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# THE POLITICS OF CRISIS CLAIMS

by Sara Angeli Aguiton, Lydie Cabane, and Lise Cornilleau

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N° 85 octobre-décembre 2019 - **Shaping and Governing Crises**

Crises appear to be all around us, whether economic, financial, environmental, social, or agricultural, whether related to energy, health, social services, security, migration, or the climate. Most economic, political and social systems appear to be affected by disruptions that feed a widespread sense of unease. There is a proliferation of discourse, images, data, and theories in the media and public space, in intellectual and political spheres, as well as in international organisations to make sense of these crises. Some consider the state of “endless crisis” as an essential characteristic of our time;<sup>1</sup> while alarmist discourses call for all kinds of interventions for us to adapt to the situations we face today, and the crises to come. In addition to potentially leading to exceptional measures such as states of emergency, <sup>2</sup> the most common kind of interventions consist in creating specific institutions, and putting in place crisis management plans within states, the private sector or international organisations.<sup>3</sup> “Crisis” is considered a worldwide phenomenon, fuelled by globalisation and the interdependence of networks and markets, that create an intrinsic vulnerability of productive and financial systems.<sup>4</sup> This global dimension can be seen in the way crises are managed, with the promotion of political intervention at the international level. New professions emerge, contributing to the institutionalisation and spread of crisis as a permanent threat, requiring expert knowledge and blurring the boundaries between emergency situations and ordinary routines.

Yet, as the anthropologist Janet Roitman suggests in her book *Anti-Crisis*,<sup>5</sup> and in the interview in this special issue,<sup>6</sup> the diagnosis of a crisis relies upon a vision in which public issues are perceived as resulting from error, dysfunction, or poor management. In asking “what went wrong?”, analysts consider the crisis as a given, and in so doing, they fail to ask the essential question: what is the “normal” state of the world that is used to devise and define crises? Is the state of stability that implicitly serves to define a crisis really exempt from any kind of dysfunction? How do diagnoses of crisis end up leading to, or even worsening, positions and asymmetries of power, even as they call for reforms that are up to the challenge? These discourses are also marked by a certain conception of time. History is presented as a repetition of crises, that each

constitutes an anomaly in relation to an (hypothetical) ordinary, “normal” state of affairs. This contributes to the impression of a permanent state of crisis. Yet, the fact that these crises are repeated over time constitutes a paradox that invalidates the very idea of a crisis. For example, the oil crisis of the 1970s was framed as a “crisis” in the following decades, since it broke with the Fordist compromise that regulated Western societies, maintaining the illusion that returning to “normal” was possible, until 2007-2008 when a major economic and financial crisis again imposed a new break from the previous period, which consequently became the new normal.

Although declarations of crisis are a way for actors to legitimise their actions, to produce meaning, or to contest the state of the world by constructing temporal breakpoints, this way of speaking and doing remains nevertheless historically situated. Crisis management has become a dominant organisational and political approach since the 1990s, particularly in the techno-industrial sectors, and around environmental issues, where it replaced the discourse on control and “zero risk”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, alongside the institutionalisation of risk management as a policy tool,<sup>8</sup> crises progressively appeared on the agenda and came to represent the most important problem that various organisations had to “prepare for”. Initially, crisis management concerned spheres related to health, military, or public safety.<sup>9</sup> But today, its ubiquity encourages us to question the extension of crisis management; today these tools can be found in finance, in environment (for example, industrial pollution), or in the social sphere (for example youth unemployment). The proliferation and institutionalisation of the techniques and organisations related to crisis management are probably the most distinctive characteristic of the governance of risk in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Therefore, rather than give in to the imperious nature of discourses and practices associated with emergency, immediacy and exception – a situation that raises a number of political consequences and pitfalls, condemned by many social science researchers in the wake of 9/11 – it is important to study the modalities of the “normalisation” of crisis. This means conceptualising a “politics of crisis” that is removed from crisis discourses themselves.

Taking crisis and the way it is governed as an object of research – as Roitman encourages us to do – means abandoning the search for causes, and moving away from the distinction between a routine state of the world and a state of crisis, which often leads to the restoration of the status quo, as we have seen for the climate crisis,<sup>10</sup> the energy crisis,<sup>11</sup> and the economic crisis.<sup>12</sup> Hence, it is possible to raise new questions – what is at play in the governance of (or by) crises, and what policy(ies) emerge from them? How does the diagnosis of a crisis – and of the state of normalcy that it implies and performs – contribute to making certain aspects of a public issue visible and invisible? What forms of regulation and deregulation are associated with these phenomena?

“Crisis” is an indigenous category as much as an analytic concept, and it plays a specific role in sociological and economic theories of capitalism,<sup>13</sup> as well as in research in political science, philosophy, and other social sciences. In the context of a proliferation of interpretations, we focus our reflection on the *shaping of crises*, understood here as the construction of declarations and diagnoses of crises, and on *how they are governed*, i.e. the range of specific actions implemented in intervening in a situation defined as a crisis. This involves documenting both the implementation of a “state of crisis”, i.e. the process by which a situation or a sector is considered as being in crisis, as well as the subsequent practices and instruments that serve to govern a given situation. Questioning what is thought of as a crisis also leads to discussions around the effects of visibility and ignorance produced by this process. Adopting this kind of perspective allows us to document dynamics that are sometimes neglected in certain social science traditions.

Among these studies, some consider crisis as a global phenomenon. This is the case for certain Marxist theories,<sup>14</sup> particularly the regulation school that sees crisis as a moment of destabilisation, and thus a revelation, of the foundations of a historical form of regulation of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> In international relations, crises are phenomena characterised by their sudden time frame and extreme impact, giving rise to institutional and political breakdowns,<sup>16</sup> revolutions, genocides, civil wars, or epidemics. In other words, these situations constitute moments in which international relations are redefined, and which often justify the existence of international institutions.<sup>17</sup> This approach, which could be described as “realist” can also be observed in many contemporary studies on crisis management. The latter, while recognising framing processes and power relations, tend to take for granted that some events do constitute a crisis (typically situations that are very intense, limited in time, and which threaten society’s values), and consider our globalised world particularly prone to crisis.<sup>18</sup>

Other studies, which are canonical in French political science,<sup>19</sup> have rejected the vision of political crises as exceptional and pathological by re-situating them in the continuity of routine actions. From this perspective, the crisis is considered a point at which the boundaries of the political and social world are blurred (“desectorisation”) and then re-stabilised (“sectorisation”), which leads to a redistribution of power and the interactions of those who have it, or the government, and increase the spaces for confrontation. More recently, studies in political sociology sensitive to the international dimensions of crises have enriched these approaches, particularly on the question of phenomena of extreme violence,<sup>20</sup> emphasising the importance of truth assessments, the interventions they provoke, and the controversies these interventions give rise to. New original research has emerged in particular in recent years in relation to the “government of disaster”, its instruments, knowledge, discourses, and the forms of governmentality that result from it.<sup>21</sup>

Although these studies – briefly presented here – have shed important light on the political regulation of crises, our goal in this special issue is to revisit the political and epistemological processes through which these situations come to be considered and framed as crises. Our approach lies at the intersection of science and technology studies (STS), the sociology of organisations, the sociology of public action and public issues, and anthropology. We focus specifically on the way these phenomena are labelled as crises and how they are governed as such.

In this respect, our perspective is close to that of the sociology of risk,<sup>22</sup> from which we draw our main theoretical arguments. The question of what distinguishes risk from crisis is crucial. Although both concepts are close and connected, they each capture distinct logics and approaches. Where risk management aims to reduce uncertainty through calculation,<sup>23</sup> crisis management embraces this uncertainty by trying to prepare societies, organisations and individuals for the uncertain threats of the future.<sup>24</sup> It develops knowledge and instruments such as “preparedness” through simulations and plans to guide action in the event of a crisis. For example, in banking, new specific regulatory authorities were set up after the financial crisis of 2007-2008 to manage failure. They operate in a very different way from traditional financial regulators, as they require banks to plan for their own failures, by writing their ‘living wills’. Similarly, in the energy sector, preparedness for nuclear accidents has been added to the traditional management of risk. We do not claim that we have witnessed a shift from a risk regime to a crisis regime, but rather that crisis management has become an additional level of political and technical intervention, and that therefore, the impact of these new instruments, knowledge, and discourses on the politics, policies, and polity of risk, should be questioned. What kind of government emerges through crisis and crisis management? How does “crisis” affect the reach and contours of

states?

Our hypothesis is that crises reveal unprecedented articulations between regulations, markets, powers, and knowledge. Security – as performed by states – no longer rests today on the historical compromise between industrial risks and public safety that shaped the foundations of the welfare state (even though some of these historical forms persist in risk management tools). The government of crisis seeks to avoid the worst, thanks to the coordination of security responsibilities distributed between private enterprises and public institutions. National security, nuclear risk, or banking regulations all constitute good examples of this trend. Alongside these transformations of public regulation, private actors also present themselves as providers of ‘crisis’ solutions: consulting services in crisis management, new insurance products, enriched agricultural grains and fertilisers, new circuits for energy and products. Within the paradigm of technological solutionism,<sup>25</sup> crises are seen as a driver for innovation. By documenting these new positions in the face of danger,<sup>26</sup> we hope to contribute to contemporary research on the way in which disasters are envisaged as an inevitable future, imposing a material and organisational culture based on perpetual adaptation.

Analysing the deployment of knowledge and instruments that describe and define crises, brings us to question how the government of crisis emerges in the first place. Who makes a “crisis claim”<sup>27</sup>? How does a crisis transform or reproduce professional and institutional jurisdictions? What kinds of instruments and frameworks are put in place to deal with this? What deeper transformations of politics and techniques of governance does the proliferation of crises reveal? Finally, how do the different levels of government interact with each other in regulating a crisis?

In the face of such vast questions, in this special issue we have chosen to compare and contrast different disciplines and themes.<sup>28</sup> The contributions presented here come from various social sciences disciplines in (sociology, anthropology, history, political science, STS) and cover a range of different crisis situations (nuclear, environment, food security, finance), and at different levels (national, European, international). This comparative approach is essential because it allows us to identify the dynamics of the government of crises, by providing perspective on the different levels and spaces in which the crisis unfolds, spreads, and is governed. In other words, it provides a way of moving beyond the disciplinary and sectorial approaches to identify more general trends.<sup>29</sup> Three such avenues will be covered here: the dynamics of claiming crises; the government of crisis; and the making of visible and invisible crises.

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### The dynamics of crisis claims

What a “crisis” means is difficult to gauge, and its exact timescale is difficult to establish. Rather than adopting an *a priori* definition, we consider it as a diagnosis made by certain actors and institutions that contribute to the implementation of a “state of crisis” in a given situation. This kind of diagnosis involves technical operations and specific framing of problems that were previously considered governable, but which now demand new forms of public or private intervention. Thus, this special issue examines technological risks, strategic natural resources, financial flows, and global food supply as problems “turned into crises”. Declaring a crisis, like declaring “fallibility”,<sup>30</sup> contributes to describing a situation, a sector, or an organisation that is “on the brink” of an unsustainable situation, on the point of succumbing to chaos,

requesting the intervention of a higher authority. The development of organisations and policies dedicated to crises management enables states to reclaim their legitimacy in the face of social and financial crises, which in fact stem from their own policies.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, crises are often invoked by supranational organisations (EU, UN) to justify their intervention.<sup>32</sup> By consequence, declaring a crisis means constructing a political framing of what is sustainable and what is unsustainable, which paves the way for specific actions before, during and after crises: emergency frameworks for managing humanitarian crises or epidemics, the financial troika, the building of preventative infrastructures, the European Central Bank's "stress tests", actions against youth unemployment, increase in the number of crisis institutions. The implications of such actions go beyond crisis management and redesign the nature of states' power.

Through the case of the global food crises in 1974 and in 2008, Lise Cornilleau explores the strategic uses of crisis diagnoses within an international organisation, the Committee on World Food Security. Declaring a food crisis in the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) justified reforming global food regulation, which gave rise to new strategies by global actors, which Cornilleau explores in her article in this issue. In 1974, as in 2008, divergent diagnoses of crises co-produced distinct projects of regulation. The author demonstrates that, in spite of the democratisation of knowledge about crisis that was undertaken in 2008 by the Committee, certain actors successfully defended the institutionalised paradigm that was established after the 1974 crisis. The study of the processes leading to the declaration of crisis allow us to reconsider the idea according to which crises are laboratories for sudden and drastic political reform. This perspective generally refers to the state of exception as a facilitation of the implementation of certain authoritarian political measures (bypassing the democratic process), and their subsequent discrete normalisation, as in the case of austerity policies or privatisation. Considering crises as laboratories also suggests that these measures are tested during exceptional events before being transferred to other contexts, as part of transnational circulation, particularly between the Global South and the Global North. Although these approaches have the merit of drawing attention to the instrumentation (and instrumentalisation) of crises to push for reforms in a context of a shock and exceptional measures, they risk uncritically recycling the discourses of institutions that often invoke this image of a laboratory to describe and prescribe their interventions.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the instruments those institutions use are far from being all-powerful. The governance of crisis is thrown together haphazardly,<sup>34</sup> it must face failures and unforeseen events as it rolls out the policies that it tests. If there is a "laboratory effect" associated with crises, it must firstly be studied within the institutions responsible for naming and governing the crisis, rather than taken for granted in relation to the problems it aims to govern.

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### Modes of governing crises

When actors take hold of an object from the perspective of crisis, they govern it through a range of embedded actions, such as data, procedures (stress tests, simulations), solutions (creation of agencies, technological innovations). These interventions are distinct from and more specialised than the institutional routines. Yet, the articulation between crisis and routine is at the heart of the governance of crises. How do actors ensure that crises exist within ordinary action, instruments and procedures? Does crisis management give rise to new actors within organisations? Does it push others out? Are

the instruments and knowledge used radically different? And how does this mode of governing contribute to solidifying and reinforcing the problematisation of the crisis?

In most areas (environment, finance, food and agriculture, humanitarian and disaster relief), international and European organisations also develop their own form of intervention on crises. Specific plans within national governments and administrations are developed to tackle crises. Crises give rise to new experts. They become part of the normal tools of public institutions tasked with guiding public action in critical situations. In this respect, crisis management is akin to a “world”<sup>35</sup> of institutions and professionals whose *raison d'être* is the expert government of crises.

The world of crisis management simulations in the nuclear industry, presented in this issue by Olivier Borraz and Elsa Gisquet, is a good illustration of this. The authors describe the way in which operators, regulators, experts, and public authorities simulate crisis situations in order to ensure fluid coordination and the circulation of information between instances in the event of a real crisis. They emphasise the importance of procedures in crisis preparation, making it part of routines. Preparing for crises becomes a bureaucratic activity while preserving power relations between the organisations in the nuclear industry. What is at stake in these exercises is a “process of normalising the nuclear accident”. Not only does a nuclear accident become the new normal through which reality is evaluated, but the very “idea of an accident” become conceivable and is considered governable.

Crisis management has also become an aspect of business practices. Companies use crises strategically, to distribute their products via a logic of technological solutionism (particularly in the case of the environment and agriculture). These industries seek to reinvent their own production processes by integrating the fluctuations linked to crises – such as the recycling of strategic minerals studied by Soraya Boudia in this issue. Crisis management professions also emerged within the industry itself, just as they internalised risk management in the 1980s.

Finally, a crucial aspect of crisis governance is the question of the limits of the political power. The state, and more generally public and private organisations, redefine the possible extent of their intervention as events unfold. The governance of crisis is a powerful tool for revealing moments of redefinition of the state,<sup>36</sup> operations of “state-making” and “state-destroying”.<sup>37</sup> By studying the “stress test” evaluations set up in Europe in the finance and nuclear security sectors, Alexandre Violle, Başak Sarac Lesavre and Brice Laurent show how these instruments stabilise several limits. First, they define objects of risk and take a stand in the controversies surrounding them. Second, they establish the authority of European expertise incarnated by the European Central Bank (or by the expert committees on nuclear security) as being the only ones able to evaluate the finance (or nuclear) industry’s ability to resist shock. Their article sheds new light on the governance of public issues at the European level: crisis management is rendered highly technical, while political orientations remain in the hands of member states (in the case of energy policy) or are confronted with undeniable constraints (in the case of economic policy).

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## Crises between the visible and the invisible

In most cases, governing crises lie in the hands of professionals and experts. This type

of interventions tends to focus on what is governed “as a crisis”, while overshadowing routine problems or issues at stakes in affected domains. The crisis itself constitutes a site for the demarcation of what is visible and what is invisible, between issues that are high on the political agenda, and those that are not considered priorities. This raises questions that are both political and cognitive. Crises can be considered in terms of the tensions between the dynamics between the production of knowledge and the production of ignorance. And these tensions are not only visible in the possible competition between different issues, they are also visible within the same issue.

In the case of rare earth elements, studied here by Soraya Boudia, the discourse fluctuates as the crisis evolves. The extraction of these strategic minerals is particularly damaging to the environment, but when the market for these rare earth elements is high and international competition is intense, the industry adopts a crisis discourse to promote environmental management of this resource and recycling technologies. The question of the – radioactive – waste generated by the production of rare earth materials is excluded from the crisis discourse, and the general public often remains ignorant of this risk. Sometimes the logics of circulation and immobility are reversed, as in the case of migration crises, where border police work constantly to prevent migrants from stopping and setting up camp.<sup>38</sup> In this instance, mobility and circulation are modes of crisis management that enable the invisibilisation of migrant populations.<sup>39</sup> Crises often has a visible face, which is considered legitimate, which is clearly problematised (with an investigation of “causes” and the adoption of relevant procedures). But it also has invisible faces, which are actively ignored, concealed, or forcibly moved on.

This issue’s comparative and pluri-disciplinary approach makes an essential and original contribution to this subject. Of course, many high-quality studies have been published on crises in recent years, but the general implications of the widespread use of this concept in terms of political transformation have not always been analysed, particularly due to the ubiquity of the “crisis”. This makes it difficult to isolate its sometimes-paradoxical effects, between emergency and routine, between order and disorder, between exceptional powers and normalisation. This challenge is as much empirical as it is theoretical. We need to adopt this position if we are to move beyond a focus on a limited sector and the magnifying effect produced by crisis in each specific domain, and to question what the proliferation of these discourses, techniques, and crisis management instruments means. This issue also takes a close look at the interconnection between different levels, local, national and global, thus documenting contemporary logics of governance.

The other contribution of this issue consists in providing avenues for the renewal of the political sociology of crises. The possibilities developed here partly converge with those opened up by Michel Dobry, by inviting us to question the “normal” that is implicitly referred to by crises, the continuity between these two logics of action, and the role of actors and structure in particular moments. The articles presented in this issue are clearly marked by Dobry’s perspective. However, this theoretical apparatus is not the most suited to analysing the current reorganisation within the management of crises. It does not provide the necessary tools to explain the proliferation of “crisis claims” and their repetition over time, which seems to annihilate any distinction between routine and crisis. In other words, although Dobry encourages us to observe the processes of labelling and the cognitive and material toolkit of the actors involved, the proliferation of crisis management shifts the terms of the analysis. Dobry’s strategic analysis cannot account for *ad hoc* techniques and policies that arise from crises. In other words, to move beyond the analysis of social dynamics of crises advocated by Dobry, it is important to decrypt the way crises are constructed and what specific governance responses arise in the contemporary period. We argue for increased dialogue between

public policy analysis and STS, for example, on the strategic production of knowledge or the dynamics of invisibilities.

Finally, this analysis of the how crises are governed reopens an interrogation within political science about the notion of crisis itself. Our objective is not only to analyse situations, but also to question the logics of governance that underpin the deployment of “crisis” as a technique and as a policy in various areas. The plurality of cases and approaches studied here, as well as the concern for close empirical analysis, nevertheless lead us to distance ourselves from theories of governance “by” crisis (in the wake of Agamben), and to focus on what is at play in the gaps of the politics of crisis claims.

*Translated from the French by Katharine Throssell*

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[28] These articles were originally presented at a seminar held in 2016-2017 at the Centre Alexandre Koyré (Paris), with the financial support from IFRIS (Institut francilien pour la recherche sur l'innovation et la société).

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