

Facing the storm.
Institutions and crises: historical approaches
(Rennes, 2023/03/16-17)



Vernet, *Shipwreck*, oil on canvas, 54x81 cm, 1764. Private collection.

Crisis is omnipresent, at least in discourses. Without falling into doom-mongering, the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected our contemporaries and a number of institutions (Bergeron et al. 2020); the challenges to come, or those predicted, will affect them even more strongly. Scholars cannot ignore this issue. What is the connection between institutions and crises? The question must be tackled in the light of the experiences of past societies. Above all, those often unclear concepts must be defined. This conference aims to bring together young researchers in order to contribute to these debates. It does not intend to offer ready-made solutions, but rather to suggest tracks for reflection, to give these concepts a heuristic virtue. This event wants to underline the importance of empirical studies as a basis for comparatism: this is the condition for achieving a certain degree of generality in such a perspective.

By crisis, we mean the moment of breaking continuity in an apparently established order. The term is understood in two dimensions: a temporality and an intensity. It is a moment of change, a revelation of the social tensions at stake, which can only be understood in the longer term. In ancient Greek, the medical meaning of crisis referred to that fateful moment when faced with the alternative: to live or to die. The medical meaning still permeates the modern concept, which became established at the end of the 18th century, with a negative connotation. Although in the 19th century progress philosophy gave it a positive meaning, as a time of transformation, the fact remains that crisis in its contemporary uses is a repellent term. But, whether positive or negative, crisis is indeed a time of possibilities between a past that is no more and a future that has not yet happened.

As far as the institution is concerned, it is necessary to discard an overly broad anthropological sense, in which institutions regulate social life (marriage, politeness). Besides, organisational and institutional approaches should not be opposed. Therefore, inspired by the new reading of Maurice Hauriou's work by the so-called Dresden school, around the medievalist Gert Melville (Hauriou 1925; Melville 1992),

under the term institution we will consider symbolic and material arrangements that have reached a certain degree of formal and legal organisation, which implement a multitude of 'guiding ideas' capable of orienting the action of individuals, and which are supposed to guarantee the stabilisation of institutions. A guiding idea is understood as a goal to be achieved and a way to achieve it, in accordance with a value system.

The relationship between crisis and political institution has been established, notably by Michel Dobry who uses the rupture introduced by crisis to think about the continuity of institutions and the individuals in them (Dobry 1989). The interest of the colloquium lies entirely in the conviction that institutions hide a processual dimension, recalled by etymology and revealed by crises. Consequently, five lines of thought are proposed to the speakers. First, we shall investigate the institutions in crisis, when confronted with an internal disruption, and, secondly, how the institutions react when an external crisis occurs. Crisis resolution may involve the creation of institutions: reflection on these issues is the third axis. Four, institutions are not monoliths; they are embodied by individuals, by social groups, whether they are part of the institution or in relation in it. What social uses do they make of the crisis? Eventually, and finally, we shall analyse the irruption of the past in the present: how do institutions impose forms and modalities of the memorial constructions of the crisis?

I. Crisis(es) in institutions

Reversing the perspective, Peter Von Moos proposed to read crisis as the normal state of an institution (Von Moos 2001). What about it? Anyway, every institution seems to encounter crises in the course of its history. How do they emerge? First, some crises have internal origin, by organisational dysfunctions, by the loss of guiding ideas' meaning, by inadequacy of its government. It will be necessary to identify the possible origins of internal crises and understand their emergence-related issues. Do they result from a questioning of the guiding ideas that ensured the stability of the institution? How are the cultural, political, social and economic conditions intertwined in crisis origin? Since there can only be an interplay of internal and external factors, this complex web must be untangled. A particular attention has to be paid to members' reactions to the crisis that hit the institution. Distinction could be made between, on one side, members involved in the crisis, with immediate responsibility in its triggering and development, and on the other side, members involved in the crisis and suffering its effects because of their situation or position in the institution. Do these two groups, which may partly overlap, participate in the resolution of the crisis? How to find a way out of the crisis? By institutional reform, which may be orchestrated from the outside, in accordance or discordance with old guidelines? Or with a change in the internal rules? Did it justify the creation of its own mechanism for identifying and overcoming the problem? Resolving the crisis can have repercussions on the institution's relations with the outside. Initially an internal crisis in the French army, the Dreyfus Affair became a national political crisis (Bach 2004; Denis-Lagrée-Veillard 1995): this case sums up the interest of this axis.

II. Institutions in the contexts of crisis

What does crisis do to institutions? The main point is to capture the dynamics at work within institutions in a context of potential disruption of a supposedly established order. Attention is required to grasp what the moment of crisis is, in its temporality and its level of intensity. But whatever it is, the crisis' context challenges the reasons for the existence of institution, their internal functioning and organisation, as well as their positioning in an institutional and social environment characterised by unpredictability. In the 16th century, at the heart of the religious crisis, the order of the Capuchin Friars

Minor suffered the departure of senior members to Geneva and survived only at the cost of a reform centred on obedience, pray and poverty (Camaioni 2018). It is therefore important to study the updating of the institution's guidelines, the political and social recompositing of its organisation, and its repositioning in the fields in which it operates. Whether one thinks of the organisational and social developments of the French army after Azincourt (Contamine 1972; Toureille 2015) or during the revolutionary era (Bertaud 1979), crisis is the driving force behind an institution's change; it is important to understand the modalities of this relationship. However, there are institutions which appear to be unchanged when they emerge from the context designated as crisis. Considering that a Confucius' writing changes because it does not change in a changing world (Levenson 1965; Bourdieu 2012), what does crisis do to the institution when the later seems not to be affected? And, if it can be determined, under which conditions do the institution and its guidelines display their legitimacy, or even become stronger? This opens up a final track: the institution becomes a stakeholder in the development of the crisis, either by aggravating its dynamics or by contributing to its resolution, re-establishing a balance in an endangered order.

III. Instituting to respond to the crisis

Can institutions be responses to crisis? This third section examines the way in which instituting, *i.e.* establishing a new institution, appears to be a solution for societies facing crises. An institution could be an *ad hoc* response to peculiar and temporary goals, and yet endure; it can be committed to last from its very beginning. Thus, a first step must be devoted to the motivations and issues surrounding the creation of a new institution to alleviate or even remedy the crisis. If the institution is the realisation of a guiding idea, it is still part of a specific context. Many works have already reflected a variety of situations, from the institution of the commissioners for the application of the pacification edicts in 1563 and 1570, aimed to put an end to civil wars in France (Foa 2014), to the establishment of the polysynodality during the *Régence* in 1715-1718 in the face of the political and economic crisis of the early eighteenth century (Dupilet 2011). In this context, crises can also be seen as 'institution-creating disorders' (Lecuppre-TeXier du Mesnil 2014), *i.e.* contexts that are particularly favorable to the redefinition of ways of doing things or goals to be achieved. The situation of this institution in its institutional and social environment, in relation to the participants in the institution process, must be investigated. The question of determining who institutes appears to be fundamental in this respect. Particular attention should therefore be paid to the justifications ensuring the legitimacy of these new structures, and even their durability, whether this legitimacy is part of a claimed practical and symbolic heritage or whether it contributes to redefining it. Finally, it is worth asking whether instituting is a necessity to get out of the crisis, and measuring the effects of these new creations.

IV. Groups and individuals: institutions and social uses of crisis

According to different modalities and forms of individuation, each society has assigned a position to individuals in social relations. What uses do these individuals and groups make of the crisis? On the one hand, it is a question of following the trajectory of members within their institution: they can benefit, intentionally or not, from an internal or general crisis. They can also suffer from it. On the other hand, what about the variety of interstitial situations, trajectories made of back and forth between the institution and the outside? Lastly, individuals outside the institution, in relation to it, deserve attention. It is for instance the case of taxpayers dealing with the tax institution (Delalande 2011). Crisis may encourage entry, or, on the contrary, push members or groups out. Do these individual or collective

paths influence the functioning or even the guidelines of the institution? Do they contribute to the resolution of the crisis? Do they manage to retain the benefits acquired, with deleterious effects - or not - on the future of the institution? In addition, the experience and knowledge of groups and individuals, forged before their entry or exit from the institution, are subject to transfers of practices that need to be questioned. Finally, it will be necessary to understand discursive strategies: does not a pythia of crisis produce a performative discourse capable of making the crisis happen, and maintaining it? Prophet of doom can have an interest in doom.

V. Memory of institutions and discursivity of crises

Subsequent elaboration of crises narrative and organization of its memory appear to be a way beyond a problematic change, to make a factor of institutional stability from the tipping point. This takes place in various ways, from the rejection of the crisis to its incorporation, not forgetting its repression. Memory, understood as “a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present” (Hallbwachs 1925), implies a historiographical work for an institution, a storytelling between transmissions and oblivion. It is either the memory of a moment experienced as a crisis by the institution, or the *a posteriori* construction of a moment in the guise of a crisis. It can take place within or outside the institution, in an official or unofficial way. Recent attention has been paid to the memory of origins in monastic institutions (Caby 2003; Josserand-Olivier 2012). Do not crises constitute a time of (re)foundation? What are the mechanisms for developing a narrative and a memory of the crisis? Thus, reform, in its medieval and contemporary senses, is often justified by the state of crisis of an institution, as exploited by the Regular Observance movements in the late Middle Ages against their Conventual rivals (Huijbers 2018). This also implies thinking about the control of access to the past, as the control of sources is part of the control of discourses and knowledge about the crisis. Institutions are indeed great purveyors of ‘paperwork’ (Kafka 2013). To cite the crisis in the past is to reset it in motion in the present: tradition or legitimation tools in discourses, it can also be a “reference” for action as “actualization tentative of an unachieved past” (Moatti 2018). Crisis memory is in fact a matter of collective coherence and even identity. The aim is therefore to understand the relation between collective and individual memories, as well as to question any organization of remembering. The capacity to use a crisis memory, or even to impose it, will be worth a specific attention: elements rejected from the past during its construction as memory persist in the “discordances [...] of the created past” (Geary 1996).

This colloquium is primarily open to all young researchers in history and social sciences (PhD students and young PhD's), whatever the academic period of their works. Papers should address some of the questions raised. Particular attention will be paid to proposals that link work on sources and reflections on concepts. They may be submitted in French or English.

Proposals should include a title and 5 keywords, a short CV, a summary of 2000 characters (maximum) of the paper, and a short bibliography of 5 references. Proposals should be sent to: colloque.crisis.institutions@gmail.com before 2022-06-30.

Organisation committee:

Anthony Hamon (Université Rennes 2, Tempora)

Alexandre Lepeteur (Université Rennes 2, Tempora)

Pierre Meignan (Université Rennes 2, Tempora ; Université Charles de Prague)

Jean-François Morvan (Université Rennes 2, Tempora)

Scientific committee:

Gäid Andro (Université de Nantes, Tempora)

Marie-Madeleine de Cevins (Université Rennes 2, Tempora)

Marie Delezenne (Université d'Artois, CREHS)

Jérémie Foa (Université d'Aix-Marseille, TELEMMe)

Chloé Gaboriaux (Sciences Po Lyon, Triangle UMR 5206)

Paulin Ismard (Université d'Aix-Marseille, ANHIMA)

Pierre Karila-Cohen (Université Rennes 2, Tempora)

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