



THE RESEARCH THEME STRIKES BACK
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When introducing my research topic to the other incoming Fellows in September 2019, I reckoned that studying crisis discourses was not completely irrelevant for scholars beyond the field of intellectual history, but also that it was not that vital for them. Coming from Hungary – and from the Central European University, in particular, which the Hungarian government was forcing into exile – I have been surrounded by the rhetoric of crisis (of democracy, of liberalism, of institutions, of education, of identity, etc.). And

while especially colleagues coming from Russia or Turkey, but lately also the USA or the UK, were overdosed with this discourse if they reflected on the politics of their countries, there were still seeming loopholes (in both a geographical and an intellectual sense) where one could hope to escape from it. For me, spending some time at the Arcadian environment of Wiko in Grunewald seemed to be exactly such a temporary safe haven, after which I expected to return to the crisis-ridden context I was coming from, with reloaded intellectual and emotional batteries.

Upon my arrival in January, I acted accordingly, first of all ordering loads of books to read, which I had not had time for before or could not find in the libraries I had normally access to. With my family, Oksana and Márk, we also tried to make the best out of Berlin's cultural offerings, going to museums every weekend (enjoying that there was no rush and we could afford the luxury of viewing only parts of the exhibitions, for instance attentively studying some of our favorite halls in the Pergamon Museum), trying to get tickets to the ever-overbooked theater performances of the Schaubühne, the Berliner Ensemble, and the Deutsches Theater, visiting some of the nearby cities we have never been to before (like Quedlinburg), and meeting up with our many friends and colleagues in Germany. In addition to the three months to be spent at Wiko, I was also a guest of the Centre Marc Bloch, and we planned many common activities on comparative history and the challenges to democracy in Eastern Europe and beyond. I also hoped to organize some academic events, bringing together the two institutions.

When discussing at the lunch table in early March the mysterious virus spreading from Wuhan, most of us still felt it a distant and rather abstract danger. Then I left for Brussels for a week as an evaluation panelist of a European research grant scheme, and when I arrived at EU headquarters, the atmosphere was still completely relaxed: after debating the applications fiercely for eight hours, we went out to restaurants and, except for the reticence of most people to shake hands and hug each other, life seemed to be as usual. But when we left the office building on March 19, the whole corridor (and very soon the whole building) was closed and disinfected after us, and by the time I got back to Berlin it was a radically different city, and what is more, a radically different world...

Afterwards, whenever I mentioned to people who asked about my current research project that I worked on crisis discourses, I got a wink with the message that the topic is truly current, sometimes with the evident subtext that I might have been very quick (and slightly opportunistic) to pick up a new theme in light of the dramatic global developments. For some time, I still tried to mention, for the record, that my research topic

predated by years the first COVID case ever discovered, but usually this made it look even worse.

That said, working on my sources as the global pandemic unfolded evidently brought to particularly sharp light a central issue of the debate on the ways crisis has been conceptualized in the context of political modernity. After Reinhart Koselleck's seminal *Kritik und Krise* (1959), there has been an increasing scholarly consensus that it was not some crisis, existing "out there," that generated the crisis discourse; rather, the crisis discourse had its own internal dynamic, not necessarily reflecting the historical processes unfolding in front of the eyes of those who applied this conceptual framework. A radical take on this could even go so far as to argue that "crisis" was a – rather frequently used and abused – discursive weapon that was often completely – and sometimes intentionally – detached from the actual political and social dynamics it claimed to describe. Instead, it should be conceived as a catalyst of processes challenging and eventually even dissolving the existing political order. While Koselleck himself focused on the "pathogenesis of modernity" in the context of the Enlightenment, the main debate on the history and politics of crisis discourses has been unfolding, quite predictably, with regard to the historical image of the Weimar Republic. The classic postwar narrative described this historical context as eminently crisis-ridden and tended to take at face value the endemic statements of the various Weimar political subcultures about disorientation, disintegration, and impending catastrophe. This picture, however, was increasingly questioned by scholars (such as Rüdiger Graf) who sought to nuance the way these statements themselves were to be read, pointing to the intended illocutionary force of the representations of crisis in terms of various doomsday scenarios (i.e., rather than predictions of what was to come, they were meant to unify and mobilize their target audience to make a concerted effort to avoid the catastrophe). From another perspective (for instance, that of Tim B. Müller), there has been a growing emphasis on the open-ended horizons of Weimar politics, in the sense that radical ideological criticism could go together with de facto acceptance of the existing institutional frameworks. While democracy was heavily contested, its fall was far from predetermined.

These discussions greatly influenced me well before I came to Berlin (in fact, I even had the good luck to meet Koselleck a number of times when I was a graduate student) and sought to draw on these insights when casting out my own net of comparative intellectual history, seeking to catch various discourses stemming from Western and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, I also had an underlying assumption (maybe linked to my own

East Central European experiences) that we should try to nuance even further the way we describe the interrelationship of discourses and historical processes. It is evidently not true that the “objective” crisis creates “subjective” crisis narratives, but it is also farfetched to argue the other extreme position, namely that representations have nothing to do with what is going on in reality and are only meant as discursive weapons to subvert the political order. What I was looking for was instances of serious engagement with the social, economic, cultural, and spiritual tendencies of a given period, often relying on diverse scholarly methods (from political economics to sociology, history, and cultural philosophy) and pointing to those aspects that they identified as existential threats to the community. In a way, I was interested in efforts to make sense of the world under conditions of extreme urgency. While we should not forget that framing a social, economic, or cultural process as a threat can well be conscious manipulation, it is hard to deny that there were various ways and epistemic patterns in which reality could be constructed, and their weight was not completely equal. In this sense, following the local (i.e., German) and global discourses on COVID was extremely instructive for me, as it was quickly becoming evident that different actors (such as the federal government, the political elites of the various Bundesländer, the off-mainstream political forces, the medical experts in key state institutions, the medical experts of less central institutions, the para-experts trying to find a niche for themselves, and the adherents of various conspiracy theories) all constructed partly overlapping and partly divergent realities about what the virus was actually “doing” to society; and these divergences actually mattered. Even as a simple pedestrian, going out to walk in Grunewald during the lockdown in April, one could not just take up an equidistant position from all these representations, as one had to adjust one’s behavior (having to make impromptu decisions all the time, for instance about keeping or not keeping distance from another jogger coming along the same path), depending on which of the descriptions one regarded as most realistic, even if one could still retain a critical distance from all of them, considering them models and not “the Truth” (and tending to trust exactly those who themselves expressed their awareness of the incomplete nature of their knowledge).

Reading various intellectuals who sought to conceptualize the developments around them in the 1920s–30s (such as Pitirim Sorokin, Walter Lippmann, Mihail Manoilescu, Wilhelm Medinger, Florian Znaniecki, Ludwig von Mises, José Ortega y Gasset, Wilhelm Röpke, István Bibó, Bogdan Radica, Louis Rougier, Alfred Weber, Ferdynand Zweig, Oswald Spengler, and Alexander Rüstow – to mention just a few of them, representing different national contexts as well as extremely divergent intellectual and political positions),

one has a similar feeling about competing models of reality, which obviously should not be mistaken for Reality as such; but we should nevertheless be able to say more than just to register their divergences. Analyzing how they constructed reality and thereby engaging in a sort of dialogue with them (as an intellectual historian I can rely on some sort of toolkit to do this somewhat better than I could, for instance, decipher the depiction of the medical and social implications of COVID made out by various speakers), I hoped to learn something not only about the speakers, but also about the world they inhabited and sought – often desperately – to make sense of.

The period spent at Wiko was thus a very complex and instructive experience. Rather than an Arcadia existing outside my “normal” space and time, it functioned as an observatory on the hilltop from where certain phenomena could be seen perhaps somewhat better. It mattered a lot that in this situation, which was becoming more and more “serious,” in addition to my “dialogues with the dead,” which were only rarely satirical (à la Lucian of Samosata), there was a broader circle of Fellows and their families (Zhanna, Sergey, Zhoru, Bilyana, Efraín, Romy, Derin, Alon, Alexandros, Achille, Altay, Xóchitl, Natasha, Tijana, Tolga, David, and many more) with whom I could talk about very serious things, always with a jocular overtone – lifting at least part of the burden of insecurity and, by creating a pleasant moment, bridging the feeling of rupture between past and future. That is, we were trying to cope with the crisis.

This could not have been possible without the preservation of the functionality and ongoing hospitality of Wiko as an institution and especially its staff on all levels (let me thank especially Barbara, Thorsten, Daniel, Dunia, Vera, Andrea, Maike, Eva, and all the library team). This made it viable for all of us to continue functioning like a community of scholars, and not to feel like in the ballroom of the Titanic, but indeed preserving our existential and professional curiosity. To keep working, not as if nothing had happened, which would be a mistake and was impossible anyway, but precisely keeping our reflectivity and capacity to face the new personal and intellectual challenges posed by a set of developments that at first sight seem rather unprecedented – even though, if you ask us historians, we will surely come up with at least partially fitting parallels and analogies.