The Crisis of Crisis: Dissolution of the Event in the Risk Society

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"From the point of view of time, everything existing becomes an event"[1]—because everything existing happens in the present, and the present passes in the very moment at which it appears. But if the event is the norm, when do we meet the Event, the crucial moment that makes the difference, starts a story, and allows us to articulate the passage of time? Memory and planning need notable events, discontinuities that help organize observation, action, and possibly critique. They build discontinuities in many different ways, with different implications and different consequences.

A highly effective construction of events, and one that is widespread today, is the form of the *crisis*, which can be found everywhere: in finance, in politics, in the ecological debate, in private life—in more and more areas and with increasing frequency. But is it an appropriate form in which to observe the social world and social time? Or is it, as some have suggested, a form that hides as much as it reveals? [2]

The notion of crisis comes from medical language, and indicates the stage at which a disease either goes into remission or becomes acute—the crucial moment at which history divides, the

[1] Niklas Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*, vol.1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 261 (" … wird alles, was ist, von der Zeit her gesehen, Ereignis").

[2] Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

event upon which the subsequent course of the disease depends. The temporality of crisis is a time marked by crucial events, with a structure that must be interpreted and possibly followed in order for the crisis to be overcome and a more harmonious physiological state restored. The crisis is an opportunity to coordinate with the course of things—and assumes that there is a correct course to be reestablished, a normality to return to.

Describing what is happening as a "crisis" often appears effective and feels very satisfying. But the semantics of crisis is not neutral, and does not want to be—it is a description that is both a diagnosis and the beginning of an explanation. The idea of crisis identifies a pathology and presents it as a transitory state that can be overcome.[3] Identifying the crisis is already a step towards overcoming it. One understands, and has an orientation for one's action—even if one cannot be sure of success. The crisis is always informative, and allows the observer to gather further information, to criticize, and (if so desired) to act.

The most serious crisis (for those who seek order) would be a condition in which there can be no crisis because there are no revealing crucial moments, and where the observer himself is immersed in the world he tries to describe. There are no articulations and no events that disclose the correct order of things, because there is no correct order to restore, but only that which is continually generated and reproduced. This would be a world in which the observer cannot identify the "right" course of things with which one should coordinate, because it cannot be seen from the

[3] Jürgen Habermas, [1973] *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975); Reinhart Koselleck, [1959] *Critique and Crises: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

outside and has no independent references. One would need a different way of observing the world and oneself, and the relationship of oneself with the world.

But maybe this world without events is the one in which we find ourselves now, the world of the current risk society, which in consequence is so confusing to observers. From the perspective of risk, the future does not exist as an independent given,[4] but depends upon what we do (or don't do) to build it; therefore it is risky—it can go wrong, we can regret our actions, and we know this in the very moment at which we decide.[5] But how do we decide what to do when we face an open future in which, strictly speaking, anything is possible—even if not everything will come about? And especially when we face a future that we cannot know? There are no crucial moments and no crisis, because the future does not yet exist and cannot send signals—but still, we would like to have some indication.

The semantics of risk has identified a concept other than that of crisis, one that seems more flexible and less prescriptive—a way of referring to the event that does not imply critique and does not necessarily presuppose a correct order of things. Instead of crisis, our society, risk society, seeks *occasions*—these are what concern and fascinate us. It is no coincidence that risk and occasion are associated. The occasion is the other side of risk—the positive side of openness and opportunity, as opposed to the negative side of threat and danger. We run risks in order to seize occasions, and all occasions are risky. But reference to the occasion helps us to manage risk. The occasion seems to give us an orientation: we must be able to identify the right moment at which to steer the course of

[4] Or as a range of alternative givens, as in scenario planning (Elena Esposito, *The Future of Futures. The Time of Money in Financing and Society* [Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011], chapter 10).

[5] Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991).

events in the direction most favorable to us, and this requires a particular sensitivity to context and to circumstances, a practical wisdom that often escapes the criteria of formalized rationality.

In its various forms (*kairos*, opportunity), the occasion seems to give access to a creative dimension, unstable and difficult to control, but therefore productive and effective. A part of the fascination is undoubtedly due to the impression that we are dealing with a dimension that, although essential, is usually neglected or at least overlooked, and thus indirectly reveals a blind spot in our idea of rationality and planning, and especially in our conception of time—a blind spot that also affects the idea of crisis. Someone who observes the crisis already knows the right course of things to be restored once the crisis is over, whereas the occasion is completely open. Anyone who looks for the crisis does not see occasions—he closes the open occasion into the preestablished form of the crisis, and sees only what crisis allows him to see, thus missing out on a great many occasions.

But does the occasion really exist, and do we know what it is? Do we have a concept of the event appropriate to the complexity and flexibility of a society that is based on, and draws its criteria from, contingency?

The idea of the occasion has a long history. Already in ancient times there was the feeling that the forms of temporality are not exhausted by the classic distinction between *aion* and *cronos*, between eternity and the fleeting time of humans. In the form of *kairos*, occasion indicated an additional temporality, inserted as a third between the time-without-time of gods and the mobile time of mortals—a potentiality that is hard to define, but in which time discloses its materiality and its depth. *Kairos*, the time of occasion, is not an abstract time like that of dates or chronology, the empty time of a merely formal dimension; *kairos* is a significant time full of potentialities and

constraints, and yields indications on what to do: the moment is suitable for certain things and not for others, shows up at a given instant, and cannot be recovered later.

Kairos is the time of *mêtis*, a form of contextual intelligence that concerns practical efficacy, and which does not refer to immutable truths but to the infinite variability and diversity of specific situations.[6] There is a right moment to start a battle or to get married, to leave for a journey or to make an investment. One should be able to seize the moment and mobilise in its favor a complex of forces that remain unknown. You do not need to know everything and to control all factors—just to be able to refer to the context so as to obtain indications to guide your action in a nonarbitrary way.[7]

This dense and informative set of terms appears all the more valuable in relation to modern temporality, which is far more abstract than ancient time with its reference to eternity. Our chronological time is incomparably more empty and contingent. It consists of a timeless difference (the present that vanishes in the very instant in which it appears) between a past that no longer exists and a future that does not yet exist, endlessly extended backwards and forwards without telling us anything about what will happen or what has been.

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[6] Cf. Monique Trédé, *Kairos. L'a-propos et l'occasion. Le mot e la notion d'Homère à la fin du IV^e^ siècle avant J.-C.* (Paris: Klincksieck,1992). On *mêtis* the text of reference is Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, [1974] *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), which first brought to attention a concept that would later be the focus of much discussion.

[7] According to Eric Charles White (*Kaironomia. On the Will-To-Invent* [Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1987]), "kaironomies" are theories of the laws governing exceptions. According to Vladimir Jankélévitch (*Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* [Paris: Seuil, 1980]), they rely on a paradoxical "kairology": a technique of the good use of the occasion (which however is always unpredictable).

In the ancient temporality to which *kairos* belongs, the order of time conveyed meanings, and therefore was of interest. Genealogy, for example, gives time a meaning and an orientation; it starts from a significant event and creates an order in reference to it: after the birth of the King, before the end of the war, three crops after the famine. Historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides only bothered to temporally coordinate events when this coordination was relevant to the meaning of the narration. Events with no meaningful connection had no temporal coordination either. When the protagonists of the story moved from one place to another, or when the context of the narration changed, the timeframe also changed, with no need to establish general relations of contemporaneity: in different places and in different events, different times obtained. Time, in this interpretation, depended upon the meaning of the event and upon its relations with other data and other events. It was meaning that established time, when required; and time was always significant.

Our time, the time of calendars, is, on the contrary, empty and devoid of meaning—and that's why it works. Modern time is measured by abstract markings such as dates, not by "natural temporal markers" such as stars or genealogies.[8] No one can know what will happen in the future, under what conditions we will find ourselves, or how we will consider events; however (and because of this) we can refer unambiguously to a future date, which provides a unique reference shared by everyone, and which has the same meaning (i.e., no meaning) for everyone. The date is only a date, and the calendar gives no indication as to what to say or do, or about the state of the world—thus leaving us entirely free to decide and to act.

[8] Jack Goody, "The Time of Telling and the Telling of Time in Written and Oral Cultures," in John Bender and David E. Wellbery (eds.), *Chronotypes. The Construction of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 77–97: 92.

The advantages of this abstraction for planning, coordination, and the complexity of social life are evident. There are constraints, of course, but they do not depend on time, which is open to receiving any determination but is not at all informative; and we find ourselves in a chronic state of uncertainty. So *kairos* fascinates us as a sort of compensation and a breaking open of the abstractness and neutrality of time, and at the same time as the promise of a broader and more flexible form of wisdom. The crucial moment seems to promise clues as to what to do. It is true that the future does not exist yet, and that no one can know it, but the ability to seize and exploit occasions ought to enable us to face it more favorably.

But is the semantics of *kairos* still appropriate for this purpose? Does the occasion really exist, in the sense of the moment full of potentiality, to be seized before it goes by and is lost? Or is it a further residue—maybe the last—of an "ontological" attitude that still refers to independent entities which the observer can see from outside? From the perspective of second-order observation, is an idea of an opportunity that exists by itself, and which the observer need only meet and exploit, any longer plausible?

Like risk, occasion is neither a given of the world nor an inherent characteristic of a specific crucial moment, to be caught when it occurs. It becomes so, but only in retrospect. Rather than as an encounter with something independent, occasion can be seen as a result.[9] It is only in retrospect that the moment is revealed as crucial, and you see the opportunity that it contains—after it has generated a course of events that mark a difference and would not have happened without that initial break. The crucial moment begins a story, and is indispensable for that story (so in a sense it is necessary); but it was not crucial before that story took shape. If time had taken a different

[9] François Jullien, *Traité de l'efficacité* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1996).

course, a different moment would be crucial, in a different way: I could have fallen in love with someone else, and then my story would be different, including the decisive moment of the first meeting. In this sense, the occasion is revealed when it dissolves as event, in so far as it can no longer be different.[10] Looking back, one realizes that things could have been otherwise, but also that now a certain course is necessary, starting from the initial occasion. The occasion is the moment that gave rise to a course that will eventually also allows us to observe its starting point, its beginning—but had it not begun, it could not be observed; and were it not observed, it would not exist as occasion (one of the possible reformulations of "re-entry" given in Spencer Brown's *Laws of Form*).[11]

This does not imply that the occasion becomes irrelevant, or is voided as a reference. The crucial moment makes a difference, and observing it is very useful. But not because time itself contains breaks, with the occasion allowing the decision maker to access the hidden nature of things, as the mystique of the occasion seems to suggest, but rather because it forces him to observe himself and his relationship with the world—with *his* world, which depends upon what he does and upon the way he observes, creating ruptures and irreversibilities. The time of the occasion is a kind of performative temporality, which takes into account recursive circuits running from the future to the present (a present that tries to predict it), and from the present to the future (a future that depends upon what we do today). Even if time is contingent, and even if the future is open, not everything is possible in time; and the occasion reminds that in each case, possibilities are produced

[10] George Lennox Sherman Shackle, *Imagination and the Nature of Choice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979).

[11] George Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form* (New York: Julian Press, 1972).

by a present that excludes other possibilities. Every time that we do something, this implies that we do *not* do something else; but we create the conditions for the possibilities that will arise in an as-yet-unknown future (Yves Barel speaks of "potentialization").[12]

In modern temporality, the image of *kairos* cannot no longer be the classical one of the running young man with the single lock of hair that must be grasped as he passes by—because there is nothing to seize before it is grasped. If we grasp him, we grasp ourselves and our projection of the future, affecting the course of his running, but not determining its direction.

[12] Yves Barel, *Le paradoxe et le système. Essai sur le fantastique social* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1979).