

WIKI n°13: Multiplication or heightened perception of crises

Originally a medical term, "crisis" referred to "a set of pathological phenomena manifesting abruptly and intensely, but for a limited period, and suggesting a generally decisive change, for better or for worse, in the evolution of a disease"⁴³.

The fundamental characteristics of crises are their intensity and suddenness, coupled with their limited duration and significant impact, whether positive or negative.

Crises are generally understood as turning points in the normal course of events, signaling a decisive and often negative change. From this perspective, the course of events is considered "normal" until disrupted by an "abnormal" event—a crisis. In other words, the definition of a crisis depends on one's interpretation of normality.

The occurrence of such often unpredictable, intense, and brief events creates sudden disruptions and adverse consequences. This raises the question of whether crises have become more frequent or whether our perception of them has intensified compared to the past.

Factors influencing the perception of crises:

- Paul RICOEUR argues that **modernity**⁴⁴ is not only a historical period but also a state of mind characterized by the pursuit of progress, faith in reason, and a tendency toward individual and collective autonomy. Crises can be seen as symptomatic of the tensions and contradictions inherent in this modern project. The various dimensions of crises—manifesting politically, economically, socially, and culturally—underscore their complexity as phenomena rooted in the very structures of modernity.
- **Substantial global population growth** since 1980 naturally implies increased human interactions and, consequently, a greater potential for crisis situations.

⁴³ Centre national de ressources textuelles et linguistiques.

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, Paul "La crise: un phénomène spécifiquement moderne?", Revue de théologie et de philosophie, n°120, 1988, pp. 1-19

- The human tendency to idealize the past while overlooking its negative aspects—known as the "fading affect bias"⁴⁵—shapes a subjective and skewed view of current political crises. For example, while democracy is more widespread today than in the past, perceptions often suggest otherwise.
- **Tocqueville's syndrome**⁴⁶ has a significant impact: in democratic societies where equality is promoted, individuals develop high expectations regarding improvements in their living conditions. Even when these improvements occur, citizens may express dissatisfaction. Similarly, as equality or peace advances, remaining inequalities or instances of violence, even if moderate, become increasingly intolerable to both victims and public opinion. Consequently, in relatively peaceful democratic societies, almost any event can be interpreted as a crisis.
- **The media** play a central role in amplifying the perception of crises. The advent of continuous news cycles, social media, and other digital platforms has brought global attention to events that might have otherwise remained unnoticed or localized.⁴⁷ This extensive media exposure, coupled with a tendency for sensationalism and negativity bias, fosters a constant perception of crisis. This phenomenon of media focusing on problems to attract larger audiences dates back to the late 1960s.
 - ✓ Media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic⁴⁸ illustrates this heightened perception. The focus was predominantly on negative aspects, such as rising infection rates and fatalities, while less attention was given to positive developments like declining contamination rates or vaccine successes⁴⁹.
 - ✓ Similarly, the media extensively highlighted the severity of Greece's economic crisis (2010–2015) and its implications for the Eurozone and global economy, often exaggerating its gravity. However, the resolution of the crisis and Greece's subsequent economic recovery received comparatively little coverage.
 - ✓ Finally, As Esther DUFLO observed, "A catastrophe occurring on the African continent needs 48 times more victims to receive the same level of coverage on American television as a catastrophe occurring in America or Europe." This highlights the selectivity in crises deemed worthy of media attention⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ Richard Walker et John Skorwronski, "The Fading Affect Bias: But What the Hell Is It For?", *Applied cognitive psychology*, volume 23, 2009

⁴⁶ ; Elster, J. (2009). Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist. Cambridge University Press; Jaume, L. (2008). Tocqueville : Les sources aristocratiques de la liberté. Fayard.

⁴⁷ Pinker, S. (2012). *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Reprint édition). Penguin Books

⁴⁸ IRES, Rapport stratégique Covid-19

⁴⁹ Bruce Sacerdote, Ranjan Sehgal et Molly Cook, " Why Is All COVID-19 News Bad News?", National Bureau of Economic Research (USA), 2020

⁵⁰ Jeangène Vilmer, J.-B. (2012, 8 février). Existe-t-il un "effet CNN" ? L'intervention militaire et les médias. *Inaglobal. La revue des industries créatives et des médias.

While crises may indeed be more numerous today, perception is significantly influenced by external factors. Even if the actual number of crises is on the rise, biased public perception leads to an overestimation of intensity and nature (confusing structural and cyclical crises).