Crisis: critical and interdisciplinary perspectives

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On a daily basis, we are alarmed by crisis reports concerning hurricanes and floods, economic and financial uncertainties, political instability, armed conflict, desperate refugees and migrants, and outbreaks of aggressive global diseases. Most recently, the still-unfolding COVID-19 pandemic highlights how many of these perspectives are both discursively and materially woven together. COVID-19 has emerged not only as a public health crisis, but also as a myriad of other both global and more localised crises – from food shortages and deep-seated economic recessions, to breakdowns and ruptures in political regimes, social structures and collective mobility infrastructures for goods and people. As both governments and individuals continue to cope with and navigate these different issues, the pandemic underscores not only how experiences of crisis are often mutually reinforcing, but also how they serve to fuel and even amplify existing social and geopolitical asymmetries, with devastating effects for large parts of the world’s population.

This special issue is not about COVID-19 per se. In fact, early work to launch this issue began some time before the world had heard about this new variant of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), much less its various subsequent mutations or far-reaching political, social and economic impacts. As for so many others, though, our work and ability to think collectively about ‘crisis’ at a more general level was initially interrupted due to the pandemic. However, the unfolding events also brought a new sense of urgency to our work and shed more light on how crises are interpreted, analysed and framed across multiple disciplines. The articles in this issue present a set
of critical explorations of ‘crisis’ as a notion, phenomenon, materiality, reality and experience to carefully explore the compositions of crisis, both globally and locally.

Our common starting point is that we need a broader intellectual framework to understand and analyse crisis, one that does not approach crises as mere temporary injunctions or atomistic events, but rather appreciates the socio–material entanglement through which crisis seems to weave our world together. These entanglements emerge as the result of repeated crisis narratives promoted by the media and policymakers, sometimes twisted in populist and apocalyptic ways. However, they also become materially evident through the monumental forces of reality that shatter life worlds and communities, and thus cause pain and societal rupture. Moreover, the intrinsically gendered nature of a crisis, while rarely articulated, impacts both how crises are framed and interpreted, and the policies implemented to cope with their aftermath. Contrary to its historical usage, crises are far from always felt as momentary incidents (that is, emergencies) for those involved, nor as promises of constructive change. All too often, crisis is experienced as a chronic state of prolonged harm, especially by those who were already in vulnerable positions prior to the crisis.

In this special issue, we argue for a broader interdisciplinary field of crisis studies. All too often, existing, ‘siloed’ approaches obscure learning from one issue to the next. It also tends to oversimplify the complex map and intersections of environmental, socio–economic, political and medical factors that may together define a given crisis. Our intellectual engagement with crisis must necessarily seek to match these wider discursive and material entanglements. A broader and interdisciplinary focus on crisis further brings attention to the transformative character of a crisis and its connections to conditions of uncertainty in predictions, global–local dynamics, politics, precariousness, a ‘post-fact’ environment and the diversity in human suffering.

Such an endeavour reaches well beyond the scope of this special issue. Yet, the present collection of articles aims to showcase the feasibility and potential for a broader and more structurally embedded analytical engagement with crisis. In different ways, the articles progress with multidisciplinary (understood as empirical backgrounds, research objects and key literatures), interdisciplinary (in the sense of combining methods and theoretical insights) and transdisciplinary (for example, cross-cutting analyses) perspectives to understand, explain and model their field of crises and crisis development. This is an approach to which Global Discourse is imminently well-suited by providing space for reviewers pertaining to other schools or disciplines to reply to and engage with each contribution, and by insisting that such intellectual efforts do not take place in a vacuum, but are complemented by policy and practice perspectives of the conversation. We, as editors, ultimately consider the question of crisis and crises so serious that there is a need to open up post-disciplinary spaces to examine these questions. This is not to argue for the supersession of disciplines as such, nor for the specific epistemologies of the ‘post’. Rather, the complex nature of contemporary crises demands drastic and collective academic ways forward.

Further in this vein, we have chosen to forgo the usual editorial summary of each article in place of a more substantive set of reflective engagements with the individual themes raised by our contributors. To frame this special issue, we have thus invited two pioneers of ‘crisis studies’, Didier Fassin (2022) and Janet Roitman (2022), to provide, respectively, an introduction and a capstone article. In-between these contributions, the articles are organised in a way that gradually unfolds different disciplinary and empirical perspectives.
The first article, jointly authored by Annika Bergman-Rosamond, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, Mo Hamza, Jeff Hearn, Vasna Ramasar and Helle Rydstrom (2022), makes a more general case for ‘interdisciplinary crisis studies’ as a field of study. Following this, Sylvia Walby (2022) seeks to further develop her analytical perspective on cascading crisis to understand ‘crisis and society’ in the context of COVID-19. Taking a more temporal perspective, Henrik Vigh (2022) critically examines the notions of ‘chronic crisis’ and ‘slow crisis’ by focusing on the experiences of male youth in Bissau. Following this, Helle Rydstrom (2022) analyses how entanglements of crises modalities, intensities and temporalities transmute into the ‘hardship of ordinary crisis’ for women in Vietnam. Engaging with current debates in critical studies of men and masculinities, Jeff Hearn (2022) considers the analytical dimensions and political implications of ‘local crises of masculinity’. Next, Steffen Bo Jensen and Nanna Schneidermann (2022) explore ‘living in and alongside crisis in Cape Town’ by showing how violence pervades local life. Ekatherina Zhukova (2022) examines how a state of ‘chronic crisis’ frames bodies and minds following from the nuclear disasters in Chernobyl and Fukushima. The penultimate article, by Ravinder Kaur (2022), advances a perspective of ‘crisis as acceleration’ by analysing the political response to minority populations in India during COVID-19. Finally, Fredrik N.G. Andersson (2022) provides a critical examination of ‘macroeconomic equilibriums, crises and fiscal policy’.

Following *Global Discourse’s* common practice, each of the substantive articles is complemented by a response or set of reflections. We have as far as possible similarly sought to enlist cross-disciplinary perspectives in this regard. We are deeply grateful to Jesper Bjarnesen (2022), Nanna Bonde Thylstrup (2022), Heidi Gottfried (2022), Anne-Meike Fechter (2022), Henrik Hansen (2022), Jonathan London (2022), Cristian Norocel (2022), Ninna Nyberg Sørensen (2022), and Roger Zetter (2022) for their further insights in this regard. Last, but not least, Morten Kjærum (2022) – current director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights in Lund, Sweden, and former director of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency – contributes an article on the impact of COVID-19 and ways forward for a right-based approach to crisis, drawing on his position as both a human rights practitioner and scholar.

**References**


