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INTERVIEW



Anti-Crisis: thinking with and against crisis excerpt from interview with Janet Roitman*

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On what epistemological grounds can we declare ‘crisis’? How does such a diagnosis relate to representations of history, and to the pragmatics of markets and politics? These questions are at the heart of Janet Roitman’s scholarship, which focuses on emergent economic and political forms. Her early work (*Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, 2005) analyzed the formation of new figures of economic regulation and illustrates how state structures persist despite (or due to) the proliferation of unregulated networks, thus calling into question analyses in terms of ‘failed states’ or state crisis. She then deepened her analysis by considering the conceptual foundations of persistent analyses of Africa in terms of crisis. This concern led to an inquiry into the status of the concept of crisis in the social sciences, generating her second book: *Anti-Crisis* (2013). *Anti-Crisis* takes the 2007–2008 ‘financial crisis’ as an exemplar and shows how the concept of crisis constitutes a blind spot in social science analysis. We took the opportunity to revisit this intellectual trajectory, to probe her analysis of the concept of crisis and consider the avenues of research she opened up.¹

From Africa in crisis to the US financial crisis

Interviewers: To begin, we would like to discuss the evolution of your research. How did you shift from the ambition of thinking ‘Africa otherwise’ (Roitman 2017) to the subprime crisis in the United States? Can we draw parallels, or at least common questions, between these projects that seem so very different?

Janet Roitman: Indeed, the path between the African continent and ‘subprime’ credit seems sinuous, if not arbitrary. But the link does exist conceptually. My experience in Africa taught me many things, one of which is the power of regulatory concepts – or the point, made by many (Foucault, Saïd, Rabinow), that the terms we elaborate to think ourselves – or to think our world – are political insofar as they regulate the veracity of enunciations and practices. Without delving into that larger epistemological problem here, suffice it to say that the terms of social science analysis (state, capitalism, economy, society, culture) should not be taken for granted. That seems obvious. But of course the entire enterprise of social science inquiry (and political practice) emerges from these constitutive terms. I am interested in these constitutive terms. Therefore, instead of limiting my research to a critique of analyses that qualify African states as ‘failed states’ or African economies as ‘in crisis,’ I turned instead to the concept of crisis itself. I asked a fairly straightforward but daunting question: How

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*Interview conducted by Sara Angeli Aguiton, Lydie Cabane, and Lise Cornilleau.

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can one think Africa otherwise than under the sign of crisis? And that question forced me to step back and ask: What is the status of the term crisis in social science accounts? That is, how do we account for the world – or for specific situations and practices – in terms of crisis? And what justifies this accounting? In addressing those two primary questions, the overall project of *Anti-Crisis* is to consider how the concept of crisis is constituted as an object of knowledge.

And just as I was asking what seemed to be fairly academic questions, the major newspapers churned out copy, declaring ‘Financial Crisis!’ This became a wonderful opportunity to trace and document the claim to crisis and to take note of the effects of this claim – the questions it allowed one to ask and the questions it foreclosed.² So while the path from ‘crisis in Africa’ to ‘subprime crisis’ might seem obscure, I was really addressing the same question all along: What are the effects of the claim to crisis? What questions does it enable and what sorts of questions does it foreclose? What is at stake when we claim ‘crisis’? And, most important: What are the consequences of our accession to that claim?

At the same time, my work tends to be anchored in ‘the anthropology of value.’ This can be used in rather vague ways (everything can be described in terms of value ...), which is a problem. But, in good anthropological fashion – and following in the footsteps of my first mentors, Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1986) and Jane Guyer (Guyer 2004) – it’s important to never assume that value inheres in anything; we always must account for its production, its elaboration, its translations, and its transformations. And while the point that value is not an intrinsic quality might seem banal, it is in fact a challenge to truly demonstrate (and not assume) its production and its translations – its forms and its practices.

That’s what I try to do in both *Fiscal Disobedience* and in *Anti-Crisis*. For instance, in *Fiscal Disobedience*, I show how non-state regimes of accumulation and economic regulation participate in the propagation of the sovereign state through an anthropology of value, or the ways in which these networks partake in shared modalities of value production that involve more than mere economic exchanges. Indeed, following from that, I resisted the then-prevalent view that non-state actors were ‘new sovereigns’ or ‘partial sovereigns’ or ‘variegated forms of sovereignty’ because both state and non-state actors emerge from shared epistemological grounds. Statements – such as ‘this is a state’ or ‘X represents Y form of value’ – had not been transformed by these emergent non-state practices. Hence the sovereign form prevailed despite constant reporting of intractable political-economic crises across Africa. Academic analyses claimed that these political-economic crises were legitimacy crises, being normative and even epistemological. But my view was that if crisis obtained, we would expect these forms to be radically transformed.

Similarly, in *Anti-Crisis*, I illustrate my point with reference to the claim ‘financial crisis!’ made in 2007–2008 regarding what is now called The Great Recession. While this work was motivated by an interest in the concept of crisis in-and-of-itself, the illustration depends on an anthropology of the term. In other words, this work was not motivated by purely theoretical concerns, as some imagine. In fact, I went to great pains to avoid delving *into* theoretical debates. For instance, while I do refer to Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual history of the concept of crisis, this is because it contributes to the historiography of the term (in fact, Koselleck, in some ways, determined the historiography of the concept). My intent is not to adjudicate whether Koselleck got it right or wrong; whether his theory is adequate or not, whether his historiography is correct or not. This is because my aim is to illustrate the *practice of the concept of crisis*. Koselleck is one practitioner of the concept – and an influential one at that! And it is my view that one can only really take note of the effects of the claim to crisis by accounting for the ways that the concept is practiced.

INT: In your 1995 article with Achille Mbembe (‘Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis’), and in *Fiscal Disobedience*, crisis is the starting point of reflection. What brought you to reverse this position in *Anti-Crisis*, and to question the use of the term crisis as a narrative strategy and even as a foundational premise?

JR: The short answer is that I came to think differently about the approach we took in that text. We documented the state of affairs in Cameroon under Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1990s by illustrating the *immobilisme* that reined both in materiality, such as the landscapes of abandoned construction sites, and in dispositions, or what we called ‘crisis as a figure of rationality’ (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). By taking crisis as a figure of rationality, we explored how conditions of life in Cameroon at that time entailed an experience of crisis. But, years later, I asked myself: If crisis designates something more than a historical conjuncture, what is the status of that term? And how did crisis, once a signifier for a critical, decisive moment, come to be construed as a protracted historical and experiential condition? Can one even speak of a state of enduring crisis? This is an oxymoron. So I embarked on an exploration of the concept itself, using these questions as guideposts. I’m now acutely aware of how many academic research programs begin with the premise of crisis. It is posited as a starting point without any rigorous attention to its entailments. At the very least, crisis is posited to legitimate research; at the most, it is posited as the condition of our times, without any consideration of the stakes of positing the world (much less time) in these terms. This is what *Anti-Crisis* explores: the stakes of those claims.

Rethinking crisis

INT: *Anti-Crisis* refers to the 2008 financial crisis. But does finance have a specific status because of the special role of the financial industry in the contemporary capitalist system? How does the approach you outline in *Anti-Crisis* shed light on the ways that financial crisis is typically posited as an exceptional moment and as a matrix of the contemporary period?

JR: That’s a difficult question that requires a long answer. To answer it with care, I would first need to know what is meant by ‘finance’ – a term that signifies heterogeneous terrain. Are we referring to investment banks, asset management firms, central banks, pension funds, stock markets, bond markets, capital markets, consumer credit markets, sovereign wealth funds? Are we referring to the operations of finance, which include pricing, trading, hedging, intermediation, accounting, computation, automation, modeling, etcetera? Or are we referring to the practice of finance – also an expansive terrain that includes an array of financial devices as well as myriad instantiations of financial practice in the world today? In brief, the question seems to assume that ‘finance’ and ‘capitalism’ are unified systems that can be defined as having particular (and known) logics, essentially driven by accumulation and ... crisis. The notion that capitalism, or finance capitalism, produces crisis as an inherent systemic attribute has been criticized on many grounds. And there is a rich body of work in the social studies of finance that upends this approach in terms of intrinsic logics and the teleology of systems. *Anti-Crisis* takes inspiration from that body of work.

The *claim* to crisis engenders particular forms of critique. These forms of critique entail assumptions about how categories like ‘the market’ should function and consequential conjecture about how deviations from ‘true’ market value were produced. Social scientists generally produce post hoc assessments of the nature of historical deviation or systemic failure; and post hoc evaluations about the nature of (hypothetical) true market value, or the fundamentals of the economy, to which we must return.

In *Anti-Crisis*, I walk the reader through a thought experiment: if we don’t take crisis as inherent to a system, then we cannot take the category of crisis for granted. We must therefore embark on an anthropology of the claim to crisis. And this anthropology of the claim involves not just an account of actors’ usages of the term (an instrumental account of discursive practice). Rather, it entails an account of the ways that value is produced in the first place. For instance (and to simplify), in the case of subprime markets, it’s important to note the qualifier ‘sub’ (inferior to prime) which denoted securities not scored as high-grade investments. Martha Poon’s research shows how the creation of an *investment-grade* subprime market was part and parcel of the production of socio-technical networks that generated risk as a category of finance and risk-pricing as financial practice (Poon 2009).

These practices arise from positive, pragmatic spaces of calculative possibility, which cannot be reduced to the 'logic of capital' or 'the law' of the market (Callon 1998), and which generate debt as a fungible asset. Likewise credit derivatives were the product of similar socio-technical networks, facilitating bets on probable default. In other words, bets were made *for* increased risk and probable default; risk and default did not represent a breakdown in an otherwise 'rational,' risk-averse market.

Reference to 'financial crisis' with respect to the subprime mortgage market only serves to unify these disparate devices and practices, subsuming them into a hypothetical logic (the logic of capital). They merit study. Without such study, reference to 'crisis' can only identify historical significance in terms of systemic and ethical failure: faulty finance and bad banks. A sociology of error instead of an account of the production of positive knowledge, or *how* debt became a fungible asset class in the first place.

The sociology of error (cf. Bloor 1991 [1976]) – faulty finance, bad banks – accedes to the claim to crisis as well as to the response, or the transfer of public wealth to the private sector. Taking issue with the claim to crisis would have depended on an account of how particular financial practices were extremely effective in what they set out to do: they produced debt and risk as fungible assets. This allows us to see how value was not constituted from profit on housing loans; instead, the locus of valuation was the secondary markets, or in hedging and risk-pricing. Questions need to be addressed regarding wealth generated in the secondary markets before homes were foreclosed upon. Since, at that stage, one couldn't trace back secondary market losses to particular homes, justification needed to be produced as to why some homes were foreclosed upon but others were not. Naming a situation 'crisis' implies that what was once perfectly intelligible and construed as productive (debt is a credit) is now taken to be without basis and construed as a negative value form (debt is a toxic asset).

In that sense, it's not quite accurate to say that finance is the arbiter of political decisions. If *the claim to crisis is a political decision*, as I'm suggesting, then we need to know more about how that claim is formulated and what the consequences are for our accession to that claim. My point is that 'crisis' is not a claim about error; it is a judgment about value.

INT: One important point made in *Anti-Crisis* is that 'crisis' narratives depend on a diagnosis of failure or error. The expression 'what went wrong?' is quite telling in this regard: things have gone wrong because they deviated from an expected normal course of history, which implies both an empirical-normative judgment (the falsehood of the crisis in relation to a truth that is taken to be normal), as well as a moral one ('it is wrong'). How can qualifications such as 'failure, error' be considered as operations of power? How do crisis claims connect the question of truth with the question of politics?

JR: The claim to crisis is a political claim because it is a judgment about value as opposed to an observation of error. Despite the presumption that crisis does not imply, in itself, a definite direction of change – that it doesn't predict an outcome, partake of an ideology of progress or entail linear causality – it does imply a certain telos. That is, it is inevitably though most often implicitly directed towards a norm. Evoking crisis entails reference to a norm because it requires a comparative state for judgment: Crisis compared to what? Compared to what alternative state of affairs?

The main proposition of *Anti-Crisis* is that the concept of crisis is an enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge. It is a distinction that is not seen as a blind spot, but rather as an error or deformation – a discrepancy between the world and knowledge of the world. But if we take crisis to be a blind spot – or a distinction, which makes certain things visible and others invisible – it is merely an *a priori*. However, it should be noted that this does not amount to denying crisis. *The point is to take note of the effects of the claim to crisis, to be attentive to the effects of our very accession to that judgment.*

Crisis engenders certain forms of critique, which politicize interest groups. This is a politics of crisis. Would not crisis, if it effectively obtained, engender not merely critique of existing relations and practices, but rather occasion the reorganization and transformation of those very relations

and practices? If that transformation has not obtained, then we need to extract ourselves from the politics of crisis so that we can consider, more clearly and more explicitly, the effects and consequences of our accession to that claim. This is a different political exigency.

Crisis and critique: resist / escape 'crisis'?

INT: By refusing to give in to the urgency of crisis, you are at odds with social scientists who tend not to open the black box of crisis propositions, including Marxist approaches that analyze crisis as a moment of truth, or the disclosure of the power relationships that animate the capitalist system. *Anti-Crisis* questions the relationship between crisis and critique, showing that claims to crisis potentially serve to reestablish to the status quo. Is critique doomed to succumb to the prism of crises, or can it avoid this trap?

JR: Critique and crisis are cognates, so the answer is yes! Less facetiously, that does seem to be our fate: we still suffer Foucault's requirement of cutting off the king's head. In more recent terms, the critique train has left the station, but it has run out of steam (Latour 2004). Latour's revitalization of critique involves moving from matters of fact (first empiricism) to matters of concern (second empiricism). I don't pretend to have a solution for the revitalization of critique, so we could stop there. But should we leave the concept of crisis unexamined, here too?

Leaving matters of fact (first empiricism) makes sense. Indeed, because we are unable to establish non-contingent grounds from which to claim critique, truth is necessarily immanent, which means that the practice of critique is performed in the constant unveiling of latencies, or contradictions. These contradictions have been characterized in various ways: sediments of tradition opposed to the march of modernity; ideologies that skew real social relations; naturalized categories, which we show to be social; or normativity, which we demonstrate could be otherwise. Critique is therefore practiced through the purging of contradiction and paradox. It is practiced through the commitment to obstinately demonstrate the paradox of power, or the necessary exclusions (the Other, non-sovereigns) that expose the foundations of power to be merely contingent. And these paradoxes are denoted in terms of the dichotomies that are at the foundation of all social theory (subject/object, theory/practice, transcendence/immanence). What sort of politics is generated by this recognition of the necessity of paradox? Put differently, what are the possibilities generated by suspending crisis (contradiction, paradox) as the foundation of narration and critique? I'll leave it there.

INT: More concretely, crises translate into new practices of forced austerity, violence, exclusion and economic, social, political and physical injustice in the lives of many people. How can we take up your analysis of the term crisis and yet account for those who are affected by them? In other words, how can we both analyze the qualification of history as 'crisis' while taking seriously the question of the effects and consequences for the victims?

JR: Yes – people lost their homes. It's extremely important to note that *Anti-Crisis* does not argue for a political utopia without crisis (although that would be wonderful). It doesn't take an extreme, naïve position, arguing for a voluntaristic transformation in epistemology (get rid of the concept of crisis!) nor does it take on a high-theoretic position that ignores the tangible effects of the concept. This is why I refer, quite insistently, to *the practice* of the concept of crisis.

In 2007–2008, we were hit with a tsunami of academic analyses, journalist accounts, and novelistic publications, which rendered the technical 'facts' of the crisis as folk wisdom, or tacit knowledge. Particular statements were taken to be historical facts, such as 'home prices naturally declined.' Naturally? Why wasn't there serious consideration of the possibility that trading ceased on under-capitalized secondary markets, which then led to a devaluation of home prices (and not their natural decline)? Since we missed that opportunity, the only point I can make now is that we can only take seriously the effects of crisis on the victims by contributing to alternative

statements, alternative propositions, alternative narratives – alternatives to ‘What went wrong?’ – such that we do not become victims of the orthodoxy of crisis. That’s my first point.

The second point pertains to an anthropology of the claim to crisis. This is often understood as merely an inquiry into how people use the term, which is limited to discursive analysis. As I note in *Anti-Crisis*, my disposition is inspired by Paul Rabinow’s ‘mode of adjacency,’ an approach that requires one to neither directly identify with an object of investigation or an object of knowledge nor make it strange or exotic (Rabinow 2008). This is the approach I tried to take with respect to crisis: I was not seeking to confirm it or affirm it; and I was not attempting to reveal its truth, as anthropologists once did for the strangeness of distant communities. This means suspending judgment about expert claims to crisis so as to see how those very (expert) claims and (lay) accession to those claims serve not radical change, as expected if crisis obtains, but rather the affirmation of long-standing principles, thereby precluding certain thoughts and acts, such as the outright refutation of the very idea of foreclosure as a valid proposition. Thus I tried to excavate the epistemological basis of certain claims (‘This is crisis’) and reflect upon how those claims engender certain types of action (devaluation, foreclosure) and not others (human protest-chains around homes, effacement of the very legibility of the term ‘foreclosure’). But this approach requires one to go slowly, to not take up the terms of the time, the times of crisis.

INT: What are the political consequences of *Anti-Crisis*? What would an ‘anti-crisis activism’ be? Social movements often use, in a more or less strategic and intentional way, the vocabulary of crisis to denounce alarming situations and demand political intervention or change. In doing so, are they lost in the blind spot that you aim to illuminate? Have you observed any cases of recent social movements that are reflective of ‘anti-crisis’ politics?

JR: An anti-crisis activism is to be made by others. I refrain from prescriptive politics here, which is not to say that I don’t have my own politics on this score, which I elaborated above. My aim was not to perform recognizable forms of critique (excavate the silenced other, show how what seems natural is really social, etc.). My aim was to provoke thought.

Crisis activism is generally couched in terms of redistributive justice. Thus, Occupy Wall Street mobilized around a (extremely valid) question: Who should bear the burden of fading prosperity? Tax-paying homeowners or private bankers? The 99% or the 1%? I think most people reading this interview share the same answers to those questions. And these are, from my point of view, the right answers.

But are they the right questions? In other words, questions regarding socioeconomic distribution are based upon particular forms of critique – in this case, the critique of accumulation by dispossession, best articulated by David Harvey (2003). This critique, though compelling, bypasses a constitutive aspect of transformation: that is, the very question, ‘Which social actors should bear the burden of fading prosperity?’ has not been transformed or rendered illegible. Despite claims to crisis, we still ask the same questions. They remain valid propositions for the scheme of binaries (capital versus labor, use value versus surplus value, politics versus morality) through which we reason. Ultimately, questions must be devised that address the status of those propositions. Instead of acceding to crisis and thus assuming that what is at stake is only resource allocation, we should step back to consider what is at stake with crisis in-and-of-itself. Again, I ask: What are the possibilities generated by suspending the concept of crisis as a foundation for narration and critique? Answers to this question require experimentation. Thus the real question is how free we are to dare to both experiment and remain untimely.

Notes

1. For further discussion, see Sara Angeli Aguiton, Lydie Cabane, Lise Cornilleau, ‘Politiques de la “mise en crise.”’ Introduction to the special issue, ‘La fabrique et le gouvernement des crises,’ *Critique internationale* 84, 2019: 9–21.
2. I’m grateful to Michel Callon for encouraging me to use the sub-prime mortgage ‘crisis’ as a ‘live’ exemplar.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Janet Roitman is University Professor at The New School. She is the author of *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton University Press), an analysis of emergent forms of economic regulation in the Chad Basin, and *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press), an inquiry into the concept of crisis as an object of knowledge in the social sciences. Her current research focuses on emergent fintech and middle class politics in Africa. She founded and currently directs the Platform Economies Research Group.

Sara Angeli Aguiton is a sociologist and STS scholar investigating emerging technological and environmental risks, their political regulation, and their commodification. She is a CNRS permanent research fellow, based at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France. Her monograph *La Démocratie des Chimères: gouverner la biologie synthétique* (Bord de l'eau, 2018) critically examines the 'upstream' regulations of synthetic biology in the US and in France. Her research now focuses on insurance innovations (disaster risk finance and agricultural insurance) dedicated to making climate risks insurable.

Dr. Lise Cornilleau is an assistant professor at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines in France. Her research deals with the politics of expertise and quantification in the global governance of food and agriculture. She has published articles in *Revue d'Anthropologie des Connaissances*, *Science & Technology Studies* and *Critique Internationale*.

Dr. Lydie Cabane is an assistant professor at the Institute for Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Her research is concerned with the politics of crisis governance across political entities and policy sectors. Forthcoming books include *The European Government of Crisis* (OUP) and *The Government of Disasters in South Africa: state, politics, and knowledge* (Palgrave).

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