

Polillo, Simone

Article

Economy, politics, and critical events: From transformation to permanent crisis

economic sociology. perspectives and conversations

Provided in Cooperation with:

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG), Cologne

Suggested Citation: Polillo, Simone (2024) : Economy, politics, and critical events: From transformation to permanent crisis, economic sociology. perspectives and conversations, ISSN 1871-3351, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG), Cologne, Vol. 25, Iss. 3, pp. 6-13

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/300732>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

Economy, politics, and critical events: From transformation to permanent crisis

Simone Polillo

Events, ruptures, critical junctures: these have become critical concepts in sociology. Yet, they have not enabled current models to grasp the complexity of capitalist crises, in their dual nature as unique occurrences and intrinsic characteristics of capitalist economies. Studies of political crises, where these concepts have been developed most fully, make political conflict, semiotics, and cultural change central to understanding the contingencies and emergent properties of crises and their fragile connection to the underlying reality they represent. By contrast, analyses of economic crises often view them as concrete realities with quantifiable effects on people's lives. While the ontology of economic crises should not be ignored, especially in the context of orthodox economic approaches that explain crisis away to preserve their focus on efficiency and equilibrium, this perspective has not fully illuminated how these crises are culturally negotiated, administered, or performed. Think, for instance, how in the United States the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a deep economic crisis but also sparked a sincere belief among policymakers and progressive think tanks that the lockdown would instigate fundamental structural transformations such as universal parental leave, expanded Child Tax Credit, loan forgiveness: economic,

political, and cultural change seemed to go hand in hand. As the pandemic wound down, these hopes were dashed, and a regressive, inflation-centered discourse has now taken hold, calling for austerity, a restriction on assistance programs, and curtailed public spending. This is not a peculiarity of the pandemic response. As Sewell (2012) suggests, there is something enigmatic about economic crises more generally; they feel like and are experienced as events, with their "eventfulness" consisting of their capacity to transform structures. Yet, they are not transformative, neither structurally nor in a semiotic sense. Instead, their transformative power, not always activated, lies in reshaping the underlying political structures that support and perpetuate capitalist systems through shifting power dynamics. As a result, they also tend to leave the economic structure intact, the logic of capitalism seemingly unaltered, and faith in the restorative power of markets seemingly unchallenged.

In this article, I argue that the ontological approach to economic crisis can, and should, be complemented by an approach that departs from the contingent characterization of the "economic." The nature of economic crisis, from its beginning to its resolution, is inherently uncertain, and this contingency stems from the very way we construct and manage the economy. The economy itself is an object constantly being shaped through analysis, technical interventions, and expert knowledge (Çalışkan and Callon 2009). To match this performative approach to the economic, the essay discusses a "distributed" model of crisis

Simone Polillo is professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. He is the author of two books, *The Ascent of Market Efficiency: Finance That Cannot Be Proven* (Cornell University Press, 2020) and *Conservatives Versus Wildcats: A Sociology of Financial Conflict* (Stanford University Press, 2023). His research focuses on how monetary relationships form, how they are governed, and how they fail, concentrating primarily on institutional dynamics (e.g., the power of central banks) and relational ones (e.g., how creditworthiness is established). In his current work, he investigates the role that exceptions play in economic governance. In 2022, he coedited an issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* with André Vereta-Nahoum (Department of Sociology, University of São Paulo), in which they first proposed a distributed model of crisis. sp4ft@virginia.edu

analysis (Polillo and Vereta-Nahoum 2022). This framework challenges the exclusively ontological focus on crises, revealing how their very nature is shaped by shifting narratives and diverse expertise, ultimately influencing political and economic outcomes. A distributed model can afford a deeper understanding of Sewell's observation about the puzzling nature of economic crisis – often appearing "uneventful" due to its recurring nature within capitalism, even when it triggers significant political restructuring. Attending to the representations that give meaning to crisis allows

us to situate their eventfulness in the very continuities that are reproduced through crisis, and in the silencing of those who bear the costs of how a crisis is constructed, managed, and acted upon.

I begin with an overview of new models of crisis in political sociology and international political economy, fleshing out and making more explicit the insights they offer into the distributed model. I then draw on Callon's economization approach to better integrate these insights, and illustrate this model with a historical analysis of Italy's "permanent crisis" of the 1970s and its "overflows" on subsequent political and cultural crises, focusing in particular on the critical analysis of a contemporary Italian economist, Federico Caffè.

Crisis in political sociology

There are two main theoretical perspectives on crisis in political sociology: we can broadly describe them as *transformative*, with crisis intended as the catalyst of political transformation (Sewell 2005; Wagner-Pacifci 2017), versus *stabilizing*, with crisis framed as a problem of governance (Adey, Anderson, and Graham 2015; Collier and Lakoff 2021). The first, *transformative* approach connects crisis to political change by emphasizing the disruptive power of events (their "eventfulness"), and the political work needed to stabilize them and render them meaningful. It is a tradition that goes from Sewell's eventful critique of the sociology of revolution and of comparative historical sociology to Wagner-Pacifci's theorizing of events and eventfulness. This approach is interested in the dynamics of power as they are shaped by contestation. It wants to understand change, and it foregrounds the relationship between sovereign and subject in doing so: in Wagner-Pacifci's (2017, 31) words, "there are social and political forces – structures, agents, institutions – that vie with themselves and among themselves to acknowledge or ignore the imprecations and interventions of the event's performatives, demonstratives, and representations." This approach also tends to put the state at the center of its focus, foregrounding the political dimensions of crisis via its relationship with social order.

The second, *stabilizing* approach to crisis takes the problem of crisis from the point of view of governing. It is no less political than the first approach, but rather than change, it emphasizes administrative rationality and continuity, and how knowledge and expertise are implicated in harnessing crisis to conservative agendas (where "conservative" is not a strictly political label and rather refers to attempts to preserve ongoing arrangements of power). In this framework,

the claim that crisis extends administrative rationality is based on a model of power as distributed rather than sovereign: crisis engages policymakers, experts, and broader publics in a moral discourse that searches for responsibility, errors, and threats, rather than fostering a clear understanding of the logic through which events unfold. The proliferation of crisis narratives, then, stops rather than nourishes critical and transformative agendas.

The core argument of the stabilizing approach is in turn developed in two main directions: by Roitman as a critical approach to crisis narratives; and by Anderson, Collier, and Lakoff as an "emergency" approach. Roitman (2013) turns the problem of crisis on its head and theorizes crisis as a second-order observation, not an object of analysis. She highlights how crisis is performed through the positing of culturally meaningful categories and schemas that are moral in nature, that justify a search for errors and responsibilities rather than an analysis of how concrete social processes operate. Crisis, in other words, is more of a morality play than a program for change.

For Collier and Lakoff (2021), crisis is an essential element of emergencies, or policy programs motivated by diffuse rationalities that put the anticipation of future threats and the management of risk at the center of government policy and institutional transformation. At the core of their approach lies a genealogy of the "process through which a governmental apparatus initially assembled to manage economic depression and industrial mobilization for war mutated into an apparatus of emergency preparedness for domestic catastrophe" (2021, 4). Technocratic expertise is mobilized not simply to prepare for crisis but to prevent it, turning crisis management into an ongoing process of risk analysis and threat assessment. Ben Anderson (2020), in addition, focuses on the mobilization of fear, urgency, and uncertainty about the future as catalysts for political action. An example of how crisis turns into institutionalized emergency with politically regressive effects is the shift in the United States from older cash welfare programs to temporary cash welfare in the '90s, premised on the idea that the older welfare regime had incentivized out-of-wedlock childbearing and dependence and morally destroyed poor people, and that a new regime which would impose time limits on welfare was needed to make people more independent and stable in the future. Once the crisis of welfare turned into an emergency policy program, states then exploited this opening to spend the money on other projects while continuing to cut benefits (Seefeldt 2017).

These models of crisis – both as political transformation and as a stabilizing model of governance – are not about economic crisis per se, but they provide

useful perspectives on it and can be considered complementary. In the political transformation perspective, political failure in managing crisis instigates social change, creating a space for creativity, cultural transformation, and resignification. In the stabilizing perspective, the rationality of government is tied to its success in preempting crisis, which ensures the reproduction of its power. In both models, further, the unpredictability and creativity of responses to crisis always generate new social forms and cultural meanings, but it is authoritative interventions that eventually put an end to the crisis – either because new political formations appear, or through a process of institutional growth and structural stabilization.

From political to economic crisis: IPE and new crisis theory

The idea that crisis emerges at the intersection of governance and transformation is central to a strand of theory in international political economy (IPE) that can be dubbed “new crisis theory,” a lineage that builds on Marx and Engels’ theorizing of crisis as dual (Koselleck and Richter 2006) to weave historical analysis into a structurally oriented but agentic understanding of capitalist evolution. In a wonderful, critical overview of this literature, Samman (2015) shows the influence that French regulation theory, with its critical incorporation of the post-structuralist Marxism of Althusser and Keynes’s theoretical focus on uncertainty, has had in this strand of theorizing. One key takeaway is that capitalist crisis is overdetermined, in the sense that there is no universal contradiction that pushes the capitalist system to the brink but rather crisis emerges from multiple, historically specific contradictions present in every regime of accumulation. Further, crisis is an amplification of uncertainty, previously dampened by the ongoing balance of power; and it is through narration (ideas, discourse, interpretation) that social and political actors overcome it. As Samman argues, it is important to extend this argument by drawing analytical focus to the meta-historical dimensions of crisis, specifically to the narrative practices of historical representation, and the functions they are able to perform. This means attending to the role that crisis itself, in its signification, mobilizes as reanalysis, narrativization, and the drawing of lessons from the past, leading to “history-making” as a reinterpretation of past crises. In subsequent work, Samman (2022) shows that, under financialization and the subsequent emergence of the asset economy it instigated, economic crisis has transformative effects on social and cultural forms, and the construction of temporality they support, in

particular cyclical notions of time that posit it as endlessly repeating itself. Taking a cue from Jameson’s focus on the nexus between capitalism and culture, he notes how one of the cultural expressions of this temporal shift is the spread of binge-watching TV series on streaming channels.

New crisis theory in IPE, in short, looks at the interplay between different social forces in the subjective and cultural construction of crisis. As with the discussion above, it is useful to distinguish between political transformation and the reproduction of ongoing arrangements as contingent outcomes of economic crisis. The “symptomatology” of crisis, as proposed by Jessop (Jessop and Knio 2018), is a matter of focusing attention and zeroing in on the construction of crisis as it unfolds: not simply understanding its antecedents and causes, or its effects, as objective factors, but rather questioning assumptions regarding the duration and interconnectedness of current crises with those in the past. Framing an event, disruption, or problem within the scope of crisis management turns it into a manageable emergency. This process involves a suite of tools, including risk calculation, predictive and anticipatory measures, and affective responses. However, there is a paradox where crisis management itself can become crisis-ridden. A distributed model of crisis analyzes how economic crises are constructed, negotiated, and enacted as self-perpetuating entities – especially when they disrupt the administrative logic of emergency. Within this model, the performative nature of a crisis is evident in its capacity to perpetuate a state of deadlock, inhibiting decisive action rather than catalyzing it. In short, if we follow Samman and move away from crisis as an ontology to crisis as productive of subjective experiences that echo (and perhaps perform?) social scientific knowledge, the distributed model of crisis gains more analytical purchase.

Towards a distributed model of economic crisis

The upshot of my argument, so far, is that an approach to economic crisis as a problem of sovereign power – whether as a catalyst of political transformation or as a problem of crisis management – illuminates its transformative potential for structures, institutions, and cultural forms. Although the connection between political crises and subsequent economic changes needs further exploration, it aligns well with economic sociology research that emphasizes the state’s role in guiding economic shifts. What I want to focus on, however, is the paradoxically stabilizing effects of eco-

conomic crisis – for it is this argument that makes it tempting to frame economic crisis as ontologically real. Understanding the continuities that economic crisis makes possible, the opportunities it affords for the preservation of the economic order, in short, the paradox of the resilience of economic structure in the face of seemingly devastating challenges, requires precisely a move beyond the sovereign model of crisis.

A complementary framework can be proposed, one that departs from the sovereign crisis model and emphasizes its dispersed nature and surrounding claims. This framework pulls together insights about the distributed nature of the power to deliberate and make critical claims already present in the crisis literature. Like non-sovereign or distributed models of political action and practice, this reorientation informs a non-sovereign crisis model. The focus is on the implicit and explicit connections between crisis claims and their audiences. This approach is rooted in the modern discourse that views a crisis as a historical break driven by critical moral assertions. Modernity enabled the possibility of distributed critique through the formation of diverse publics composed of concerned individuals. The authorship of moral judgments shifted from the sovereign to reflexive and critical citizens, as public interest was no longer solely the concern of the sovereign. Yet Habermas's optimism about the public sphere and Giddens's "reflexive modernization" project now seem overshadowed by Beck's more pessimistic approach to "risk society."

This distributed model of crisis can be refined to identify the conditions under which the proliferation of crisis claims and the rationalities they embody, rather than inciting calls to action instead sustain the status quo through the preservation of discursive regimes, the fragmentation of responsibility, and an increased public mistrust in the capacity of governing authorities to manage crisis. The point of departure is Roitman's (2013) critique of the transformative potential of crisis claims, paired with an understanding of distributed agency in the economic world. The problem with crisis accounts, according to Roitman, is their foundation in the "sociology of error." They are accompanied by, and depend on, persistent and often implicit judgments that latencies, errors, and failings must be eradicated and overcome. Within a distributed-crisis framework, this dynamic appears particularly relevant in crisis management situations. A surge in crisis claims, as the perception of an ongoing crisis intensifies, influences their intended effects, instigating calls for a return to a "normal" state, and, most importantly, the reassertion of the "normality" of some at the expense of excluding and subjugating others: the emergence of the category of the "essential worker" at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic is exemplary of

this process. Some crisis claims may be challenged by denials of their validity; others may be countered by alternative crisis claims. Following Roitman's critique of crisis claims – that they may not be erroneous representations of the world based on a concern with errors and mistakes but ways of shaping reality precisely by virtue of their recourse to a sociology of error – we can apply the same logic to crisis claims themselves. Crisis claims may be effective precisely because of their recourse to error. This effectiveness may come from distributing responsibility, normalizing crisis, or segmenting audiences and publics, rather than facilitating the construction of new political projects.

To further elaborate on this point, we can find a deeper justification for understanding crisis in general, and economic crisis in particular, as a distributed set of claims by drawing on Michel Callon's work on hybrid forums. Callon (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009) proposes this term to foreground contexts that facilitate an exchange and amplification of expertise. These are situations in which experts make decisions in uncertain conditions and face challenges and opposition, but potentially also support, from lay audiences. Callon challenges the strict boundary between expert and lay knowledge and highlights the variation in research practices. On one end of the spectrum lies "secluded research," which takes place in restricted circles and involves alliances between powerful actors. Political decisions are made without broad public debate. On the other end is "research in the wild," where experts and laypersons collaborate to build mutual trust, focus collective attention on the problems at hand, and acknowledge the world's richness and complexity to produce better knowledge. Callon advocates for institutional arrangements that promote cooperation between these two extremes, so that they can lead to the formation of "new groups and new identities" (2009, 10). These arrangements take the shape of "organized hybrid forums" where collective learning produces new knowledge and social configurations, resulting in a network of micro-decisions that are subject to discussion and interconnected.

Callon's concern with hybrid forums, of course, emerges from the economization approach he spearheaded, his insistence that economic processes too depend on expert interventions via the role of economic theory in performing the economy. In this framework, economic experts, such as economists, play a crucial role in constructing economic objects, such as consumer markets, through theories and models. Expertise is not only discourse; in fact, its power lies in how it gets inscribed into technical devices like economic models, financial formulas, and forecasting tools, which perform the economy as they get picked up by various, heterogeneous actors using them in an eco-

economic capacity (Muniesa, Millo, and Callon 2007). The economy can thus be understood as an ordinary technical accomplishment, framed by and shot through economic devices that separate the exchanges and effects they measure from the exchanges and effects they do not. The latter are overflowings, mostly ignored by market actors, or dismissed as non-economic, until they are captured by calculative techniques that reveal and perform their economic nature (Callon 1998).

The analysis of economic crisis relies on the economization of crisis claims: this is evident in the fact that economic crisis is a calculative construction, in line with Callon's perspective and his suggestion that calculation, and more broadly economization, is the process through which the economic is assembled. However, it is more difficult to envision how hybrid forums would work in an economic context, where heterogeneous crisis claims, supported by heterogeneous technical devices, can lead to fragmentation rather than coordinated action; and where, as the governance perspective emphasizes, calls for action are surrounded by uncertainty, anxiety, and a sense of urgency. These insights have implications for an understanding of how crisis claims contribute to and shape constructions of economic crisis. Connecting the distributed model of crisis claims with Callon's distributed model of expertise reveals that it is not sufficient to merely inquire whether economic agencies possess the "symbolic power" to declare an economic state of affairs a state of crisis (Bourdieu 2014). The performativity model implies that technical devices empower actors to frame situations as crises, but also that calculation allows for potentially conflicting interpretations to emerge. The two ends of the expertise continuum, in fact, align with the two approaches to crisis we have been discussing: in conditions of "secluded research," expertise is likely to be a tool of contestation among elites, vying for more political power, and in turn influencing the "sovereign" construction of crisis. But in conditions of "research in the wild," the diffusion of technical devices increases the heterogeneity of crisis claims themselves. Heterogeneous constructions of crisis in turn mean fragmentation, uncertainty, and weak grounds for coordinated political action.

1970s Italy: "Permanent" crisis?

To move from theory to empirical analysis, let us examine how a distributed model of economic crisis manifests in the real world. This framework helps explain why crises often feel "uneventful" despite widespread anxieties, and how they might lead to institutional changes that reinforce the conditions that led to crisis – a puzzle that has preoccupied thinkers like

Sewell and persistently resurfaces in political commentary. Rather than a lack of awareness, this analysis suggests that the uneventfulness of crisis arises from a proliferation of crisis claims, each supported by a web of technical devices that shape interpretation and action. To empirically ground this dynamic, I introduce the concept of the "permanent crisis." Here, a prolonged period of instability normalizes a cacophony of crisis narratives, generating a pervasive sense that things are not going well, yet hindering decisive, transformative action.

I want to turn to a brief historical discussion of this, focusing on the case of Italy in the post-WWII period, and in particular the 1970s. The distributed model of crisis offers a lens for understanding how the complex dynamics of the Italian economic experience in the 1970s shaped the perception of and responses to the unfolding events. Here, multiple actors, each with their own evolving agendas and interpretations of how economic conditions shaped their own situation, played a role in constructing the narrative surrounding the crisis. This period becomes particularly illustrative of the "permanent crisis" concept since the extended economic turmoil normalized the competing crisis narratives, obscuring decisive action. Unlike critical-juncture models of crisis, ideas guiding the interpretation of crisis – of "what constitutes an economic crisis as crisis" (Blyth 2002, 9) – paired with technical devices to contribute to a more general perception of the long temporality of the crisis, and rather than seeking to find transformative solutions to it, prepared the ground for institutional reconfigurations that perpetuated the status quo.

The economic turmoil of the 1970s echoed challenges faced by the rest of the capitalist world. After prior decades of growth, Italy faced its first significant decline in income alongside high inflation. This crisis spurred major policy shifts, including reforms to industrial policy, a weakening of labor unions, and the central bank gaining independence in 1981. At the same time, these changes solidified Italy's commitment to a market-oriented economic system that institutions of economic governance, like the Bank of Italy, had publicly supported since the 1950s (even as its interventions reflected a practical understanding of the mixed nature of the Italian economy). The puzzling aspect of these changes is their timing with respect to crisis. Italy's first taste of economic trouble in the post-war period was the 1962-63 balance-of-payments crisis, which led the central bank to make controversial decisions on credit that generated a contentious debate as well as instigating innovations in how the Bank of Italy modeled the economy and the effects of various interventions. However, the 1960s were not a period of formal institutional transformation. Under the

leadership of Guido Carli, from 1965 to 1974, the Bank acted as “a ‘clearing house’ for power struggles among the nation’s ruling class” (Zamagni 1993, 342) but insisted that, while its authority was firmly constrained by the law, it would be “seditious” to exercise its legal rights when that impaired the functioning of government, as Carli asserted in a famous speech in 1973. By contrast, by the late 1970s, the Bank of Italy had reframed monetary policy as subsidiary to more structural interventions, recognizing that it was insufficient for resolving the country’s economic problems. As Wansleben (2023) argues for other central banks, this meant increasingly abdicating certain responsibilities in the name of supporting the emergence of financial markets as engines of growth.

Why neither the turmoil of the early 1960s, nor the social mobilization of 1968-9, led to institutional transformations, whereas the crisis of the late 1970s did, but in a way that reinforced the country’s commitment to markets, warrants further scrutiny. Is a critical juncture sufficient to explain these dynamics? To perceptive economic analysts that lived through this period, the severity of the 1970s crisis was not unique. But the widespread availability of quantitative tools (such as new techniques of economic data analysis) heightened the perception of the crisis while normalizing the ongoing work of asserting the power of markets, rather than strengthening the welfare state or embracing new forms of economic development. Understanding how these techniques fragmented crisis claims could then offer valuable insights into the processes that later triggered crucial institutional transformations. One of the most vocal and critical voices in support of this position was the Italian economist Federico Caffè, who focused on the gap between representation and perception to highlight the subjective and political dimensions of economic crises.

Drawing an analogy between oligopolistic markets on one side and political systems (like Italy’s), comprised of trade unions, professional and industrial associations, and other forms of political organization, on the other, Caffè (1972, in Caffè 1976) provocatively argued that the corporatist balance of power that characterizes such systems is often disturbed by established groups that attempt to acquire more power for themselves, or by marginalized groups that strive to have their voices heard. The “artificially exaggerated presentations of real fact,” (Caffè 1972, in Caffè 1976, 59) or what he called “economic alarmism,” is one strategy available to those invested in putting the system in crisis. How is it possible, he asked, to use such a strategy effectively, given the widespread availability of statistical data and econometric models in modern society?

He identified two main conditions, pertaining to the perceived gravity of the situation and to the role

that economic data play in characterizing it as such. First, the situation must lend itself to a critical interpretation due to the presence of problems and challenges that draw public attention and that appear urgent and call for action. Second, economic analysis can be leveraged to frame the situation in particular ways. In a strategy of “exaggerated amplification,” economic data are marshaled in support of the impression that interdependent mechanisms (for instance, economic recession, low investment, low profits) are in fact separate phenomena, each adding independently to the gravity of the situation. Through “deliberate omissions” of relevant data, economic analysis can be used to emphasize the uniqueness of a problematic situation, and discourage comparisons with past events, making it difficult to use potentially relevant historical precedents as a guide for action. Finally, through “one-dimensional presentations” of crisis, certain interventions can be made to appear necessary and inevitable, while others (especially social-justice claims articulated by the working class) appear partisan and excessive.

The constructivist approach in sociology emphasizes how data manipulation, presentation, and diffusion support competing claims about social problems (Spector and Kitsuse 2017). Caffè’s distinction between “real fact” and its exaggeration demonstrates this approach, suggesting that a crisis can exist without a strong factual basis, and can be assembled in different ways even in the face of widely recognized economic challenges (Fourcade and Babb 2002). The analytical value of Caffè’s perspective is reinforced by his position. A socialist-oriented, Keynesian economist, he had a long-standing but informal relationship with the Bank of Italy – his colleagues and students recount a story about how drafts of the annual reports were delivered to his private residence by motorcycle to give him the chance to write his comments and remarks, which would then be considered in later revisions. In my ongoing interviews with contemporaries who knew him, I have not been able to confirm whether he had the Bank of Italy in mind when he articulated his critique of “economic alarmism” – some vehemently reject this interpretation, mentioning his sense of civic duty and institutional commitment. However, in another important public intervention, published in *il Manifesto* on February 17, 1981, Caffè added a more pointed critique of what he colorfully termed the “abacus of information,” a system of producing news about the economy in tendentious ways, turning forecasts into “myths,” and overcoming uncertainty via sheer repetition rather than more accurate and rigorous measurement. This supports the constructivist notion that technical devices, as they gain wider circulation, become embroiled in and sustain a politics of

numbers that governing agencies may use to rationalize their ongoing interventions.

Caffè's perspective anticipated core ideas in the sociology of ignorance and quantification. Crisis claims are used to promote certain outcomes, often through methods presented as "mechanically objective" (Porter 1995). Caffè's work also offers an early look at the "economization of crisis," where expertise and technical tools matter not for their objectivity but for the anxieties they produce. This politics of numbers embeds crisis in measurement and calculation, potentially allowing its construction to persist over time. A crisis can become permanent through its entanglement in calculative devices and their circulation among broader publics.

Despite Caffè's protestations that "our country is not on the edge of a precipice ... if it were ... the abyss would have closed on top of us already" (*il Manifesto*, January 12, 1984, in Caffè 1990, 98), the Italian economy emerged from the 1980s as more market- and finance-oriented than it had been in the past; and yet, talk of crisis continued and multiplied, even in the face of institutional transformations meant to ensure its management. In Silvana Patriarca's incisive account of the work of shared, fictional representations of national character, she argues that recurring, self-denigrating accounts of "Italian vices" are part of a broader pattern of "latecomers" who develop a "keen awareness of their failings or failure to live up to the perceived standards of a normative modernity" (Patriarca 2013, 243). As crisis narratives interspersed with the emergence of new crises, like the corruption scandals of the early 1990s that led to the collapse of the "First Republic" and the twin rise of Berlusconi's populism and the far right, the "perceived standards of a normative modernity" were quantitative too, producing

ongoing anxieties about the economy, its management, and its performance.

Conclusions

Whether or not economic crisis is an objective property of capitalist economies, the central role that calculation and its technical devices now play in the management, administration, and future development of the economy means that crisis itself is calculable, but that calculability does not reduce uncertainty; rather, it can amplify it. Understanding the effects of calculative efforts, and their relationship with various institutional projects like crisis management, is a first step towards a model of economic crisis as a multidimensional and distributed construct. For crisis to become permanent or "routine" (Muir 2021), however, it is necessary to also understand how calculation is incorporated into socially shared and subjective experiences. Perhaps crisis, a concept with its roots in modern-era critical judgment, has indeed come full circle. The calculability of crisis, while seemingly a tool for control, might in reality contribute to its "permanence" while obscuring the underlying social and political determinants of the events that, through crisis, economic authorities and agencies strive to manage.

Acknowledgments

This article is an extended reflection on a special issue I coedited with André Vereta-Nahoum, and it would not have been written without the benefit of our collaboration. I also want to thank Egor Makarov (PhD student at the University of Virginia) and Jennifer Silva (professor at the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University) for their help and suggestions.

References

- Adey, Peter, Ben Anderson, and Stephen Graham. 2015. "Introduction: Governing Emergencies: Beyond Exceptionality." *Theory, Culture & Society* 32 (2): 3–17.
- Anderson, Ben, Kevin Grove, Lauren Rickards, and Matthew Karnes. 2020. "Slow Emergencies: Temporality and the Racialized Biopolitics of Emergency Governance." *Progress in Human Geography* 44 (4): 621–39.
- Blyth, Mark. 2002. *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2014. *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Caffè, Federico. 1976. *Un'economia in ritardo*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Caffè, Federico. 1990. *La solitudine del riformista*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Çalışkan, Koray, and Michel Callon. 2009. "Economization, Part 1: Shifting Attention from the Economy towards Processes of Economization." *Economy and Society* 38 (3): 369–98.
- Callon, Michel. 1998. *Laws of the Markets*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Callon, Michel, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthe. 2009. *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Collier, Stephen J., and Andrew Lakoff. 2021. *The Government of Emergency: Vital Systems, Expertise, and the Politics of Security*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cooper, Marianne. 2014. *Cut Adrift: Families in Insecure Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fourcade-Gourinchas, Marion, and Sarah Babb. 2002. "The Rebirth of the Liberal Creed: Paths to Neoliberalism in Four Countries." *American Journal of Sociology* 108 (3): 533–81.

- Jessop, Bob, and Karim Knio, eds. 2018. *The Pedagogy of Economic, Political and Social Crises: Dynamics, Construals and Lessons*. London: Routledge.
- Koselleck, Reinhart, and Michaela W. Richter. 2006. "Crisis." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2): 357–400.
- Muir, Sarah. 2021. *Routine Crisis: An Ethnography of Disillusion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Muniesa, Fabian, Yuval Millo, and Michel Callon. 2007. "An Introduction to Market Devices." *The Sociological Review* 55 (2_suppl): 1–12.
- Patriarca, Silvana. 2013. *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Polillo, Simone, and André Vereta-Nahoum. 2022. "Crisis: Sovereign or Distributed?" *American Behavioral Scientist*, published online December 27, 2022, doi: 10.1177/00027642221144842.
- Porter, Theodore M. 1995. *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Roitman, Janet. 2013. *Anti-Crisis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Samman, Amin. 2015. "Crisis Theory and the Historical Imagination." *Review of International Political Economy* 22 (5): 966–95.
- Samman, Amin. 2022. "Eternal Return on Capital: Nihilistic Repetition in the Asset Economy." *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 23 (1): 165–81.
- Seefeldt, Kristin S. 2017. "Serving No One Well: TANF Nearly Twenty Years Later." *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 44 (2): 3–28.
- Sewell, William H. 2012. "Economic Crises and the Shape of Modern History." *Public Culture* 24 (2 (67)): 303–27.
- Sewell, William Hamilton. 2005. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Spector, Malcolm, and John I. Kitsuse. 2017. *Constructing Social Problems*. New York: Routledge.
- Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. 2017. *What Is an Event?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wansleben, Leon. 2023. *The Rise of Central Banks: State Power in Financial Capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zamagni, Vera. 1993. *The Economic History of Italy 1860–1990: Recovery after Decline*. New York: Oxford University Press.