**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# When Time Freezes: Socio-Anthropological Research on Social Crises

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Social and cultural anthropologists have made a unique, relevant and anti-normative contribution to the study of crises. By means of ethnographic fieldwork in specific settings, anthropologists have provided significant information on how social groups try to cope with critical situations in everyday life resorting to different strategies, forms of cooperation or political action. Simultaneously, anthropology has brought to light the role played by cognitive schemata and symbolic resources in making sense of crisis situations, turning them intelligible and developing possible resolutions. Anthropology has carried out important studies on how people experience time, give meaning to and produce plausible images of the future in crisis situations, when time freezes. The main theoretical contributions to the study of crises will be discussed, together with a number of empirical studies among which special attention will be paid to those carried out in Latin America, including my own research on the experiences and responses of the middle class during the 2001 Argentine crisis.

**Keywords:** crisis; social anthropology; time; experience; Latin America

Los antropólogos sociales y culturales han hecho una contribución única, relevante y anti-normativa a los estudios de crisis. Mediante el trabajo de campo etnográfico en escenarios específicos, los antropólogos han proporcionado información importante sobre cómo los grupos sociales tratan de hacer frente a situaciones críticas en la vida cotidiana por medio de diferentes estrategias, formas de cooperación o acción política. Al mismo tiempo, la antropología ha puesto de manifiesto el papel que desempeñan los esquemas cognitivos y los recursos simbólicos para dar sentido a las situaciones de crisis, tornándolas inteligibles y desarrollando posibles soluciones. La antropología ha llevado a cabo importantes estudios sobre cómo las personas experimentan el tiempo, dan sentido y producen imágenes del futuro plausibles en situaciones de crisis, cuando el tiempo se congela. Aquí se discutirán las principales contribuciones teóricas a los estudios de crisis, junto con una serie de investigaciones empíricas, entre las cuales se prestará especial atención a aquellas llevadas a cabo en América Latina, incluso mis propios estudios sobre las experiencias y las respuestas de la clase media durante la crisis argentina de 2001.

**Palabras claves:** crisis; antropología social; hora; experiencia; America Latina

## Introduction: Crisis as an object of inquiry

Social sciences make use of the notion of 'crisis' to define a state of affairs in the world. It is generally assumed that crises have a real existence, that they are particular situations having certain properties and visible or clear features an outside observer can describe. As such, the notion itself cannot be subject to questioning or challenge. This is mostly the case in economics, sociology, history and psychology. Social and cultural anthropology has

also similarly resorted to the notion of crisis, although its use was long restricted to very few realms of society and until the mid-twentieth century, the term 'crisis' did not receive special attention from anthropologists. Since then, anthropologists have devoted significant efforts to studying the most varied situations of crisis however. These may include the effects of climate changes and geological hazards, famines, technological accidents endemic diseases epidemics and pandemics, the effects of violence and terror and the devastating consequences of economic policies generating poverty and social exclusion. As addressed in the introduction to this dossier, there is a close connection between studies on disasters and social crises. Playing with words: what we call 'economic crises' have disastrous

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aspects. In turn, since disaster breaks the temporal continuity, the current time is perceived as 'frozen' and the future cannot be imagined, this implies installing a *time of crisis*.[1] Social crises are liminal moments in which a given order that is considered normal or desired is dissolved, breaks down, is affected by a decomposition or imbalance and has to be restored. Put differently, it is the established order that recurrently collapses[2] and should, therefore, be destroyed and substituted by another one (Stewart & Harding 1999).[3]

The purpose of this paper is to show how anthropology has addressed crisis situations through an overview of the main approaches and disciplinary concerns. More specifically, I will outline how crisis situations have been simultaneously characterized and analysed, what problems and main approaches have been proposed for studying crisis; and how the constitution of a specific field of anthropological research on crisis may be possible. I will discuss the main theoretical contributions to the study of crises in anthropology, together with a number of empirical studies among which I will pay special attention to those carried out in Latin America, including my own research on the experiences and responses of the middle class to the 2001 Argentine crisis. I intend to demonstrate that anthropologists have made a unique and relevant anti-normative contribution by conducting studies about specific situations through the presence of researchers in the field. By using ethnographic methods such as participant observation, and theory development intimately linked to the holistic and comparative approach, anthropology has provided significant information on the way social groups cope with critical situations, in ways that are not available to other disciplines.[4] Fieldwork and an ethnographic perspective allow us to understand how people react and develop practical responses using their beliefs and learned knowledge; among many other possibilities, people can perform several strategies in everyday life, including diverse forms of cooperation or political action.

## The Beginnings: *Rites of Passage* and Life Cycles Crises

Crises were early on anthropologists' agenda of study, yet their interest was initially focused on social life on a small scale. Since anthropology originally and for a long time studied small-scale societies, the use of the notion of crisis in relation to social situations of a larger scale only started after World War II.[5] This was due, on the one hand, to the adoption of analytical approaches that enabled the understanding of conflict and social change, rather than those focusing on the processes of stabilization and systemic reproduction (Kapferer 2005, LeVine 1961; Sluka 1992), and, on the other hand, to profound changes in many of the populations that had so far been their privileged object of study. Instead, anthropologists applied the notion of crisis in relation to *life-cycles* and *rites of passage*.[6]

Traditionally, it is argued that changes in the so called life-cycles produce psychological stress (anxiety, ambivalence, rejection). As a result, societies have developed special devices to mitigate the negative effects of such situations, such as the rites of passage or *transition*. Focusing on birth, childhood, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, parenthood and death ceremonials, the Dutch-German-French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep found a universal standard for every rite of passage, based on three distinct phases: a) preliminary or separation phase; b) liminal or marginal phase and c) post-liminal or aggregation phase. He argued that ceremonies make up cycles, i.e., a chain of stages that are invariably repeated for all individuals and are associated with *severe life circumstances* (Van Gennep 2008: 260). These circumstances result from the way *changes of state disturb both social and individual life*; hence, a fair number of *rites of passage* have the purpose of 'reducing the harmful effects of these disturbances' (Van Gennep 2008: 28, my emphasis). This scheme was the starting point for Victor Turner's theory of ritual. In Turner's work, the 'severe circumstances of life' involving 'status changes' that 'disturb social and individual life' are called *crises*, that is 'critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of the community' (Turner 1969: 168), and to prevent deviations and conflicts (Turner 1967: 45).[7]

Studies of rites of passage or transitions have fundamental implications for conceptualizing times of crisis. There, a crisis refers to a *discontinuity*: something happens and puts an end to what existed so far. It refers to a temporary disruption in which the future does not appear as the predictable result of the continuity between past and present where time is perceived as stagnant: something is no longer what it used to be, but it has not yet become what it is meant to be (Visacovsky 2011; Wagner-Pacifici 2000: 60–63). By definition, 'crisis' implies the inability to envision the future and it is, therefore, a time that can only be lived as uncertain (Koselleck 1988); that is what Claudio Lomnitz-Adler (2003: 132) calls a *present saturation*, i.e., a collective aversion to socialize viable and desirable future images. Those undergoing the time of crisis cannot know how or when it will end, but they can still imagine possible outcomes; and in doing so, they forge their possible solutions and scenarios of action. Rites of passage have the ability to counteract this impossibility.

Indeed, they help life cycles crises to conclude and allow the new states to appear, constituting devices intended to resolve any discontinuities and indeterminacies, and inaugurating a new continuity. The main lesson conveyed by the rites of passage model is that *any temporal discontinuity in which present saturation is involved, is solved by formulating transitions into new states*. However, the ritualization of transition in lifecycles crises presupposes a socially recognized order. Those undergoing a life crisis will experience what others have experienced before; they will assume a new state, just as other members of their society have done. In the ritual sequence the future is foreshadowed, and so is also the way to resolve the crisis. In contrast, transitions imagined to solve the major economic and political crises of capitalism do not necessarily lead the way towards a new state; instead, that new state has to be designed and imposed on society, both by way of consensus as well as by disputing other possible

futures: transitions, far from being pre-established, have to be imagined, imposed and enforced (Castillejo Cuéllar 2014; Visacovsky & Guber 2005).

## Conflict Situations and Their Resolution

After World War II, the South African and British social anthropologist Max Gluckman began a new era in anthropological research. He took an interest in the study of crisis situations or *crisis contexts*, i.e. contradictory and conflictive processes offering multiple possibilities for the generation of something new (Kapferer 2005: 86; Levine 1961). These crisis contexts (Gluckman 1958) would come to be the ideal locus for research, particularly because they revealed underlying or latent social forces and principles (Kapferer 2005: 89), what Sahlins (1978: 214) called a *crise revelatrice* (cf. Oliver-Smith (1996: 304). The idea of crisis as a conflictive scenario is common in studies of for example the violent reality of Colombia before a possible peace agreement between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The subject matter is the 'humanitarian crisis,' that is, the war and its victims, survivors, refugees and displaced persons (Jiménez-Ocampo 2008). This perspective is convergent with the idea of crisis as a context of violence, fear and insecurity experienced by middle classes in Porto Alegre, Brazil (da Rocha et al. 2000).

Returning to Gluckman; he refers to the moral crises that appear in situations where the individuals are driven to act in different and opposite ways on account of diverse social rules and values, with no clear and distinct solution in sight. The idea of moral crisis has common features with the crisis of meaning suggested by Berger and Luckmann (1995). The Brazilian anthropologist Cornelia Eckert (2007) also refers to this in her study on crisis experiences in urban contexts, such as the decline of Sao Paulo, the absence of sense of political action and the breakdown of ethical values. Gluckman argued that, once these situations were unleashed, in tribal societies the possible solutions were provided by their customs (magical-religious beliefs), while in modern industrialized societies they came from what he called 'secular beliefs' (Gluckman 1972).[8] Clearly, from Gluckman's view beliefs are unaffected by crisis situations; further, beliefs must remain intact because their cohesive role will be crucial to resolving the crisis. But we know that crisis situations can disrupt beliefs. Why would beliefs remain intact during a crisis situation while social relations, institutions and living conditions collapse? The study by Clifford Geertz (1973) on a funeral ritual in Java is a good example that beliefs can lose their effectiveness in convulsive times. And, simultaneously, new beliefs come into conflict with older ones. Furthermore, the case could only be understood as part of a broader process of social change. Geertz observed that cultural aspects do not necessarily serve the purpose of repairing conflicts caused by economic and political tensions. His analysis can be considered a response to Gluckman's perspective. Geertz showed that customs and beliefs could become ineffective or assume a confrontational character too.

If crises should be analysed as part of a process of social change, this means that the resolution of a crisis does not imply a return to breakeven, but the genesis of something new or at least different from the previous state of affairs. In his studies about the Ndembu's in Northwest Zambia, Victor Turner, whom I already referred to above, expanded and delved further into Gluckman's approach to study crisis situations, although his efforts were aimed at understanding the role and specificity of symbolism. This is why his approach is closer to Geertz's, despite their different backgrounds as regards socio-anthropological traditions and their intellectual differences. Turner saw in Van Gennep's model of the rites of passage a procedural approach that could challenge the more static models of social system and, therefore, was more suitable for the analysis of conflicts and social change. As I stated above, rites of passage were associated to the resolution of life cycle crises, i.e., to the changes in status a person had to go through as a member of a social group. This change of status required undergoing a liminal phase in which the old status was abandoned, but not yet assuming the new one. This liminal phase was ritualized by changing or shedding clothes, fasting or consuming special food or beverages, abstinence, various cleaning / purifying actions, submission to physical challenges, etc.; upon completion of the liminal phase requirements, the individual was ready to assume the new status and, thus, bridge over the crisis (Turner 1969: 95). If rites of passage resolved life cycle crises, then might any other crisis situation also be resolved by using similar devices?

This model was highly inspiring, inasmuch as it postulated the existence of bridges between states in the form of transitions. However, as expressed in the previous section, while in rites of passage of life cycles the whole process leading from one status to another is anticipated, in capitalist economic and political crises, both the transition and the new state are a matter to be built by the political forces disputing and leading the resolution of the crisis. But, instead of considering the resolution of a crisis as the recovery of a lost balance, Turner suggested to see the acquisition of the new status as a *creative process*. Such creativity would reside in the *liminal phase*, since the structural aspects that characterize social status would be then suppressed; it is in this liminal phase that we are able to imagine other ways of social existence, reversing current hierarchies or annulling them altogether. Although rituals can be seen as set and limited circumstances that provide little space for leeway, they are indeed real examples of symbolic invention. Based on his studies on ritual symbolism, he developed the idea of a dynamic between structure and *communitas*, defining the latter as a kind of relationship in which all members are deemed as equal, as part of a collective We, allowing them to share a common experience that is typical of the situation of liminality. It would, therefore, involve a creative, imaginative instance, one capable of contesting what is structurally established (Turner 1964, 1969: 94–130, 1982: 20–60; Deflem 1991). This conception of the ritual as productive and transforming not only drove him away from the perspectives that considered rituals as a device for social control; it was also the matrix for the development of his concept of social drama.

## The Narrative Construction of Crises

The concept of *social drama* is linked to Turner's interest in the anthropology of experience. He first introduced this concept in his study of the periodical crises among the Ndembu in Zambia (Turner 1957). As already anticipated, Turner extended the procedural model of rites to the entire social life. To escape the objections raised by the different variants of functionalism to incorporating the contingent, conflict and social change, Turner emphasized the deep interrelation among experience, narrative, action and interpretation. Turner defined social dramas as public episodes of tensional irruptions resulting from the opposing interests and attitudes of groups and individuals. *The key feature of these processes is the emergence and unfolding of a crisis,* meaning in Turner's approach, *both a disruption of a social order and the experience of a temporal discontinuity*. He regarded social dramas as units of the social process capable of being described, which comprised four distinguishable phases of public action: a) the breach, the infringement of a rule by members of the community in some public arena, the disruption of ordinary social relationships; b) the *crisis,* which in Turner's view was a decisive turning point, a time of danger or suspense with liminal characteristics constituting a threshold between rather stable phases of the social process; c) redress, the remedial action, based on the existence of formal and informal –institutionalized or *ad hoc*– adjustment and repair mechanisms promoted by the leaders or representative members of the social system (arbitration, mediation and other legal, religious or related instruments); and,  d) in principle, reintegration, where conflict should be resolved through the reinstatement of the rebel groups into the larger society (thus restoring the *status quo*) by means of peace agreements, but also trough schisms or even by restarting the conflict (Turner 1974: 98–155).

Turner understood that if social life could be described and analysed in terms of an uninterrupted succession of social dramas, these should be the matrix from which experience would be constituted and organized. The various genres of *performance* were the product of these experiences and, at the same time, the condition of possible experimentation and attribution of meaning to social dramas. We should bear in mind that every crisis constitutes a liminal instance, and as such it is potentially innovative or creative. From this analytical perspective, *drama* was not just a metaphor, since the processes resulting in crisis situations and in subsequent attempts to resolve them took on a dramatic form, in the sense of a *story* (or several stories), whose focus was a dispute between the participant characters. This conflict will develop throughout the *story* as a narrative, consisting of its resolution or continuity in the same form or another. As stated above, there is an affinity between critical social processes and their interpretation in the form of a story, whether oral, written or performed. Turner stressed the importance of the repair phase in the (eminently liminal) social drama, since through different forms of dramatic performance and/or narrative it seeks to reconstitute the undermined group identity (Turner 1986: 40–41). Those involved in these processes of crisis count with expressions of the most varied genres that help them make the undergone conflicts intelligible. Those facing these dramatic situations need to make them intelligible, i.e., understand how they came about, what chain of events resulted in the current situation, and how it can be repaired. *Living and experiencing drama is apprehending it, establishing a sequentially organized chain of events*. Different genres provide registration matrices in which to process the events, such as religious rites, political ceremonies, and legal acts (Turner 1982: 86–87). The testimony of a victim, the allegation of a prosecutor or the decision of a judge are forms of action that organize experiences under a narrative form, attempting both to make sense of the current situation by establishing its connection to past events, and to find a possible way out within a legal framework. This analytical approach to the historical process can be seen in Turner's famous work on Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, who led the first stage of the War of Independence of Mexico in 1810. He shows there how Hidalgo not only updated and created stories and symbols that had a decisive role in the uprising, but also became himself a symbol of *communitas*, of solidarity, for Mexicans, being represented years later in murals, statues, plaques, streets, squares, etc. (Turner 1974: 98–155).

Crises occupy a central place in Turner's approach; he is particularly emphatic as to the open nature of social dramas, whose direction or sense are not predetermined. The resolution of crises does not involve a structural adjustment or a relapse to an initial balance; quite on the contrary, it involves *creative* moments, conditioned solely by the prevailing relations of power and the possibilities of restating the meanings of the available symbols. Along these lines, the core purpose of the concept of social drama is to provide an empirical tool for the study of social change. This model has been repeatedly used in social and cultural anthropology and also in other disciplines, to study situations of conflict and disruption in different scenarios, from daily life to vast national crises where mass media play a central role in the representation of the critical scenario (Cottle 2005; Wagner-Pacifici 1986; Alexander, 1988; Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Jacobs 2000). Examples of anthropological studies in Latin America that have used Turner's approach are Guber's (2000) on the institutional crisis at Easter April 1987, when military personnel staged a series of barrack uprisings against President Raul Alfonsin's government; and Rodrigues (2004) about the managerial and ideological process of change of the Banco do Brasil in 1995.

The social drama model has some converging aspects with Marshall Sahlins' analysis of the arrival of James Cook and his fleet to Hawaii in 1779.[9] Sahlins extended the Levistraussian idea that culture organizes the present: perceptions, beliefs and even behaviours obey to certain traditional schemes; yet, simultaneously, the updating of traditional patterns by means of specific practices opens the doors to alteration. Sahlins tried to understand how Hawaiians might have initially interpreted the arrival of Cook and his men, and for such purpose he reviewed their interpretive schemes. Sahlins argued that these

schemes should offer a hint, not only of the perception and meanings that Hawaiians had awarded to the British, but also of a change of attitude that would eventually end up with Cook's death: the same Hawaiian mythical tales that allowed for an allegedly unprecedented event to become foreseeable also allowed for another unexpected event (the return of Cook after his departure) to culminate with the killing of the Admiral. Sahlins gave the name of *mythopraxis* to the way certain archetypal events enable experience, updating accounts about the past when enacting present events (Sahlins 1981, 1985). If Sahlins is right, the arrival of the British in Hawaii was not a totally unforeseeable event.[10] The cyclical nature of mythical stories and ceremonial practices granted Hawaiians a way to normalize extraordinary events (Sahlins 1981, 1985, 1996).

It is crucial to all social groups to ensure their continuity, defined as the basic modes whereby the so-considered 'normal' order of everyday life is perceived or defined. There is an enormous, though not necessarily explicit, work performed by members of the society to sustain this order. In his study of the Tiv of central Nigeria, Paul Bohannan (1958) suggests the existence of *extra-normal* activities, phenomena or institutions that become part of society; not inevitably accepted or approved, yet they are indispensable for a functioning world. The important thing about this approach is that the extra-normal events are essential for normal events to take place (somewhat like a necessary evil). If crises are extra-normal events, then they are necessary events of social processes. Normality –whichever form it may take – represents the necessary mode to which the members of a particular social group resort to define the world they live in and the course of their own actions and those of others. Common sense has a crucial role in the constitution of such known order, the reality of their every-day life world, making the immediate experience of events possible, and making them evident by nature. This order that we take for granted makes our and others' actions foreseeable. In social life, normality can be seen as a stable and proper condition, and its loss or neglect constitutes a threat to the survival of the individuals and the social system itself. Yet, a state of crisis may entail the destruction of the existing normality, and its transformation into a new order (as when an economic system collapses and is replaced by another one, based on different rules and principles). Therefore, normality (i.e. the flow of predictability in everyday life) can be broken or altered, requiring its members to, first of all, repair it (Luckmann & Schütz 1973; Berger & Luckman 1966; Garfinkel 1967). Under such circumstances, the interpretative schemes that were effective until then may cease to operate; reality that was up to that moment taken for granted may no longer be such, crudely revealing its construed nature. The task of re-establishing the order has to face new conditions to respond to, for instance, a dispute to establish plausible definitions for the new order. In crisis situations, the world taken for granted becomes exposed, as the actors strive to restore order by the methods used in times conceived as normal (cf. Gaggioli-Hoerpel 2014).

Turner and Sahlins made significant contributions to the understanding of how the experiences of social processes are organized across genres of representation and how these, in turn, participate in the constitution of social processes; i.e. how social processes generate the narratives whereby they are related and how these narratives constitute them (Trouillot 1995: 4–10), some of these narratives reaching a paradigmatic dimension of past events in respect to the present (Valeri 1990), thus becoming a sort of scripts containing dramatic plots of the social action in which they are played. This approach has been developed by Lomnitz-Adler (2003) in his analysis of the cultural traditions that made possible the constitution and interpretation of the 1982 Mexican debt crisis, such as the ideals of Aztec and Christian sacrifice. In a forthcoming article about the 2001 Argentine crisis, I state that public interpreters and lay people in their everyday lives appealed to two paradigmatic narratives to give meaning to the situation: 1) the decline of the country and 2) the national history as a cycle of recurrent crises. Both narratives could be linked and work as theodicies of the nation; in an underlying form, they manifested that the history of Argentina could be seen as a battle between antagonistic forces. Beyond short-term solutions, the crisis revealed a profound conception of history which conditioned not only the present but also the future. Another way to give meaning to the crisis was through stories on the origins of the middle class. Life stories and public narratives on the European origins of ancestors explained individual success as a result of effort, hard work and sacrifice. Crisis and personal misfortune were explained by the abandonment of those values by national authorities (Visacovsky 2014).

An important role in these processes is played by those who have authority or legitimacy as interpreters. A very good anthropological example is Neiburg's analysis (2004; 2005; 2006) about the transformation of professional economists in public intellectuals in Brazil and Argentina between the mid-twentieth century and the mid-1980s, when they became interpreters of national crises. A similar role was played by political scientists and sociologists during the Argentine transition from the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) to democracy. They characterized the final period of the dictatorship as a 'crisis' and the passage to democracy as a 'transition' from an authoritarian to a democratic culture (Visacovsky & Guber 2005). Mass media also perform an interpretive and public function, enhanced by their extensive possibilities of diffusion. For example, Colin Hay (1996) has addressed the rhetorical strategies and the linguistic devices used by certain media in narrating the events that resulted in the 1978–1979 'winter of discontent' crisis in the United Kingdom. Hay considers that moment as crucial for the transformation of the British state and the emergence of Thatcherism; through some media, the New Right ideology showed that the circumstances (an increasing wave of union protests) were a symptom of the 'crisis of the state', and that she was the only one able to resolve it. It is remarkable that the disputes on the definition of the situation as a crisis construct it as an event, and make way for certain public interventions. In the case of the 2001

crisis in Argentina, media described the *cacerolazos* (urban protests from people banging pots and pans) as 'middle class demonstrations'. Based on these taken for granted accounts, different public interpreters reflected on the revolutionary or conservative nature of Argentina's middle class (Visacovsky 2009).

Collective memories about past critical experiences play a key role in the interpretation of crises. The past can work as a paradigm of the present, by which actors can warn imminent danger or, conversely, hopeful future. In her anthropological work about the 2001 crisis in Argentina, Goddard (2006) suggests the need to explore the interpretations and responses of citizens in relation to a distinctive historicity during the critical situation. She affirms this specificity resided in the collective memory about state terrorism during the last military dictatorship, which had become an underlying grammar through which the events were interpreted. In Mexico, Shoshan (2015) analyzed how the experiences of forced displacement and expropriation of land in Santa Fe (a commercial and residential district of great economic activity placed in Mexico City at present) had traumatic effects on the present. Because of those memories, the current residents distrusted government authorities and were politically apathetic to claim their rights.

There is still one more issue: Turner and Sahlins faced the difficult challenge of understanding the way human beings perceive or experience disruptive situations, where the interpretative resources available may not guarantee the interpretative function that is allegedly necessary to organize the experiences. Both concluded that it is precisely these instances that make possible the narrative representation of social processes. Even when there may be general conditions that work independently from the actors' will and can explain the appearance of crises, the fact is that actors cannot identify the events as *critical* without socially available schemes or frameworks. This means that such instances have to be studied with regard to their historical singularity, the specific modes whereby collectives think of themselves.

## Innovation in Times of Crisis

When a given social order is dissolved, how can a new order be possible? A strong case to think about this problem is the Black Death in the XIV century. Whereas the pandemic spread across the European continent, the interpretations of massive damage were initially based on traditional beliefs about witchcraft and on the role of the Jews as responsible agents of the disease (Cohn Jr 2002). But as time went by, a new and more secularized conception of the world emerged, which set the bases for the cosmologic transformations of the Renaissance in the XV and XVI centuries, allowing the Europeans to rebuild their society in a completely different way (Herlihy 1997). In a very different context, Evans Pritchard's study from the 1930's (1976) showed that witchcraft performed as a theory that made damage comprehensible among the Azande people in Sudan as a means to deal with uncertainty. Niehaus (2013) has also shown how the population in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, situated and framed the

unfortunate and destructive events in areas beyond everyday life, by resorting to local theories on witchcraft or male irascibility. The question is how and why deep beliefs and practices stopped providing satisfactory answers and led to new forms of interpreting the world.

The idea of innovation is usually more closely associated with the creation of new practices, habits and customs. For example, the Black Death forced changes in the way of burying the dead; the HIV pandemic of the late twentieth century transformed the sexual habits of much of the world's population; the attack on the Twin Towers drastically changed security measures at airports. However, during times of crisis the social organization and the world taken for granted can be destroyed or damaged. Restitution or recomposition requires thinking again about lost continuity. And continuity is only possible if there is an image of the future. In a way, the problem is part of two broader issues: social (re)production and change. As I said at the beginning, the practical challenge social groups have to face in a crisis situation is associated to the initial inability to foresee the future: the temporal experience resembles that of a frozen, *immobilized and saturated present*, as Lomnitz-Adler (2003) says; or, likewise, a deadlock, a stagnation, a *standoff* (Wagner-Pacifi 2000: 5). If every crisis is, by definition, transitional (Holton 1987: 504), this implies that saturation of the present and time freezing can be overcome and the future can be conceived anew. As we know, cognitive schemes, ritual acts, and great narratives that define collective identities and destinies, play a decisive role in the task of conveying a meaning to crisis situations, making them comprehensible, and elaborating possible solutions.

It is not a new subject for anthropologists. In the 1950s, Anthony Wallace suggested that members of a society can undertake efforts to build a more satisfying culture when there is frustration because of, for example, unsatisfied basic needs. He defined this process as a *cultural revitalization*. According to Wallace, the emergence of cultural revitalization movements depended on exceptional conditions resulting from a process of disintegration. Consequently, disasters and crises that result from these would be a ferment of innovation (Wallace 1956a). He based his studies on the Iroquois revitalization movement led by Seneca religious leader and prophet Handsome Lake (Wallace 1952). Extrapolating this case to all societies, he thought that all leaders (religious, political) played a crucial role in the revitalization of culture; therefore, this process was conscious and deliberate. Wallace compared his studies on messianic and millenarian movements with other political processes in complex societies, concluding that they shared common traits. Wallace provides few elements to understand how it is possible to create the future in cognitive or symbolic terms and suggested the existence of *mazeways*, or mental maps; a sort of hinge between individual personalities and culture, as an attempt to understand how individuals and social groups cope with the standard and exceptional adversities of life (Wallace 1956b; 1957). Theories about how the experience turns into narrative have unique advantages to think about how societies reinvent themselves imagining the future. Once again I will consider Turner's analysis on Hidalgo.

Turner claimed that the years 1810 (the *Grito de Dolores* that started Mexican Independence process) and 1821 (when the Trigarante Army entered Mexico City) *constituted a liminal period* in which certain slow processes that had been developing along centuries of colonial Spanish domination were followed by a series of faster social dramas that revealed many of the contradictions that had remained hidden under those processes and generated new myths, paradigms, and political structures (Turner 1974: 98–99). As a consequence, Turner would consider conflict as a driver of social change, particularly when conflict resulted in the rupture or dislocation of the established order. But the emphasis placed on the cultural conditioning of experience entails the question as to how can cultural presuppositions themselves be modified, abandoned and renewed, still maintaining their role as organizers and constituents of experience.

The Indian anthropologist Veena Das has argued that certain events have the ability to alter and transform current cultural categories. She resorted to the notion of *critical event*[11] to characterise disasters, socio-political changes or violent practices and discourses, all of them constituting events followed by the appearance of new modes of action, leading to a re-definition of current traditional categories used, so far, to convey order and sense to reality (Das 1995: 5–6). Das thought that events such as the 1984 industrial disaster in Bhopal (India), the Partition of India on August 1947, the kidnapping and rape of women during the civil unrest following the Partition, or the construction of a *Sikh* militant discourse in Punjab and the specific place that violence had in it, would allow to study the process of social change in complex societies. Such events would generate experiences that might destabilize previously established social categories (Kleinman et al. 1997), where the world is devastated not only in terms of lives and sense of community, but mainly as regards the criteria upon which it has been conceived so far (Das 2003), thus giving rise to processes of metamorphosis and social creation. *Critical events* constitute not only expressions of destruction, but also vehicles for innovation, and therefore, for social change. Das conceives events in their nature as *unaccomplished*, since they have the capacity to structure the present and project themselves towards the future.

My own work on the 2001 crisis in Argentina shows how narratives create the future. The crisis was incorporated as an event in stories about national history. The crisis turned into an episode of Argentina decadence or the expression of the battle between two opposing parts of the nation. According to the story of the decline, the current crisis urged to restore a progressive temporality. The attribution of culpability of the crisis to neoliberalism of the 1990s had a wide consensus; some even connected this period with the last military dictatorship. From the point of view of the narrative of antagonistic dualism, the challenge was to defeat those responsible for the crisis and simultaneously block their possible return in the future. But the two narratives had serious difficulties in thinking about the future. Who truly represented the new Argentina? In what exemplary mirror of the past could the future be reflected? In the values of democracy in 1966 and 1983? In the ideals of the guerrillas of the 1970s? In developmentalism in the late 1950s? In the Peronist social justice? In the people's struggle against the oligarchy? In the idea of Argentina as the world's granary? In the values of the immigration from Europe and the middle class? Or was it essential to go back to the nineteenth century and return to the path of the heroes of the independence and the national organization? Consequently, the crisis opened an intense debate about the past, which continued for the following years.

If certain events generate favourable scenarios for social transformation, then it is essential to formulate possible forms of understanding the relationship between the old and the new; in particular how new institutions, organization modes and interpretations could be developed based on the old ways. Now then, since events cannot but be interpreted within certain cultural frameworks, the members of a social group should always have the acceptability schemes or disruption anticipation devices available. However, when normality is abolished under certain circumstances, when the interpretive frameworks so far effective no longer offer responses, then the creation of a new order of normality is required, a new frame of ontological safety. But, doesn't this order always require the existence of interpretive resources? How can extraordinary and disruptive events be apprehended foregoing the culturally pre-interpreted nature of experience?

## Conclusions

My intention in this article has been to show how social and cultural anthropology has made a significant and original contribution to the study of the crisis situations. Mainly, anthropologists have developed a perspective that has not been normative or teleological. They have focused on the particular ways through which people perceive, categorise, give meaning and act in critical social conditions, in two complementary ways.

On the one hand, anthropologists offer ethnographic studies showing the plurality of visions of the world in a local setting, providing an original knowledge on the manner social groups endure critical situations by applying diverse strategies in everyday life, adopting different forms of cooperation or through political action. Besides, ethnographic studies can also reveal aspects that are not generally available to economists, hidden aspects of economic life that are far from marginal or accessory. In contrast to the vision of crises as singular events that are identified, diagnosed and resolved by experts, social or cultural anthropology can show the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of the crisis.

On the other hand, I suggest that anthropology can offer an innovative analytical concept of crisis situations. As I have shown through this overview, crisis situations must be understood as special cases of the experiences of time. A crisis arises when we can recognize empirically that a discontinuity or rupture has occurred and time is perceived as 'stagnant', 'stopped', 'frozen'. The order and the course of events assumed as 'normal' are altered, but not

replaced by new ones. Everything seems to happen at the present time and future cannot be immediately imagined.

Despite their differences, the anthropologists discussed in this article agree on the role of beliefs, cultural traditions or grand narratives to make sense of crisis situations, to make them intelligible, placing them in a sequential order. This order connects the event with other past events and therefore explains it; but at the same time it creates conditions to imagine possible futures. As I have shown through the cases of Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, each crisis is specific not merely by objective conditions that produced it, but because the interpretations of them are only possible within a particular frame and historicity. Crises are not only the effect of alien forces that humans cannot control. Crises are also a cultural and multivocal production, an event in which actors struggle to find and impose a script for action.

However, although we have a considerable corpus of research on situations of economic and political crises, it is comparatively small compared to disaster studies. This is much more evident in Latin America. It is very important that anthropologists in general and especially Latin Americans begin to be more interested in the study of crisis situations, first by reason of the political and economic difficulties in the region; and second because crises are a kind of ideal laboratory where it is possible to study complex problems about continuity and social change, innovation, creation and reproduction of beliefs and traditions and the relationship between historical events and their interpretation.

## Notes

[1] Compare with the distinction between *collective stress situation* (a notion based on Barton 1969) and disaster (Quarantelli & Dynes 1977: 23–24).

[2] Nonetheless, for a huge number of people living in situations of extreme poverty, where unemployment or labor instability are endemic, is it possible to speak of a situation in which a 'normal' state has been altered and should be restored? (Vigh 2008).

[3] I am aware that 'crisis', 'critical situation', 'critical state', 'collapse', 'disaster', 'catastrophe', 'hecatomb' and 'calamity' are often used as synonyms. These particular forms of naming events in everyday language or public discourse must be studied in relation to their specific contexts. However, as I will show throughout this article, it is essential to distinguish an analytic notion of crisis regarding other presumably related terms.

[4] For instance, anthropologists have analysed economic crises by studying the efforts of people who belong to the middle class to strengthen their social and symbolic boundaries regarding other social sectors (O'Dougherty 2002; Visacovsky 2012), or the skills learned and transmitted to address the crisis in the present and future (D'Avella 2014), Klima (2006) has showed the role of money lenders, gambling, informal lotteries and consultation with mediums during the currency fall in Thailand, and Hart & Ortiz (2008) have discussed the social effects of capitalism and financial crises as a global phenomenon.

[5] For an important exception see David Bidney (1946) who stated that a cultural crisis is the negative counterpart of cultural integration and a pathological phenomenon.

[6] For a discussion of the different uses of 'life cycle', see O'Rand & Krecker (1990).

[7] Following different paths, Ernesto de Martino (1977) also developed an analytic system to approach dramatic discontinuities in social life using the concept of *crisis of presence.*

[8] Remember Gluckman's analysis (1952) of rebellion rites such as '*catharsis*' to process the social tensions derived from the social structure.

[9] See specially Maza (1996) and Reed (2006).

[10] For a better understanding of Sahlins argument, see Lévi-Strauss (1964: 339) on the relationship between structure and event. About hot and cold societies and the sense of history in Lévi-Strauss, see Giddens (1987). On coexistence of diverse temporalities in different societies, see Hill (1988), Munn (1992), Halpern (1991) and Robbins (2005).

[11] On occasions, Das uses different notions, such as 'extreme events' and 'traumatic events'. In turn, Feuchtwang (2000: 59) uses the notion of 'cataclysmic events' to approach the reactions to violent phenomena occurred in Europe and China.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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