



## What is a crisis of culture? Towards a genealogy of the philosophy of culture

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### ABSTRACT

The article engages with a recent discussion in philosophy and social sciences on the function and the history of the concept of crisis by proposing a short genealogical investigation of the concept of a crisis of culture. Similarly to other uses of the notion of crisis, a crisis of culture is a term that has been widely used in philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences, however, without being precisely defined or analysed. For this reason, the critical inquiry into the function and meaning of crisis in philosophy formulated here takes the form of a genealogy of philosophy of culture. Instead of attempting to provide a definition of the concept of crisis, the article traces how the notion of crisis — in particular a crisis of culture — played a definite role in formulating early theories of the philosophy of culture and how various authors used this notion to mark out the philosophy of culture as a separate field of inquiry. Special attention is given to authors — like Georg Simmel and Ernesto de Martino — who went against the dominant tendency to treat crisis as a threat or a problem to be overcome and instead described a crisis of culture as a defining element of culture itself — and maybe even the main problem of the philosophy of culture.

### KEYWORDS

crisis; crisis of culture; philosophy of culture; genealogy of crisis; Georg Simmel; Ernesto de Martino; Roberto Esposito

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## TOWARDS A GENEALOGY OF CRISIS IN PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

Writing in a world profoundly transformed by the 2007/08 financial crisis, economic anthropologist Janet Roitman soberly observed that while “crisis” has become a universally defining category of political and social reality and one of the key concepts in the social sciences, crisis itself has remained undefined. Narratives around crisis are always about a crisis of something or a crisis somewhere — an economic crisis, a political crisis, a crisis in Africa, a stock market crisis, a health-care crisis, etc. — while crisis as a reality in itself, or the reality of a crisis itself, remains outside the realm of inquiry (Roitman, 2014: 3–4).

As noted earlier by perhaps the most important researcher of the concept of crisis in the 20th century, Reinhart Koselleck — who at the same time, for reasons as much methodological as political, abandoned the attempt to create a theory of crisis in favour of historicising the category — crisis is a historical “super concept” (Koselleck, 2006: 392). The question is whether this diagnosis explains anything from a philosophical or theoretical point of view. While Koselleck’s study of the emergence of a historical consciousness of the period of bourgeois revolutions probably accurately reconstructs the emergence of “crisis” as a symptom of a completely new understanding of history (Koselleck, 1988) — a history that can be intervened in and shaped — Koselleck does not explain what this concept made possible to do at the level of theory at that moment when modernity began to understand itself as an epoch of crisis. For crisis does not merely refer to a certain philosophy of history, it suggests diagnoses about the transformation of reality. When we speak, for example, of a crisis of the economy, a crisis of society or even a crisis of philosophy, we are doing just that — formulating diagnoses about reality. The notion of crisis, from the perspective of the experience of modernity, is not only the expression of an understanding of history, it also makes possible a certain understanding of history. As Roitman argues, it constitutes the specific object of knowledge. And even more than that, as we shall argue here: it makes possible the constitution of the object of theorising.

The starting point of the following inquiry, which takes the form of a critical genealogy of the concept of a cultural crisis, is a simple observation: we do not have an explicit, defined or even contested concept of crisis, whether in political philosophy, the philosophy of history or the social sciences.

Quite recently, a similar diagnosis was made by the philosopher Miguel de Beistegui, noting “the remarkable (yet not absolute) absence of what we could call a rigorous concept of crisis in the history of philosophy” (de Beistegui, 2022: 158). This lack of a theoretical elaboration of the concept of crisis is in itself an interesting theoretical problem. The concept of crisis constantly

balances between pre-philosophical (everyday) and theoretical discourse, and it is perhaps impossible to take it completely out of either register. In the sense of a watershed moment, a moment of decision, the end or suspension of a certain stage, a departure from the norm, an emergency, the necessity to intervene, etc., in addition to many other meanings of crisis — it has been and remains central to philosophy and theoretical discourses. Indeed uses of the concept frequently benefit from this ambiguity — but without offering a definition, interpretive clarification or a philosophical theory of crisis (de Beistegui, 2022: 160).

Starting from this diagnosis, the lack of a strictly philosophical theory of crisis, I nevertheless recognise the key role played by the concept of crisis in theoretical discourses attempting to deal with modernity. The following inquiry is not yet a proposal for a broader genealogy of the concept of crisis itself, nor is it an attempt to formulate a philosophical theory of crisis or cultural crisis. What I am proposing here is to outline a history of the notion of the crisis of culture as an important, but also underdetermined, conceptual condition of the possibility of philosophy of culture — which represents one of the more distinctive languages of modern philosophy. The question we will try to answer is: What was philosophy doing when it was formulating the diagnosis of a crisis of culture? The answer will allow us to see how different possible diagnoses of a crisis in a given phenomenon can be, and how important it is for our theoretical grasp of a given issue — in our case culture — to understand what it means for a theory to diagnose the object of its inquiry as in crisis.

I will link the emerging genealogy of philosophy of culture and the role the concept of cultural crisis played in this field of inquiry to a recent critical discussion of crisis in 20th century European philosophy undertaken by Roberto Esposito (Esposito, 2018). Esposito attempted to go beyond what he called the “crisis *dispositif*” — a conceptual “device” whereby the diagnosis of crisis is used to aid the restoration of a lost or corrupted essence of a phenomenon in crisis. For Esposito this conceptual operation of the “crisis *dispositif*” dominated the intellectual field of European philosophy in the interwar period and continues to shape our understanding of what we are doing when we diagnose a crisis. Within the philosophy of culture, one of the defining discourses for philosophy in the previous century, “cultural crisis” in most cases followed the logic reconstructed by Esposito as “crisis *dispositif*”. The perceived crisis of culture was conceptualised as a corruption of culture or an obstacle in its proper functioning, and the role of philosophy of culture was to overcome that crisis. However, it was also philosophy of culture that offered a different understanding of crisis, one where crisis is not merely something to be overcome, sublated or exorcised, but is a very condition of the possibility of culture and one of its defining traits. This second, more radical, understanding of crisis — a crisis

that conditions and determines culture in contrast to a crisis of culture as defining the task for philosophy of culture (to remove the crisis) — will form the basis for the following genealogical inquiry. I will try to show that at the very emergence of modern philosophy of culture there was a model for theorising a crisis of culture which should be considered a key point of departure for any future genealogies of the concept of crisis in 20th century philosophy and theory. — This model is to be found in the work of Georg Simmel, although he quickly abandoned it himself.

## PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE AS A RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS OF CULTURE

Philosophy of culture emerged as both a diagnosis of cultural crisis and a response to it. Perhaps there is no more distinctive trait of philosophy of culture as an characteristically modern endeavour, inextricably linked to the history of Western capitalist societies, than the fact that philosophy has defined culture as a separate object of inquiry — distinct from art, society, politics, ethics or science — in terms of its crisis.

This is not yet evident in the first instances of the use of the term “philosophy of culture” (*Kulturphilosophie*) in German Romanticism, for example in the writings of Adam Müller. As long as philosophy treated “culture” in a Hegelian manner as *Bildung*, as education and upbringing — i.e. as a form of mediation that binds together different areas of life and institutional regimes or as a cultural movement that strives to go beyond the existing social order (Boey, 2006) — culture was conceived as a force that can prevent or bring about crisis. It was not yet an expression of crisis or a phenomenon defined by crisis. However, it becomes clear at the turn of the 20th century, when “philosophy of culture” becomes an autonomous theoretical enterprise, that the way to grasp culture as an autonomous object of philosophical reflection is to identify a crisis of culture. So, the different projects of philosophy of culture put forward in the years leading up to WWI were a response to the perceived crisis of culture.

Even Ludwig Stein, who was a well-known apologist for the principle of optimism illustrates this focus. According to Stein, the direction of societal development was to run in one direction towards peace, socialism and world-unifying, rational government. Nevertheless, the 1899 volume of his essays devoted to the philosophical questions of the “Turn of the Century” — and whose subtitle probably included the first use of the term *Kulturphilosophie* in the modern, technical sense — defined the task of philosophy of culture precisely in terms of the turn of the century. Stein postulated, in one and the same theoretical gesture, the methodological distinctiveness of philosophy of

culture from other sciences. The latter were given the task of reconstructing laws of nature, whereas the former was situated at the moment of transition, between the passing past and the coming future. Although Stein devoted a notable amount of space to emphasising that the turn of the century is an arbitrary date and its meaning derives from the imposition of human categories of understanding onto the passage of time, he nevertheless formulates the role of philosophy of culture as interpreting the past from the perspective of the given moment of transition, so that it will be possible to prepare for the approaching future (Stein, 1899: 11). In other words, it's not the objective turn of the century, but the transition from past to future and the accompanying change of perspective that constitutes the proper problem of the philosophy of culture.

Stein's optimism, which made him see time as an uniform path of progress, confronted the inescapable fact of being in a given moment of history, separating the passage of time into a past that is laden with meaning and a future that is coming — an experience that four decades later Walter Benjamin would try to capture with the figure of the dialectical image that “flashes up” in moments of danger and transforms our understanding of history (Benjamin, 1968: 255). Although Stein does not formulate this experience in dialectical categories and does not use the term “crisis”, the task he sets for the philosophy of culture — to diagnose and understand the tendencies present in the past — is formulated in relation to the experience of a break in time. Philosophy of culture, even if its object is defined simply as a “cultural system” (Stein, 1899: III), has been linked since its inception as a theoretical field — one distinct from theories of society, politics or the economy — to the experience of a break in the unified course of history.

Ten years later, in 1909, Rudolf Eucken, one of the best-known philosophical authors of his generation, foresaw a new field of research, the philosophy of culture, one directly connected with the concept of crisis. In his influential book on “spiritual currents of contemporaneity” Eucken set himself the task of analysing the most vital concepts in the language of his time. The task he explicitly formulates in his treatise was to find an answer to the prevailing “spiritual crisis” (Eucken, 1920: 4). The diagnosis of crisis is later repeated in the chapter on the concept of culture, where the idea of a new “philosophy of culture” is put forward, the task of which is to study “the spiritual conditions of cultural life” (Eucken, 1920: 246). There, too, the “complex of culture” (*Kulturkomplexe*) is determined by its inability to respond to the looming crisis, being burdened by an outdated and obsolete content. It's highly symptomatic that although Eucken does not speak explicitly about a “crisis of culture”, the chapter on the “spiritual conditions of cultural life” (along with the book's introduction) does speak of crises. The diagnosis of crisis opens the entire work, as well as concludes the section devoted to the question of culture. Culture has

fallen into crisis, according to Eucken, because of the “weakening” of its “foundations” handed down by tradition, but also because of its inability to respond to “the masses” who demand their share in cultural participation. The current state of culture is defined by its inability to respond to the crisis brought about by cultural transmission and mass demands to participate in culture. It’s not yet culture itself that is defined by crisis, but it is a constellation of “spiritual conditions” — or rather the historical and material conditions of the “complex of culture” in capitalist societies — that defines culture as an ability (or inability) to respond to this crisis. *Kulturphilosophie* increasingly defines culture self-referentially as a capacity to react to a crisis of culture. Ultimately Eucken expects the philosophy of culture to take up a metaphysical task: the renewal and deepening of “spiritual life” which without external help must find the strength to exit the crisis into which culture has fallen (Eucken, 1920: 261). The self-referential definition of culture as a capacity to react to the crisis of culture inevitably refers to the condition of the possibility of culture which, in Eucken, is given the name “spiritual life”. This is an obvious example of a circular definition, since “spiritual life” is defined as a condition of possibility of culture, but “culture” in turn, is defined as an expression of spiritual life. Philosophy of culture is therefore set up as an attempt to renew the conditions of cultural life. However, Eucken does not present any other desired outcome of this renewal than to remedy the current crisis of culture.

Only a year later, the first issue of the journal *Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* appeared, edited by Heinrich Rickert. Although the journal published texts representing various philosophical currents, it was to significantly contribute to a neo-Kantian foundation of philosophy of culture — as an epistemology of values, a theory of the genesis of meaning and a philosophical anthropology. It is in this version that philosophy of culture stabilised as a research paradigm and co-created, along with phenomenology and analytic philosophy, the horizon of philosophical reflection in the interwar period (Krois, 2013). The problem of the crisis of culture ended up enclosed in the self-referentiality of the concept of culture. The impulse to look at culture as crisis, transition, break, or even the revolutionary practice of transforming the world, only found expression as an aspect of a wider theory of social or political crisis, and mostly within Marxist and critical schools. And at the same time, the concept of crisis increasingly became a weapon used by reactionary intellectual and political movements, as a synonym for the collapse of values, the degeneration of the human species and the regress of civilisation. In both cases the problem with the diagnosis of the crisis of culture remains structurally similar: If the culture falls into crisis, what is the relation between culture as a distinct phenomenon and its crisis? What is the crisis of culture in relation to culture and what should be the response to that crisis?

## GEORG SIMMEL'S THEORY OF CULTURE AS CRISIS

Philosophy of culture was consistently developed as a philosophy of cultural crisis in the work of Georg Simmel. Simmel preserved the original impulse of beginning the philosophy of culture with the diagnosis of a cultural crisis, and he also strived to treat philosophy of culture as transcendental philosophy. In other words, to some extent he refrained from searching for a condition of possibility of culture (and its crisis) outside of it, in a "spiritual life" or social processes, and strived to present culture as a form of mediation that is prone to crisis or even defined by it. A similar approach is to be found in his theory of society. In *The philosophy of money*, sociological analyses of the market economy culminate in a diagnosis of modern life falling into crisis — a crisis caused by the imposition of the category of quantitative equivalence on social relations by the medium of money (Simmel, 2004: 433–450). It is the market economy itself, the modern logic of socialisation, that brings about the crisis of the social forms it has given birth to. For Simmel, the primary goal of formulating theory was to find tools to capture, understand and represent change, breakthrough and, above all, crisis as an internal dynamic and logic of social phenomena.

The paradigmatic text of Simmel's philosophy of cultural crisis is his essay *The concept and tragedy of culture*, published in 1912 in *Logos*. The title itself already shows that for Simmel any inquiry into the concept of culture must go hand in hand with an analysis of its crisis, or in this case — "tragedy". The latter is understood as the divergence of "objective" and "subjective culture". According to Simmel, the products of culture assume an objective character, independent of individuals (objective culture), and tend to impose an impersonal, alien logic on subjects (subjective culture). To put it another way, the mediation of subjective desires and forms of understanding by the structures of culture can break down (Simmel, 1997a: 68). Culture, a human creation, is capable of turning against us. But this is not, however, the result of an external intervention, but of the internal dialectics of culture itself.

It is worth noting that the figure of culture opposing humanity and turning into a kind of soulless, meaningless process was already present in Eucken (Eucken, 1920: 254). Nevertheless, Simmel made it more than just a key to understanding the potential crisis of culture. In his perspective, the possibility that the mediation of objective and subjective culture can undergo a crisis constituted the very essence of culture — at least in its modern form. Culture, in Simmel's view, can only exist with a constant tendency to fall into crisis. One might argue that for Simmel, a culture that did not carry within itself the potential for tragedy or crisis would not be culture. Or even more forthrightly — what we call culture is the introduction of the experience of crisis into the world.

Although in 1912 Simmel was still writing about the “tragedy of culture”, after the outbreak of the First World War, in a lecture delivered in Vienna in 1916, he was already speaking explicitly about the “crisis of culture”. Referring implicitly to his earlier texts, especially to *The philosophy of money* and his essay from 1912, Simmel analysed two manifestations of the crisis he was interested in: the transformation of existing means into ends-in-themselves, and the transformation of cultural products into objective processes detached from the lives of individuals (Simmel, 1997b: 91–92). In doing so, he clearly emphasised that these are not two different processes, but the same tendency present in culture only framed from two sides: culture is the result of our ability to think and live in a network of means-to-end relations, and our ability to produce cultural artifacts. There is the possibility that means to ends will become ends in themselves, and ends will turn into means, and that the artifacts created from the work of human hands and minds will become a force wielded over the lives of their creators (which also constitutes a version of the changing means-to-ends relation).

Simmel conducted his analyses of the crisis of culture with the conviction that the crisis could and should be resolved. After all, modern philosophy of culture was first formulated as a diagnosis of the crisis of culture, and then, as a response to the crisis. For Simmel, the significance of cultural crisis consisted solely in mobilising “life” to reemerge out of the crisis strengthened, to regain its “unity”. In this he ultimately positioned himself close to the earlier *Kulturphilosophie* of Eucken. It also led him to conclusions that strike the reader as an indirect admiration of war. He was able to suggest that ration cards would restore to food the character of an end, bringing money, the medium of exchange, back to its proper character as a means of satisfying needs — and not an end in itself (Simmel, 1997b: 97). Moreover, he envisioned a situation in which the war effort would give the German people a common goal and a sense of unity so that, despite the destruction of the “substance” of culture, its “form” would be revived and renewed (Simmel, 1997b: 99).

A philosophy of culture, according to Simmel, was only possible as a philosophy of cultural crisis. But the analysis of the crisis of culture served him only to reconstruct the proper, authentic functioning of culture which could only be properly understood through and thanks to its crisis. Ultimately, Simmel did not focus his attention on the crisis *per se* as a condition of possibility, although his sociological analyses often veered in that direction. Ultimately, he was interested in the possibility of returning to a proper economy of means and ends and restoring the unity of cultural life — both the unity of the individual subject in its relation to objective culture (Amat, 2017) and the unity of the collective, made possible by the proper form of culture. This notion of crisis would later be inscribed by Simmel into the metaphysics of life, in which crisis would become the necessary and transitive moment wherein life overcomes its current form



which is no longer able to accommodate it (Simmel, 2010). Culture once again is defined as a response to crisis, although this time crisis itself is defined as the product of culture. Crisis and culture are mutually conditioned: culture is possible through crisis, but crisis is conditioned by culture. A transcendental philosophy of culture in Simmel makes the self-referentiality of cultural crisis clearly visible, but ultimately fails to transform it into a concept of culture built on crisis — crisis as a condition of possibility of culture and experience in general — and ends up as a metaphysics of life.

### THE CRISIS OF CULTURE AND THE ECONOMY OF MEANS AND ENDS

The importance of Simmel's philosophy of culture lies primarily in the fact that he formulated the question of the crisis of culture in categories of transcendental philosophy: conditions of possibility, the relationship between form and content and the economy of means and ends. Like the later neo-Kantian tradition, Simmel addressed the question of culture in accordance with Kant's classic distinction between culture and civilisation. Culture for Kant was the domain of ends to which human life should aspire, encompassing morality, art and science. Civilisation, on the other hand, was a collective term for all the means we produce to be able to pursue these goals of culture. For example, we teach manners which then help to realise the moral law — but cannot be an end in itself in place of morality (Kant, 2007: 12).

Unlike, however, Rickert's, Wilhelm Windelband's, and later also Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture, the key for Simmel was a transcendental grounding of culture in the distinction between means and ends alone. Here, too, he developed the Kantian tradition: according to *The critique of judgment*, culture is "the production in a rational being of an aptitude for any ends whatever of his own choosing, consequently of the aptitude of a being in his freedom" (Kant, 2007: 260). This is not to say that Simmel was uninterested in issues that became central to philosophy of culture and, later, cultural studies — such as semiotics and the production of signification, cultural politics and intercultural communication. But the key point is that Simmel viewed philosophical questions of culture as a matter of formal relations between means and ends. So, in Simmel's theory, the concept of culture is synonymous with its crisis: for it is in crisis that the possibility of changing the existing relations of means and ends is revealed. Crisis in Simmel is a name for this transcendental experience — the very possibility to transform the economy of means and ends.

Here we are going to some extent against the spirit of Simmel's thought, which over time moved towards a vision of reconciliation, expressed in the language and sensibility of *Lebensphilosophie*. Simmel needed the notion of

crisis to float the possibility of a reunion of subjective and objective culture, so that life would once again find appropriate forms of expression. This return to a Hegelian-inspired conception of culture as something that reunites the individual with the universal had a significant impact on 20th-century philosophers of culture in various intellectual and linguistic traditions — such as György Lukács or Mikhail Bakhtin (Tihanov, 2000). Simmel surely also belongs to the Hegelian revival of the 20th century, however, his interpretation of Hegel as a philosopher of synthesis was definitely one-sided. And his framing of culture as a Hegelian-like synthesis of the subjective and objective remains to some extent at odds with his notion of crisis of culture as a condition of possibility of culture. Simmel expressed the crisis of culture in the language of transcendental philosophy: as the condition of possibility for a reconciliation between subjective and objective culture and as a disruption or even reversal of the relationship between means and ends. In different terms: there is no other need for a reconciliation than a change in the economy of means and ends. Culture and the crisis of culture are explicable in the same categories as any other crisis — be it economic, political or social. And culture is then defined by Simmel as precisely that disposition that allows us to transform the changed economy of means and ends and respond to crisis. In other words, for Simmel culture exists, because there is crisis. And on the other hand, especially in his later writings, crisis exists only for there to be a new form of culture.

This transcendental notion of culture and its crisis influenced many subsequent critical theories of modernity. In Lukács' concept of reification, in Theodor W. Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason and cultural industries, in Martin Heidegger's thinking of the essence of technique, in Herbert Marcuse's revolutionary power of art, in Michel Foucault's genealogy of power or Hannah Arendt's vision of the human condition, regardless of whether the author in question was invoking Simmel or not, we recognise a similar thought: crisis consists in changing the existing economy of means and ends. All those standpoints deny that culture is an independent sphere with its own transcendental constitution, instead treating the economy of means and ends as the only form of culture. As in Simmel, where culture is defined in categories of form and content and means and ends relation.

In the 20th century, posing the question of culture and social relations in terms of form and content provided the conditions for formulating the concept of crisis in social theory, especially in Marxist theory. This is because it was possible to speak of a form that is no longer sufficient for the content of social relations. For example, Lukács scholars emphasise both the methodological and socio-ontological importance of the category of form for his theory of the crisis of bourgeois society (Kavoulakos, 2018: 125). In social theory, however, when it comes to the question of crisis, the fundamental problem is causation:

What is the direct/structural cause of the crisis? The first step is to identify the framework that constitutes the form of a given society — in the case of Marxist theory, this would be the mode of production — and then analyse the factors that have led or may lead to undermining this framework, rendering the form (the so-called “superstructure”) inadequate for the transformed social content (the “base”, the mode of production). Here, too, however, the basic categories remain the means and the ends — bourgeois society will eventually fall into crisis when the most important end of its existence, the accumulation of capital (which over-determines all other social and cultural goals), can no longer be fulfilled.

Against the background of these later theories, Simmel’s thought might seem rather naive. He did look for social causes of crises, whether in the expansion of market relations or the outbreak of war. Nevertheless, he assumed that it was possible to reconcile objective culture and subjective culture without deep social transformation. In this regard, he was definitely not a Marxist who would seek to reconcile this divergence of the objective and subjective — what could also be described as “alienation” — in the metaphysics of life. The possibility of reconciliation, Simmel sought to show, lies in the tremendous power of culture — or “life” in his later vocabulary — to reformulate, in a moment of crisis, the existing economy of means and ends, rearticulate and express it again. Although Simmel seems to distinguish between the condition of possibility of crisis and actual, real social or cultural crises (such as war), the way he theorises culture, its form and its crisis, makes it almost impossible to sustain the distinction between culture *per se* (a form of relations between means and ends) and cultural crisis (the transformation of this economy). Culture comes to be defined by philosophy as a form that is at the same time the condition of possibility of its crisis. The question of crisis in Simmel, to put the point in other words, is explicitly formulated as both formal and a transcendental question, and not as a problem of the cause of crisis.

It wouldn’t be difficult to explain in biographical terms why Simmel came up with this peculiar concept of culture whose originality is often hidden by its enormous but silent influence on philosophy and social theory in the 20th century. As a secular Jewish intellectual, one who sometimes compared himself to Spinoza, Simmel was deeply influenced by the German tradition of literature and philosophy. However, he also experienced at firsthand that culture, no matter how close to one’s soul, can remain alienating as a social institution (Sutcliffe, 2021). It’s easy to understand both his belief in the power of culture to rearrange the codified means and ends of a given cultural formation, as well as his naive vision of a possible reconciliation of the subjective and objective in another future form of life. However, his attempt to think of the crisis of culture in transcendental terms remains a challenge, especially for today’s world, marked as it is by a crisis possibly even greater than the one Simmel witnessed at the end of his life.

The philosophy of cultural crisis, which Simmel first sketched more than a century ago, was not initially so much a social theory, a theory presenting and analysing the (economic, social etc.) causes of cultural crisis, but a philosophy of the experience of crisis. That is to say, it was a philosophy of the transcendental conditions of culture as such, conditions not reduced either to “spiritual life” on the one hand, or to the economic “base” on the other. Simmel’s philosophy contributed to a general understanding of crisis as such: crisis is not something that is caused by an external factor alone; it is not an external factor — it is the condition of possibility brought to the forefront and transforming the very thing that it makes possible. For Simmel, culture is defined and conditioned by crisis. And the importance of this understanding of the crisis of culture will become evident once we compare it with the prevailing notion of crisis in the period that immediately followed.

#### BEYOND THE CRISIS *DISPOSITIF*

For European philosophy in the aftermath of World War I, crisis became a key technical term. This wasn’t however crisis formally understood as a condition of possibility, but rather crisis as a conceptual operation the function of which was a diagnosis that provokes a response — a return to a lost essence that had become corrupted or in some other way had fallen into crisis. Already in 1919, Paul Valéry reflected on the cultural state of Europe after the Great War in his famous essay *The crisis of the mind* in which he expressed the end of faith in the linear progress of society and politics — a faith which had dominated European bourgeoisie in the second half of the 19th century, the epoch of the first wave of capitalist globalisation.

[W]e see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilisation has the same fragility as a life. The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Menander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers (Valéry, 1977: 94).

In the interwar period the notion of crisis in European intellectual life gained unprecedented significance and a new meaning. In the 19th century “crisis” referred to a break in an objective process that influenced the dispositions of individuals — like history for Burckhardt or the economy for Marx (Koselleck, 2006). The 20th century came to understand crisis as a state of the disposition toward the world, whether the disposition was intellectual, scientific or philosophical. The focus on the crisis of culture at the turn of the new century marks this change, because culture was understood both in objective and subjective categories. For Valéry, crisis affected intellectual life itself, the very ability to understand changes in the world.

The military crisis might be over. The economic crisis is still with us in all its force. But the intellectual crisis, being more subtle, by its nature, assuming the most deceptive appearances [...] this crisis will hardly allow us to grasp its true extent (Valéry, 1977: 96).

Nowhere is this transformation in the notion of crisis — from a moment in an objective process to a subjective disposition shaping the general processes — more visible than in Edmund Husserl's famous lectures on *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental philosophy*. In 1936, three years before Europe would be set ablaze again, Husserl diagnosed the crisis of science and the legitimacy of its claim to grasp the truth with absolute validity (Husserl, 1954). In his reconstruction of the history of modern sciences Husserl pointed to the subjective relation to the world — a scientific disposition — as the main factor shaping the development and the crisis of European sciences. In the face of this diagnosis, Husserl called for a return to the roots of European scientific consciousness — to Galileo and the renaissance notion of scientific discovery. To remedy the crisis meant for Husserl to return to the lost idea of science.

In the writings of Husserl's former student, Heidegger, we encounter a similar construction of the notion of crisis. In Heidegger's lecture from 1935, but published only in 1953, it is philosophy itself that has fallen into crisis and lost its connection with the understanding of Being (Heidegger, 1959). The remedy proposed is similar: a return to the original root of philosophical thinking, which for European philosophy, according to Heidegger, was in ancient Greece. Although for Heidegger the main factor of the crisis is the least "subjective", ultimately it is philosophy and its relation to Being that remains the main cause of its own crisis.

Roberto Esposito suggested treating all these concepts of crisis as following the same logical pattern, one he calls the "crisis *dispositif*" (Esposito, 2018). This pattern, in all its manifestations, proceeds from a diagnosis that a given phenomenon has fallen into crisis. There then follows a reconstruction of its true, lost essence, and finally there is a call for a return to its roots. We might even say that according to the logic of the crisis *dispositif*, it is precisely the diagnosis of crisis that is the only means to construct a "true" and "authentic" essence — of science, philosophy, or Europe. This might be the most enduring legacy of interwar European philosophy — the notion of crisis as a conceptual tool for the construction of an authentic, lost essence, which is then to be restored.

Esposito does not discuss the question of the crisis of culture in philosophy as a separate matter. However, the development of philosophy of culture at the beginning of the 20th century — and culture as a separate object of philosophical inquiry — could be seen as an important factor for the deep transformation of the concept of crisis after the First World War. In the early theories of philosophy of culture, the crisis of culture becomes, first of all,

the crisis of a subjective disposition towards the world, marking the moment when crisis does not refer to an objective event in the world, but to our relation to the world (one might say, our “being-in-the-world”). It was the same moment when the “crisis *dispositif*” described by Esposito emerged. When the question of crisis becomes a question of the subjective disposition — or even a transcendental question — the diagnosis of crisis can be transformed into a question of the return to, the restoration of, the proper relation with the world (like intellect, science, philosophy — or culture). Ultimately, in its most reactionary versions, the crisis *dispositif* would lead to calls for a return to the forsaken, forgotten and corrupted roots of authentic culture, the abandoned foundation of life, the *Boden* of *Blut*. The question that we are trying to pose here — What is the crisis of culture? — is also asked with the intention of dismantling of the crisis dispositive. However this dismantling happens, a critical, genealogical inquiry into the history and the function of the concept of crisis in 20th century should also include, if not begin with, the role diagnoses of cultural crisis played in formulating philosophical, theoretical, and later also political understanding of culture.

Esposito’s thesis, which we are examining here, is that the crisis *dispositif*, developed in the interwar period, became the dominant way of conceiving crisis in 20th-century theory and philosophy. Crisis remained a way of more or less directly defining the essence of a given phenomenon — perhaps no longer directly, but through the mediation of the crisis *dispositif* — and of establishing a goal to which the overcoming of the crisis is supposed to lead. The work to be done within the genealogy of 20th-century thought is to trace in how many theoretical fields — the humanities, the social sciences and perhaps many more — crisis thus understood became the basis for the formulation of theory and was itself defined as an object of theory and knowledge, in accordance with Roitman’s hypothesis.

The question we are confronted with is whether philosophy of culture in the 20th century was a field of reproduction of the crisis *dispositif*, or whether it constituted a field in which culture and the crisis of culture were conceptualised in a way that made it possible to theorise crisis as reality or experience *sui generis*. As we have seen, the category of crisis was important for the formation of the field of philosophy of culture, which distinguished its object of reflection precisely by diagnosing its crisis. In Simmel’s work, two paths had already been outlined which in principle could be followed by a philosophy of culture attempting to grapple with the question of what the crisis of culture is: 1. the very way culture functions, which continually transforms the formal relation between means and ends in the world inhabited by human beings; 2. a kind of deviation from the proper relation between means and ends that culture is supposed to overcome.

The pivotal role of crisis for 20th-century philosophy of culture — as well as cultural anthropology — seems obvious, though there are those that claim

that crisis is concept that is missing in the development of these disciplines (Becht & Knecht, 2016). Opinions of this kind confirm our initial thesis that the concept of crisis is theoretically undeveloped but is not entirely absent from the development of these disciplines. Philosophical anthropology of culture very early began to use crisis as a technical, though also undefined, term and in time began to problematise crisis itself as a philosophical problem, especially in the work of Ernst Cassirer (Truwant, 2021). Diagnoses of cultural crisis appeared in many 20th-century works addressing the economic, social or political changes of modern society. However, in the vast majority of cases (if not all), crisis remained a kind of indefinite and undefined theoretical term, one that made it possible to formulate a diagnosis of a crisis of culture, without specifying what that crisis consisted in.

So the crisis of culture remained at best a problem to be worked out, an object of knowledge, a phenomenon to which previously developed categories and concepts were applied. In many cases, the crisis in question was understood in the sense that Esposito described, as the crisis *dispositif* — a mechanism for determining the lost essence of a phenomenon. The role that Simmel more or less consciously assigned to crisis of culture — a constitutive element of the functioning and experience of culture, a transcendental condition of the possibility of culture as such — was disappearing. In 20th-century cultural anthropology, however, examples can be found of approaches to the crisis of culture that not only made crisis the central category for the analysis of culture, but went even further than Simmel: they included crisis not only as a condition for the existence of culture, but as a condition for all other categories and concepts with which philosophy describes the subject and its relation to the world.

## TOWARDS A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF CRISIS

Ernesto de Martino, the Italian anthropologist and historian of religion and an attentive reader of Heidegger, in the years following the Second World War proposed to look for various forms of ‘cultural apocalypse’ in both European and non-European cultures. He sought traces and records of how these cultures faced, whether in reality or purely ritualistically, the vision of their own end. In more Heideggerian language he investigated profound crises that completely changed the way in which the way of being-in-the-world was regulated in these cultures. Martino emphasised that all cultures face the fact that “being there, presence”, the very ability to understand the world around, constantly faces crisis, because it is culturally and therefore also ritually, regulated. The ritualisation of the cultural apocalypse makes it possible to experience the disintegration and reintegration of individual and collective presence, offering

us the possibility of imagining and symbolising potentially real situations of cultural disintegration.

De Martino describes the function of cultural apocalypse as a dialectic of crisis and reintegration (De Martino, 2023: 13), while pointing out that this mechanism of reintegration operates both at the level of individual actors and entire cultures. For De Martino, cultural apocalypse is not just one element of culture, but culture as such organises itself around the institutionalisation of the rituals of cultural apocalypse, and thus around facing and experiencing the possibility (or historical facticity) of the end of culture as such. Culture and the crisis of culture are in this sense the same thing: the crisis, the cultural apocalypse, is the central theme and task of any culture. Culture is nothing other than measuring itself against the possibility of its own crisis.

De Martino does not only conceptualise the crisis-integration dialectic of cultural apocalypse as a basic mechanism, a kind of transcendental logic of culture. He goes further, treating the ritualisation of cultural crisis as the basic mechanism of the constitution of all transcendental structures:

Besides this, the supreme principle of the transcendental unity of self-awareness involves a supreme risk to the person — the risk, or threat of losing the supreme principle through which it is constituted and established. This risk appears when the person, instead of retaining his autonomy in his relationship to the contents, abdicates, and allows the contents to act, outside of the synthesis, as undominated elements, as “given facts” in the absolute sense. When confronted with this threat, it is the person himself that is in danger of disintegrating, of disappearing as presence [...]. Kant adopted the analytical unit of apperception as a non-historical and uniform given fact — that is, the thought that belongs to the self: and does not change with its contents, but considers them as an integral part; and then placed the transcendental condition of this given fact within the synthetic unit of apperception. But elements and given facts of the consciousness do not exist (except through abstraction), nor does a presence exist — there is no empirical being-within-the-world that is a given fact, an original immediate that is sheltered from all danger and incapable, within its own sphere, of any dram or development, or any *history* (De Martino, 1972: 146–147).

With these brief remarks, De Martino made perhaps the strongest anthropological turn in philosophy in the history of the 20th century, reducing basic transcendental categories — the unity of apperception and being-in-the-world — to the material and historical effects of cultural institutions, thus subjecting them to radical historicisation. It was crisis, in this case, that proved to be the key concept for such a conceptual operation: if anything is in crisis, this automatically means that it is a historical phenomenon and susceptible to change. De Martino’s philosophical project was to show that crisis is not only a logic that explains the functioning of culture, but that the crisis of culture is a category that explains fundamental transcendental philosophical concepts.



De Martino's project of treating cultural crisis as a central philosophical category has been taken up by the philosopher Paolo Virno, who proposes to treat the cultural apocalypse described by the Italian anthropologist as an example of a basic anthropogenetic mechanism — the repetition of anthropogenesis (Virno, 2015: 91–93). Virno, in fact, like Esposito, attempts to reclaim crisis as a central and fundamental philosophical category, rather than a mere object of knowledge to which previously developed concepts and categories are applied. In these projects we can recognise a similar tendency, which in the 20th century was found in the early proponents of critical theory, who sought in economic crisis, in catastrophe, in the radical historicity of desire — and later, in the most theoretically elaborate way in negative dialectics — the basic analytical categories of critique.

Conceptualising crisis as the main theme and problem of every culture, as De Martino proposes, or even as a category of anthropogenesis, like Virno, transforms the epistemology of the crisis question in a similar manner to Simmel at one point — when he attempted, but ultimately failed, to theorise crisis of culture in his project of philosophy of culture. In these conceptions, a diagnosis of crisis is no longer merely a conceptual operation to discern an object of knowledge — like a crisis of society, crisis of politics, crisis of science or crisis of culture — but it becomes a central category for identifying culture or even for defining becoming-human. Crisis is then no longer merely a threat to shelter from, a sickness or corruption to remedy, a problem to overcome, but a condition of possibility for a relation with reality — be that reality culture, politics, philosophy or social practice etc. Anew philosophy of crisis of this kind may well be possible, but in any case it must begin by asking why and how the concept of crisis shaped theoretical self-understanding in the 20th century.

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