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On the Criterion of Crisis; Or, on Diacrisis

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πολίτης δ' ἀπλῶς οὐδενὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὀρίζεται μᾶλλον ἢ τῷ μετέχειν κρίσεως καὶ ἀρχῆς.¹

Introduction

In a time of a pressing crisis, such as the one we are living today, a need for a resolute assessment is imposed upon us. The crisis itself requires us that we somehow become critical in order to foresee and judge its hidden turns and twists, which are inevitably on their way. We are to be reminded here that the term “crisis [κρίσις]” is a Greek

term used in the ancient medical sciences and signifies a “turning point [μεταβολή]” of a disease, sudden change for better or worse.”² Indeed, we often neglect the fact that a crisis affirms a state of illness, which nonetheless opens itself to the coming of both a recovery and an exacerbation. As a state of disorder, a crisis is a liminal circumstance, an *aporia par excellence*, not something static but a contorted transition that splits itself into itself and its exact opposite. As a judgment on a disturbing order of affairs, it is a discordant recognition that undecidedly affirms a division of fixed affirmations.

It is not a surprise, then, that our gross negligence has decidedly made us unable to see the coming of sick economics, austerity measures, and structural reforms. For many years, we have failed to foresee the state of upcoming crises as a state of quagmire that does not provide a solid ground for assured decisions. We have eviscerated any sense of doubt that any type of rigorous thinking brings about, and we have surrendered our political economy in general to false promises of predictable, foreseeable, and estimable fortunes. For example, we have uncritically relied on the science of econometrics to avoid financial sickness and formulate healthy policy decisions. Broadly speaking, traditional econometric theory proceeds by (a) stating an economic theory as a hypothesis, (b) specifying the mathematical model of the economic theory, (c) specifying the econometric model of the theory, (d) obtaining data, (e) estimating the parameters of the econometric model, (f) testing the initial economic model, (g) forecasting or predicting, if the chosen model does not refute the theory under consideration, (h) using the model for policy purposes, and, finally, (i) choosing among competing models.³ In a few words, the science of econometrics adds abstract mathematical content to all kind of economic theories, allowing, thus,

for newly formed and hybrid economic-mathematical structures to be tested empirically and used for policy control. We have even pursued a totalizing quantification of indecision, uncertainty, and risk, and we have designed calculating models that reduce moments of crises into “standard deviations” that are predicted and restricted by probabilistic assessments.

Phenomenology and the Crisis of Modern Scientific Culture

This type of uncritical reliance on natural sciences and, in particular, pure mathematics is exactly what Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology and one of the most recognizable philosophers of the previous century, called “crisis [Krisis].” This type of crisis does not just refer to the measurable collapse of monetary economies as it is understood and circulated in today’s media parlance. It is, as Husserl understands it, the overall denial of European humanity to question the hidden presuppositions that underlie scientific and philosophical thinking.

In his later diatribes, collected in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl argues that the modern European world, in its agonizing struggle to reduce all scientific disciplines to a positivistic model that is self-proclaimed as purely fact-finding and objective, has lead itself to the “emergence of a set of world-enigmas which were unknown to earlier times,” which is none other than the appearance of “*the enigma of psychological subject matter and method.*”⁴ Undoubtedly, Husserl’s diagnosis of the modern crisis is quite complicated and multilateral. On the one hand, modern philosophy, while it attempts to preserve the ancient Greek spirit of investigation, takes a sudden turn towards a novel *worldview* in which theory is totalized as formal abstraction. In its theoretical stance, modern philosophy is grasped as the universal knowledge of world and humans, with

“universal validity” operating as the grounding necessity of all knowledge. Elaborated initially by Descartes, this new type of inquiry claims an apodictic methodology, formalizes a model of absolute but interrelated truths, and practices an unending but rationally ordered progress. Accordingly, the modern thinking subject is certain that she can liberate herself from her old prejudices, fully discern intrinsic human reason and its founding principles, and even envisage absolute freedom *per se*. In this context, the human subject strives for a presupposition-less grounding of herself and her world. On the other hand, the establishment of modern philosophy as *mathesis universalis* gives a legitimate ground for modern sciences to adopt a “natural attitude.” In particular, modern sciences rationalize the world into a naturalized space that is thoroughly objectified: observed, manipulated, formulated, and verified endlessly in infinity. The methodology of modern sciences implies the superimposition of an ideal universe of abstract signs over the realm of the human world. It presupposes an *a priori* geometrical space where entities are “pure” configurations. The modern scientist idealizes “pure models” and abstracts from everything subjective to constitutive her factual, objective world.

For Husserl, the modern scientist’s stance towards nature—an attitude that aims to provide a pure and presupposition-less grounding of the human subject and her world as she is found *in* her world while, at the same time, abstracting, removing and alienating herself *from* her world—remains highly paradoxical and effects an enigmatic distortion of scientific thinking as such. By searching for a presupposition-less principle that grounds a thorough and systematic knowledge of the human subject and her world, the modern scientist takes for granted and neglects the most evident fact of all: the human subject is unconditionally bounded *with* a world. In effect, the

modern scientist necessarily fails to make the very genesis of the scientific attitude *from within* the world into a problem. In other words, the human world remains an enigma for modern sciences because scientific thinking as such has always and already been unfolded within the terrain of a human world, which is in every case unthematically pre-given. Husserl's diagnosis here is that the crisis of modern sciences and its rippling effects are situated well within the very root of scientific thought; modern science is distorted because it is conditioned by its founding principles to be so.

Overcoming the Crisis through rethinking Subjectivity and World

In order to overcome this critical stalemate, Husserl suggests an orientation towards a different viewpoint, a sudden change of attitudes, an abrupt judgment of a sort that interrupts and upsets the scientific mindset and penetrates into its unseen conditions. The Husserlian judgment reconsiders the human world as the pre-given correlation between the human and the world. He names this *a priori* predicament as "subjectivity." He explains: "Only a radical inquiry back into subjectivity—and specifically the subjectivity which *ultimately* brings about all world-validity, with its content and in all its prescientific and scientific modes, and into the 'what' and the 'how' of the rational accomplishments—can make objective truth comprehensible and arrive at the ultimate ontic meaning of the world."⁵ Only a return to a methodological "subjective" thinking that suspends the scientific mode of thinking from its founding principles can possibly provide the principle of all principles of thought and properly sanction modern science as such.

Exactly at this point, the Husserlian phenomenological project addresses our cultural crisis. It positions modern science—and, by extension, the whole edifice of Western

metaphysical thinking—at a inconvenient juncture whereby it splits itself in order to catch a glimpse of its exact opposite, i.e., that which it could never possibly be, so it can, in turn, become that which it truly is. “Subjective” phenomenological thinking reviews all modern sciences by transcending and transforming them into something that they are not conditioned to recognize, and this alternative un-conditionality conditions without exception all modern sciences. As envisioned by Husserl, the phenomenological critique of modern sciences does not offer a normative cure to defective thinking but rather a painful acknowledgment of an essential disease whose hidden pre-dispositions allow and condition its incubation, again and again. However, it is also necessary to note that Husserl’s phenomenology itself remains in crisis. It designates a subject-world correlation as an uncontaminated ideal, as a transcendental but nonetheless unwavering suspension that founds all of our cultural norms. The science of phenomenology does not develop in continuity with the other sciences, but it claims that it affirmatively justifies them. The rigour of the phenomenological method has nothing to do with the rationalist exactness of the natural sciences, but it moves towards the direction of abstraction, idealization, and objectification. To put simply: Husserl’s phenomenological science does not see itself as a science positioned constantly in crisis, and this failure to see itself in crisis is the critical failure that makes it remain in crisis.

The crisis that we are currently referring to, therefore, is an unprecedented crisis unknown to recorded human history. It is a profound critical failure constituted by an enigmatic negligence, which unsuccessfully seeks to establish the primary relation between subject, world, and subject-world method, between the presuppositions of our cultural order and the critical disorder that ensues. We are talking about a unique

collapse where every movement of thought comes to a halt *because* it fails to think of how the crisis is brought about in the first place. It is a crisis of *not yet* undergoing a fundamental crisis, of *not yet* being altogether able to move. Such a unique crisis arises and gets recognized *because* there already exists a certain *pre*-recognized criterion by virtue of which the crisis as a pure impasse is primarily recognized. But this “foundational” criterion is not to be founded as a self-identical or a self-differential ideal topos that exists outside of the critical bifurcation. Instead, it is the very constitution of a recognition that *is* critical within a locus of an *un*-recognizable crisis. It is a *prima facie* recognition that fails and yet gets succeeded at the same time. It is a ridiculous circulation, a nonsensical farce, a laughable “turning point [μεταβολή]” which marks a founding movement with no proceedings.

Concluding Remarks

We, then, as post-phenomenologists, as post-thinkers of a critique of scientific thought, need to preserve the sense of urgency and emergency that every sort of crisis demands. We need to revisit and revise, again and again, thinking, may that be scientific, phenomenological, or other. We need to treat any and every affirmed judgment critically, as a criterion of a crisis, as an intermediary of a perpetual crisis, as a proper “διάκρισις”⁶ that does not simply summon a formulated demonstration or an idealized abstraction. We need to reread our world’s master-thinkers, scientists and philosophers alike, anew with a critical eye and remind ourselves constantly and at all times that every judgment is a compromised crisis. We need to become thinkers who negotiate a crisis not as a singular issue of a particular order but as an issue of issues which affirms itself by constantly articulating itself as an unconditional division of itself and its un-recognizable other.

We, finally, as young citizens of an ill State of political affairs, of failed policy models and bankrupt financial systems that naively relied on the mathematical skills of techno-bureaucrats of many sorts, need to reposition judgments made on the crisis and reassess decisions taken for the crisis. We need to reclaim the crisis as a diacritical issue that generates an unregulated state of intellectual discernment. We need to reconsider the crisis not as an affair of the few master-thinkers of our age but as the affair of affairs that labours the polis itself, not as a principality of a normative order but as an aporetic constitution that inharmoniously effects utopias as well as dystopias. We need to rethink our citizenship as a diacrisis in constant crisis and reassert it as our unconditional condition that makes a difference.

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 1275a22-23.

² See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). 997. The term also means “decision,” “judgment,” “power of judgment,” “choice,” “interpretation,” “trial,” “result of a trial,” “dispute,” “event,” and “issue.” For “κρίσις” as turning point of a disease, see Galenos, ed. *De crisisibus libri* (Göteborg: Elanders, 1967), iii, 9, 550. For a critical overview of the development of the term “crisis” in intellectual history, see Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis ” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 357-400.

³ For a detailed view of the science of econometrics, see Damodar N. Gujarati, *Basic Econometrics*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003).

⁴ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

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⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶ It is important to keep in mind that the ancient Greek word “διάκρισις” does not only mean a “decision” and “determination” but also a “revision of accounts” and “dissolution.” See Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*: 399.