CALL FOR PAPERS


International Conference, Paris, France, 15-16 October 2020
Maison de la recherche (salle Athéna), Université Sorbonne Nouvelle
4, rue des Irlandais, 75005 Paris
Deadline for proposals: 4 May 2020

This conference aims at studying the current state of Britain’s democracy in order to assess the challenges and changes it has faced over the last two decades marked by crises.

Media consumers are constantly exposed to news stories about one crisis or another: diplomacy, terrorism, climate, financial markets, state deficit, inequality, retirement, health, welfare etc. International relations, climate or the financial system seem to attract attention only when rapid or large-scale interventions are needed. But the repetition and the accumulation of such ‘crises’ raise questions about the nature and the actual meaning of such events. What exactly is a ‘crisis’ and should such a wide range of phenomena be referred to as ‘crises’?

Antonio Gramsci famously wrote in his Prison Notebooks that ‘the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’ The first characteristic of a crisis thus seems to be its temporary nature as a period of transition.

According to Hannah Arendt, a crisis is a moment that invites us to think anew about fundamental problems [Arendt 1977, 174]. However, just like a medical crisis refers to a turning point at which a disease might either lead to death or recede, Arendt defines a crisis not as a permanent situation but as a key moment when certainties and guiding principles are questioned. Yet, Arendt also depicts crises as moments when what a society has in common is destroyed and interactions between citizens become almost impossible [Arendt 1977, 178]. This ambivalent definition points to the complex nature of a moment of social and political transformation.

German historian Reinhart Koselleck adds that in late modernity, a crisis has been defined as ‘a state of greater or lesser permanence, as in a longer or shorter transition towards something better or worse or towards something altogether different’ [Koselleck 2006, p. 358]. According to him, crises associate a given society’s experience of the past with shared expectations for the future [Koselleck 2004, p. 259]. Therefore, a crisis can be understood as an ‘epochal change’ [Koselleck 2006, p. 358], a moment when social and political interactions are redefined. But tension between a shared past and a desired future could be politically exploited or, as Sum and Jessop put it: crises could be ‘manufactured crises, that is, creating crises where none exist […] for “political” motives’ [2013, p. 396], which invites a particular attention towards the semiotic and material properties of this social phenomenon [Jessop 2013, p.3].

It is worth noting that the ‘crisis narrative’ is not a recent phenomenon in the United Kingdom, and takes on a very broad meaning, ranging from identity crisis to crisis of confidence in the British institutions, and representation and participation crises. For instance, the discourse on identity crisis dates back to the 1970s, when the rising tide of nationalism in Wales and Scotland sparked a discussion on the very nature of Britishness and the territorial integrity of the Union [Nairn 2000; Marr 2000]. The devolution project, which aimed at containing the nationalist movements, was then perceived by some as a direct threat to the core constitutional principle.
of parliamentary sovereignty, challenging the ‘British Political Tradition’ (BPT) based on a hierarchical and centralised organisation of power [Hall 2011]. More broadly, the crises British institutions experienced were analysed as the result of ‘21st-century expectations, technologies and transparency challenging a 19th-century model of democracy and participation’ [Richards and Smith 2014, p.10]. The BPT has informed British understanding of ‘democracy, the executive, voting and representation,’ with the idea that ‘the executive and the legislature should operate within a self-regulating arena to protect against outside, potentially undemocratic, influence’ [Richards and Smith 2014, p.10]. It is this model that has been upset in recent years but without a new system of politics being implemented [Richards, Smith and Hay 2014, p. 269].

Over the last two decades, the ‘crisis narrative’ mentioned above has taken on a new dimension, not least due to the 2008 financial crisis, followed by the Great Recession that Cameron’s government sought to solve through the implementation of an austerity programme. The 2000s and 2010s also saw the rise of Euroscepticism, both with the growing weight of UKIP and within the two major parties, especially the Conservative Party, leading to the organisation of the 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union. The calling of a referendum on such a crucial issue for the future of the UK raises broader questions about the way politicians have tried to answer frequent demands for more direct democracy and invites comparison with other referenda (2004, 2011, 2014) but also a reflection on other forms of democratic innovation (Citizens’ assemblies, Citizens’ juries, Deliberations etc.) and political participation.

The current Brexit debate has been described as an unprecedented crisis [Schnapper and Avril 2019, p. 233] and indeed epitomises the climax of this crisis narrative. Uncertainty remains around the preservation of the Union and the future relationship that the UK will be able to build with old or potentially new partners on the European and international stages.

Therefore, reading these events as a series of crises emanating from a more global and deeper crisis of the British Political Tradition originating in the late 1960s/early 1970s brings up the question of the duration of this state of transition, characteristic of crisis. Is this seemingly permanent state of crisis a ‘new normal’ and what does the ‘crisis narrative’ entail? Perhaps more importantly, unpacking this narrative will lead to reflect on the outcome of the crisis which, in the words of Reinhart Koselleck quoted above, could be ‘something better or worse or […] something altogether different.’

We are seeking proposals relating to a wide range of topics of relevance to the reflection on the state of crisis in the UK from 1997 to 2020, including, but not limited to:

- Institutional reforms
- Political participation
- Democratic innovation
- Referenda
- Political parties and their ideologies
- Euroscepticism
- Populism
- Neoliberalism and its discontents
- The economic crisis and austerity
- The union and devolution
- The UK and the EU/ EU member states
- The UK on the international stage
Following the conference, we intend to send a number of papers for publication as part of a special issue in a peer-reviewed journal.

References


Submission instructions

Please submit 250-300 words abstracts by 4 May 2020 to all of the following: crisis.conf@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr, Thibaud Harrois (thibaud.harrois@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr), Sarah Pickard (sarah.pickard@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr), and Nolwenn Rousvoal (nolwenn.rousvoal@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr). Please ensure you include all of the following: your full name, university/institution, email address, research discipline, key words, and a short biography.

Please note we will be requesting papers to be circulated before the conference and aim to publish a selection of full papers.

Organising committee

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