

Crisis Tropes: What cultural apprehensions of the post-1989 period in Central Eastern Europe can Reveal about the global rupture of 2020

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Macro-historical crises are foundational moments for the sociological imagination. Crises unleash materialist and idealist forces in society, forcing individuals to come to terms with an accelerated pace of social change. Crises are notoriously polysemous events: Convolved as they are, they probe and often shatter existing foundations and boundaries of order. At the same time, they reconstitute the grounds of society: Crises are socially and culturally construed as the beginning of new temporal regimes.

Robin Wagner Pacifici (2017), in a recent exposition of this problem, argues that in the way societal rupture is apprehended, knowledge about the sources, the nature, and the consequences of the crisis is generated. How we signify the crisis also affects the course of action: Horizons of meaning are not merely attached to layers of causality, but themselves come to co-constitute that which we denote as “real” and “causal”. In such moments, it becomes evident that culture is both a model of and for the world.

The global coronavirus pandemic has brought the stark health and economic inequalities of our time into full relief. As the crisis continues to unfold, sociologists are beginning to explore the patterns of meaning that crystallize in the process.

In my presentation, I seek to make a specific contribution to this endeavor: I discuss five salient *tropes of crisis apprehension*: 1- Eventful thinking as delineating temporal orders; 2- The problem of excess of meaning; 3-Shifting meanings in the relation of the realm of work and the state; 4- A sense of contingency and renewed agency; 5-Delineating categories of legitimate victimhood. These five tropes contain popular, evocative ideas about the nature of a macro-historical crisis, rooted in a specific quality of everyday experience. It is via the level of everyday apprehensions of rupture, I suggest, that they enter the sociological imagination, that they become the stuff of sociological theorizing. All of these tropes are also

centrally concerned with justice as a temporal way of reasoning about society – and thus they provide a looking glass through which we can understand how the problems of social order and legitimacy is negotiated in apprehensions of the coronavirus crisis.

I arrive at this typology through a comparative angle. I develop the argument against the foil of recent historical transformation, the post-1989 period in Central Eastern Europe. Above all, these events, like the ones we are living through today, were marked by the “dilemma of simultaneity” (Offe 1996, Ther 2016) of interacting and mutually reinforcing processes of political, economic, and cultural shifts. This somewhat enigmatic quality continues to challenge the popular as well as the scholarly apprehension of 1989. The “restlessness” of those events, to use Wagner-Pacifici’s formulation, provides an opportunity for thinking about the meanings of the crisis of 2020.

We might ask: Isn’t this comparison flawed from the outset, as we have two diametrically opposed horizons of meanings in front of us: 1989 denotes the triumph of neoliberalism, globalization, and anti-collectivist projects more generally; 2020 is taking on shape as a moment of the resurgence of the welfare state, egalitarian ideologies, and the end of neoliberalism as we knew it? Yet this juxtaposition, I would argue, relies on a narrow idea of 1989 as a moment of revolutionary change (as crystallized in the image of the falling Berlin Wall), and misses the universe of meaning associated with the social processes of change that unfolded in the aftermath of this event. Shifting our focus to the aftermath of this event, to the post-1989 period, we find processes of societal transformation during which the relationship between state and society was profoundly recalibrated. We find a Polanyian moment in which state agency reshaped the foundations of the economy, an instance of labor market ruptures and shifting valuations of skills that had an existential meaning for the livelihoods of millions of individuals, the rise of a newly coded inequality regime, all of which brought the economy’s dependency on the state to the fore. And it is very much this multilayered reality of change – with its complex institutional and biographical consequences

– that informs the politics of Central Eastern European, post-communist societies today (Ther 2016, Krastev and Holmes 2019). Against this background, I develop five tropes of crisis apprehension. I present them briefly in the following.

Eventful thinking as delineating temporal orders. First, our current moment, just as the post-1989 period, grants us to recognize that peoples’ sense of temporal order is profoundly restructured by eventful ruptures. A distinction between the “old” and the “new” temporal order (which is simultaneously a social order) arises. This is not just something that concerns political and economic elites in society, and it is not limited to public discourse: It is really a biographical reality, something that people apply to their personal lives. Consider the ubiquitous invocation of the language of a “before” and “after” the event which we find with respect to Covid-19 today. In the case of 1989, there exists in all Slavic languages (as well as German, Hungarian, or Romanian) a temporal distinction, often a version of “before-revolution-time” and “after-revolution-time”, that serves this function. It has both biographical meaning and constitutes a classification of larger social forces, as it is often linked to a lay understanding of causality (Tilly 2006).¹ How do similar dynamics play out in the way the pre- and post-Covid time is classified?

The problem of an excess of meaning. The events of 1989, much like the ones of 2020, are semantically open. Different groups in society – who bear different material consequences given their location in the social structure – have varying perspectives onto these processes. At the same time, a macro event affects all of society. It is, by definition, a supra-individual experience. Breaking it down by single groups and individuals will only ever serve specific analytical purposes, but it will not capture the ways in which relevant experiences may only become real and specific through references to collective representations. This is the (Durkheimian) problem of an excess of meaning. It leads us right to questions of legitimacy

¹ For instance, whether people locate the source of particular social problems (say, low levels of trust in politics) in the pre-1989 era instead of in the post-1989 era provides a different reading of society with many implications.

and power. What actors achieve to speak on behalf of those collective realities? The rise of the authoritarian right in post-1989 societies closely linked to this problem. For the 2020 crisis, we must recognize that this dynamic is already in place – while the problem of stratification is key, we can see group identities and alliances forming behind its very articulation.

Shifting meanings in the relation of the realm of work and the state. While 1989 is often coded as the triumph of capitalism over state-socialism, it has a much more concrete meaning in the sphere of work in the societies that underwent those changes: 1989 has brought an accelerated deindustrialization, a swift and dramatic revaluation of skills for the majority of citizens living in Central Eastern Europe (Ther 2016). This took place in what were highly industrialized, educated societies in which work was cherished as a sacred value. Bringing the centrality of labor as a symbolic structure back to the table, we can see the parallel to the post-2020 crisis: Today, we are confronted with historic turbulences in labor markets, with rapid shifts and possible revaluations of work in entire sectors of the economy. Questions that inform a moral economy in the sense of E.P. Thompson (1963), – such as *whose work can legitimately be recognized as serving a social purpose? Who can claim to be a “productive” member of society?* – were and are the questions that occupied many citizens in post-1989 transforming societies.² The cultural response to these problems is critical.

A sense of contingency and renewed agency. The “wonder of beginnings”, in Hannah Arendt’s terminology, is a cultural force in its own right. For the post-1989 period, it was both political and economic liberty; for the post-Covid age, it is arguably too early to make claims about the direction and the nature of value change. Still, what is key in this trope of crisis apprehension is that the discourse of agency always necessarily conceals structural disparities

² Unlike the post-1989 period which was characterized by massive deindustrialization and the rise of the service sector; the post-Covid shock, in the short run, has severely harmed precisely the service sector, while industrial production has quickly recovered. Still, in the long run, against the background of accelerated automation, de-carbonization, and shifting consumer patterns, the economic fallout from the Covid crisis will likely be dramatic.

in who has what kind of agency in this moment – at the same time, it serves as an articulation of normative forces, a “rejuvenation” of moral orientations. This dynamic needs to be taken seriously, despite its potential for sentimentalism and kitsch, in the post-Covid context.

Delineating loss and victimhood. The Covid-19 pandemic has wrought immeasurable pain and suffering around the world. As of March 2021, more than 2,6 million people have died from complications associated with the virus, and many more are suffering from negative physical, psychic and social consequences. Cultural trauma theory demonstrates (Alexander 2012) that important political dynamics arise from how loss and victimhood is collectively construed. Still, the comparison between 1989 and 2020 is arguably not fruitful in this particular respect, as the nature of loss that is associated with the post-1989 period can only very selectively inform our thinking about the current moment. I still include this trope here as it is at the very heart of our contemporary experience.

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