

The Crisis concept and Crisology. From disruption to complex transformation

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Abstract: This article aims to examine the historical and conceptual evolution of the notion of crisis, emphasizing its increasing centrality in contemporary discourse across the political, economic, environmental, and public health domains. It is based on the premise that crisis, rather than representing an episodic disruption, has become a structural condition of late modernity, particularly in light of the emerging concept of *polycrisis*. The methodology employed is interdisciplinary and historically grounded, combining critical analysis of philosophical, theological, and political sources with an extensive review of literature in the social sciences, political theory, and epistemology. The study traces a diachronic trajectory of the concept of crisis – from its classical roots in Antiquity and medieval scholasticism, through its modern reconfigurations (especially in Enlightenment philosophy), to contemporary postmodern and systemic interpretations. This trajectory culminates in the contemporary understanding of *polycrisis*, in which multiple systemic crises (environmental, political, social, economic) coexist and mutually reinforce one another. Crisis is thus no longer perceived as an isolated event, but rather as a permanent and complex condition of present-day society – one that demands a systemic mode of thinking. Ultimately, the article advocates for the development of *crisology* as an emerging interdisciplinary field, arguing for the need to adopt systemic and transdisciplinary approaches in order to better understand and respond to the multiple, interconnected crises shaping the present world.

Keywords: Crisis; Crisology; History of Ideas; Political Theory; Transformation; Rupture; Global Challenges.

Introduction

“There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem” (Morin & Kern, 1999, p. 74).

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In times of social upheaval, political instability, or cultural transformation, the notion of “crisis” often emerges as a key framework through which individuals and societies attempt to make sense of change. Far from being a modern invention, the concept of crisis has deep historical roots and has undergone significant reinterpretations across different intellectual traditions.

How has the concept of crisis evolved from Antiquity through the medieval and modern periods to postmodernity, shaped by various doctrinal, philosophical, and political perspectives – and how does the postmodern conception of crisis differ from its antecedents? In the context of the increasing complexity and interconnectivity of contemporary global challenges, what is the relevance of establishing a science dedicated to studying multiple contemporary crises-crisology?

This article aims to answer these questions by tracing the historical and conceptual development of crisis from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages and modernity, culminating in its redefinition within postmodern thought. By examining the philosophical, theological, political, and cultural dimensions of the term, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of crisis as both a moment of rupture and a catalyst for the emergence of new social paradigms.

This research adopts a qualitative, diachronic approach that combines historical and philosophical analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Key texts from Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and postmodernity are examined to trace the conceptual evolution of crisis. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives – including philosophy, political theory, and cultural studies – it offers a comprehensive overview of how the meanings and functions of crisis have shifted over time.

The analysis is grounded in a diverse corpus of sources. Primary materials include philosophical, political, and theological works such as Augustine's *City of God*, Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Giovanni Botero's *The Reason of State*, and Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. These are complemented by a rich body of secondary literature, including critical and historiographical studies on the intellectual history of crisis. More recent thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and David Harvey, together with medieval and early modern historians and philosophers, provide essential interpretive frameworks for understanding the concept's transformations across different epochs.

Crisis(es) and the quest for meaning

The word *crisis* originates in Classical Antiquity, derived from the Ancient Greek term *krísis* (κρίσις), meaning ‘decision,’ ‘judgment,’ or ‘choice.’ The original use of the term implied a turning point – a critical moment requiring evaluation and decisive action. Its etymological roots point to its application across diverse contexts, including medicine, politics, philosophy, and rhetoric. In the 5th century BC, the *Corpus Hippocraticum* employed the term *krísis* to describe the decisive stage of illness, the critical juncture at which the patient would either recover or succumb to death (Sournia, 1995).

In political philosophy, Aristotle associated the notion of *crisis* with rational discernment – the capacity to distinguish between different ideas, values, or arguments. Crisis was thus linked to the process of critical analysis required for rational decision-making (San Miguel, 2006). In the realm of justice, *crisis* referred to the act of adjudicating disputes among citizens, pointing to a moment of judgment that served to restore social order. Thucydides, (2010), in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, portrayed crisis as a moment of profound rupture in the social and political order. In Antiquity, the term denoted a period of transition or decisive change.

It was understood as a specific point in time at which a situation or condition required evaluation or resolution, the outcome of which could have significant social and political consequences. Over time, the term *crisis* came to be employed in a broader sense, describing moments of uncertainty and doubt across various dimensions of human existence. Cícero interpreted political crises as indicators of Rome's moral and institutional decline. Viewed as a moment of rupture, crisis represented a decisive juncture in which the future of the *res publica* was at stake. In his work *De Re Publica*, Cícero argues that corruption and the unrestrained ambition of political leaders give rise to crises that threaten the political equilibrium and the very survival of the Republic (Cícero, 2008).

Throughout the different periods of the Middle Ages, the concept of crisis evolved from a primarily theological and eschatological interpretation – linked to divine punishment and apocalyptic expectations, as reflected in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (Hipona, 1998) and Thomas Aquinas (Aquino, 2000) – to encompass political, social, and institutional tensions, particularly during key moments of transformation such as the Investiture Controversy, the Crusades, and the medieval crises of authority and legitimacy in 13th century discussed by thinkers like Dante Alighieri (Alighieri, 2006) and Marsilius of Padua (Padua, 2012).

During the High Middle Ages, the rediscovery of classical texts facilitated the introduction of the term *crisis* into the vernacular languages of Europe. This term, widely used across medical, theological, philosophical, and political discourses, denoted moments of tension between stability and change. Rooted in a medical framework influenced by Hippocrates and Galen, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) conceptualized *crisis* as critical junctures in the course of a disease, which he called “critical days.” These moments were seen as decisive points where the patient's condition would either improve or decline. Avicenna highlighted the significance of carefully observing symptoms and illness patterns to anticipate outcomes, treating *crisis* as a natural and pivotal event within medical diagnosis and prognosis (Sournia, 1995).

From a religious standpoint, during Middle Age, crisis was often interpreted as divine judgment – human society's crisis being the result of moral corruption – as articulated by Saint Augustine, who saw crises as manifestations of spiritual conflict and the struggle between the City of God and the earthly city (Hipona, 1998). Medieval scholasticism approached moments of doubt – understood as crises between faith and reason – through a rational lens, seeking to harmonize divine revelation with classical philosophy, particularly in the work of Thomas Aquinas (Aquino, 2000). In the vernacular sense, the concept was disseminated in French in the 15th century, and retaining the meanings of ‘decisive moment’, ‘turning point’ or ‘critical period’.

In *The Reason of State* (1589), Giovanni Botero presents a vision of political order focussed on the stability and preservation of the state, responding directly to Machiavellian pragmatism by emphasizing moral governance, religious legitimacy, and prudent administration. Within this framework, crisis is implicitly understood as a disruption of the delicate balance underpinning state authority – whether caused by internal disorder, mismanagement, or external threats. Botero grounds his conception of the state in reason as the guiding principle of governance, whereby the ruler must anticipate and manage sources of instability.

While crises are not always explicitly named, they are treated as critical moments demanding swift and calculated intervention to safeguard the common good and prevent the erosion of political legitimacy. Unlike Machiavelli's acceptance of opportunistic rupture, Botero views crisis as a test of the ruler's wisdom, foresight, and moral responsibility rather than a mere opportunity to seize power by force (Botero, 2017). Consequently, *The Reason of State* makes a significant contribution to early modern political thought by framing crisis as an ever-present latent threat to sovereign order – one that requires not only tactical response but also ethical reflection.

Among Enlightenment thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762), famously declared: “Vous vous fiez à l'ordre actuel de la société sans songer que cet ordre est lui-même soumis à des révolutions inévitables (...). Nous approchons d'un état de crise et du siècle des révolutions. Qui peut dire ce qu'il adviendra alors de vous?” (Rousseau, p. 468). As a contractualist philosopher, Rousseau foresaw revolution as an imminent and radical change. For him, the political crisis of his time originated in the corruption of the Ancien Régime's institutions and the growing depth of social inequalities.

In contrast, Montesquieu, in *L'esprit Des Lois* (1748), proposed the separation of powers as a structural mechanism to prevent institutional crises and safeguard political liberty (Montesquieu, 2010). Both thinkers, in different ways, contributed to a conceptualization of crisis as a symptom of systemic decay and a catalyst for political renewal.

The German historian and theorist, Reinhart Koselleck, in his seminal work *Critique and Crisis* (1988), emphasized that crisis is both a concept of interpretation and a structure of expectation. For Koselleck, ‘crisis’ doesn't just appear as a moment of rupture, circumstance or difficulty, but as a conceptual tool created during the Enlightenment to manage the tension between traditional authority and the rise of critical and rational thought.

Koselleck describes how the Enlightenment's moral and intellectual critique of absolutist regimes fostered a new historical consciousness, in which crisis was understood as a decisive stage in a progressive movement of emancipation, reason and progress. Koselleck conceptualises crisis as a moment of transition – an intermediate phase – which reveals the instability of the existing order and points to the possibility (or necessity) of a radical transformation. In this sense, crisis is inseparable from the dynamics of modernity itself, incorporating both the decline of the old and the ideological struggle over what should replace it. He argued that the concept of crisis not static but carry layered, historically contingent meanings that reflect shifts in social and political structures.

Karl Marx later stated that emerging capitalism generated inequalities and cyclical crises. It was through Marxist writings, at the 19th century, that introduced the idea of a positive connotation of the crisis, associating it with social transformation and the end of capitalism. According to the Natacha Ordioni (2011),

“la connotation positive de la crise prendra toute sa résonance. Dans cette perspective utopique, “la crise” ouvre en direction d'une nouvelle ère associée à la fin du capitalisme et se transforme en étape vers un meilleur équilibre social. Au XXe siècle, tandis que la conscience de la crise est aiguisée par la Première Guerre mondiale et la dépression économique, ses approches analytiques se développent parmi les historiens et les économistes” (p. 139).

Miguel de Beistegui (2024) attributes to Karl Marx a critique of the economic dogma that views crisis as an exceptional event. The idea – common among the classical economists of his time – that economic crises were merely exceptional events or occasional deviations from a norm of stability and equilibrium was deeply mistaken, as it ignored the internal contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production. Beistegui assigns to Marx the origin and development of a science of crisis, which he refers to as *crisology*, highlighting the recurring nature of economic crises within the capitalist system.

“For Marxist and post-Marxist thought, crisis is capitalism's basic state, its ontological feature: capitalism is structurally in crises it is crisis itself – for the simple reason that its basic form, that of commodity, contains within itself its own contradiction” (Beistegui, 2022, p. 162).

Subsequent scholars have further developed the Marxist conception of crisis, expanding its analysis to include political, economic, and discursive dimensions.

The inseparable nature of the crisis: contingency, disintegration and multiplicity

Culturally and philosophically, postmodernity began in the 1970s and 1980s, marking a significant shift in the concept of crisis (Anderson, 1998). This period saw a growing scepticism toward grand narratives and universal truths, as theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard (1979) famously declared the “end of metanarratives”, while Michel Foucault (1977) explored how crises are produced and managed through power relations and discourse. The concept of crisis expanded beyond political or economic ruptures to include cultural, epistemological, and social dimensions, reflecting the fragmented, decentralized, and pluralistic nature of postmodern society (Jameson 1991; Harvey 1989).

In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard argues that the crisis of knowledge is defined by the decline of metanarratives those overarching, universal explanations of history, society, and human development that dominated modern thought (e.g., Enlightenment rationalism, Marxism, and Christianity). According to Lyotard, the crisis corresponds to the erosion of consensus concerning what constitutes truth or legitimate knowledge. Postmodern society, with its emphasis on pluralism, relativism, and fragmentation, signals a rupture with the modernist ideal of a single, rational progression of history or universally valid truths. In this context, crisis does not merely refer to the collapse of specific systems or ideologies, but rather to a more fundamental crisis of meaning – an inability to ground our understanding of the world within any overarching or universal framework.

Ten years later, in the same year that Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man* (1989), amidst the revolutions marked by the fall of communism and the rise of liberal democracies, Félix Guattari, in *The Three Ecologies*, proposed a framework for understanding ecological crises through three interconnected dimensions: environmental ecology, social ecology, and semantic ecology. Guattari says that contemporary capitalism degrades all three ecologies by promoting consumerism, homogenisation, and environmental destruction. He proposes the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and subjectivity systems, advocating for interdisciplinary approaches and the integration of values.

Anne Brigitte Kern and Edgar Morin, in their work *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium* (1999), highlight the urgent need for a complex and systemic mode of thinking to tackle the multifaceted global challenges of the new millennium. Situated within the context of postmodernity, they critique the fragmentation of knowledge and the excessive specialization characteristic of modernity, arguing that these tendencies limit our ability to comprehend reality in its full complexity. Their approach advocates for an epistemological shift toward integrative thinking, capable of bridging disparate fields and addressing the multidimensional nature of contemporary crises.

Kern and Morin contend that postmodernity must overcome the constraints of modern thought by adopting a planetary, global perspective – one that embraces uncertainty, ambiguity, and the interdependence of environmental, social, political, and economic issues. Notably, they were among the first to conceptualize the notion of ‘polycrisis’, describing the interconnected crises faced by modern society –environmental, social, political, economic, and cultural – that cannot be effectively addressed in isolation. According to their framework, polycrisis refers to a condition where multiple crises coexist and interact in complex and interdependent ways, reinforcing each other and generating cascading effects that amplify both their individual and collective consequences.

Kern and Morin argue that this structural interconnectivity amplifies the vulnerability and instability of global systems, making contemporary challenges more unpredictable and resistant to resolution through traditional, compartmentalised approaches. Their perspective calls for a shift toward complex, systemic thinking – capable of integrating uncertainty, contradiction, and interdependence – as essential for understanding and responding to the dynamics of the modern world.

In the contemporary understanding of the trans-systemic nature of global challenges, political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon (2020) argues that we are living in an age of crisis that is no longer merely persistent, but also 'poly' in nature: current crises have converged into a single, interconnected polycrisis – a condition significantly more complex and dangerous than the sum of its individual components.

In *Commanding Hope*, Homer-Dixon outlines proactive strategies for addressing this condition, calling for a fundamental shift in how we think, feel, and act in response to a rapidly evolving global context. The term polycrisis has gained significant traction, particularly since it was adopted during the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in January 2023. Regardless of its growing usage, what is most critical is the development of systemic thinking – an approach that highlights the dynamics of current power structures and identifies the transformations needed to make global systems more resilient, less volatile, and less hazardous (Ulmi, 2023).

This trajectory reflects the complexity of contemporary challenges, positioning crisis as a dynamic concept that reveals both the disruptive potential and the constitutive instability of societies moving forward.

The Crisis in Distinct Fields of Knowledge

The trajectory of the concept's evolution reveals a significant semantic expansion, as the term – once confined to the technical domains of medicine and philosophy in Classical Antiquity – came to be employed more broadly to designate situations of collapse, transformation, and uncertainty across various dimensions of human experience. Contemporary crises are interpreted in diverse ways, depending on the disciplinary lens through which they are analysed.

Within the historiographical domain, the concept of crisis is crucial for understanding processes of change over time. It serves as an analytical tool to describe periods marked by discontinuity, tension, and transformation within societies. Furthermore, it enables historians to account for overlapping temporalities and multiple causalities, offering a framework for interpreting complex historical dynamics that resist linear or monocausal explanations. Crisis, in this context, becomes both a subject of inquiry and a methodological device for examining the ruptures that redefine historical trajectories.

Not every crisis culminates in revolution; some lead to reform, while others signify the dissolution of a system. From the perspective of the *École des Annales*, crises are analysed through their multi-causal nature – encompassing political, economic, social, and cultural factors – and are situated within broader, gradual historical transformations and long-term processes.

Fernand Braudel, in his seminal work *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme (XVe–XVIIIe siècle)* (1967), illustrates how economic crises, for instance, often emerge from tensions accumulated over decades or even centuries. These crises reflect deep structural changes in modes of production, the circulation of goods, market organisation, and demographic shifts. Within this framework, crisis is not merely understood as a collapse but as a moment of reconfiguration, revealing the underlying forces that shape social life. Rather than representing a simple rupture in the historical *continuum*, crisis may be interpreted as a symptom of profound historical change, a manifestation of *longue durée* processes that redefine the trajectory of societies.

According to Eric Hobsbawm, historical crises represent decisive turning points characterized by a rupture between the established order and the emergence of new social, political, or economic structures. These moments of disruption are not merely transitional phases, but rather critical junctures that redefine the trajectory of history. The two World Wars stand as paradigmatic examples of historical crises in the 20th century. Far from being isolated military conflicts, they represented profound ruptures that reshaped global political, economic, and social structures.

In economics, the concept of crisis typically refers to periods of instability and contraction in key economic indicators such as production, employment, investment, or consumption. Crises are often marked by sharp disruptions in market functioning, loss of confidence, and systemic inequalities. Keynes (1936) understands that crises require state intervention to restore economic balance, in contrast to Adam Smith's classical notion of the "invisible hand" (Smith, 1993).

In the post-World War II period, with the dominance of Keynesian economic thought and active state intervention, the notion that "crisis" could be prevented remained a dominant belief until the mid-1970s (Keynes, 2010). In recent decades, the concept of crisis has expanded to include financial instability and globalization risks, as exemplified by the 2008 financial crisis, leading to renewed debates about regulation and state intervention.

In political science, the concept of crisis is often associated with moments of instability, rupture, or the erosion of legitimacy affecting governments, institutions, norms, and power relations within a political system. These crises challenge the continuity and functioning of political order and may result in regime change, institutional reform, or systemic collapse. Several prominent scholars have contributed to this understanding, for example, Giovanni Sartori (2018) analysed political crises as moments of rupture stemming from the breakdown of institutional functionality or legitimacy, emphasizing that when institutions no longer perform their intended roles or lose credibility in the eyes of the public, general instability succeeds.

Giorgio Agamben's work critically explores the concept of *crisis* through the lens of the *state of exception*, a condition where normal legal order is suspended by sovereign power in response to perceived emergencies or crises. Agamben argues that modern political systems increasingly rely on the state of exception as a paradigm, distorting the boundaries between law and its suspension. This creates a permanent state of crisis in which the distinction between normality and emergency becomes ambiguous, leading to the normalization of extraordinary measures. In this framework, crisis is not merely a transient disruption but a structural feature of contemporary sovereignty, raising profound questions about the nature of power, legality, and political order (Agamben, 2005).

Similarly, Samuel P. Huntington, in his influential work *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), argued that political crises tend to emerge when political institutions fail to keep pace with rapid social and economic changes. For Huntington, the mismatch between the mobilization of new social forces and the institutional capacity to integrate and manage them generates political disorder, making institutional development a prerequisite for maintaining political stability in transitional societies.

In sociology, crises are understood as moments that reveal underlying tensions, contradictions, and vulnerabilities within the social structure. These episodes often act as catalytic agent for transformation, prompting shifts in values, behavioural norms, and institutional configurations. Crises can disrupt the taken-for-granted stability of social life, exposing fractures that may have long remained latent. Max Weber (2022) associated social crises with deficits of legitimacy, particularly in relation to the authority of institutions and the erosion of belief in their normative foundations.

For Jürgen Habermas, philosopher and sociologist, the concept of crisis is related to systemic dysfunctions that affect the ability of a modern society to maintain its social integration and institutional legitimacy. In *Legitimation Crisis* (1976), Habermas expands the Marxist notion of crisis, going beyond the economic sphere to include the political-administrative and socio-cultural domains.

From a philosophical perspective, crisis is conceived as a multidimensional phenomenon that transcends isolated events, reflecting deeper structural tensions and disruptions across political, economic, and cultural systems. Philosophy not only interrogates the causes and consequences of crises, but also explores their ontological and epistemological dimensions.

For Miguel de Beistegui, crises must be understood not merely as empirical disruptions, but as events that disclose the deeper structures of our being-in-the-world and the historical conditions of knowledge (2023). Miguel de Beistegui (2024) offers a nuanced philosophical typology of crisis, distinguishing between three interconnected levels that reflect varying degrees of intensity and depth.

First, he identifies *functional or localized crises*, which are absorbed by biopolitical mechanisms (forms of governance oriented toward the regulation of life, health, and the normalization of population). These crises, though disruptive, are contained within existing institutional frameworks and resolved through technocratic or administrative means. Second level involves *states of exception*, where normative structures are temporarily suspended. Such crises reveal the fragility of institutional legitimacy and are justified by appeals to necessity. Finally, Beistegui conceptualizes *structural or ontological crises*, which destabilize the foundations of a system and create the possibility for new frameworks of understanding, normativity, and power to emerge. At this level, crisis becomes a moment of historical rupture (new forms of meaning, sense and value – subjectivity). In this way, a crisis is not just something to be managed, but a turning point that makes change possible.

Conclusion

Crisis is not simply an event occurring in time; it fundamentally reveals the structure of temporality in which it is situated, acting both as a symptom and a disclosure of a particular historicity. In Antiquity, crisis was understood primarily within a personal, existential, and ethical framework – closely tied to individual experiences of moral, medical, or judicial judgment. It signified a decisive moment requiring resolution, intimately linked to the exercise of choice and the confrontation with transformative truth.

With the development of medieval scholasticism, the concept of crisis shifted towards an epistemic tension between faith and reason. Here, crisis was less a rupture and more an intellectual challenge embedded in the reconciliation of theology and classical philosophy. During the Renaissance, political thought recast crisis as a threat to the fragile stability of the state, emphasizing governance through moral virtue and prudent administration to maintain order amid internal and external challenges.

The Enlightenment further expanded the meaning of crisis, framing it as a collective rupture that questioned the legitimacy of entire political, social, and intellectual systems. Crisis became synonymous with radical transformation, driven by ideals of reason and progress, marking the collapse of old regimes and the birth of new orders.

Postmodernity, however, departs from these notions of discrete rupture, conceptualizing crisis as a persistent state of instability marked by the fragmentation of universal narratives and the proliferation of multiple, often conflicting, perspectives. The contemporary idea of *polycrisis* captures this condition, highlighting the complex, intertwined nature of economic, ecological, political, technological, and existential crises that amplify one another, generating unprecedented uncertainty and historical indeterminacy.

Finally, the understanding of crisis varies widely across disciplines—whether in political theory, environmental studies, philosophy, or economics—shaping distinct conceptualizations as rupture, transition, or structural condition. This epistemological diversity influences how crises are interpreted and managed today. Emerging as a response to this complexity, *crisology*—the interdisciplinary study of crises—aims to critically map these varying conceptual frameworks, recognizing both their historical contexts and their systemic interconnections.

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Recebido para publicação: 9 de maio de 2025

Aceite após revisão: 15 de junho de 2025

Received for publication: 9 May 2025

Accepted in revised form: 15 June 2025