdieu calls “reproduction crises” (Bourdieu 1994), or the current climate crisis. Other types of crises unfold in the medium-term. Crises can therefore be classified, on a second axis, according to their duration, in three categories: short-term, medium-term, and long-term (or *longue-durée*) crises.

Short-term (or one-off) crises are those that are quickly resolved, for instance a ministerial crisis. To give an example, in France in September 2025, the government of François Bayrou did not win the vote of confidence of the Assembly, forcing him to resign and to be replaced by another prime minister. Even though one could argue that this ministerial crisis is the expression of a deeper medium-term crisis, which first manifested in the dissolution of the Assembly in June 2024, it entailed a series of short-term political crises which required rapid and specific resolution (in this case the replacement of the prime minister and parliament's acceptance of the budget). By the same token, a fire, which is a short-term crisis, can result from *longue-durée* processes such as climate change, and require medium-term transition policies to be avoided in the future. Drought due to climate change may occasion a medium-term crisis of agriculture, as is currently happening in France. As a final example, the uprising of the French *banlieues* (suburbs) in 2005, following the death of two teenagers who tried to escape the police, was a local crisis resulting from mid-term postcolonial causes of racialization and discrimination, which became national when the government decreed a state of emergency.

Medium-term crises are characterized by their duration over time, between a couple of years to several decades, until they get settled. They can occur at the local level, as for example the effects of deindustrialization in an area or a city (although deindustrialization may also have long-term effects such as structural unemployment, skills mismatch, and multigenerational labor market gaps when there is no organized transitional process to a new job market structure, like in the city of Detroit). Medium-term crises may occur at the national level, for instance famine caused by natural disasters or wars, the instability of a regime; or, at the inter- or transnational level, geopolitical conflicts lasting several decades, such as the Cold War.

Longue-durée crises are related to long-term processes, such as industrialization, democratization, and secularization, which lead to crises of reproduction of social groups whose existence is tightly linked to the past social structure, such as the peasantry (manifested by peasant celibacy, which in turn generated a crisis of biological reproduction of this class; Bourdieu 2002) or the nobility. Or they may lead to crises of institutions such as the Catholic Church, causing a crisis of religious vocations.

Table 1: A Typology of Crises

Geography/ Temporality	Short Term	Medium Term	Long Term
Local	Natural disaster (earthquake, fire) Accident Local epidemics Uprising in the French <i>banlieues</i>	Deindustrialization (Detroit)	Reproduction crisis (e.g., peasant celibacy)
National	Ministerial crisis Coup d'État Revolutions Civil wars Famine (due to natural disaster or war) National epidemics	Regime instability Crisis in the cultural sphere Overproduction of diplomas Crisis of teaching vocations (reproduction of the educational institution)	Sector-specific reproduction crisis: e.g., crisis of religious vocations (Church)
Supranational (regional, trans- or international)	Diplomatic crisis War Pandemic Symbolic/scientific revolutions	Geopolitical conflict: e.g., Cold War Pandemics (Black Death, Covid-19)	Climate crisis

Major long-term social transformations such as the rise of capitalism or the construction of the modern state are punctuated by national or local crises during times of transition. The current climate crisis and the energy transition required to curb it call for the implementation of crisis policies that face strong resistance because, beyond the inertia of habitus, which makes it difficult to change individual and collective behavioral routines, they run counter to the interests of many companies.

Conversely, *longue-durée* crises may lead to reforms driven by certain groups. The actions of philanthropists in the conjuncture of industrialization largely supported the transition from private to public responsibility, a process that is – in a circular rather than dialectic causality – related to the development of insurance, including universal public health insurance and other welfare-state institutions (Bourdieu 2012, p. 577).

Similarly, the process of universal schooling, which according to Bourdieu (1989, p. 406) led to a shift from a “mode of direct reproduction” to a “mode of reproduction with a school component,” was punctuated by short- or medium-term crises such as those linked to the overproduction of diplomas, which entails their devaluation and creates a mismatch between qualifications and jobs and between aspirations and objective opportunities. Thus, prolonged states of crisis are likely to crystallize into a critical event. For example, according to Bourdieu’s analysis in *Homo Academicus*, the devaluation of degrees was partly responsible for the student protests of May 68 (Bourdieu 1984; see also Theda Skocpol’s analysis of the crisis of the French absolute monarchy; Skocpol 1979).

By the same token, protests about environmental issues – both those of environmentalists demanding more reforms and those of farmers protesting against reforms – give rise to demonstrations and

social movements of varying intensity. It is through politicization that this crystallization occurs. The long-term ecological crisis gives rise to a medium-term political crisis, characterized by more or less violent clashes between groups over the policies to be implemented to resolve the crisis (clashes that burst into confrontations which may produce short-term crises).

The social dimension of crises: groups, institutions, sectors, and fields

To these geographic and temporal axes, one needs to add a third (which cannot be included in Table 1 as such but appears in the examples): a social axis. Indeed, these crises may only affect one social group (a class, a caste, a professional body, or smaller units like a family), an institution, a field or a whole sector. Reproduction crises concern groups or institutions. Faced with the suppression of its privileges, the nobility had to adopt conversion strategies: the German landed aristocracy converted into the state bureaucracy in Germany, and part of the French nobility invested in diplomacy. The crisis thus led to a transition to a new position for the group in the social organization. This is the meaning of the sentence: "If we want things to stay as they are, everything must change," pronounced by Tancredi in Lampedusa's *The Leopard*.

Reproduction crises of institutions may be related to a crisis of vocations, due to long-term processes such as secularization or medium-term changes such as the structure of the job market or certain policies such as neo-liberalism which degrades working conditions. Examples are the crisis of religious vocations in France in the 1960s (Suaud 1978) or the crisis of secondary school teaching vocations in France today (Prati 2025).

Conversely, a conjuncture of overproduction of diplomas with respect to the structure of job opportunities may generate a crisis in a sector or a field, as it happened in May 68 in the academic field. Crises concerning a specific sector and/or field (including a professional field) can also be due to long-term or medium-term changes. Some trades or professions may be affected by industrialization or by technological advances (mechanization or automation of certain tasks, such as those executed by supermarket cashiers today). The translation profession is for instance currently threatened by large language models (LLMs), and the crisis leads professional organizations to reflect on the topic and try to defend the profession and translation schools to adjust to the changes by including training to revise automatic translation. This (partial) transition from translation to revision may suffice only for a short period, until the LLMs are able to correct themselves.

Relatively autonomous fields (including professional fields) may traverse inner crises, due to endogenous factors (inner struggles following the rules of the field): for instance scientific revolutions implying a change of paradigm as described by Kuhn, or symbolic revolutions as described by Bourdieu (2013) in his analysis of that which led from the monopoly of the Académie des Beaux-Arts over a legitimate artistic career to the emergence of an artistic field in France in the second half of the nineteenth century. Among exogenous factors that are prone to generate a crisis in a field is the competitive relation with other fields; in the same way Andrew Abbott (1988) analyzes the competition over the division of expert knowledge.

Inversely, crises can be general, affecting the whole of society, such as a localized natural disaster, a pandemic, an economic crisis, a brutal change of regime, or a revolution. However, these crises affect individuals, groups, sectors, or fields differently. A medium-term economic crisis may accelerate an inner crisis in a field like that of publishing, where the shift from industrial to financial capitalism has

fostered the “conservative revolution” observed by Bourdieu (1999) in the French field in the late 1990s (it had happened in the English-speaking area two decades earlier).

Like revolutions, the shift operated by brutal regime changes is characterized by a rapid pace of transition, through physical force and governmental decrees rather than law, but once the juridical field is subsumed to the political field (against the democratic principle of separation of powers), law serves ultimately to legitimize and naturalize the new order.

Brutal changes of regime, like revolutions, often induce a shift in the hierarchy of legitimate identities (across classes, or ethnic or religious groups, or professions; see below), which affect specific groups (like Jews, Roma, and homosexuals under the Nazi regime, or women in Afghanistan and in Iran), and a heteronomous reorganization of fields, in the sense that the changes in the inner power relation result from forces that are external to the field, promoting agents (individual and institutions) that support the new order. I have studied at length the upheavals that the German occupation and the authoritarian Vichy regime produced in the French literary field (Sapiro 2014). Without detailing here the findings of this study and the more general model that can be drawn from it on these processes (Sapiro 2013, 2022), I will simply note that the effects of the crisis on the field can be understood in light of its former structure and the retranslation of the political issues at stake according to its specific logic in a process of politicization and heteronomization. Thus the opposition between collaboration with or resistance to the new order can be related to the field’s structure and inner struggles. Similar divides can be observed in the legal field in Liora Israël’s study on lawyers and magistrates, although she does not use the theoretical framework of the field (Israël 2005). While crises have a revelatory effect, making the field’s structure appear more clearly because it forces agents to position themselves, it also has its own specific effects and logics, such as the reconfiguration of alliances (in particular intergenerational alliances in this case) and the concentration of the struggles surrounding the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy, which becomes politicized (Sapiro 2013, 2022).

The authoritarian intervention in the intellectual field can go as far as banning certain disciplines. For instance, the Vichy regime suppressed sociology as a discipline. Sociology was also forbidden as part of the reforms and constraints imposed by the communist regimes upon the academic field in the transition phase, until the thaw. By the same token, more recently, the ban on gender studies has been part of the ideological constraints to which the academic field was submitted in authoritarian and illiberal traditionalist countries such as Russia, Hungary, Turkey, and the field is now being challenged in the United States (sociology is as well, to a lesser extent). In all these cases, the political crisis also provokes the departure of opponents, entailing in many cases a transnationalization of these fields, and continued politicization of the issues at stake in them through the struggles led from abroad by these exiles (Sapiro 2024).

A crisis that is sector-specific or linked to a social group may however spread beyond its first location: the confrontation between the parliaments and royal power in pre-revolutionary France and the formers’ demands for the holding of the Estates General led to the French Revolution (Skocpol 1979; Tackett 2008). Similarly, the May 68 movement emerged from the convergence of student and worker mobilization (Damamme et al. 2008).

It is through the same process of politicization, to which we shall now turn, that a local crisis or one initially limited to a particular sector (education and manufacturing in the case of May 68), or even the demands of a social group, can spread to the whole society. For example, in the 1820s, in France, the claims of the “*capacités*”, that is to say the educated fraction of the middle class (lawyers, men of letters, journalists), and their demand to lower the *cens* – the tax for voting that was so high that only the aristocracy and some very rich bourgeois could vote – led to the July Revolution of 1830, which broad-

ened the boundaries of the political field, until then restricted to the economically privileged fractions of the field of power.

“Critical moments”

A conjuncture of crisis, whether localized, sectoral, or generalized – at the level of a state or beyond – is characterized by uncertainty about the consequences of the crisis and may lead to a struggle to characterize it – the diagnosis – which justifies the solutions and actions recommended by competing groups to take the lead. It also involves identifying those responsible for the crisis and criticizing, denouncing, or even stigmatizing their actions. It is in this sense that it becomes politicized.

One should perhaps distinguish a structural crisis, which can crystallize into chronic or cyclical crises (such as economic crises due to overproduction), and conjunctural crises, but these conjunctural crises always have a structural basis. Conjunctural crises are described by Bourdieu, who borrows his analytical model from the mathematician Cournot, as an encounter between independent causal series (for instance the devaluation of diplomas and the economic crisis affecting the workers in May 68) which produce the “event” or the “critical moment”. Crises vary of course in intensity, from a ministerial crisis, or a strike, to acute crises such as revolutions, wars, or mass extermination.

A generalized crisis conjuncture or “critical moment” is one in which the state or the government loses control of the situation: it is what Dobry (2009) calls, in his theory of political crises, “grande crise politique” (big political crisis). The confrontation between these groups can take a physical form, challenging the state’s monopoly on legitimate physical violence, as defined by Max Weber, and leading to unprecedented upheavals: revolutionary moments, coups, or the overthrow of a regime, as we observed in Syria in 2024 for instance. What happens in such critical moments, during states of potential transition? They are characterized by the emergence of new possibles, promoted by certain social groups, whether they be revolutionary forces or failed coup attempts. But the critical moment precedes any transition, and is defined by confrontation between forces of resistance to change and forces of transformation. Critical moments are not transitional, as there is no new order yet (and this potential new order is not yet defined), and might not be (as happened in Turkey after the failed 2016 coup). Such critical moments may however result from ongoing transitions, such as the ecological transition, which provokes reactions of resistance from farmers (a group in crisis due to this medium-term process) that can vary in intensity from mini-crises to more important confrontations and blockages (of the economy or of the traffic).

Critical moments can be triggered or exacerbated by endogenous factors such as an economic crisis (e.g., the fiscal crisis that preceded the French Revolution) or exogenous factors such as external aggression: war, occupation, colonial invasion (e.g., the German occupation of France in 1940, which led to the fall of the republican regime), or the Paris Commune. In her book on revolutions, Theda Skocpol (1979) highlights such external factors which foster political crises leading to social revolutions: war and international competition. The boundary between exogenous and endogenous factors is, however, unstable and related to interdependencies (Zolberg 1985).

For example, the crisis of reproduction experienced by the peasantry in the transition to capitalism (a long-term process), which Bourdieu observed both in Kabylia and in his native Béarn, was accentuated and accelerated in Algeria by the fact that the transition was imposed by the colonizer, and culminated in a forced resettlement of peasants by the army into regroupment camps, entailing a crisis of traditional

agriculture (Bourdieu and Sayad 1964; Bourdieu 2002). But they also accelerated the rebellion of Algerians against the colonial power.

Critical moments are characterized by politicization and synchronization (Bourdieu 1984, p. 226–233). Politicization is defined by French political scientist Jacques Lagroye (2003, p. 360–366) as a “requalification” of different kinds of social activities as political by individuals who are not professional politicians. Whereas the autonomization of the political field tends to exclude non-professionals from politics (Bourdieu 2000b), conjunctures of crisis favor the intensification of struggles over the boundaries of the political field and over the very definition of politics, all the while politicizing the other social fields.

A critical moment is also characterized by the synchronization of the various social fields – which have their own pace of development – in the same temporality produced by the crisis (“synchronization of different social times”; Bourdieu 1988, p. 34). This temporal process also leads to a “synchronization of crises latent in different fields, which encourage the harmonization of local crises or conjunctural alliances” (Bourdieu 1988, p. 173).

Politicization may foster the synchronization and harmonization of fields around a similar problematic and its alternative, obliging each participant to take a stand. This process reduces the relative autonomy of fields, entailing a process that Dobry (2009) calls “desectorization”. We could say that politicization subordinates all fields, including the economic one, to the field of ideological production and to its cleavages.

Politicization and synchronization are not, however, mechanical and automatic processes, nor are they organic ones like contagion; these rapid processes are mediated by individuals and institutions, and occur over time, thus offering a framework for comparative sociological investigations. Harmonization also requires some “translation” of the issues at stake in the different spheres or cultural contexts. This “translation” is undertaken by activists and political organizations through a process of politicization that entails clear-cut divisions into camps. Bourdieu argues that:

In obliging everyone to organize his political position with reference to the position held in a specific field and in that one alone, the crisis tends to substitute a *division* into clearly distinguished *camps* (according to the logic of a civil war) for progressive distribution between two poles, and for all the multiple, partly contradictory memberships which the separation of spaces and times allows to reconcile. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 235; 1988, p. 181, emphases his)

Another typical characteristic of political crises is the uncertainty stemming from the fact that the usual social mechanisms are no longer functioning in a predictable way. Drawing from astrophysics, Dobry speaks of fluid conjunctures (Dobry 2009).

Uncertainty is due to the upheaval of the “structure of objective chances” which enables individuals to predict the future and develop adjusted strategies. Bourdieu calls them critical moments, since they interrupt the ordinary experience of time and seem to suspend the reproduction processes, thus opening up new unexpected possibles (Bourdieu 1984, p. 236–237).

While politicization results and benefits at the same time from the uncertainty engendered by the crisis, the politicization process produces, in turn, uncertainty, and also state violence: it can be the repression against demonstrators in revolutionary conjunctures – as we saw in the Arab revolutions, or more recently in Serbia, Nepal, and Iran – or against groups that are targeted because of their ideology or because of their identity, as happens in coups or occupations. But these oppositions also challenge the monopoly on physical violence by the state, and this is why the repression can turn into large-scale massacres.

The harmonization of fields results from symbolic struggles. I shall now examine two discursive practices that play a strategic role in conjunctures of crisis: prophetic discourses and axiological operators.

Prophetic discourses

Conjunctures of crises open up the public space to prophetic discourses, as Bourdieu argues in his interpretation of Max Weber's theory of the prophet (Bourdieu 1971). According to Weber, prophetic discourses reinterpret the past in order to predict the future in a mode that is more emotional than rational (Weber 1995, p. 320–325). These discourses are not born from the crisis; they exist at all times, but they come to the fore in such conjunctures because of the uncertainty and unpredictability that the near future will follow traditional analytical patterns, which contributes to relativizing traditional intellectual authorities. As Bourdieu explains:

[...] the constitutive power of (religious and political) language, and of the schemes of perception and thought which it procures, is never clearer than in situations of crisis: these *paradoxical* and *extra-ordinary* situations call for an extra-ordinary kind of discourse, capable of raising the practical principles of an ethos to the level of explicit principles which generate (quasi-) systematic responses, and of expressing all the unheard-of and ineffable characteristics of the situation created by the crisis. (Bourdieu 1991, p. 128–129)

The mixture of uncertainty and politicization favors receptivity to extreme discourses rather than to nuanced analyses and the lifting of censorship in the public space. Even if the regime stays in place, uncertainty forces the government to develop narratives – what Bourdieu calls “*sociodicée*” (sociodicy) – in order to justify the disruption and burst of violence in everyday life.

I shall use another of Bourdieu's concepts, which he hasn't employed in his discussion of crises, to extend his analytical model to other types of political crises. In his *Lectures on the State*, Bourdieu, drawing on Weber, defines the state as holding the monopoly not only on physical but also on what he calls “symbolic violence.” Symbolic violence underlies symbolic domination among groups – men and women, the dominant classes and the dominated, colonialist and colonized – which enables the social order to reproduce itself without coercion, not because the dominated consent but because they were educated to share the same worldview and schemes of perception and of evaluation as the dominant. Domination is thus naturalized.

The state plays a role in the hierarchization of legitimate identities, and, consequently, in the reproduction of symbolic domination, as Bourdieu and Passeron showed with regard to school. But we can also think of ethnic identities, like the Alawites in Syria under the Al-Assad family, who nominated Alawites in the army and security forces to oppress the Sunnite group.

Conjunctures of political crisis often reinforce struggles over the monopoly on symbolic violence, but can also lead to accrued violence against dominated groups, the symbolic violence justifying physical violence, especially in times of war, but not only. Thus, these discourses become performative, like self-fulfilling prophecies (as defined by Merton 1948), not in the sense that they produce the acts, but in the sense that they legitimize them. For these populations, the new conjuncture means a *restriction of possibles*, rather than an opening. The Third Reich and the Vichy regimes imposed daily restrictions upon the Jewish population and excluded them from many professions and from public life before arresting

and deporting them to concentration camps where most of them were exterminated. Similarly, Armenians were arrested and murdered in death marches organized by the Ottoman government.

Nationalism has provided the most common modern sociodicy for wars. Andreas Wimmer has demonstrated, based on 484 cases, that the nation state is the form of government that has engendered the highest number of wars (Wimmer 2013). His reflection on the role of ethnicity can be reframed in terms of a competition for the imposition of a hierarchy of legitimate identities. He shows that ethnicity will be more politicized and that an ethnic minority will impose its rule more easily in three cases: 1) in states that are not highly centralized and are endowed with a limited capacity to distribute public goods, collect taxes, and control the political process, like in Saddam Hussein's Iraq; 2) in states where power is divided among different ethnic elites, like in Lebanon; 3) in nation states that were formerly governed by an empire and have a less institutionalized relation with the political center (for instance the Ossetian or Abkhazian separatist movements once they became part of Georgia). In all these cases, the fight for the monopoly on physical violence is sustained by ethnic identification and by a struggle over legitimate identities (like in religious wars, which sometimes partly overlap with ethnic wars, as in Lebanon), and the idea of the superiority of one over the other, but also the idea that the dominant group is threatened by the dominated one. However, as suggested by Wacquant (2024, p. 99–106), one should distinguish between salience and consequentiality of ethnoracial categorization: the first operates in the realm of the symbolic order, while the second designates the unequal access to material opportunities (education, income, wealth) and the impact on life chances (measured through indicators of life expectancy, morbidity, etc.). Salience and consequentiality of ethnoracial categorization converge under some circumstances, but do not always coincide.

Imperial and colonial wars transform the occupied or colonized societies to varying degrees, from preservation of their mores to forced (religious, linguistic, cultural and/or economic) conversion and even physical extermination (as in the case of the Hereros). Some of these different cases are illustrated in George Steinmetz's study of the German colonial field of power. He argues that the mode of domination depends on the competition between different groups in the ruling elite, and their diverging anthropological definitions of the colonized population: cultural exchange and mutual recognition among intellectuals prevailed in Qingdao; in Samoa, the colonial economic entrepreneurs aimed to convert the natives to the capitalist economy; whereas in Namibia, it was the commander of the colonial forces, General Lothar von Trotha, who ordered the extermination of the racialized Hereros, turned from "noble warrior savages" to "ignoble savages" (Steinmetz 2008; on the Hereros, see also Mamdani 2001). These anthropological definitions pertain to the construction of legitimate identities that underpins symbolic violence (even though Steinmetz does not use this concept), and as we can see, they partly determine whether or not physical violence is used against the colonized population.

In his large study of mass extermination in the modern era, Abram De Swaan (2015) identifies two necessary but not sufficient preconditions for asymmetrical mass violence against unarmed populations and for citizens' tolerance of genocidal – or rather democidal – regimes (to use Rudolf Rummel's concept): on the one hand, there are the mechanisms of disidentification and dehumanization of the ostracized population, with, as a counterpart, strong identification with the dominant group; on the other hand, there is the spatial separation – compartmentalization – of the targeted population (which applies to all the cases he studies, except for Rwanda). Like Steinmetz, De Swaan does not use Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, but it is clear that the dehumanization process (already analyzed by Kuper 1981) is part of the construction of legitimate identities by the state, which legitimizes physical violence against the "outgroup", in Merton's sense (Merton 1948; the ingroup/outgroup categories in sociology were defined by Sumner 1906, p. 12–13).

A closer example of symbolic violence justifying physical violence, and even genocide, can be provided by a declaration by the Russian far-right intellectual Alexander Dugin, whose ideas influenced Putin. In May 2014, during the initial outbreak of the Moscow-backed conflict in eastern Ukraine, Dugin declared in a video interview via phone to Russian state television: “The Ukrainians must be killed, killed and killed. No more discussion, I say this as a professor”. And in August, during the war in the Donbass, he declared again, on the Kontakte (VK) social network, that “Ukraine needs to be cleansed of idiots” and that a “genocide of cretins is a given” (Denisova 2025). His discourse appears as a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that it has become performative. In this sense, one can say that words may kill – not so much because they cause the killing but because they legitimize it by stigmatizing the targeted population (Sapiro 2020).

In political crises due to factors such as war, military occupation, or a coup, with their ensuing brutal disruption of the social order, the sudden change in the governing structure induces a politicization, promoting the fractions expressing allegiance to the new ruling forces and ostracizing the opponents and the stigmatized groups (for instance the Jews in occupied France, or the Armenians when Turkey was established, and later the Kurds).

The usage of “legal” procedures and tools that are adapted to the political objectives, which reveals the symbolic power of law and its arbitrariness (Bourdieu 1986), is typical of the need for these new governing forces to establish their domination not only through their monopoly on physical violence, but also that on symbolic violence, aimed at “legitimizing” the former.

The struggle surrounding the monopoly on symbolic violence is manifested in the overproduction of narratives and prophecies, which is typical of crisis conjunctures – not only political ones, but also economic ones, or cultural ones – as a consequence of the uncertainty regarding the future and in order to establish – or contest – the new powers’ legitimacy. In these struggles, which occur in the field of ideological production, the legitimate representation and interpretation of the crisis are at stake: this entails proposing an explanatory framework and thus diagnosing the causes of the crisis, while designating the individuals or groups deemed responsible for it.

Axiological operators

The concept of *axiological operators* can help us study more precisely the ideological struggles over the legitimate interpretation of a crisis and, more generally, the competition for imposing or challenging the dominant worldview (Sapiro 2021). I call *axiological operators* notions or expressions such as “progress”, “modernity”, “freedom”, and “human rights”, or conversely, “tradition”, “roots”, “social order”, and “civilization”, which give systems of cultural oppositions, at the same time their meaning and their position in a hierarchy of values through spatial designators – high and low – with a moral connotation of worthy (*digne*) and unworthy or undignified (*indigne*). In conjunctures of crisis, axiological operators play a crucial role in the processes of retranslation of the issues at stake across fields (political, religious, legal, administrative, intellectual, academic), and thus in both their politicization and harmonization.

For instance, the notion of civilization was used in the interwar period by conservative and reactionary intellectuals to claim the superiority of European peoples over others. This theme has continued to be used by the far right and has resurfaced with the far-right discourse coming to the fore. Far-right French intellectuals like Renaud Camus, Richard Millet, and Eric Zemmour use it to contest European immigration policy.

We find in their discourse all the leitmotifs of the interwar reactionary rhetoric: decadence heralding the end of civilization – what Renaud Camus calls the “great replacement”, the danger that “métissage” (miscegenation or crossbreeding of “races”) poses to the “French essence” and the purity of the language – these are themes dear to Monarchist thinker Maurras and his league Action Française. Except that here, Muslims have replaced Jews. They also attack the social sciences, like Durkheim’s adversaries in the past.

The expression “great replacement” serves to synchronize and unify the far-right pole of the field of ideological production at a transnational level, euphemizing under the concept of civilization its racist grounds. In 2017, Renaud Camus founded a National Council of European Resistance at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, where de Gaulle is buried, with the motto: “Vive la France libre. Vive la civilisation européenne” (reference to the Resistance – comparing the emigration to a genocide of the European people).

It is clear that these notions are not and do not function as *axiological operators* in themselves, they are given a specific meaning in an ideological framework and in a social configuration, and they become core notions of these ideologies and their related narratives, for which they serve as a synecdoche. They also euphemize and legitimize the forms of violence perpetrated in their names: they are thus key in sociodicy. The notion of “civilization” served for instance to justify French colonialism.

The social efficacy of such operators stems from their ability to unify, symbolically, systems of classification or heterogeneous types of hierarchies in the order of values and institutions. Such general principles are instrumental in the construction of “causes” as universal, lest those causes otherwise be discredited as defending particular interests (as illustrated by the corporatism reproach) or selfishness.

Consequently, axiological operators play a major role in symbolic struggles, especially in periods of transition, of social transformation, when new ideas and worldviews seriously challenge the dominant ideology, but in “normal” times they are also a constant object of struggle for their definition and appropriation within the field of ideological production.

Critical moments make these symbolic struggles more intense, more explicitly ideological and more concentrated, fostering, as said above, the spread and retranslation of these axiological operators across fields and thus contributing to the politicization and harmonization of the latter around a common problematic. Opponents to the change of power relations also use axiological operators by working to counter the narrative imposed by the winners.

For instance, in occupied France, while the Vichy regime and its ideologues qualified the *résistants* as “traitors” and “terrorists”, thus justifying their killing – so that it was again a performative speech, a speech act, in Austin’s sense – the Resistance presented them as national heroes who sacrificed their lives to combat the occupying forces, and the underground literature played a major role in this symbolic struggle (Sapiro 2018).

The notion of terrorism serves as a negative axiological operator in all authoritarian regimes (like in Russia or Turkey today), and even in liberal democracies it is codified in the law. Under the Third Republic in France, antiterrorist laws were adopted against the anarchists, called by their opponents the “lois scélérates” (“scurrilous laws”) and they included not only acts but also speech (propaganda for terrorism), thus framing them as speech acts. The qualification of terrorism is an issue at stake in the field of ideological production as we observe today.

Since the strategy of the far right is to use such axiological operators against the dominant antiracist worldview in liberal democracies, some intellectuals like Richard Millet use terrorism against antiracism: “What we call literature today is merely the hedonistic face of a nihilism of which antiracism is the terrorist branch”. It is also a legal struggle: they all, especially Zemmour in *Le Suicide français* (100,000

copies sold), challenge the law against hate speech, and reclaim the notion of freedom of speech for this purpose (so again, using the values shared by the democrats against them).

During the Vichy regime, the ideological struggle over the framing (in Goffman's sense) of the crisis used a common axiological operator, "national interest", while connecting it to other, different axiological operators: "social order" and "authority" on the side of the Vichy regime; "freedom" and "independence" on the side of the *résistants*. After the war, it was the collaborators and the supporters of the Vichy regime's collaboration policy who would be designated as "traitors" and tried for "intelligence with the enemy".

These few examples are not intended to symmetrize collaborators and *résistants*, just to say that they struggled over these key notions. In each socio-cultural and political configuration, the relevant axiological operators – there are usually only a few words or notions which function as such – have to be identified and the ideological work they perform described, especially in the interpretation of crises.

However, the paradigm of collaborators and *résistants* goes beyond the context of the German Occupation in France, as I have shown elsewhere (Sapiro 2022).

Conclusion

In reflecting upon crises in relation to transitions, I have shown that we should distinguish these two concepts, even though they can coincide in many cases, but the distinction forces us to raise specific questions and complexify the study of social and political transformations. The crisis creates uncertainty and opens up new possibles, that appear in the very struggles for framing and diagnosing its causes and solutions. This is a moment when prophetic discourses and axiological operators come to play a major role. Some of these prophetic discourses function as self-fulfilling prophecies, especially the stigmatizing discourses against groups that are targeted as responsible for the crisis, and their dehumanization, which can lead to discrimination, and even to large-scale massacres and genocide. What is for the new pretenders to dominant positions an opening of the space of political possibles is, for them, a shrinking of the (social and political) life space of possibles.

However, a sociology of crises has to acknowledge the fact that, whatever their temporal, spatial, or social scope, whatever apparent discursive unity emerges, crises affect people differently, and the characterization of crises along these parameters does not suffice to account for their impact on individuals and groups. Confronted with crises that affect them more or less directly, the latter may react in three ideal-typical manners:

- 1) a fatalistic acceptance of the new order – and, when it particularly affects a group or a sector, of their own *déclassement* (downgrading);
- 2) strategies of adjustment and *reclassement* which may imply conversion (*reconversion*) – as in the example of the nobility – or reforms; such strategies may also imply escaping the new configuration by fleeing abroad (as the nobility did during the French Revolution, and as political refugees or climate migrants do), which means a conversion to another society and culture;
- 3) collective rejection through political mobilization, which may provoke a political crisis, like in May 68 (strikes, uprisings, rebellions, and even revolutions).

These categories may at first sight seem to overlap with Hirschman's triad of exit, loyalty, and voice, but it is not the case (Hirschman 1970). While the third reaction clearly coincides with "voice," fatalistic acceptance may be understood either as "exit" or as "loyalty," depending on the practices implied by this acceptance. By the same token, while strategies of adjustment may mean "loyalty" to the new dominant

group, the term “loyalty” may be confusing because adjustment can result from opportunism and calculation rather than adhesion to the new order (as in the case of the conversion of the nobility). Moreover, adjustment strategies like escaping the region or the country are clearly “exit” attitudes in Hirschman’s terms, although some may lead to political commitment from abroad (thus “voice”). This comparison does not at all invalidate Hirschman’s still very relevant categories, but complexifies the analytical framework for studying attitudes in times of crises.

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