



# Discussing the Concept of Crisis in Cultural-historical Activity Research: a Dialectical Perspective

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## Abstract

The concept of crisis has a long history across disciplines (medicine, history, political economy, political science, sociology, psychology, history, philosophy of science, etc.). This concept has been used in a variety of different ways. Vygotsky employed the concept of crisis in a critique of psychology as a ‘problematic discipline’. Additionally, Vygotsky used the concept of crisis to refer to the specific mechanisms related to psychological development. More generally, the concept of crisis is crucial for the conceptualisation of the process of development of Vygotsky’s project. From a dialectical perspective, a crisis is a critical moment of a dynamic, contradictory, developmental process. The elaboration of the concept of crisis as a part of a broader, dialectical vision of society in the long-term process of its historical development can become a moment of regenerating cultural-historical activity research.

**Keywords** Crisis · Cultural-historical · Activity research · Dialectics · Human development · Contradiction · Practice

## Introduction

‘Cultural-historical activity research in crisis contexts’ was chosen as the topic of the 6th International ISCAR Congress in Natal.<sup>1</sup> More generally, various aspects of the current global crisis are being discussed widely from the perspective of various disciplines such as economics, sociology and psychology. (Begley et al., 2016; Centeno & Cohen, 2010; Robinson, 2014; Strasser & Dege, 2021; Dege & Strasser, 2021). The meaning and consequences of the crisis have been the topic of intense discussions, not only in the academic community, but also in social media, political forums and everyday life. People in various parts of the globe in

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different moments of their life have to deal with various forms of crises (environmental crisis, public health crisis, socio-economic crisis, psychological crisis, educational crisis, etc.). Stetsenko provides a deep and penetrating account of the current crisis and its challenges for CHAT: ‘We are currently in an acute crisis, if not an apocalyptic catastrophe, witnessing turmoil of a drastic, monumental, and far-reaching nature and proportions. This crisis cannot be ignored in discussing CHAT, our scholarship, the fate of academia, and the very prospects of our future lives and survival’ (Stetsenko, 2021). Crises bring to light uncomfortable truths, reveal hidden conflicts and open new unpredictable paths of global crisis.

This paper raises the following three questions: (1) What is the origin of the concept of crisis in the history of human thought? (2) What is the meaning of the concept ‘crisis’ in Vygotsky’s project? (3) How is it possible to develop a dialectical understanding of the crisis in cultural-historical activity research at the crossroads of socio-economic, ecological and health crises?

The purpose of the present paper is to provoke open and constructive dialogue on the concept of crisis in the field of cultural-historical activity research and to call attention to perspectives regarding its further development. The paper highlights the importance of dialectics for understanding and further elaboration of the concept of crisis in cultural-historical activity research. Many scholars have noted the centrality of dialectical thinking to cultural-historical activity research (Fleer & Veresov, 2018; Dafermos, 2018, 2021; Elhammoumi, 2015; de Aguiar et al, 2020; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2010). From a dialectical perspective, concepts are historically grounded. Consequently, the concept of crisis should be conceived dialectically in terms of its historicity. Precisely for this reason, the paper provides a brief history of the concept of crisis.

Additionally, the paper highlights the central importance of the concept of crisis in Vygotsky’s project. Vygotsky’s project was formed in a period of a socio-economic and political turmoil. Psychology at that time was a discipline in crisis. A critical reflection on Vygotsky’s way of conceptualising the crisis within psychology can become a source of insight for further elaboration of this concept in today’s crisis-ridden world. Vygotsky’s treatment of the concept of crisis is examined as a moment in the history of human thought and not as an isolated phenomenon.

Based on the dialectics, Vygotsky provides a dialectical explanation of crisis as a part of a non-reductionist, materialist, non-dualistic conceptualization of human development (Fleer & Veresov, 2018; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2010). A dialectical perspective is crucial not only to understand the philosophical underpinnings of Vygotsky’s theory but also to shed light on the social and scientific context of its formation. Furthermore, the very process of the emergence and formation of Vygotsky’s theory can be seen as a contradictory developmental process in terms of a drama of ideas (Dafermos, 2018).

Beginning with the historicisation of the crisis concept and continuing with the conceptualization of crisis in Vygotsky’s project, the paper moves forward to the contemporary context of cultural-historical activity research. It is proposed that dialectics can contribute to the regeneration of cultural-historical activity theory in times of dramatic, multifaceted, global crises and unfinalised transitions.

## Historicizing the Concept of ‘Crisis’

One of the difficulties in defining the term ‘crisis’ is that its meaning varies in significant ways across disciplines such as economics, politics, medicine and psychology. Moreover, it is important to reveal how the term ‘crisis’ is perceived, interpreted and implemented in different socio-cultural contexts from various positions.

The transformation of the fashionable term ‘crisis’ into a universal scheme for interpretation of all challenges may provoke trivialisation and confusion. Historicising and contextualising the term ‘crisis’ is necessary to avoid confusion. Although the history of the concept ‘crisis’ has not yet been written, I will outline some milestones in its emergence and formation in the history of human thought.

The term ‘crisis’ originates from the Ancient Greek verb ‘κρίνειν’ that means ‘to separate’, ‘distinguish’, ‘judge’ or to ‘decide’ (Shank, 2008; Sturm & Mülberger, 2012, p. 425; Dafermos, 2013a). In the ancient Greek language, the word ‘κρίσις’ means the critical point or critical phase in the development of a disease, that is, the point at which a patient is judged to live or die. According to the Hippocratic treatise ‘On Affections’, crisis ‘occurs in diseases whenever the diseases increase in intensity or go away or change into another disease or end altogether’ (Starn, 1971, p. 4). According to the medical meaning of the word, during a crisis, the patient is on the verge of life and death. A crisis is a critical point in the progression of disease when everything is possible. Either the illness will triumph and lead to the death of the patient or natural processes will make the patient recover. Being in a crisis means being at the borderline between life and death.

The juridical meaning of the term ‘crisis’ (κρίση) in ancient Greece was related to the court’s decision (‘legal decision’). The court in Ancient Athens could decide whether the accused was innocent or guilty and whether he/she should live or die.

It is important to mention that for Vygotsky, the juridical meaning of the word ‘crisis’ was a familiar topic because he studied at the Faculty of Law. Additionally, Vygotsky had to deal with medical crises during a long period of his short life. Both Vygotsky and Hamlet, his literary hero, lived and reflected on the borderline between life and death. Identifying himself with Hamlet, Vygotsky attempted to respond to urgent social, cultural and personal challenges in the concrete historical context.

Adopting a medical model for history, and as a physician, Thucydides offered a profound diagnosis of crisis as a decisive turning point of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides employed the concept of the crisis for the explanation of political and military conflicts. He offered an account of the Peloponnesian War and the decline of Athens in terms of tragedy. The crisis refers also to the climax of the plot, the turning point of a drama because of a conflict and dramatic struggle between opposing forces. ‘Unlike such organic analogies as the cycle of birth, maturity and death, a crisis pattern could be open-ended, unpredictable, dynamic, rather than static’ (Starn, 1971, p. 5).

The juridical meaning of crisis had been accepted and transformed in the Old and New Testaments. The theological teaching on the Last Judgement (judicium) is connected with the apocalyptic expectation of salvation (Koselleck, 2006). Apocalypticism in its various transformations is especially strong in times of crises such as pandemics, political turmoil and wars.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the concept of ‘crisis’ took the meaning of a difficult decisive moment in the discussion about politics (‘ministerial crisis’, ‘dynastic crisis’, ‘crise ministerielle’, ‘crise politique’). Rousseau in his ‘Emile’ stated that ‘We are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolutions’ (Rousseau, 1979, p. 194). The political crises act as the catalyst for the death of the old political order and the emergence of the new. The concept of the crisis was employed to explain a ‘problematic’ situation or the decisive moment, the turning point of social change (Ritter, 1986).

The concept ‘crisis’ opens the path for conceptualising human history in terms of drama.

Hegel (2001) provided an account of the World’s history as a theatre, a stage on which the World Spirit appears and progressively achieves self-consciousness. Hegel developed

a system of theoretical concepts for a dialectical reflection of dramatic conflicts, negation and transitions as acts of the drama of the world's history.

During the nineteenth century, crisis became an important concept of political economy for the periodic outbreaks of disorder (Ritter, 1986). John Stuart Mill's 'Treatise on Political Economy' (1848) employed the concept of 'commercial crisis' as that moment when 'a great number of merchants and traders, at once, either have, or apprehend that they shall have, a difficulty in meeting their engagements'. There are striking similarities and important differences in the understanding of the crisis in the work of J. S. Mill and K. Marx. Based on the materialist dialectic, Marx offered evidence that economic crises are the inevitable result of the internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. Like Thucydides as a physician who analysed the crises of the Peloponnesian War, Marx investigated the crises of the capitalist system. Marx's systematic investigation of the capitalistic system and its crises resonates with Spinoza's words 'not to be astounded, not to laugh, not to cry, but to understand' that inspired Vygotsky (1987, p.10).

Challenging the interpretation of crises as accidental and irrational phenomena, Marx offers evidence that crises are an inevitable part of the dramatic development of the capitalist mode of production and reproduction. 'The life of modern industry becomes a series of periods of moderate activity, prosperity, overproduction, crisis and stagnation' (Marx, 2010b, p.455). Focusing on the necessity of crises, Marx noted 'the universality of its theatre and the intensity of its action.' For Luxemburg (1900), 'crises are an organic manifestation inseparable from the capitalist economy.' Marx's concept of crisis and the tendency for the rate of profit to fall in a capitalist system is still the subject of debate.

In contrast to Marxist accounts of the permanent tendency for crisis inherent to the capitalist mode of production, 'the Weberian methodological turn in crisis theory' pluralises forms of crisis as a way to resist economic determinism (Roitman, 2014, p. 82). The concept 'crisis' was extrapolated to explain problematic trends in the field of society, culture, science, etc. Spengler (1991) declared the 'decline of the West'. Husserl (1970) addressed the issue of 'the crisis of the European Sciences'. Kuhn (1962) raised the topic of crises and scientific revolutions in the context of the history of philosophy of science. Obviously, the concept of crisis is used to describe trends that are observed in almost all aspects of social life. Freedden (2017, p.17) has reported that 'the concept of crisis spreads like a contagious disease, permeating and disjointedly infecting ever-broader discursive spheres'. The post-modern pluralisation of crises expresses an increasing fragmentation of both social life and human subjectivity. Post-modernism is an expression of the uncritical acceptance of increasing fragmentation and dissolution taken for granted.

'Crisis' became a key concept for the consideration both of modernity and post-modernity. It marks a new understanding of history that differs from both the ancient, cyclic, model of time and the modern idea of gradual, linear, cumulative progress. The emergence of various forms of crisis challenges 'the Enlightenment belief in the irreversible progress of humanity towards happiness' (Roitman, 2014, p. 86). Koselleck (1988) examined the dynamic relationship between critique and crisis during the period of modernity.

The concept 'crisis' has been used with various meanings: (1) a 'chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required'. (2) '...a unique and final point, after which the quality of history will be changed forever', (3) 'a critical situation which may constantly recur or else to situations in which decisions have momentous

consequences' and (4) '...a historically immanent transitional phase' (Koselleck, 2006, pp.371–372).

The crisis is discussed in relation to other concepts such as 'risk', 'catastrophe' and 'liminality'. Beck (1999) proposed the emergence of a 'world society of risk' in connection with dynamic modernisation and globalisation. Catastrophe theory was developed as a branch of mathematics for explaining the abrupt changes of discontinuous dependent variables. The concept of catastrophe has also been applied to the study of biological and social processes (Deakin, 1980). For Beck (1999, p.24), 'Risk society is a catastrophic society. In it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm'.

The concept of liminality refers to the experience of standing at a threshold and being forced to make choices. The term 'liminality' was employed for conceptualising rite passage in small-scale societies and later expanded to include experiences of ambiguity, disorientation and 'cultural hybridity' in post-modern condition (Thomassen, 2014).

The concept of crisis in its relation to all the above concepts reflects various dimensions of social change. 'Crisis' was transformed from a marginal concept to a fundamental mode of interpreting contemporary historical time (Krsteva, 2019). Despite the significant differences in its meaning, the concept 'crisis' highlights historicity and temporality as essential dimensions of the study of modernity.

The dominant modern conceptualizations of crisis have been challenged by the epistemologies of the Global South. From the perspective of the epistemologies of global South, the contemporary crisis is the crisis of the particular world, 'the dominant form of Euro-modernity (capitalist, rationalist, liberal, secular, patriarchal, white...)' (de Sousa Santos & Menese, 2020, p. 43). From this standpoint, crisis involves the prospect of moving towards 'a multiplicity of worlds' by making use of the diversity of experiences and social practices across countries and continents.

## Contextualising Vygotsky's Project

Vygotsky (1997a) employed the concept of 'crisis' in the context of a critique of psychology as a 'problematic' discipline. Moreover, this concept is crucial for the conceptualisation of Vygotsky's project. It is not enough to detect various ways of using this concept in Vygotsky's writings. More generally, Vygotsky's project cannot be sufficiently understood without the concept of crisis. Vygotsky during his life course had experienced various crises: He experienced discrimination and pogrom against the Jewish population at an early age and the death of his family members. He suffered not only from a progressive form of tuberculosis but also from unfair criticism of his theory and the split in his scientific school. Growing through multiple crises, Vygotsky's sense of the complexity and contradictory nature of social and personal life was deepened. From this perspective, Vygotsky's life and the development of his theory can be understood as an optimistic tragedy. In contrast to the widespread understanding of Vygotsky's theory as a readymade set of ideas that it is possible to apply instrumentally, the concept of crisis offers the opportunity to reveal the temporality and historicity of Vygotsky's project (Dafermos, 2018).

From my perspective, the very process of the emergence and formation of Vygotsky's project can be examined in terms of drama that includes both crises and attempts to overcome

them.<sup>2</sup> Vygotsky's project emerged in the tragic and heroic period of human history connected with the collapse of the Russian empire, the October revolution and the first period of building the new society. Participating actively in the process of social change required new forms of conceptualising human development.

Luria compared the experiences of Western and American psychologists, who '...spent their lives in a comparatively quiet, slow-moving environment', and their work consists of 'doing research and sometimes moving from university to university'. Luria described his experience of living in '...the fantastically stimulating atmosphere of an active, rapidly changing society. My entire generation was infused with the energy of revolutionary change -the liberating energy people feel when they are part of a society that is able to make tremendous progress in a very short time' (Luria, 2010, p.17). It was an intense historical time that was full of conflicts, crises, transitions and transformations. Participating in transformative societal practice in critical times and reflecting these processes is a way of promoting new, original conceptualisations of human development.

Vygotsky grew up in a unique chronotope between the decline of pre-revolutionary Russia and the birth of new society, between the anxiety of the collapse of the old world and the enthusiasm of the radical reorganisation of social life and between the aesthetic sensibilities of the Silver Age intelligentsia and socially transformative practice. On the border between different cultural traditions is created space not only for dramatic tensions but also for unpredictable synthesis. The co-existence of Promethean collectivism of the Soviet epoch with Hamlet's existential questions of the Silver Age intelligentsia contributed to the formation of a unique socio-cultural background of Vygotsky. Participating in a socially transformative practice, Vygotsky was aware of the insufficiency of the explanation of human development in terms of slow, cumulative, quantitative growth.

Dialectics becomes especially important in times of social crises, turmoil, wars and revolutions. In critical times, the dominant views of society and individuals based on a metaphysical way of thinking in terms of an aggregate of stable entities demonstrate their inadequacy to explain the historical process with its unexpected twists and turns (Dafermos, 2021). In a challenging period, the need arises to develop the dialectical way of thinking that highlights 'conflictuality of the social world' (Schraube, 2015) and the complex, dynamic character of human development. From a dialectical perspective, the crisis is not only something negative or positive itself but a critical moment of a dynamic, contradictory, developmental process (Dafermos, 2018).

## Crisis in Psychology

Although the academic institutionalisation of psychology as an independent discipline occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, an enduring sense of the crisis was generalised, and various descriptions and explanations emerged (Bühler, 1927; Driesch, 1925;

<sup>2</sup> I adopt the following assumptions from Vygotsky's work 'The historical sense of the psychological crisis': '...the development and downfall of concepts, even the replacement of classifications etc.,-all this can be scientifically explained by the links of the science in question with (1) the general socio-cultural context of the era; (2) the general conditions and laws of scientific knowledge (3) the objective demands upon the scientific knowledge that follow from the nature of the phenomena studied in a given stage of investigation' (Vygotsky, 1997a, b, p.242). From this perspective, it is difficult to adequately explain Vygotsky's use of the concept of crisis without understanding crisis-ridden society in which he lived. Moreover, psychology at that time was a discipline in crisis.

Koffka, 1935; Lewin, 1931). At the beginning of his engagement in the field of psychology, Vygotsky was aware of its crisis. Vygotsky offered an interesting definition of the crisis in his work 'Preface to Thorndike': 'in this transitional revolutionary period when the old and previous concepts are hopelessly compromised and unfit for further use, and adequate new concepts that can replace them have not yet been created. A fruitful and beneficial revolution and crisis in science implies almost always a painful and excruciating crisis in the teaching and study of this science' (Vygotsky, 1997b, p.147). The crisis was defined by Vygotsky as a situation of the contradictory co-existence between the destruction of old, previous, concepts on the one hand and the emergence of new concepts on the other. The old concepts have been hopelessly compromised, while the new concepts have not yet been created. Vygotsky described not only the juncture in Western psychology and Russian psychology after the October revolution but also his personal experience in the teaching and study of psychology as 'a painful and excruciating crisis' (Vygotsky, 1997b, p.147).

Moving from the periphery to the centre of Vygotsky's research, the crisis in psychology became the subject matter of a systematic, methodological investigation in his manuscript 'The historical sense of the psychological crisis'. '...It was not the crisis in world psychology, but the crisis of his own approach that inspired the book' (Veresov, 1999, p.147). The crisis of a discipline is refracted through the conceptual development of a concrete scientist. Dramatic tensions and collisions in a discipline can provoke a series of crises in the personal and professional development of a scientist.

Vygotsky's treatment of crisis differs not only from the positivist account of continuous, quantitative accumulative growth but also from the post-structural/post-modern celebration of discontinuities and differences. Vygotsky's treatment of crisis is based on the dialectical relationship between continuity and discontinuity, qualitative and quantitative changes. The connection between opposite sides and forces of the developmental process is intrinsically dynamic and dialectical rather than static and metaphysical.

The concept of 'crisis' was employed for articulating the specific mechanisms related to personality development. Vygotsky (1998) examined crises from the perspective of the transition from one age to another as a result of internal conflicts. 'During these periods, abrupt and major shifts and displacements, changes and discontinuities in the child's personality are concentrated in a relatively short time... In a very short time, the child changes completely in the basic traits of his personality. Development takes on a stormy, impetuous, and sometimes catastrophic character that resembles a revolutionary course of events in both the rate of the changes that are occurring and in the sense of the alterations that are made' (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 191).

Vygotsky demonstrated the double nature of the crisis. Crises strengthen the trends of 'disintegration and breakdown of what had been formed at preceding stages' (Vygotsky, 1998, p.192). The intensification of external conflicts with others, the internal conflicts and the strengthening of negativity accompany the critical periods. Simultaneously, crises force the transition to new stages of development. Both negative and constructive dimensions of a crisis in its contradictory unity create the space of human development.

'Crisis' is embedded in a conceptual system that includes concepts such as 'social situation of development', 'ages', 'new formation' (novooobrazivanie) and 'perezhivanie'. The concept of 'crisis' is not an isolated concept but a moment of a dialectical account of the contradictory, developmental process as a dialectical unity of qualitative and quantitative changes, progression and regression, emergence and disappearance. As Polivanova (2015) has demonstrated, a crisis is not just a period of change of the social situation of development or a critical period of the transition from one age to another. A crisis can be

understood as a *space of the developmental act*. A crisis acquires rich conceptual content when it comes to portraying a broader developmental process.

Vygotsky employed the concept of the crisis not only in relation to short critical periods between periods of stable development but in the wider sense of the word. 'Crises are not a temporary condition, but the way of inner life' (Vygodskaya & Lifanova, 1999, p.25). In contrast to environmental determinism, Vygotsky focused on the study of the dynamics of internal tensions and conflicts. 'But essential to every crisis is the fact that the internal changes occur in a much greater dimension than the changes in the external circumstances, and for this reason they always cause impressions of an internal crisis' (Vygotsky, 1998, p.296). The concept of crisis brings to light the complex, changing, relationship between the personality and social environment and various ways of their experiencing (*perezhivanie*), the dynamics of the objective-subjective relationship, the conflicting nature of psychic life, the complex links between the internal and external tensions and conflicts that serve as a driving force of development.

Psychological development is not reduced to an adaptation of a personality to the external environment or to the establishment of the equilibrium as it has been accepted in North American functionalism. 'If life surrounding him does not present challenges to an individual, if his usual and inherent reactions are in complete equilibrium with the world around him, then there will be no basis for him to exercise creativity. A creature that is perfectly adapted to its environment, would not want anything, would not have anything to strive for, and, of course, would not be able to create anything' (Vygotsky, 2004, pp.28–29). Challenging the functionalist concepts of adaptation and equilibrium, Vygotsky demonstrated that the dramatic tensions and conflicts in the relationship between a personality and social environment become the source of psychological development. '...The painful experiences forcing people into life crises were often at the same time enlightening experiences forcing people to grow beyond their previous limitations' (Rappoport, 1986, p.176). From a dialectical perspective, pain, disappointments, failures, mistakes, regressions, enormous swings, crises and leaps are not accidental but inevitable moments of a developmental process. 'Dark' and negative sides of human life may be transformed into their opposites.

The regeneration of life often takes place through crises. Without a dialectical account of the drama of human development, it is difficult to grasp the contradictory nature of experiencing a crisis and the co-existence of various ways to go through it. The drama of human development found its expression in the Phoenix metaphor. The Phoenix was the mythical birth that could obtain new life and rise from its own ashes. Going through the crisis is a life-changing *perezhivanie* that opens the perspective of reconstruction, re-organisation and regeneration. The Phoenix metaphor depicts the contradictory co-existence of the negative and positive, the continuity and discontinuity in human development. The vacuum of a crisis paves the way for qualitative reorganisations and empowerment. The possibility of radical transformation emerges from awareness of the impossibility to continue living in the same repetitive, adaptive way. Calling into question the individualistic approaches to personality rebirth, Vygotsky's project highlights human development and learning through active, transformative engagement in social life and collaboration with others.

One of the reasons for the crisis of mainstream psychology is connected with the reproduction of a static model of human functioning and stressing on adaptation to a social environment that has been taken as stable given and unchangeable. The concept of 'crisis' is crucial for understanding the human becoming an active, transformative process within the space of collaborative practices.

The concept of 'crisis' is internally connected with the concept of *perezhivanie* (Dafermos, 2018; Vygotsky, 1994b). It is not enough to describe how people are trapped in critical situations.

It is crucial to examine how the concrete subjects make sense of a problematic situation and attempt to go through it. The crisis can be examined as a multidirectional labyrinth, a complex branching puzzle with multiple choices of paths and directions. Labyrinth is not only the place where we get lost but mainly the journey to discover ourselves and become aware of the complexity of the world and its various potentialities. By developing creative, mediating activity, people explore the labyrinth and invent cultural means that allow them to get out of it.

Development has contradictory and non-linear character. The developmental process includes both rising and falling, progressive evolution and retrogressive involution as its necessary moments. The negative sides of the developmental process can contain positive potential. Vygotsky noted that ‘a defect is not only a minus, a deficit, or a weakness but also a plus, a source of strength’ (Vygotsky, 1993, p.56) and that ‘along with a defect come combative psychological tendencies and the potential for overcoming the defect’ (Vygotsky, 1993, p.57).

In contrast to the naturalistic accounts such as ‘humanistic psychology’ and ‘positive psychology’ focused on the positive, pre-existing potential of human nature, Vygotsky demonstrated that the active engagement of people in social life, with all the challenges, problems and crises that it contains, is the source of human development. Naturalistic and individualistic accounts of human nature have been commercialised and accepted as a part of the dominant, technocratic crisis management. The focus on the transformative potential of crises and their developmental possibilities is one of the most important contributions of cultural-historical activity research. Human development is internally connected with active participation in social life, co-creation with others and social transformation (Stetsenko, 2012).

## Regenerating Cultural-historical Activity Research in Times of Global Crises

The contemporary reception of Vygotsky’s theory occurred in the tragic and contradictory period of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The neoliberal triumph of homo economicus was labelled as the ‘end of history.’<sup>3</sup> Homo economicus is a competitive, entrepreneurial agent with instrumental and cost–benefit relationships with others (Teo, 2018). However, the triumph of neo-liberalism and the celebration of the ‘neoliberal form of subjectivity’ (Teo, 2018) became a starting point for new series of socio-economic and environmental crises rather than the ‘end of history’.

Crises act as accelerators of the ‘whole process of history’. According to Burckhardt (1979, p.224), ‘a crisis in the whole state of things is produced, involving whole epochs and all or many peoples of the same civilisation.... The historical process is suddenly accelerated in terrifying fashion. Developments which otherwise take centuries seem to flit by like phantoms in months or weeks, and are fulfilled’.

The concept of ‘crisis’ is crucial for understanding not only psychological development but more broadly human development in the wider context of social, cultural history. There is a close connection between the system of social relations and personality development. It is difficult to understand personality development without a broader vision of society and its internal contradictions. ‘The various internal contradictions which are to be found in different social systems find their expression both in the type of personality and in the structure

<sup>3</sup> On the influence of the ‘end of history’ politics on the reception of Vygotsky’s theory, see Stetsenko (2013, 2020) and Dafermos (2016).

and development of human psychology in that historical period' (Vygotsky, 1994a, p.176). In contrast to the dominant accounts based on the psychologisation, individualisation and pathologisation of human development, Vygotsky reveals the internal connection between social and individual development and inter-psychological and intra-psychological processes and highlights the social roots of distorted development in its multiple forms.

The elaboration of the concept of crisis as a part of a broader vision of society in the process of its historical development can become an important moment of regenerating cultural-historical, activity theory addressed by a group of scholars (Ferholt et al., 2020; Jornet et al., 2020). The project of the regeneration of cultural-historical, activity theory is an important step in this direction. From my perspective, the regeneration of the tenets of cultural-historical activity research may be presented in terms of the Hegelian concept of 'sublation' ('aufhebung', 'snjatje') that means to cancel, preserve and bring to a higher level (Dafermos, 2018; Van der Zweerde, 1997). Dialectical sublation is neither a simple rejection/revision nor simple preservation of cultural-historical, activity theories in their existing forms.

Crises, even when they are not reshaping history or changing its direction, act as its accelerator. Because of the acceleration of history, what seems impossible becomes possible and real in a short time. During ongoing and unprecedented global crises, it is essential to think, imagine, learn and develop out of the box. It is essential to develop international, cross-country, cross-disciplinary, long-term research on global challenges to humanity, such as global environmental crisis and extreme global inequality in relation to human development. In the midst of unprecedented socio-economic and ecological crises, it is necessary to think globally and locally and act globally and locally from the standpoint of social justice.

It is difficult to make sense of the increased catastrophic trends without a broader view of the history of society in the long-term perspective. The introduction of the concept of Anthropocene serves as a way to discuss the crisis of the Earth System, caused by human activity (Angus, 2016). Making Earth an increasingly uninhabitable planet through biodiversity loss and climate change is a major crisis. Inevitably a question arose: is it the human activity in general which destroys ecological systems or a specific, social form of activity formed at a certain stage of historical development? Global challenges and various crises and disasters usually are perceived as exogenous or accidental events '...nothing to do with any inherent flaws in the capitalist mode of production and the social structure of society' (Michaels, 2020). The dominant Anthropocene argument does not engage the issues of power, work and capital for the explanation of the origin of the current ongoing environmental crisis. Examining the Anthropos, humanity in terms of an undifferentiated whole, the dominant Anthropocene argument reproduces the nature/society binary based on Cartesian dualism (Moore, 2016). It is difficult to explain the metabolic rift between society and nature without a systematic investigation of the endless accumulation of capital, the dominance of neo-colonial politics and the injustice to indigenous people, etc.

Traditionally, the crisis is considered a temporary condition. However, nowadays, crises become long-lasting, permanent and endemic in a rapidly changing world. 'When one crisis ends, another, which in the meantime has come to lick round our borders, steps in to take its place. Or perhaps it is the same huge crisis that feeds on itself and changes over time, transforming and regenerating itself like a monstrous teratogenic entity' (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014, pp.6–7). In other words, the crisis as 'a monstrous teratogenic entity' becomes the 'new normal'. The inability to prevent crises and the failure of crisis management is one of the most important dimensions of contemporary crises.

Gramsci offered an expressive description of the meaning of the crisis: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (Gramsci, 1971, p.276). It has been reported that we live in an age of monsters, in times of ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe, 2019), ‘zombie economics’ (Quiggin, 2010) and ‘zombie capitalism’ (McNally, 2011). An increasing culture of cruelty, insensitivity to human suffering, massive investments in military power, slow violence and cynicism, ‘racial and class-based health disparities in the current COVID-19 pandemic’ (Sandset, 2021) are facets of the death-dealing policies and practices driven by a market logic.

Marx used the vampire metaphor for reflecting the relation between capital and labour: ‘Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks’ (Marx, 2010b, p.241). Vampires of capital reduce personality to an unthinking body-machine, while human transformative activity degrades into adaptive motor behaviour. The profit-making machine with the imperative of infinite economic growth becomes more and more incompatible with the survival of life on Earth. The world economic crisis of 2008 brought to the fore worldwide societal problems such as growing poverty, mass unemployment, exponential increases in social inequality and destruction of natural recourses and livelihoods.

One of the most important difficulties of the current social crisis is connected with the grotesque dominance of living dead forms of being and ideas (Quiggin, 2010) as well as the confusion of the relation between the Old and the New. Berthold Brecht examined the reversal of the relationship of the New and the Old in his poem ‘Parade of the Old New’: ‘The Old and the Very Old, now re-entering the arena, proclaim themselves as new, or else it is held to be new when the Old or the Very Old are put over in a new way. But the New, having been deposed today, is declared old-fashioned, degraded to being a transitory phase whose day is done’ (Brecht, 2018, p.190). The reversal into the opposite is a constituent feature of Brecht’s ‘dialectical theatre’. The estrangement effect proposed by Berthold Brecht is very close to the device of making strange (приём отстранения) of Russian formalism that was examined by Vygotsky (1987) in his ‘Psychology of Art’.

It looks like the transformation of an idea into its opposite penetrates ‘the dialectical theatre’ of world history. The ‘Great Reset’ project (Schwab & Malleret, 2020) for the post-pandemic era is a new, fashionable version of an outdated technocratic vision of the future, while the perspective of a new society beyond oppression, colonialism and patriarchy looks like an old-fashioned utopia. The reversal of the relationship between the New and the Old is a form of destructive carnivalization of social progress. The COVID-19 pandemic is examined as a turning point that can restructure every aspect of society. More generally, a wide range of crises has led to the reconfiguration of the social structure. As Klein (2007) has demonstrated in her work ‘The Shock Doctrine’, climate disasters, wars and financial crises have been used to impose privatisation, reconstructing work relationships and enhancing exploitation in terms of creative destruction.

Margaret Thatcher’s words ‘There is no such thing as society’ reflect real tendencies of social disintegration and toxic individualism. Fragmentation processes and increasing individualism destroy the cultural ‘ideal forms’ that act as a model for what should be achieved at the end of the developmental process. Developing social solidarity and active participation in social life becomes an urgent need especially in times of crisis. ‘As long as we function as individuals, our ability to solve complex social problems will fail us’ (Bailey & Lobenstine, 2020). Social fragmentation and erosion of communities destroy not only ‘ideal forms’ but also the potential for social and personality development.

Developing social ‘ideal forms’ is a necessary condition for personality and social development. The promotion of social ‘ideal forms’ goes through the historicising neo-liberal form of subjectivity. The ontological priority of the individual over the collective is not an expression of eternal human nature but a product of a concrete stage of historical development. It is difficult to find a concept of individualised self before the eighteenth century. For example, from the perspective of Ancient Greek philosophy, a post-modern selfish, narcissist agent with instrumental relations with other people, homo economicus reducing everything to some kind of economic calculus of cost and benefit, is an idiot. The English word ‘idiot’ originates from the Ancient Greek word ‘ideotes’, private citizen or individual (from ‘idios’, private, ‘one’s own’). ‘Idiotes’ were self-sufficient individuals concerned to maximise utility and ignored the need of the community (Dafermos, 2013b). For Aristotle (1984), human beings are active participants of a political (social) community rather than utility-maximising, self-sufficient individualised agents, homo economicus. From this perspective, homo economicus is homo narcissus and homo idioticus.

The awareness of the toxic nature of individualism develops in various historical and cultural contexts. For example, the African Ubuntu maxim ‘I am because we are’ reflects a dialectical understanding of the inter-relations between the individual and community. It looks like individualism is a result of fictional universalism, an abstract, problematic generalisation that does not reflect the big variety of ways of cultural development in different parts of the globe. Vygotsky pointed out that ‘As a result of the advance of capitalism, the development of material production simultaneously brought with it the progressive division of labour and the constantly growing distorted development of the human potential’ (Vygotsky, 1994a, p. 178). The growing fragmentation and individualisation of society coexist with its cultural homogenisation and decline of creative potential for socio-cultural and personal development. Nowadays there is a strong tendency to the disintegration of both the social and the individual, the social and biological. The postmodernist declaration of ‘the death of the subject’ (Kvale, 1992) reflects the high degree of widespread social disintegration. From my perspective, the postmodernist declaration of ‘the death of the subject’ is part of the dominant necro-politics.

One of the important dimensions of the dominance of neo-liberalism is connected with the occupation of social imaginaries by exaggerated individualism and consumerism. Haiven (2014) examines the crises of capitalism as a massive failure of the imagination. Challenging fetishised, converted forms, ‘false consciousness’, the development of creative imagination becomes an important dimension of critical consciousness and conscientisation (conscientização) (Freire, 2000). Without a radicalisation of imagination through the creation of alternative imaginary landscapes of the common good, new horizons of mutual solidarity, it is really difficult to go beyond the crisis of global capitalism. Historicising individualism, competition and consumerism and questioning their interpretation as an expression of eternal human nature is a way to resist the ‘disimagination machine’ (Giroux, 2013) and radicalise social and personal imagination. For Vygotsky (2004), imagination as a higher psychological function has a crucial role in taking distance from the immediate situation and constraints of the environment. Escaping from now and here, looking forward to possible worlds opens up new avenues of resistance and human behaviour in adverse conditions.

Vygotsky developed his theory as a way to overcome the crisis in psychology. Nowadays some scholars argue that not only psychology but, more generally, science is experiencing a crisis from the epistemological, methodological, ethical, institutional, political perspectives (Saltelli, 2018). One of the dimensions of this crisis in science is related to the deterioration of the quality of mass production of scientific publications that mainly

takes the form of routine, repetitive activity. ‘...current practice of mass production of publications is misleading and redundant, it creates research waste, distorts science...’ (Barić et al., 2017, p.2). The lack of original, innovative ideas is linked with the dominant tendency of the imitation of scientific activity for management, advertising, public relations that have been labelled as zombie science. ‘Zombie science is science that is dead but will not lie down. It keeps twitching and lumbering around so that (from a distance, and with your eyes half-closed) zombie science looks much like real science. But in fact the zombie has no life of its own; it is animated and moved only by the incessant pumping of funds’ (Charlton, 2008, p.327).

It is possible to examine reductionism and elementalism as forms of living dead ideas because they undermine the prospect of studying socio-historical and biological processes in terms of an organic whole. The dominant reductionist and elementalist views are unable to deal with the complexity of human subjectivity, societal and natural history and address some of the most urgent social and ecological problems. As Anna Stetsenko (2015, p. 102) notes, ‘There is a pressing need today for alternative models of science’ beyond both objectivist scientism and postmodernist relativism. The liberation of scientific imagination from the shackles of positivism, elementalism and reductionism that remains the epistemological background of the bulk of published empirical studies is crucial to overcome the crisis of science and develop ‘creative synthesis’ (Tateo & Marsico, 2021).

More generally, the crisis in science is expressed in the escalating mismatch between the tendency of the reproduction of scientific knowledge in its existing form, while the needs and conditions for substantial development and its radical transformation are maturing. From a Vygotskian perspective, crises in science can be examined not only in the light of their negative dimensions but mainly through the prospect of maturing the need for radically new approaches that break with the prevailing practices of fragmentation of knowledge and ‘cult of empiricism’ (Toulmin & Leary, 1985). As Albert Einstein once said, ‘We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them’. Crises in science pave the way for scientific revolutions that lead to substantial transformations of the foundations of theory, methodology and practice. The impending scientific revolution is connected with the dramatic and creative transition towards an integrative, synthetic science that can be made from the standpoint of ‘human society, or social humanity’ (Marx, 2010a, p.5).

In the light of the impending scientific revolution, it is important to develop cultural-historical and activity research across generations, across national and disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, creating space for critical dialogue between cultural-historical activity research and critical approaches in psychology, pedagogy and social theory becomes fundamental for the ISCAR community (Fleer et al., 2020). Jovanović (2021) argues that ‘it is necessary to reclaim critique in order to turn crises into a possible instigation to emancipatory processes’. In the middle of acute crises and unfinished historical transitions, the agenda of the dialogue between cultural-historical activity research and critical approaches should include the topics of social contradictions, human subjectivity, social imaginaries and transformative practice. Moreover, it is important to think seriously about what kind of theoretical tools are missing in order to conceptualise radical change (Jovanović, 2021).

Reflecting backward and reflecting forward, travelling back to the earlier stages of the history of culture and anticipating the future society is a way to resist socio-cultural amnesia and deliberate and radicalise scientific imagination. Especially in times of crisis, people lose their orientation in time. They tend to extrapolate the present situation connected with the dominance of oppression to the past and the future. ‘The individual is divided between an identical past and present, and a future without hope. He or she is a person who does

not perceive himself or herself as becoming' (Freire, 2000, p.173). Rethinking the history of culture, promoting the open-ended, multi-voiced dialogue between the past and present cultural forms is an important source of inspiration, learning and resistance under adverse conditions.

I want to discuss the myth of Prometheus as a part of this dialogue between the past and the present cultural forms in times of crisis. The myth of Prometheus is an important metaphor from a cultural-historical, activity perspective, as well as the myth of Oedipus, and crucial for the development of psychoanalysis. The rebel titan Prometheus was the opponent of tyrannical gods and an advocate for humanity. Prometheus gave people not only fire but more generally materials and symbolic tools. Prometheus was the teacher of arts and sciences that offered people the opportunity to survive and control not only natural processes but also psychological processes (writing, mathematics, memory, etc.). Before the creation and use of these cultural tools, people were weak natural beings. Humans became cultural beings through the creation and use of a system of material and symbolic tools. The creation and use of a system of cultural tools provided people with the means to become as strong and smart as the gods. The awakening of critical consciousness calls into question the foundations of the dominant regime. Zeus banished Prometheus to be eternally clamped to a rock in the Caucasus, and every day, an eagle came and ate part of his liver. Kratos (power) and Bia (violence) are the servants of the tyrannical regime of Zeus who chained Prometheus to a rock (Aeschylus, 2012). Suffering is the 'price' in the struggle for freedom. Simultaneously, as Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged, 'freedom is won by a struggle against suffering' (Mieder, 2010, p.163).

It would be advisable to consider the etymology of the word 'Prometheus'. It means 'forethinker' [pro- (before)+ manthano (learning, thinking)] meaning 'forethought'. Prometheus had the opportunity to anticipate the future. Revealing the historicity of the dominant regime of Zeus, Prometheus anticipated its end. Prometheus's long-term pain and suffering prepared the end of the tyranny of Zeus (Aeschylus, 2012). Prometheus's ability to anticipate the future was a real danger to the regime of Zeus because it reveals the temporality of oppression and the perspective of its overthrow. Prometheus's suffering and resistance is an optimistic tragedy that may inspire people in critical periods. The figure of Prometheus as a metaphor reflects the human potential for emancipatory learning, radical imagination and conscientisation in Paulo Freire's terms.

## Re-imagining the Future and Changing the Present

Vygotsky's project with its focus on a dialectic of change, becoming and proximal development is a future-oriented theory. Reflecting backward and reflecting forward, travelling back to the earlier stages of the history of culture and anticipating the future of the society is a way to resist socio-cultural amnesia and radicalise scientific imagination (Dafermos, 2020). The development of creative imagination is especially important in times of crises and unfinished transitions.

The crisis has a temporal trajectory and a future orientation (Freeden, 2017). Forward-looking reflection on the future is an essential dimension of the process of human emancipation. 'A holistic outline of an alternative society' (Levitas, 2013, p.xiii) based on global solidarity and cooperation is required in times of the contemporary 'existential crisis' for the human species. 'The imaginary reconstitution of society' (Levitas, 2013, p. xvii) is the only way to cope with global challenges such as pandemics, global warming, massive

storms and poverty. Re-imagining a possible world in which the free development of each one is the precondition for the free development of all is necessary for resistance and radical social change. The future society will be a deep cultural, social transformation of all human history rather than a simple negation of capitalism (Vaziulin, 1988). At the cross-road of ecological and socio-economic crises, it is important to explore scientifically the future society in positive terms rather than negative ones.

Ecological and socio-economic crises make change inevitable. The crucial questions are: what is the direction, the orientation of this change? To what extent can the direction of this change be transformed? Crises are periods that require the creation of collective, collaborative spaces for critical reflection on action, for action, as well as the search for new unpredictable paths and transitions from the future to the present and vice versa. Going through and handling a crisis is often painful. Simultaneously, crises challenge the existing conceptualisations and create conditions for the formulation of new theories that allow people to orient themselves, make sense under adverse conditions and become creators of both their own lives and social history. The development of new, original theories about society and its history is internally linked to changing societal conditions that cause human suffering.

Going beyond the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives of 'the end of the world', dialectical thinking reveals *the contradictory coexistence of dying of the old social forms and painful childbirth of new* in terms of the optimistic tragedy of human history. Going beyond agency/structure dualism, a dialectical way of thinking focuses on 'the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and human activity or self-changing' (Marx, 2010a, p.4). From a dialectical perspective, it is important to reveal both contradictory life conditions and the perspective of their radical social change: 'the human possibility of ending ... suffering by participating oneself in changing the conditions causing it' (Holzkamp, 2013, p.33). In the time of global crisis and the widespread dissemination of necropolitics, dialectics provides the theoretical and methodological framework for the systematic investigation of acute social contradictions and the revitalisation of the theory of society and its history. Focusing on the vitality of contradictions and dialectics as a way of studying them, Hegel (2010, p.382) argued that 'contradiction is the root of all movement and life'.

A dialectical reflection on social contradictions is internally connected with active participation in 'collaborative transformative practices' (Stetsenko, 2012, p.149). The adherents of Practice Research tradition propose to 'arrange co-operation between research and practice in ways that inspire open and mutual exploration of contradictions in practice and support joint exploration of how to change problematic conditions' (Kousholt, 2016, p. 255). It is crucial to underline the enormous importance of carrying out interventions, collaborative projects with a future-oriented, transformative agenda for marginalised groups in different countries and continents. Through active participation in these collaborative projects, people learn and develop to transform the practices of their communities rather than adapting to them (Sales et al., 2020; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2014; Sannino et al., 2021; Liberali & Shimoura, 2018; Stetsenko, 2021; Leite et al., 2020).

People are forced to choose between adapting to the existing conditions and participating actively, collectively in their transformation. People may continue to internalise passively oppression and discrimination, but they can resist and fight for their freedom. Global and local ongoing crises urge us to reflect upon meanings and life-orientation, find possibilities not realised yet and make crucial decisions. We often prefer, like ostriches, to put our heads in the sand than to face potential threats, pressing problems, 'conflictualities of everyday living' (Schraube, 2015) and acute crises.

## Conclusion

The term 'crisis' has a long history and connotes a variety of meanings across disciplines and over time. Starting from medicine in Ancient Greece, this term was extrapolated to political science, political economy, sociology and psychology in modernity. Highlighting the non-linear character of the historical process, its ambiguity and contradictoriness, the term 'crisis' is important for conceptualising modernity. Later, the concept of crisis has been expanded to reflect growing fragmentation and heterogenous, fluid processes in the postmodern condition.

By historicising the concept of crisis, dialectical thinking provides a fruitful methodological framework for discussing deep and urgent social and ecological problems. The work of historicizing concepts and social practices invites a closer examination of the complex, dynamic interplay of past- and future-oriented temporalities. The reconstruction of temporality in times of crisis involves the possibility of rethinking the past, re-imagining the future and changing the present (Dafermos, 2020).

The historicisation of the concept of crisis can help to appreciate the essential contribution of Vygotsky's project to the history of human thought. Vygotsky used the concept of crisis in two different ways in his writings. Firstly, this concept refers to the transitional period of the contradictory co-existence between the destruction of old, previous, concepts on the one hand and the emergence of new concepts on the other in the process of development of psychology. Secondly, it is a critical period of the transition from one age to another as a result of dramatic internal conflicts. For Vygotsky, the concept of crisis is a part of a conceptual system for a dialectical reflection of the contradictory developmental process rather than a detached concept.

There is a growing awareness in contemporary cultural-historical activity research that it is necessary to expand the concept of crisis beyond the boundaries of psychology as a discipline. The elaboration of the concept of crisis as a part of broader social theory is one of the most important priorities for cultural-historical activity research. From my perspective, a systematic reflection on social contradictions and their dynamics can become the core of a dialectically oriented social theory.

To be honest, we must recognise that Vygotsky's conceptualization of the crisis is incomplete and unfinished. Future research should focus on the following questions: Is the crisis a necessary moment in the developmental process or a problematic situation that can be avoided? Is the transition from one stage of development to another gradual or abrupt? How long does the crisis last? How are social crises connected with personal crises? How to go through a series of social crises where one triggers the others? How do people deal with societal and personal crises during their life course? How do personalities develop in various socio-historical and cultural contexts in the contemporary global and deeply divided world?

Living in hard times and going through crises allow us to reveal a harsh reality and to look for new ways of critical reflection and active, transformative participation in the world. In challenging times, decisive action and a change of practices are required more than ever. Revolutionising research and changing practices was the main idea of the keynote address of Lave (2012) given at the ISCAR Congress in Rome. This critical agenda for cultural-historical activity research still remains relevant.

In conclusion, I want to mention the words of the Greek poet Nikos Kavvadias 'dance on the shark's wing'. In other words, the poet invites us to overcome the fear of failure and make the impossible possible. Dancing on the shark's wing through resisting the adverse

conditions in times of social fragmentation and the dominance of necropolitics, zombie economics and zombie science is crucial to regenerate cultural-historical activity research, develop creative transformative activity at the international, national and local levels and transform the ‘dance of death’ into a dance of life.

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