

Moments of Crisis

Gil Caroz

A hypothesis: the list of psychoanalytic groups that make up the NLS contains a knowledge about “crisis” that it would be interesting to bring to light. If we consider crisis as one of the master signifiers of our time, and, as such, a way of naming the real, the panoply of countries encompassed by our School can teach us about a series of modes of relation to the real. Between Israel, a country constantly in crisis, and Switzerland, which seems to avoid all crises, Greece and Ireland have become emblems of economic crisis in Europe, Great Britain and Canada are the precursors of the crisis of scientism and technology, Belgium is the locus of a linguistic crisis, Ukraine is marked by the crises of a state finding it difficult to establish itself as such, and let’s leave it there.

The signifier “crisis” refers, etymologically, to a critical moment of upheaval and also to a judgement with respect to a decision to be taken. From the time of Hippocrates, this signifier has been used in the medical field to designate a phase of an illness where the symptoms manifest themselves in an acute form. Later, the term “crisis” found its place, quite naturally, in the field of psychiatry, and easily infiltrated the dimension of the Other that we call political, social, economic, historic and moral. Today this signifier is part of common discourse.

Crisis and Time

Crisis has a relation to time. Hanna Arendt speaks of crisis as a conflictual point of encounter between the past and the future.¹ This point is not the present. It is to be understood rather as a breach in time that arises when the tradition that, until then, had framed the real disappears and when the new symbolic coordinates of the future are not yet known. The subject must thus play his hand faced with the real that rushes into this void created in the interval between two symbolic systems.

But crisis is not a psychoanalytic concept. We must thus define our use of it, while allowing ourselves the freedom to grasp all the forms in which this signifier appears in culture. We will find our first point of support in a definition that Jacques-Alain Miller gave in an interview for the magazine *Marianne* in 2008, on the economic crisis. “There is a crisis in the psychoanalytic sense when discourse, words, figures, rites, routine, the whole symbolic apparatus, is suddenly found to be powerless in tempering an unruly real. A crisis is the real unchained, impossible to master. It is the equivalent, in civilisation, of those storms that periodically come to remind the human species of their lack of security and fundamental debility”.² In the same spirit, in his “Introduction to the Erotics of Time”, Jacques-Alain Miller quotes Deleuze’s proposition according to which “time (...) puts truth in crisis”.³ In other words, truth is not eternal, it vanishes with time. In this respect it is distinct from the real without law, which obeys nothing, not even time. That time puts truth in crisis, means that, at

¹ Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture”, *Between Past and Future*, London, Penguin, 1977, p. 194-222.

² La crise financière vue par Jacques-Alain Miller, *Marianne*, 10 octobre 2008. <http://www.departementpsychanalyse.com/documents.aspx?Page=2>

³ Jacques-Alain Miller, “Introduction to the Erotics of Time”, *Lacanian Ink* 24/25 (Spring 2005), p. 8-43 [T.N. Miller is quoting Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 130]

a given moment, it starts to waver when in the grips of a real that it can neither treat nor master. Crisis thus appears as a moment of rupture in the line of time, an event that extracts the subject from his routine and forces him to elaborate a new relation to the real. This relation between crisis and time is what makes us speak about “*moments of crisis*”.

Hyper-crisis

A crisis that presents itself in this way as a cut in the line of time belongs to the time of Oedipus. After Oedipus, this simple dialectical model between routine and an event that brings a crisis is no longer enough to read the phenomena. This is why sociologists have abandoned the name “postmodernism” for hypermodernity.⁴ In fact, postmodernism limits itself to describing the initial disillusionment with progress and the humanism of the enlightenment following the Second World War. But to describe the qualitative modification of humanity over the last three decades, it has been necessary to add the prefix “hyper” to the word “modernity”. This better conveys the notion of excess, exacerbation and of a process pursued without any sense of measure that characterises the era in which the object *a* has risen to the zenith as an effect of the discourse of capitalism.

What does this mean? The precipitation of events is not limited to a simple acceleration on a timeline. Up to the minute technologies produce a sort of contraction of time and space. With simple means like Skype or Facebook distances are abolished and the time taken is reduced to immediacy. Hardly has an event occurred and already the next one sticks its nose over the horizon. The pattern *routine-crisis-routine* has been replaced by the series *crisis-crisis-crisis...* which tends towards the infinite. The passage between the instant of the seeing and the moment to conclude is often immediate, short-circuiting the time to understand.

In these conditions the world no longer corresponds to Hanna Arendt’s thesis. It is no longer a matter of a conflict between the past and the future whose pressure the subject is submitted to. The timeline is constantly caught hold of by a real in a succession of moments of crises without respite. Hardly has a symbolic system been established, and it falters to give place to another. The Arab Spring already seems like ancient history. It was only a little over three years ago. This uprising spread like wildfire in a series of countries, supported by the social network. In a short time, we have seen tyrants fall from their thrones and judged, condemned, with or without trial, with everything broadcast in real time around the world. Since that time, we have not yet seen a new order establish itself in these countries. One crisis succeeds another.

A Crisis of Technique⁵

In the field that concerns us, the field of “mental health”, it can be observed that the responses given to the upsurge of crises in culture are getting out of hand. In his article, “The Post-DSM Crisis and Psychoanalysis”, Eric Laurent takes up the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics to describe the movement that abolishes the clinic to replace it with the medical management of populations.⁶ This movement “comes to replace the right of States to “put to death” which once allowed identifications to be

⁴ Nicole Aubert, *L’individu hypermoderne*, Toulouse, Eres, 2010.

⁵ [The French term, *technique*, can also be translated as “applied science” T.N.]

⁶ Eric Laurent, “La crise post-DSM et la psychanalyse”, [http://www.latigolaciano.com/assets/2\)-ltgzo-3-francés-la-crise-post.pdf](http://www.latigolaciano.com/assets/2)-ltgzo-3-francés-la-crise-post.pdf)

managed”. In 2011, the regional counsel of the World Health Organisation for Mental Health confirmed this in a message addressed to the participants of the first European Congress of Psychoanalysis, Pipol 5.⁷

Today, we look wistfully back on the time when the Governmental dream of social surveillance was based on medical knowledge. In the 20th Century, technology has taken the place of knowledge. *The Hammer without a Master* is ruled by jouissance. Technology aims at nothing other than to be used as technology. It is not a practice at the service of the master and his ideal, but a jouissance that the master makes himself the instrument of, whether he knows it or not. Jean-Claude Milner pushes this to extremes. According to him, the gas chambers were not a means with which Nazi ideology was put to work. Rather, Nazi ideology was a means for technology to deploy itself through the gas chambers.⁸

Bearing in mind the difference between them, and without the ferocity of the former, the DSM is also a manifestation of technique. Since the 3rd edition got rid of all references to psychoanalysis, it has wanted to be atheoretical. Of course, it announces this proudly as headless hammer. Its classification is founded on a statistical measurement of the object rather than on knowledge. It pretends that it is the object that is speaking. Yet, of course, the object does not speak.⁹

The disorders noted in the DSM, abstracts of this practice of number, do not engage with the real. They are signs around which masses of human bodies are organised. They allow a standardisation of clinical diagnosis throughout the world, which opens up new markets for psychotropic drugs. Moreover, this disjunction between nosographic categories, on the one hand, and the clinic, on the other, facilitates the expansion of the number of disorders added to each new version of the DSM and the extension of the limits of each disorder. Thus, with a view to being applicable to all, applied science [*la technique*] gets carried away and spins out of control, classifying and medicating in a maniacal way, without any anchoring in the real. The APA, American Psychiatric Association, which publishes the DSM, is merely the instrument that allows applied science to run away with itself.

A Clinic of Crisis

As we have said, the discontents of civilisation show that crises come one after the other. What are the echoes for the subject of these never-ending crises as phenomena of civilisation?

The western city-dweller is ceaselessly exposed to catastrophic information coming from every corner of the planet, as well as being provoked by hyper seductive objects titillating his polymorphously perverse drives. The sirens of pornography are top of the bill in this regard. Anxieties and excessive consumption intermix. The film, *Shame*, by Steve McQueen has brilliantly described this frantic gallop of jouissance,

[to be published in English <http://www.latigolacanian.com/ingles.html>]

⁷ Matt Muijen, “Message du Conseiller régional de l’OMS pour la Santé mentale – Région Europe”, *Mental, Revue internationale de Psychoanalyse*, n° 27/28, septembre 2012. [Message from the WHO’s Regional Advisor for Mental Health, Europe Region.]

⁸ Jean-Claude Milner, *Le juif du savoir*, Paris, Grasset et Fasquelle, 2006.

⁹ Jean-Claude Milner, *La politique des choses*, Navarin, Paris, 2005.

caused by the failure of the symbolic and the reduction of man to the misery of his body.

This permanent jogging of the subject, from crisis to crisis, from contingency to contingency, makes of him a mouse in a labyrinth, more of an object submerged in the real than a subject, in a hectic race between electric shock and reward. Where the discourse of the master had once given the order “march or die”, the capitalist discourse is more demanding and imposes a “run or die”. The other side of this infinitely accelerating movement is the weakening of the social bond and the casting onto the scapheap of all those who struggle to keep up this infernal rhythm. Thus, beyond the psychical structures, this duplicity of the subject who “runs” and the subject who “dies” echoes the clinical binary of mania and melancholia – mania as a forward flight that ends in an acceleration of signifiers unballasted by the object; melancholia, for subjects who can no longer pursue this race, who abandon everything and come to embody the object that has dropped from the Other.

At the level of clinical structure some research is required. I will limit myself here to a few suggestions.

For psychosis it would certainly be interesting to take up the question of crisis on the basis of the trio: *triggering, decompensation, and disconnection*. All three are forms of crisis, if one considers that they imply a vacillation of the symbolic, a surging up of a real, and then the restoration of a new form of symbolic. But there are no doubt distinctions to be made between a triggering following an encounter with the A father, a triggering following a dissolution of the imaginary register, a decomposition as a return of a triggering that has already taken place as a disconnection on the side of an abandonment of the subject by the Other.

In neurosis, the symbolic is never competently destroyed. The ripping of the veil of the fantasy is a moment of crisis that can lead the subject into analysis. The subject no longer takes pleasure from his *jouissance* and is exposed to anguish due to the irruption of the desire of the Other. But then, it is the analyst himself who assumes the role and becomes a crisis for the neurotic. At every juncture, interpretation, particularly one that disturbs or dismantles the defence, is able to provoke a crisis accompanied by anxiety. The honeymoon period at the start of an analysis is quickly substituted by a subjective rectification on the part of the analyst. The fall of the phallic position and of ideals is followed by an exacerbation of symptoms. Subjective destitution is not really all that fun, certainly, not at first. The fall of the subject supposed to know, and the crossing of the fantasy, can also be lived as a crisis.

Let us also pause particularly on what constitutes a crisis in perversion. We have had the opportunity to live through a mini-crisis in discovering the image of the Austrian transvestite Tom Neuwirth, aka Conchita Wurst who last week won first prize in the 2014 Eurovision song context. It has been sixteen years since the Israeli transsexual Dana International won this prize, but it seems that a whole world separates these two winners. While Dana International’s image can be easily inserted into the category of women, our imaginary does not yet have a place to insert the image of a man with a beard like that of Conchita. The real of these singular *jouissances* that demand identification and recognition constantly catch us out, to put us in crisis.

Conchita does not hide the pleasure that he or she draws from this vacillation produced in the Other. His shows, the words of his song and his commentary, which simultaneously provokes and defies the first prize he won, are an affirmation of his mode of jouissance and a means of challenging conformist norms. In Austria, opinion is split between, on the one hand, those, notably of the extreme right, who are offended that such an image could represent their country, and, on the other, young people full of the sentiment of life who knit themselves artificial beards as a sign of support and of identification with Conchita. Russian politicians did not miss the opportunity to denounce European decadence. No doubt a barb aimed at Ukrainians faithful to Kiev: *you want to be European, well, there, look at Conchita for an image of what Europe is*. One can observe that, if in psychosis and neurosis crisis is situated on the side of the subject, in perversion, it is the Other that is put into question.

A psychoanalyst does not judge such things. Conchita would be welcome in his consulting room. But outside the consulting room, the conflict is bound to increase between the forces of repression that want nothing to change, on one side, and new modes of jouissance, on the other. It is inevitable. We got used to Dana International quickly enough. Today, she is part of our imaginary map. Conchita will become part of it too. For if, as Jacques-Alain Miller says, one part of the world feminises itself, it will become increasingly tolerant of solutions of this kind, which, in a first moment, appear as *sinthomatic* for a few subjects and then, in a second moment, become more widespread.

So, perversion puts our conformist routine into question and makes the world progress along the path of desire towards new exploits, even if we do not necessarily consider Conchita's performance a successful sublimation on a cultural level. This conflict between cultural conformism and perversion is underlined by Lacan at the end of Seminar VI, when he knots perversion to sublimation: "we can ask whether what is produced as perversion reflects, at the level of the logical subject, a protest against what the subject submits to at the level of identification (...). On the one hand, conformity and, on the other, perversion, in as much as it represents, at the level of the logical subject, the protest that arises in the dimension of desire".¹⁰

Thus a reversal is produced. There where our reading of crisis up to this point could be understood as a terrible prophesy in the style the old testament, with perversion we find crisis in a dimension that is friendly to psychoanalysis. If crisis is sometimes the source of tears and pain, it is also a necessary passage towards invention and novelty. This is a possible translation of what Jacques-Alain Miller said in the interview with the magazine *Marianne*, which I mentioned earlier. "The Psychoanalyst is crisis's friend".

Urgency and the Act

The amity between the psychoanalyst and crisis is not a simple sympathy for the effects of crisis obtained through the challenge that comes to shake up the conformity of norms. Elsewhere Lacan, in his *Analyticon* at the end of *Seminar XVII* urges us to be suspicious of the jouissance of the agitator, which he compares to that of the

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, Le Séminaire livre VI, *Le désir et son interprétation*, Editions de la Martinière, Le Champ freudien, 2013, pp. 569-570.

bachelor. “Take care that the agitator is not preparing his own chocolate”.¹¹ The close proximity between psychoanalysis and crisis has solid foundations that pass through the dimension of urgency and that of the act, two conditions for a creation to be possible, for there to be a modification in the subject’s position, so that afterwards things are no longer as they were before.

The fact that we started our reflection with crisis in the political world must not mislead us. Crisis, as friend of psychoanalysis, as much as the urgency of the act to which it appeals, are not to be read through the grid of the master’s discourse. The psychoanalyst is neither a paramedic nor a fireman. Of course, he must be able to recognise situations that are beyond the powers of speech in order to direct the subject, when he must, towards other discourses, most notably medicine: panic attacks [*crises de panique*] which do not abate; the suicide risk of subjects who have an unshakable certainty about the waste value of their being; an overflowing of delusion with a tendency towards the passage to the act with no hold in the Other; invasive hallucinations; etc...

Now, while these events in the treatment might call for an *action* on the part of the psychoanalyst, the coordinates of emergency [*urgence*] that he responds to with his *act* are of a different order. Action, which belongs to the register of the possible, should be distinguished from the act, which is produced against the backdrop of the impossible.¹²

Lacan qualified emergencies in psychoanalysis as “subjective”.¹³ They are produced when the subject crashes into the trauma of language in so far as it refuses meaning. The emergency [*urgence*] in question is on the side of the subject, and it is an emergency [*urgence*] to speak so as to go beyond oneself in one’s own truth.¹⁴ This expression is not solely an apt means of describing the entry into analysis. It also corresponds to all the moments of crises that take place in a treatment already underway. The subject supposed to know pushes the analysand to deploy the signifiers that emerge from his unconscious as so many truths. It is what one calls the transferential unconscious. But this is caught hold of at moments of juncture [*moments de carrefour*] by the real unconscious,¹⁵ a signifier all alone which “no longer carries any meaning (or interpretation)”,¹⁶ which does not connect with any other signifier, and which thus resists the production of a truth.

These moments are followed in one way or another by a tipping point in the treatment. Here the act is called to the place where no S2 can answer to cover the irruption of the real with a meaning. At these moments, the analyst must play his part so that breaking through the autistic limits of the signifier all alone is kept inside the treatment in the form of a well-saying. If not, the subject will take charge of the act,

¹¹ Jacques-Lacan, Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg, London, Norton, 2007, p. 199

¹² Jacques-Alain Miller, “Introduction to the Erotics of Time”, *Lacanian Ink*, 24, 2005.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, “Of the Subject finally in Question”, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, London, Norton, 2006, p. 196.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, “Function and the field of speech and language in psychoanalysis”, *Écrits, op. cit.*, p.201: “Nothing created appears without urgency; nothing in urgency fails to surpass itself in speech”.

¹⁵ Jacques-Alain Miller, “L’inconscient réel”, *Quarto*, n° 88-89, December 2006.

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, “Preface to the English Language Edition [of Seminar XI]”, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, p. vii.

whether through an acting out, which remains knotted to speech, or through a passage to the act, which separates him from the Other at the price of exiting the stage, or again, through a psychotic triggering. These delicate moments often present themselves as a transference crisis. This can go from unrest outside the session in a way that is counter-productive to the treatment, on the one hand, to a definitive break with psychoanalysis, on the other, with various points in between, such as the emergence of negative transference to a greater or lesser extent, or breaking with the analyst to continue the analysis elsewhere, etc.

So, you have understood. For the 2015 NLS Congress, I have proposed the following title to our new president Yves Vanderveken: “Moments of Crisis”. I have tried to open a few doors that could eventually set us to work on this theme. I hope I have succeeded in provoking your interest.

Translated by *Philip Dravers*