Crisis as ‘slow’ or an existential state of being:  
a reply to ‘Slow crisis in Bissau and beyond’  
by Henrik Vigh

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Henrik Vigh’s (2022) article, ‘Slow crisis: continuities and intensities of hardship in Bissau’, sheds light on a central, yet under-analysed, issue around the lingering and wandering effects of continuous hardship among a growing number of migrants from the Global South in European cities – young men whose fantasies of migration to Europe are caught up in narratives of the opportunities, however restricted, available to earlier migrants but, nevertheless, hard to find in the current reality of stricter migration policy, the criminalisation of irregular entry and the increased detention and deportation of unwanted migrants. A theoretical discussion of the analytical limitations of applying a conventional notion of crisis (as something momentary, monolithic and unilinear) suggests replacing the concept with that of ‘slow crisis’, defined as a compound phenomenon in terms of temporality and intensity, which, in turn, enables an understanding of crisis as a condition rather than an aberration or instance of rupture in time and space. Coupled with an unsettling ethnographic portrayal of migrant underworlds as marked by protracted, compound, multiple and slow crises, the article contributes a thought-provoking analysis of contemporary migration phenomena.

Vigh has been working in Guinea-Bissau for the last 20 years and with the country’s diaspora for almost as long. He has also studied global crime and criminalisation, as well as the ways in which the cocaine trade has entered Guinea-Bissau and become one of the limited available opportunities for young African men in European cities. From the very start, the people Vigh worked with talked of suffering, an experience Vigh interpreted as belonging to a prolonged period of civil war and the aftermath of social, political and economic devastation. As time went by and Guinea-Bissau was revealed to be one of the many places where the “post” in post-conflict would be a long time coming (p 2), Vigh found that crisis had become a condition, not a certain
state to be overcome, but a context against which conventional notions of crisis as sudden ‘rupture’ turned out to be impossible to uphold. Instead, a perception of ‘slow crisis’ emerged, understood as a critical condition entailing gradual deterioration, with no possible solution in sight. Vigh then argues that applying the concept of slow crisis to his Guinea-Bissauan interlocutors in Guinea-Bissau and the diaspora enables him to track the harm that follows from processes of pauperisation, racialisation, conflict and global class divides.

In the article, we follow Quintino, who migrated regularly through family networks to Lisbon as a teenager and quickly gained citizenship but, due to a segmented and racialised labour market, nevertheless ended up dealing drugs on the streets. We are also presented with the views and perceptions of his friend Seku and yet another Guinea-Bissauan migrant, Amadou, both involved in the trade. We learn that the global financial crisis and following economic decline hit Portugal particularly hard, pushing Guinea-Bissauan migrants further down the employment ladder, making cocaine dealing (which was never their ambition) one of few available opportunities to make enough money to get by, as well as a business that ‘did not discriminate’ in terms of deeply engrained and racialised inequality. Quintino is arrested and jailed several times, further disqualifying him in relation to the formal labour market and, moreover, cutting him off from his family networks in Portugal. As family obligations play an important role as a security net for migrants (and dependants in the country of origin), being ‘cut off’ further adds to his precarious circumstances, defined by stagnation, insecurity, uncertainty and decline.

While I am sympathetic to the analytical argument of how enduring crisis defines the urban poor in Guinea-Bissau and the same group in the diaspora, I am surprised by the apparent lack of situating the experiences of marginalised cocaine street dealers in relation to earlier waves of migrants, of not delving into the gendered nature of flows and forms of suffering, and of excluding the perceptions of family and kin that cuts off protective family support from the analysis. I am also sceptical of Vigh’s conception of suffering as delinked from action and instead being indicative of a passive endurance and tolerance of the hardship that one’s life may be thrown into by war, migration or criminal/criminalised behaviour.

First, while it is easy to understand why young men from Guinea-Bissau remain settled on the idea that in order ‘to have a life you must migrate’, it is more difficult to understand the attraction to Portugal unless the relative successes of earlier migrants are considered. Who and what do more recent migrants compare their prospects to? Is it: the early independence migrants (whose arrival coincided with Portugal’s return to democracy); the refugees that fled the civil war in 1998–99 or subsequent military coups d’état; or the economic migrants that fled continued socio-economic deterioration and benefitted from Portugal’s economic boom following the country’s accession to the European Community, as well as the temporary blind eye shown to substantial inflows of undocumented but wanted migrants to provide extra hands in construction and domestic services? As Sonia Pires (2013) has shown, socio-economic background and time of arrival circumscribe available options for inclusion, as well as the kind of transnational networks available to Guinea-Bissauan people wishing to migrate and capable of helping them out upon arrival.

Second, I fully embrace Vigh’s argument that the individual understanding of crisis often works through comparison, either biographically as a sense of deterioration, or socially as negative differentiation. Quintino suffered at home and, due to an
unfortunate coincidence of circumstances (economic crisis, a segmented and racialised labour market, and the COVID-19 pandemic), continues to suffer in the diaspora. Usually, any interlocutor’s descent into the underworld is best understood through empathy with the person and critical scrutiny of the political context circumscribing their room for manoeuvre. Vigh delivers on both levels. Failing to provide a description of the social network beyond what is shared by other drug-dealing colleagues on the street, however, impedes progressing analytically into the transnational economy of affection, which remains mentioned only in passing. Quintino obviously had better access (for example, to legal migration and citizenship) than most other prospective West African migrants. His migration was sponsored by an uncle, who nevertheless cut connections when Quintino opted for the underground economy and ended up in prison. Did Quintino provide for other family members in the transnational network while business was good? Is the uncle continuously involved in social reproduction beyond borders with parts of Quintino’s family? What is the role of mothers, sisters, fiancés or wives back home and in the diaspora? Attention to reciprocity and gendered pathways to migration would allow for pushing the argument about ‘loosening and thinning’ family relations and obligations (p 10) beyond the surface.

My final comment is not a critique, but an observation. Suffering is not always a solace linked to non-action and passive endurance, as argued by Vigh. It can also be invoked actively to avoid criticism for behaviour deemed ‘immoral’ in migrants’ wider social networks. Given that crisis, stigma, pauperisation, racialisation and global class divides obviously result in suffering – as do prolonged family separation and homesickness – I have been amazed at how the migrant domestic workers I have worked among in various European cities have directed particular narratives of suffering to specific audiences: the suffering of long working hours and confinement within the domestic space, directed at the family back home; and the suffering of domestic violence or extreme sexual control by male relatives at home, directed to the anthropologist as an explanation for preferring the former to the latter. Thus, suffering contains not just a destructive aspect of human existence, but also a potentially creative and powerful capability for ‘proper’ representation in transnational social space.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References