Crisis–time / Krisenzeit

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Prophetic anticipation

“Let us think about the plight of the Russians in Estonia or Latvia. Those countries are home to minorities that carry a great explosive power [...]. That is, all the old issues are still there, out of which crises can flare up that could ultimately lead to armed conflicts. That is why I do not consider the hypothesis of a new war between states in Eastern Europe to be so far-fetched.”

Reread in the context of today’s Russian–Ukrainian crisis, these words – uttered by Koselleck 20 years ago, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union – seem ominously prophetic. Particularly impressive – aside from the reference to the Baltic countries, which at the time were more volatile than the eastern region of Ukraine and the Russian-speaking territories of the Donbass – is the lucidity with which Koselleck foresaw the context of the crisis, the menacing signs of it, and the conditions under which it could explode.

In the same interview, Koselleck argued that Russia lost the Cold War, and the first ramifications did not take long to unfold in all their epochal magnitude: destabilisation, ethnic clashes, and the re-emergence of conflicts only seemingly quelled under the now-tattered Iron Curtain. However, even more alarming scenarios were on the horizon, Koselleck warned – proving himself to be a modern-day Cassandra.

But how is that possible? As we approach the third millennium, how is it possible that war – the most radical form of struggle for life and death – is once again presenting its sinister face in the heart of Europe?

Crisis or Europe

At the time of the aforementioned interview, Koselleck saw the crisis that was unfolding in the territories of the former Soviet Union – as well as the contemporary dramatic crisis in the former Yugoslavia – as the result of the inability of politics and its institutions (in this case, Europe) to govern the processes of disintegration. However, Koselleck did not limit himself to retracing incidental, circumstantial causes. The reasons for the crisis go back further, and are linked to European spirituality and, more specifically, to its philosophy of history, which has shaped
modernity through dualism, opposition, and conflict. This is what he had written forty years earlier:

“From an historical point of view the present tension between two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, is a result of European history. Europe’s history has broadened; it has become world history and will run its course as that, having allowed the whole world to drift into a state of permanent crisis.”2 It was indeed within the framework “of the territories of the European states” that a universalistic “progressive philosophy” emerged: its “subject” became

“all mankind, to be unified from its European centre and led peacefully towards a better future. […] To speak in historico-philosophical terms, today’s world unity turns out – and it is this which makes its fictitious character apparent – to be a politically dichotomous unity. One half, sworn to progress like the other, lives by that other’s imagined reaction.”3

The crisis, therefore, is first and foremost the consequence of a structural conflict that pervades the European world and can be traced all the way back to its Enlightenment roots. Given this, “continental hostilities are certainly still possible:”4 it is thus a matter of “leading western Europe towards an autonomous unity of action” in order to prevent disastrous escalations. National policy marked by its differences is the worst possible response to a specific situation.”5 We must strive to overcome national individualism and pursue a “shift” towards a truly federative integration of European states, in search of a new balance within the changed global context.6

Yet another small prophecy ripples through the 1993 interview: since “China, the power of the future, is in the background,” (Western) Europe must, to all intents and purposes, become an independent player within a global context that is characterised by a “triad” in which the United States of America is a further protagonist. Only by establishing itself as an autonomous power (separate from both China and the United States) will Europe be able to play a leading role in world politics and not be merely an unwitting propagator of chaos.7

The time of crisis

However, there are deeper roots to this schism. The crisis of the times has its roots in the temporality of the crisis. It is not only epochal, but, more radically, structural: transcendental, anthropological.
The pace of the crisis is driven by the rhythm of repetition. “The prevailing civil war,” Koselleck wrote to Schmitt in 1953, “is neither an ontic nor a circumstantial event, [...] but rather one that is completely rooted in the ontological framework of our historicity.” That is why “the starting point of an ontological analysis of history should be the current civil war.”

In the meantime, there is history because there has always been the possibility of a state of conflict. It is, therefore, not just a modern state of affairs: the Neuzeit is fundamentally marked by it – “‘crisis’ becomes a structural signature [Signatur] of modernity” – precisely because the possibility of war precedes and goes beyond the modern, transcending it. History in fact continually presents “tensions, conflicts, breaks, and inconsistencies open up that always remain unsolvable in the specific moment but that all units of action must take part in and make an effort to solve diachronically, whether in order to survive or to perish.”

**The theology of crisis**

When mapping the conceptual history of the term *krisis*, tracing its evolution from the Greek use of the term, Koselleck points out that “crisis” has, in addition to others, a precise theological meaning, which refers to the quickening of cosmic time that precedes the end of the world and Judgement Day.

It is precisely this meaning of the term that allows Koselleck to frame his critique of modernity through the secularisation of the theological topos of *krisis*. On the one hand, Koselleck notes that, revived in a secularised form, it operates within the Enlightenment philosophy of history, preserving its metaphysical overtones. “For Luther, the compression of time is a visible sign that, according to God’s will, the Final Judgment is imminent, that the world is about to end. For Robespierre, the acceleration of time is a human task, presaging an epoch of freedom and happiness, the golden future.” On the other hand, however, today’s accelerated pace and the technicalisation of life seem to spell out, according to Koselleck, the ominous scenario of an apocalyptic crisis. Modernisation has effectively brought about the terrifying prospect of a radical destruction of the planet and its life forms.

Relying on dramatic overtones worthy of an end-of-the-world scenario, Koselleck offers us an evocative, secularised image of the Apocalypse to warn of the dangers of an imminent catastrophe that could engulf the world as a result of the spasmodic acceleration of technical progress (see Jonathon Catlin’s contribution published on this blog). “So, the question can be raised as to whether our semantic
model of crisis as final decision has gained more chances of realization than it has ever had before,” since “the cosmic foreshortening of time, which was formerly supposed to precede the Last Judgment in mythic language, can today be empirically verified as the acceleration of historical sequences of events.”

Therefore, the fact that “the power for the self-destruction of autonomous humanity has multiplied” makes apocalyptic expectations of the end of time, now in a secularised form, topical once more. “In Christian and in non-Christian usage, ‘crisis’ indicates in every case a growing pressure of time that appears inescapable to humanity on this earth.”

The politics of crisis

Koselleck’s critique of time, condensed into the description of modernity as Krisenzeit, is here subverted into the plastic image of a Zeitkrise, of a relentless acceleration that ensnares humanity in the pervasive and destructive effects of modernisation. In the face of this inexorable countdown, this inevitable march towards the great catastrophe, Koselleck goes on to invoke the “katechonic” task of politics: the latter must act as a “restraining force,” that “κατέχον” evoked by Paul the Apostle in his second letter to the Thessalonians and taken up, in a secularised form, by Schmitt. If it is true, in fact, that “from the industrial system founded on scientific-technical principles comes the infinitely increasing potential for destruction, by virtue of which mankind may annihilate itself at any moment,” then it follows that “anticipating catastrophe is a duty of politics, of the politics of the future.”

This entails the challenging and at the same time limited task of containing and postponing the inevitable. Challenging, as it is fraught with the difficulty of trying to contain and rationalise the chaotic advance of the forces of developed technology. Limited, since it is no longer entrusted with any expansive, emancipatory, or liberating mission, seeing as its scope is contained within the framework of a realism that has definitively renounced any propulsive and progressive drive. Thus, it is within this limited “governmental” and neutralising framework, completely devoid of constitutive power, that Koselleck’s “Unvermeidlichkeit der Politik” resides.

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4 Ibid. (“Kontinentale Antagonismen freilich [...] sind nach wie vor möglich:” ibid.)
5 “Das wäre dann die Herausforderung, Westeuropa zur selbständigen Aktionsgemeinschaft zusammenzuführen. Denn die divergent sich durchkreuzende Nationalstaatspolitik ist die schlechtest denkbare Antwort auf eine derartige Situation.” Kohler, Die beiden Europa, 38.

6 “Übergang.” ibid.

7 “Triade”; “mit der Zukunftsmacht China im Hintergrund” ibid.


9 “Der Ausgangspunkt einer geschichtsontologischen Analyse müsste […] der gegenwärtige Bürgerkrieg sein.” ibid.


12 Koselleck, Crisis, 358–60.


16 Ibid., 246–247. (“In christlicher und in nichtchristlicher Bedeutung indiziert ‚Krise‘ in jedem Fall einen anwachsenden Zeitdruck, dem die Menschheit auf diesem Globus nicht zu entrinnen scheint.” ibid., 215.)

17 “Endlich folgt aus dem wissenschaftlich-technisch fundierten Industriesystem das unendlich gesteigerte Zerstörungspotential, kraft dessen sich die Menschheit über Nacht