# CRISIS

# DEFINITION

Crisis is seen as a perpetual frame-breaking moment that dismantles the certainties and normative narratives of nation, sovereignty, social bonds and belonging. Since 2008, crisis is the buzzword of our era, accompanied by many adjectives such as “refugee,” “financial,” “economic,” “systemic,” “social,” “political,” “global,” “climate,” and - most recently - “pandemic.” Which crisis? Whose crisis? What crisis? Whither crisis?

# PROCESS

The initial discussion of the concept of crisis as a meaningful one for this project, took place between researchers of the Feminist Autonomous Centre for Research and Zaatar in Athens. We all seemed to believe that our embodied, everyday and soft experiences were affected by one crisis or another. Especially because we are all based in Athens, we felt that this city was the epicentre of the two major declared European crises of the last decade: the ‘financial’ and the so-called ‘refugee’ crisis, both of which altered the fabric of our daily lives and radically shifted the discourse on inclusion and diversity in the classroom. Education in Greece is public;  after a decade of financial stagnation, austerity cuts implemented on education have left schools, universities and the people who work and learn within them in a state of collapse. For example, most schools and university classrooms could not afford to be heated during the winter; numerous reports point at how, over the past five years, school children have been fainting in class due to malnutrition and hunger. These altered materialities in crisis made it very difficult for young people to attend universities: most had to work due to the lack of financial support from their families; student loans became extremely inaccessible in a collapsing banking system; scholarships were nonexistent. Moreover, the refugee crisis posed the need for integration of students in a system that was already hanging by a thread. In conversation with researchers from the University of Brighton and other members of the BRIDGES consortium, we realised how ‘crisis’ is a shared experience across localities.

Finally, as we are writing these lines, another crisis - that of the global pandemic - is changing the face of education, perhaps forever: online teaching and learning, webinars, and recorded lectures are emerging as the new norm; it is crucial to unpack the consequences of this new reality on the educational system, the new inequalities and barriers they create, as well as their impact on our aspirations of decolonising that system.

If crisis is the buzzword of our era, it is strategically important to critically question the term itself and the ways it has been mobilised to describe different socio-political phenomena.

## Tips for teaching crisis

The adoption of the logic of naturalisation of crisis leads to many mistakes. Instead, it is necessary to look beyond this logic and unpack some of the pre-existing conditions that lead to the particular crisis. For example, the post-2008 financial crisis did not just appear in a vacuum, it was the result of structures of capitalist accumulation by dispossession: in this sense crisis is endemic to the smooth functioning of a neoliberal economic system. Moreover, the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis' did not just begin with the appearance of certain bodies on the shores of Lesvos, at the doorsteps of Europe it was the outcome of decades of war, devastation and economic stagnation in several countries, often fueled by European resources and socio-political interests.

Moving beyond the logic of naturalisation leads to our second point: crisis discourses usually point towards an emergency problem/solution logic. For example, in the case of the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis' the solutions adopted by many states resulted in stricter border policies, more barbed wire, the proliferation of detention camps, the creation of hotspot islands - and, in general, the implementation of violent politics protecting 'Fortress Europe'. Yet, denaturalising the crisis means becoming aware of the inability of such emergency 'solutions' to solve the problem. Rather, even if we follow the simplistic logic of resolving the crisis problem, it seems more accurate to propose to stop the war, extraction, occupation, and precarity that have been imposed for decades in Syria, Afghanistan, and Palestine (to name a few places from which people have been forced to flee).

Then we need to think which crises are declared and as such deserve international intervention and media attention, and which crises remain undeclared and invisible? To give an example here, the declaration of the refugee crisis means that the EU and other supranational organizations are going to manage the crisis by enforcing the regime of Fortress Europe. The logic of detention centres and incarceration of people at the borders consists of classifying people into categories - such as asylum seeker and economic migrant - thereby creating hierarchies of vulnerability and systems of differentiations between those deserving and undeserving protection. As such, the creation of detention camps like Moria, referred to by many as 'the Guantanamo of Europe', is

portrayed as a necessary part of a declared crisis. What remains undeclared is the daily violence of the bordering regime implemented to allegedly solve this crisis.

As mentioned above, crisis presupposes normativity. It is politically urgent to understand what this normativity looks like. What is normal after all? As one of the slogans of the 2019 uprising in Chile said, 'we will not go back to normality, because normality was the problem'. If crisis is a sudden and spectacular rupture with normality, can the result after the transition to a new (or the same yet worse) normativity be still understood as crisis?

## Crisis and normativity

Crisis is seen as a perpetual frame-breaking moment that dismantles the certainties and normative narratives of nation, sovereignty, social bonds and belonging for people on the ground. The first, superficial meaning of the word refers to a sudden change, a temporal interruption, of a condition of normality. As such, the first etymological unpacking of the term 'crisis' presupposes a former path of normality that has been interrupted by a temporary shift or rupture, after which - we imagine - normality will return.

It is critical to ask:

- Did normality ever truly exist? Why is normality seen as a positive value for our societies?
- What does "normal" look like? Are we sure that we want to return there? Taking into consideration the geopolitical shifts of the last few years, is it even possible (theoretically, practically, affectively) to return to normality?
- Is crisis endemic to the very structures of capitalism? Is it possible to imagine a different way of being in our times of late capitalism?
- As we are writing these lines, some are returning to the "new normality" after the end of the pandemic. What would this 'new normal' look like? How many of those changes implemented during the "state of emergency" that the pandemic brought to our lives will remain in the "new normal"?

What needs further unpacking is the interdependence between the understanding of crisis and the implied return to normativity. In most debates about crisis, questions about the future are limited to asking when things will return to 'normal' (Athanasiou 2012). Especially since "crisis" is portrayed as a transient shift with a clear end point after which things are going to be restored, the main reaction from experts, politicians and think-tanks is to declare that what comes after this end point is 'business as usual' (Graeber 2011).

The hegemonic ideology of crisis relies the repetition of problematic narratives, the most important

being the absence of any critical judgement relating to the momentum before the crisis. The state's main preoccupation during crisis is how to overcome it and thus return to previous, desirable conditions. In other words, the massive social and political shock of the crisis and the destruction of the material conditions it imposes create a feeling of nostalgia towards what existed "before". It is exactly this nostalgia that undermines critical thinking, pointing towards an uncritical acceptance of the conditions before the crisis. Yet, the social, political and economic dysfunctions that produced the crisis were evident in the prior state, termed "normality". Moreover, a nostalgic society caught in the etymological trap of the temporal character of the crisis is a society in limbo.

## Crisis and time

Crisis evokes a certain embodiment of time, since the past presents a haunting nostalgia, the present is in crisis, and the future is difficult to imagine as it holds uncertainties. The only meaningful future is constructed through a romanticised and nostalgic remembrance of the past. In short, crisis breaks the linear contract of time that implies futures of development and progression: looking back seems like the only way forward. The future is now entirely uncertain. On all sides, the sense of self, security, and capacity to resolve the crisis is being questioned. In other words, living in a state of crisis means being able to cope with uncertainty and unpredictability on a daily basis. It is precisely this daily notion of uncertainty that creates a fertile ground for different and divergent rhetorical tropes. Moreover, a state of nostalgic remembrance makes room for deeply nationalistic and ethnocentric reactions, as almost every form of nation-building evokes the sentiments and ghosts of a glorious past. Historically there is an insidious connection between societies undergoing states of crisis and certain tendencies to establish fascist and racist ideologies about ethnic superiority and white supremacy.

## Crisis and Religious Discourses

Mainstream discourses sometimes associate "crisis" with religious narratives. According to this narration, a claimed "crisis" had fallen upon us like a natural disaster. For example, in the case of the financial crisis, this natural disaster takes the form of the punishment for certain nations' former sins. In other words, allegedly lazy, corrupt and tax-evading nations (such as Greece and Spain) are seen as deserving punishment for these 'sins.' As Slavoj Žižek (2015) and Costas Douzinas (2013) argue, this notion of "sinful nations" is highly connected with feelings of collective guilt. It is precisely the mobilisation of this guilt that minimises the potential for resistance and actions against crisis and austerity. After all, crisis is the unavoidable punishment for our sins, a fair outcome based on our former actions. Crisis also engenders a condition that we must passively endure in order to reach a moment of purification and salvation. In turn, the social body trapped in this spiral of sin and guilt is tamed, and appears to be waiting for the ultimate saviour: in the form of the political leader or prime minister who will lead the country under attack to the promised land of financial security. This religious discourse can be applied to entire nations, but also to

particular minoritised groups within nation- states. The alleged sinners are identified according to political needs of the moment. For example, in pre-Brexit UK, the sinners were the ones who took advantage of the welfare state by claiming benefits; they were deemed responsible for the austerity cuts implemented by the government (Levitas, 2012). This created a division between the "good citizens"- who work and pay their taxes - and the “sinners” who are unemployed and completely dependent on the welfare state (Anderson, 2013). Needless to say, any discussion regarding class, gender, ethnicity, structural oppression, inequality and exploitation is omitted. The sinner then becomes an established category with its own racialised, cultural, religious, and aesthetic characteristics. The most obvious example in a pan-European context is that of migrants who are blamed for "taking our jobs" and for "taking advantage of the welfare system".

While the social body is kept busy with blaming the sinners or experiencing feelings of collective guilt, the moment of crisis becomes the perfect ground for the implementation of policies and reforms that citizens would otherwise not accept. Under these conditions, the social body is preoccupied with ‘emotional and physical reeling’ (Klein 2008: 194), is in a state of “shock” and thus not able to mobilise an effective resistance.

## Crisis as an emancipatory practice

The etymology of the word "crisis" (from the Greek word κρίση), at a first, superficial, reading, refers to a sudden change, a temporal interruption from a condition of normality. But "crisis" also refers to the critical act of evaluation and thinking, which indicates a space of meaningful self-reflection. Following this logic, crisis can be seen as an opportunity to redefine and reframe the structures, values, and social formations that otherwise seemed unquestionable, fixed and inextricable from everyday realities. This understanding of crisis differs from the neoliberal opportunistic logic of financial experts and investors who see a crisis as an opportunity to increase their profits. Rather, when the future is uncertain and suspended, the expected, normative personal and social pathways seem more foreclosed. Yet, after the mourning for the loss of the grand narratives, new spaces open up. It is in these spaces that the future awaits together with the possibilities of different forms of social organisation and political action. It is also in these spaces that the function and use of radical scholarship and teaching can play a major role in reshaping forms of knowledge production and narratives, engaging different social actors, and prefiguring alternative socio-political formations.

What, then, are the vocabularies of crisis? How does the social absorb, adopt and replicate the logic of crisis? How do, for example, austerity politics impact people’s daily lives in the city? How are we to make sense of sudden socio-political changes in urban environments? Amidst the suffering, how does the "squeeze" of austerity, the suffocation of encampment, the anxiety of climate collapse, the fear of a pandemic, give rise to alternative models for surviving and inhabiting spaces of crisis, whilst resisting austere state policies and practices?

How are established provisions such as healthcare, education and welfare threatened by the logics of crisis? These crumbling social systems, experienced as lived conditions, are also mediated, replicated, and reproduced daily in media representations. As such, to live in a time of crisis is to be in a constant state of learning about change, and imagining its implications. What, then, is the **impact of the crisis on our imagination**?

BRIDGES

This document is part of the BRIDGES Toolkit, a set of tools and strategies for addressing and dismantling structures of exclusion in Higher Education curricula. The Toolkit has been developed in the context of the Erasmus+ project **BRIDGES: Building Inclusive Societies: Diversifying Knowledge and Tackling Discrimination through Civil Society Participation in Universities,** whose working team consists of the following entities:

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**To cite this document:** BRIDGES Project (2020) Bridges Toolkit.
**Available at:** https://buildingbridges.space/about-toolkit/



Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

SERVICIO ESPAÑOL PARA LA INTERNACIONALIZACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN

*This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*