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What crisis?

Normality and a systemic break in contemporaneity

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From an anthropological point of view, it is difficult to understand the so-called "financial crisis" that we are currently witnessing as a phenomenon that is linked solely to the world of economics and finance. On the contrary, if we adopt a perspective that assumes that social phenomena can only make sense insofar as they are seen in relational terms, the current financial and economic crisis shows itself, after all, to be merely the signalling of the many processes of destabilisation and systemic change that we have been witnessing in our contemporary world. We are therefore moved to ask: "what crisis?".

As is known, the word "crisis" had its origins in the medicinal practices of the beginnings of the Modern Era, being used to refer to the moment when there was a

sudden, and generally decisive, change in a disease for better or worse. In short, the concept presumes a process that introduces a sudden interruption or systemic break in normality. Furthermore, it presumes that this break is a decisive one: or, to put it more simply, it "either kills or cures", as used to be said until not so very long ago about many home-made remedies. In other words, when it comes to a crisis, health, well-being and normal life are all a background assumption.

It happens that, in the last two centuries, the direction of the metaphor has changed, as any historical dictionary will confirm. At first, we spoke of a crisis in people's health and only later, as a metaphor, of a crisis in the life of institutions. Today, however, the socio-centric metaphor has become the dominant one and most people cannot even imagine that the notion was originally only applied to human health and never to institutions. By this I mean that we have caused the concept to shift from its application to the life of individual people (a life that is irredeemably subject to death) to an application to the life of human institutions (which, in principle, are not subject to ending in the same abrupt way as our bodies). In doing this, however, we forget that, in socio-cultural as opposed to biological terms, nothing dies, everything changes. We have naturalised the notion that there is a normality in the life of institutions that renders them subject to crises – we have naturalised the social aspect and, in the case of the current crisis, it is even worse: we have naturalised our background assumptions about economic normality.

Two types of questions are immediately raised. First of all, there is a need for us to question ourselves about what may lie hidden behind the concept of "crisis" in the way that it has come to be popularly used in the mass media. If, in fact, by way of definition, there is only a crisis through comparison with what is not a crisis – what are we assuming about normality? In attempting to answer the questions about the crisis, therefore, we will always have to bear in mind that they assume that we do not make judgements about normality. For me, as a reader, this problem is clearly evident in the recent specialised financial journalism – since all that is written assumes that the current global financial

system is essentially that which has to be as it is and that what is at stake with this "crisis" is to cure any deviation from normality. Except what this normality consists of is never explained, and yet much of our human and political decision-making passes through this.

The second major question that we must ask is as follows: if the concept of crisis is a relational one, which of the crises that we are currently living through is the most decisive or the most acute in the medium term – in other words, which is the one that is most deserving of our attention? In the old Marxian days, when we all more or less accepted the "determination in the last resort" of the economic, it made sense to assume that the economic crisis is the one that matters most, because the other crises are all derived from it. However, times have changed and our modernist certainties have evaporated, so that I believe that now most of you are no longer so sure about determinations in the last resort as so many of us were some twenty years ago.

All that remains for us now, therefore, is to understand that the most important question about the contemporary crisis is less a question of empirical (or as we used to say objective) observation and nowadays is more openly a question of value. By this I mean that, in principle, like so many others, this is a question whose answer requires us to take into account the perspective of the person who is asking it. We are therefore faced with a curious problem related to the person's viewpoint, since the opposition between crisis and normality inevitably leads to the notion of interest – i.e. investment – about the world. Crisis/normality for whom?

We must therefore ask ourselves about the nature of the first person plural that inevitably emerges from discourses of this type. To simplify the intricate web that lies behind my line of argument: the nature of my position as a subject affects the meaning that I may give to my appreciation of the world in which I live and the way in which I communicate with you who are listening to me when I try to address what I think must be normal – i.e. what is desirable or undesirable; what is "better" or "worse", as used to be said in the 16th century when talking about feverish crises.

We are all immersed in stratified universes that increasingly affect our identity and are tending to expand until they cover all humanity and, even beyond this, all living beings. Furthermore, some of these pluralities into which I insert myself intersect in complex patterns of an overlapping of interests. Not only the identification of what the main crisis has to do with the perspective that is adopted, but also the very understanding of what the crisis is, depends on this.

It happens that, as suggested above, our identifications are not unitary ones – our interests are all limited by other interests. We are engaged in a constant process of negotiating perspectives based on value judgements. In that sense, I believe that it is worth identifying from the outset two main perspectives that, in relation to what I intend to say, seem to me to clearly impose themselves. They contrast with one another, at the same time as they combine with one another. On the one hand, it is clear that the global human perspective imposes itself, all the more so because nowadays we live in a globalised world in an increasingly urgent and almost instantaneous fashion. On the other hand, when we discuss phenomena of a global nature, the other perspective that seems to me to impose itself is the fact that we are members of a modern urban elite in a country that is relatively prosperous, but which is situated on the economic fringes of the so-called “developed world”. I chose not to define the question based on the Portuguese nationality, precisely because I believe that we are faced with a discussion in which the fact of my being Catalan, Portuguese, Brazilian or Australian does not greatly change the question. In short, the question of the crisis presents itself to us in the negotiation of two absorbing perspectives: firstly, the improvement of our human condition; secondly, our condition of being a subordinate elite in a financially and culturally globalised world.

In fact, the concept of “crisis” that has dominated public debates is characteristically divisive or binary in its formulation: by this I mean that it focuses on one particular instance of a systemic break, affording it a greater explanatory value and thereby silencing others. In my paper, therefore, I wish, on the one hand to emphasise

that the financial crisis that we are living through cannot be seen separately from other processes of a systemic break that we are currently witnessing in contemporary society; on the other hand, I wish to underline that the discourse of crisis hides an assumption of normality and the consequent presupposition that the future will preferably be equal to the present (once the "crisis has been overcome", as is frequently said). I thus maintain that, at the global level, and seen from a more comprehensive perspective, the future is not realistically pictured as being similar to the present and that this "crisis" does not point solely to a momentary deregulation of the financial market, but instead to a more profound alteration in the global order.

A few years ago, a Catalan friend of mine (Ignasi Terrades) wrote an essay on a totally unknown personality – Eliza Kendall. He called it an "anti-biography" because, he said, he was not writing about the life of that young Scottish woman, but about the very impossibility of her life. He found her hidden away in a footnote of a book by Friedrich Engels, in which this author used her example to illustrate how, under certain circumstances, a person's life can become humanly unbearable.

The young Eliza Kendall became famous for a very brief period in the Scotland of her time for having committed suicide by leaping from a bridge when she lost her job at the factory where she worked. For her, the misery that she was condemned to endure from that moment on would have been incompatible with her idea of herself as a "good Christian girl" – possibly the only immediate solution for her to be able to support herself would be to adopt some kind of activity, such as prostitution or begging, which was morally unacceptable for her. Her choice was therefore to put an end to her life. The small piece of news that was published in the newspapers of that period disturbed some of the intellectual spirits that were more sympathetic to the working classes, such as Engels, but the poor girl's suicide was immediately forgotten by everyone. Even Engels himself did not leave us with anything more than a short footnote.

The reason why Terrades chose to resuscitate poor Eliza was the fact that Engels used her to exemplify the notion that it is only when a system ceases to function that we can understand what it was that previously made it work. By committing suicide, Eliza had shown the limits beyond which it was impossible to take a person in that social context – she demonstrated the existence of a "crisis". In the early 1990s, when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down (we have just celebrated the twentieth anniversary of this event), and in the light of the revolution taking place at that time in the use of information technology, many people began to think that we had embarked upon a virtuous circle that would allow for a new negotiation of the world order leading towards a greater humanisation, and that crises such as the one that Eliza had experienced in the mid-nineteenth century might have come to an end. After all, that dream has evaporated.

The Berlin Wall fell, but another one was erected between Israel and Palestine and another one between Mexico and the rest of North America, as well as yet another one, which is, after all, the Mediterranean. It is, in fact, worth mentioning here yet another recent anniversary: a little less than a month ago, it was the tenth anniversary of the appearance of the first corpse to be washed ashore in the Canary Islands – a young African boy who had died during his desperate efforts to reach a job, to be able to earn his living honourably.

It happens that, unfortunately, not even the end of the neoliberal political cycle in the USA, heralded by the surprising victory of Barack Obama, can offer us much hope. There is no way for us to forget that, besides the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, we are also now celebrating another anniversary, one that is equally meaningful: two weeks ago, it was precisely 80 years since the 1929 stock market crash on Wall Street. And today we again find ourselves in the throes of another global financial "crisis".

In the last few months, despite the fact that we are only now emerging from this new and extremely serious crisis, we have noticed that, once again, the lessons of the past

have served for nothing; in the aftermath of the financial crisis, no measures whatsoever were taken that everyone could unanimously consider necessary in order, in the future, to be able to control the unbridled greed of the great international capital. The financial commentators speak in just one voice: the collapse of the world financial system has in fact been avoided, but nothing essential has been changed.

In fact, the crisis was still gradually revealing itself and already it had become abundantly clear that, amongst the financiers, there was no one who could be trusted. Their greed is truly suicidal – the first reaction of the Wall Street bankers to the American government's attempts to prevent the financial collapse that they themselves had caused was to distribute, in the form of huge salaries and substantial dividends the money that was being handed to them and that would have to be paid by the rest of the citizens – although, in this context, we may legitimately wonder whether the concept of citizenship actually makes any sense nowadays.

To them, it even seems irrational that they might actually have been worried about trying to prevent the predictable mass redundancies which they themselves had survived. On the other hand, for us mere mortals who live in what they, with a certain degree of suspicion, call the "real economy", what is truly incomprehensible is the faith that they claim to have in that Market of theirs (with a capital M), which is unconsciously supposed to control their interests for the good of us all. To give just one example of how the paralysis demonstrated in the face of such immense greed is almost total, it was reported this very month by the main economic newspapers that the corrupt blackmailing practices of the credit cards sector in the USA have not even been minimally restrained, nor indeed is there any expectation that they ever will be.

At the same time, it seems to be possible to predict that the world's largest economy will be incapable of restructuring itself internally. Situations of an increasing collapse of the "public thing", such as those that we are currently witnessing in American states such as California, seem to have gone beyond the possibilities of a simple cure.

Furthermore, not even the political and military situation in the Middle East looks likely to be solved in the short term, nor is the invasion of Afghanistan showing signs of coming any closer to reaching a satisfactory solution in the foreseeable future. And, furthermore, as a result of the war in Iraq, the American national indebtedness has reached levels that were never even vaguely imaginable before.

It becomes clear that, in the medium term, new agents will establish themselves on the international scene with intentions that are not only already formulated in imperial terms – as was the Anglo-American project after the end of the Second World War – but once again in national terms. I am thinking about actors such as the European Union, Russia, China, India and Brazil. Those who prophesied the end of nationalist logic some years ago in the name of transnationalism or cosmopolitanism were looking at the question wrongly.

It might even be possible for some people to look favourably on the dissolution of the power of the imperial mediator that has directed the world order in solitary isolation for the last twenty years. However, it is easy to understand that there are also some real and serious dangers in the alternatives. As an example, we have the behaviour of the new Russian elites in their old areas of colonial influence or that of the renewed Chinese elites on their borders, which, just like those of the Russians are not only geographical but also ethnic (i.e. racial, religious and cultural). Furthermore, the most reliable sources of information assure us that the Afghan conflict has been transformed into a narco-war (very similar to the ones that we saw some years ago in Colombia, Mexico or Rio de Janeiro). This clearly shows how our world is, after all, more integrated than it would seem and that the problems of prohibitionism are not resolved with an attitude that is only slightly less absurd in relation to the consumption of cannabis – as is fortunately the line of action of the Government of the United States.

I consider what Eliza Kendall was drawing our attention to when she jumped off the bridge in Scotland at the end of the 19th century to be particularly dramatic: the

contemporary crisis that constituted the growing difficulty, experienced by an extremely vast number of human beings all over the world, of earning a living decently as a result of their involvement in formal forms of work. By this I mean that it would seem (at least to me) to be important to fight against long-term structural unemployment and the increasing use of national borders to manipulate access to employment, transforming it into a rare commodity – this is, after all, what the concept of "economic migration" serves to hide. Others may talk in a more informed way about the effects of the relocation of employment from one place to another and the use that is made of clandestine or semi-clandestine labour as a way of eroding the established rights of workers. None of this is new or even unknown to anyone.

In the light of what we now know today, both from a demographic and environmental point of view, it is not rational to think that there may exist an alternative to the urban life forms that increasingly characterise our contemporary world. There will also never again be an alternative to a minimally satisfactory human life outside the consumer society, for there are no paths leading backwards in human history and our dependence on technology is here to stay. Knowing this, we must become aware of the particularly dehumanising effects that long-term structural unemployment has. There are no alternative forms of escape: there will never again be room for the spontaneous exploitation of the environment in subsistence economies. Furthermore, long-term structural unemployment is accompanied by processes that marginalise entire sections of the population with extremely harmful effects on the general levels of school education and, more directly, on the future economic success relating to the global order of the countries in question.

Confronted with these three anniversaries: that of the fall of the Berlin Wall – which reminds us that the Second World War only truly finished with the end of the Cold War; that of the Great Depression – which reminds us that, since we are once more living through a serious economic depression, nothing has again been done to protect human

beings from the predatory designs of big business; and that of the poor boy who was thrown dead into the waves by his companions on the drifting boat, after succumbing to starvation on that great African adventure of attempting to reach employment… Faced with these three monuments, so to speak, what observations force themselves upon us?

If our perspective of interest in looking at this question is, on the one hand, that of studying the human condition, and, on the other hand, that of considering the position of modern people who are relatively subordinated within the global order, I think that we can identify three main axes in relation to which the current world situation is presented as crisis-torn: i.e. as calling into question the maintenance of the social and cultural system that we value.

First of all, there is an environmental crisis – i.e. nowadays what is at stake is the survival of the material world that has sustained the human species and made it possible for there to be a constant improvement in the living conditions of populations such as ours. A great deal has been said about this crisis, and, despite the fact that little has been done, there are many people who concerned about it.

As far as the second point that I identify from my dual perspective of interest is concerned, there has been much less said on this matter lately. The theme really does seem to have gone out of fashion, despite the fact that the urban wars in the great metropolises have not diminished in any way and that the wars that were originally presented as being religious and political in nature have gradually turned into narco-wars – as, for example, in Colombia, where we have just seen a resurgence in American military activity in recent weeks, or in Afghanistan.

I therefore suggest that the second great crisis that we are currently experiencing at the global level is a crisis of violence, particularly one of violence that is focused on the metropolitan centres where the majority of humankind now lives today and where an even larger percentage will live in the future. This crisis is linked to three main phenomena that are interrelated and have all come together: (i) the international business that is

state-protected, but theoretically clandestine, involving the trade in small and medium-sized arms; (ii) the prohibitionism that sustains the trade in drugs and sexual slavery; (iii) the military exploitation of religious radicalism. It is not my task here to go into any great detail about these questions. I do, however, think that it is necessary to make some aspects more explicit, so that we can eliminate some of the prejudices that normally impede the full discussion of these questions. What is even worse is that these same prejudices prevent us from seeing how all these aspects are, in fact, interrelated.

The first question that needs to be swept clear from the table is that of lifting the burden deriving from the argument of the forbidden thing – whether this is a "drug" or a type of sexual activity. On the contrary, it seems to be necessary to focus on the way in which the supposed prohibition gives rise to processes of institutional erosion at the urban level, the international level and global human level. In fact, two particular aspects need to be established: the first is that the term "drugs" represents a category that includes a series of substances which, apart from the fact that they are banned, have nothing in common with one another that can serve to identify them as being different from any other consumable substances. This argument has been developed in quite some detail for a long time now, so that I do not think that it is worth going into it any further here. It is, however, relevant for our understanding that the discussion has nothing to do with the intrinsic characteristics of the prohibited products, but is instead related with their supposed prohibition.

The second aspect to be established – and once again this is a widely accepted commonplace – is that the prohibition spread all over the world by the Anglo-American imperial powers in the course of the last half century has not in any way prevented daily access to these substances or to the sexual services mediated through prostitution. By this, I mean that it is a question of criminalisation and not a matter of prohibition *strictu sensu*, since one can only talk about prohibition insofar as it is actually possible to prohibit something. Now, both in relation to the question of prostitution and in relation to that of

the supposed “drugs”, this has been spectacularly impossible to bring about; to the extent that the President of Mexico has himself been obliged to publicly explain that, were it not for the existence of such a vast market for “drugs” in the United States, Mexico would not now find itself involved in a war that, in real terms, is a kind of civil war with terribly destructive effects on the economy and is also accompanied by inevitable human suffering. Curiously, he only felt that he could do so after the election of Barack Obama as the American President.

The central error here is, in my opinion, the polarisation of the question into the modernist gesture of believing that it is possible to prohibit something. This error is clearly visible in the attention that, last week, the Brazilian national newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* dedicated to this question. There was an article in favour of prohibition, saying that, if something isn’t banned, people will consume it, which is, of course, bad for them, and immediately afterwards, there was another article saying that drugs should not be banned because the effects of such a move are profoundly perverse in terms of civil violence. This polarisation around the supposition of prohibition has not helped to improve the situation in any way. It is typically the fallacy of all or nothing.

To summarise, the mistake lies in assuming that access to highly toxic substances that are potentially disturbing for a person’s state of mind may be (a) simply prohibited or (b) simply permitted. We have already known for a very long time now that neither the ban on the consumption of these substances, nor the prohibition on their production or trade are in any way possible to implement. Yet, on the other hand, we also know that modern technology is so complex and its effects so violent that it is important to guide the way in which citizens consume products in order to protect them. If it is like this with uranium, aspirin, motor vehicles, gambling in casinos, alcohol and tobacco, or in certain countries (and it has been more than proved that these are countries where urban life is much easier and more pleasant), with the use of firearms, why can’t it also be like this with the sex trade or access to cannabis, opiates or ecstasy? The same attitude should,

however, be adopted for a whole range or different forms of personal affirmation that need to be managed, rather than prohibited – such as religious, regional or ethnic traditions that may enter into conflict with other religions, regions or ethnic sensitivities.

If what is happening in Rio de Janeiro, Colombia, Mexico, Afghanistan or Pakistan were merely questions of a local nature, we here in Portugal, who do not feel ourselves to be particularly affected by this scourge, might even try to manage it locally with Drug Addiction Treatment Centres or outreach campaigns, a policy that has in fact been very successfully implemented in Portugal. The problem is, however, linked to the trade in small and medium-sized arms and to the humanistically tragic way in which entire populations have been subjected to military violence on a daily basis, coupled with civil insecurity and the collapse of the states that would be the only guarantees of their rights as citizens. Furthermore, it is that same prohibition that, impeding the regulation and policing of the forms of sex trade, has given rise to some of the most serious situations of slavery in contemporary society. It therefore seems to me to be important to understand that the prevailing prohibitionist philosophy of all-or-nothing that sustains urban violence all over the world to some extent is one of the most serious crises facing our contemporary world.

The third great crisis, therefore, is the one that has led us to meet here today: the crisis in the institutions of economic and financial regulation at a global level. We were alerted to this crisis by the boy who, ten years ago, was thrown into the sea by his fellow passengers because he had not been able to survive the suffering of sailing on the high seas in small boats, or by Eliza Kendall's suicidal leap into the river. When we refuse to see that what is at stake is a global phenomenon, which accompanies the total globalisation of the financial market and the liberalisation of the forms of exploitation of the labour force, we are simply trying to escape from what is evident. No Market with a capital M will ever control, just as it has never controlled, the silent transformation of entrepreneurship into inhuman exploitation. Just like drugs or the powerful means or resources of modern

technology (cars, arms, medicine), no future human world can sustain its humanity if there are no agencies or bodies set up to negotiate the rights of all of us. The construction of explicitly global political agencies for the protection of our common interests is an essential condition for the survival of humankind, as well as for the enhancement of our mutual diversity.

Given the absurdities of the two World Wars at the beginning of the last century, many people understood that it was necessary to see the world as a political unit and to overcome the sectarian interests that created room for the worst acts of violence perpetrated against our common humanity. During the 1980s and 1990s, false prophets led an entire generation to claim that their own private interests should, after all, be the common interest of all mankind. The falsity of such selfishness has finally been revealed, once again. Today we again live in a world in which environmental crises, crises of violence and financial crises clearly show us that it is necessary to go back to the drawing board with the aim of explicitly reconstructing a *universal discourse* that mutually protects us from one another and allows us to enjoy some political safeguards for our humanity, which is, after all, increasingly global.

The multi-culturalist conception of the world, as an entity that is broken into watertight and non-communicating ontological universes (with all the political implications of such a vision), is not only an incorrect one, but also profoundly perverse. Whether we like it or not, our human worlds are intercommunicating and, as Johannes Fabian correctly insists, we are increasingly contemporary with one another. The unitarist language of modernist socio-centrism has divided humans into societies and cultures that should be self-sufficient in themselves. This vision does, however, have to be abandoned in view of what is happening in our current world and also in view of our ever greater knowledge about the past.

Human beings do, in fact, live within continuous spaces of human intercommunication – not in enclosed spaces. Instead of talking about unitary societies

and cultures, we can perhaps begin to invent a language in the style of the one that Tolkien uses in his fiction when he talks of the *middle-earth* or the one that the Greeks used when they talked about the *oikoumene* – the space of human interaction. Nowadays, there does not exist one oecumene, there exist oecumenes within oecumenes, because there are no borders to human communication of the type that was represented by the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans in the eras prior to the modern one. Our world is an oecumene of oecumenes – a *network of networks*, as Ulf Hannerz calls it – no matter how many other oecumenes can be identified inside it; i.e. spaces of greater human density.

In these twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we have observed the collapse of the universal discourse – both religious and political – largely thanks to the efforts of a series of very particular radicals. Not only at the hands of Ratzinger and Bin Laden, but also at the hands of Dick Cheney and the neoliberal economists, we have been obliged to stand powerless as we watch the destruction and illegitimation of our efforts to build bridges of human understanding of a global nature similar to those that had characterised the horrified response to the horrors of the Second World War.

The last two decades of humanity have been led by a generation that has failed to understand that there are risks that must not be run – a generation that has lost all interest in the fact that there are limits to the robustness of the world and of humanity itself. Today, it has once again become possible to empathise with the feeling that moved the men who sought to reconstruct the world after the two horrible World Wars. As scientists of the social world, we have to play our part and work towards a reconstruction of the intellectual instruments that allow us to tell people about this project. To this end, we must draw attention to the fact that we are currently faced not so much with a simple financial crisis, but instead with the complex process of a civilisational crisis.