Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline

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Abstract Crisis is normally conceived of as an isolated period of time in which our lives are shattered. It defines the loss of balance and the inability to control the exterior forces influencing our possibilities and choices. The phenomenon is seen as a temporary disorder, a momentary malformation in the flow of things. Yet, for a great many people around the world crisis is endemic rather than episodic and cannot be delineated as an aberrant moment of chaos or a period of decisive change. For the structurally violated, socially marginalised and poor, the world is not characterised by balance, peace or prosperity but by the ever-present possibility of conflict, poverty and disorder. In this introductory article I examine the social and experiential consequences of chronic crisis and investigate how it challenges and furthers our analytic apparatus. Instead of placing crisis in context I argue that we need to see crisis as context – as a terrain of action and meaning – thereby opening up the field to ethnographic investigation.

Keywords Normality, routinisation, reflexivity, social navigation

The Parliament is the ironically named meeting place for a group of unemployed urban youth in Bissau.¹ It is, literally, a wall; a small, porous and crumbling concrete structure outside Ivette’s equally dilapidated house. You do not really do anything at the Parliament except pass slow days and hang out with friends from the neighbourhood. However, since waiting for possibilities or problems to arise is all that young people can do in Bissau – as the city has been caught in a prolonged period of conflict and decline (cf. Forrest 1987) leading to a drastic diminishment of life chances for urban youth (Vigh 2006a) – the Parliament has become one of my prime windows to Bissauian society. As its members sit on the small wall they will flirt, fight, laugh and complain. They will remark upon the people going by.
— positioning them in relation to their networks, in relation to rumours and romance, prospects and predicaments, and, not least, in relation to the chronically dismal political situation that the city is in. They will spend lengths of time debating the general societal situation, the political state of affairs, the who’s who of Bissauian society and the unrelenting hardness of life that they see as its main characteristic.

Spending time at the parliament one quickly becomes aware that decline and conflict are not seen as passing phenomena in Bissau. ‘Here things only go from bad to worse,’ people say. The result of the prolonged period of decline has been the emergence of a dense feeling of deterioration related to social, economic, political and even identificatory decay, entailing that critical events become figured upon a background of persistent conflict and decline; on chronic disorder and disruption. As my friend Vitór put it shortly after the outbreak of fighting in November 2000:

What will happen now, will things change?
No, here in Bissau… War in Bissau is like this. It is like the rainy season. It darkens, and then everything falls down. Then it darkens again and it falls down.

As the metaphor of the rainy season indicates, war is no longer seen as an exception but as a recurrent event. It has become a cyclical and expected manifestation of the dense disorder that characterises Bissauian society. It is potentiality (Agamben 2000), a constant prospect waiting on the other side of the horizon, which even when absent is omnipresent; as a possibility ingrained in the conflict prone social environment. And though every bout of fighting or serious tension implies another period of heterodoxy, reflection and awareness of other possible interpretations and actions (cf. Bourdieu 1992:164), the existing decay – the bullet and shrapnel marks on doors and walls – has settled into a crumbling physical and social context in which change, in itself, is located. Thus, the actual physical and societal decay, so apparent to a visitor, recedes to the background, highlighted only by conscious reflection or action; such as when wondering how it used to function or physically manipulating it by, for example, kicking off loose bits of asphalt overhanging a caved-in sewer or pulling open the heavy metal door to the stadium by grabbing on to the holes cut by shrapnel. Decline and conflict become, in this manner, the societal states from which people make sense of events inscribing ‘the devastation in the everydayness of life’ (Mbembe 1995:331). However, though unique, the situation in Bissau is not a singular example of the way that crisis can become background. In fact, the country
stands as a reminder that ‘crisis’ often acquires an enduring hold on people and societies as it becomes endemic rather than episodic.

This special issue of *Ethnos* focuses precisely on such situations of chronic crisis and uncertainty. Featuring articles by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, on the resilience of agents and the brutality of social forces; Michael D. Jackson, on the vulnerability of migrants and the stress of alienation; Højer and Pedersen, on social collapse and the suffering of being lost in transition; and a postscript by Susan R. Whyte, on discrimination, fragmentation and instability, it places the experience of prolonged decline and uncertainty as one of the focal points of a contemporary anthropology. The present introduction contributes towards this by illuminating, first of all, the concept of crisis; secondly, the contexts of chronic crisis, that is, where the concept is played out in real life or analytically placed; thirdly, the consequence of chronic crisis as it affects social life and the action of agents in it, and finally, the way chronic crisis challenges and furthers our analytical apparatus.

**The Concept of Crisis**

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that ‘the state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule (Benjamin 1999: 248).

For most of us crisis is an experience of temporary abnormality primarily related to traumatic events such as violence, disease or bereavement. We experience crisis when a traumatic event fragments the coherence or unity of our lives, which we otherwise take for granted, leaving us to reconfigure the pieces before we normalise our social being and once again go about our lives. Yet, for many people around the world — the chronically ill, the structurally violated, socially marginalised and poor — the world is not characterised by peace, prosperity and order but by the presence and possibility of conflict, poverty and disorder. Eight hundred million people alone live under conditions of hunger, and adding to this the many that live in states of repression, violation and fear, Walter Benjamin’s insight on the ‘state of emergency’ becomes meaningful as an empirical fact. Though the quote may seem excessive from the safety and prosperity of our world of privileged plenty, we need not move far, neither temporally nor spatially, before becoming aware that social, political and existential crisis play a very real role as a constant in the lives of many people around the world.

It is the aim of this special edited volume of *Ethnos* to illuminate and consolidate the unique contribution that anthropology is able to make to the study of crisis and chronicity. Yet, rather than taking a traditional social
science approach to the phenomenon, by historically placing a given instance of crisis in context, I propose that we gain an insight into this key area of anthropological research by seeing crisis as context (Vigh 2006a); that is, as a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration. In order to gain such an insight we need to depart from our regular understanding of crisis and trauma as momentary and particularised phenomena and move toward an understanding of critical states as pervasive contexts rather than singular events. The issue thus focuses on the way we cope, not through crisis but in crisis, and in so doing provides valuable insight into an important but, as yet, largely implicit anthropological enquiry.

**Pre, Post and Persistent**

Traditionally we have been accustomed to think about crisis as a rupture in the order of things; an intermediary moment of chaos where social and societal processes collapse upon themselves only to come to life after the crisis is overcome (Kosseleck 2002:8, 16). Our theoretical impulse has been to approach crisis as a singular event rather than as an ongoing experience, overlooking the fact that for people such as, for example, battered wives, abused children or gang members, trauma is plural and the suffering arising from crisis the norm. When we look a bit closer into the phenomenon of crisis it becomes clear that conflict, violence and abject poverty can become so embedded in the social fabric that they become indistinguishable from it (Das 2006:80) making crisis chronic and forcing people to make lives in fragmented and volatile worlds rather than waiting for normalisation and reconfiguration.

Because it is often seen as a singular event most of the social scientific work on crisis has, until now, been focussed on the retrospective dimensions of the phenomenon. We generally research crisis by historically contextualising it or by focussing on the post in post-facto, post-conflict and post-trauma. Crisis is, as such, researched by illuminating how people talk about and react to a trauma or a critical situation after the event. The focus on post, implying as it does a notion of crisis as an interruption of ‘normal’ life, seems, however, to obscure the fact that a great many people find themselves caught in prolonged crisis rather than merely moving through it. As Scheper-Hughes reports, in a conversation with counsellors from the Centre for Victims of Political Trauma and Torture in Cape Town, they rejected the idea of post-traumatic stress disorder among victims who were facing continual and constant stresses. The post-trauma victims, they said, were the world’s lucky few (This issue p. 41).
The presumed existence of a ‘pre-traumatic stress situation’ of normality preceding the ‘post-traumatic’ variant, should, not as such, be taken as given. In a social scientific perspective crisis is not often the result of a sudden tear within the fabric of everyday normality but rather the result of slow processes of deterioration, erosion and negative change – of multiple traumas and friction. In similar vein, it should be emphasised that wars do not start with the first shot or end with the last. They may break out and cease at definable points in time, but the underlying factors leading to fighting and warfare are not singular. Researching social and personal crises as monofactual ruptures seems to cloud more than it clarifies.

**Implosions and Unfoldings**

The word *crisis* stems from the Greek *krisis*, meaning discrimination or decision. It designates ‘a turning point’ or a ‘movement of decisive change’ (OED) and is thus to be understood as a break or a rupture separating two ‘states of normality’ from each other (Redfield 2005: 335). In this perspective the move from crisis in context to crisis as context entails stretching the notion of ‘rupture’ into a relative constant, making the concept somewhat self-contradictory in the process. In other words, illuminating crisis as a constant does not initially seem to make much analytical sense as it, quite frankly, causes the concept to implode. Yet, though this slide into the realm of the oxymoronic has made the concept problematic as an analytical optic – and is an important reason for its implicit use in anthropology – the temporal condensation of ‘crisis’ that we see in the definition of the term as a ‘turning point,’ is neither expedient nor necessary.

In fact, part of the reason crisis is normally seen as a ‘turning point’ or a ‘moment of rupture’ seems to be related to confusion between the related concepts of crisis and trauma. Crisis is not rupture, it is fragmentation; a state of somatic, social or existential incoherence. It is ‘discrimination’ in the understanding of separation, as a situation in which a whole or a unity has been dismantled and particularised into its parts. What is important to realise is that though crisis is fragmentation, it is, in a social scientific perspective, not a short-term explosive situation but a much more durable and persistent circumstance. Not a moment of decisive change but a condition.

**Chronic Conditions**

This possibility of freeing the concept from its temporal confines and thereby putting it to analytical use can equally be found in its lexical definition.
The third, and final, definition of the concept in the OED, is that it designates a ‘condition of instability’. It is exactly this view of crisis as a ‘condition’ (understood as prolongation, not irreversibility) rather than a ‘turning point’ that loosens the phenomenon from its temporal bracketing and allows us to see it not just as a defined period of transition but as a state of affairs. In Greenhouse’s words,

‘crises, by definition, involve conditions in which people (including the state’s agents) must improvise with the elements of their social and political technologies and cope with a variety of unexpected disruptions and opportunities’ (Greenhouse 2002:8, my emphasis).

The idea of crisis as a ‘condition’ directs our attention toward the related concept of ‘chronicity’, that is, the experience of crisis as a constant (see Estroff 1993). Chronicity refers, Estroff says, to ‘the persistence in time of limitations and suffering’; it designates ‘the temporal persistence of [...] dysfunction’ (ibid. 250, 259). Chronicity thereby prevents the aforementioned implosion of the concept as it shifts our perspective away from the notion of rupture and aberration towards a perspective on pervasive critical states. Furthermore, both the notion of chronicity and of crisis as a condition take the concept into the realm of the negative. Dealing with impersonal phenomena we may be able to see crisis as a value-free transition from one state to another, yet, when committed to the study of people - and their lives and understandings - crisis is not a word that can be separated from its negative connotations. It has a directly normative dimension as it is tied to an unwelcome departure from how things ought to be, signifying, as Lindquist says, ‘stagnation, decline, and decay, the opposite of correct and desirable progress’ (Lindquist 1996:58).

**Twofold Normality**

What we call disorder and ruin, others who are younger live as the natural order of things and perhaps with ingenuity they are going to master it precisely because they no longer seek their bearings where we took ours (Merleau-Ponty 1964:23).

Merleau-Ponty directs our attention to two important points when researching crisis and chronicity. First of all, that people actively seek new bearings and continue to have the ability to act even in situations of ‘disorder and ruin.’ As crisis is fragmentation, it entails a loss of coherence and unity, yet this experience of fragmentation does not necessarily lead to passivity. Agency, in this perspective, is not a question of capacity – we all have the ability to act...
but of possibility; that is, to what extent we are able to act within a given context. And researching agency as possibility rather than capacity gives us a direct point of departure in an anthropological analysis of crisis as context. It highlights that in situations of prolonged crisis we adjust our reading of the social environment and our movement within it to its critical characteristics. In chronic crisis we base action on fragmentation as circumstance – which makes life unpleasant but not impossible.

Secondly, the quote directs our attention towards a process of ‘normalisation’ in which crisis becomes a frame of action – as it moves from a first order to a second order constitution. Yet, though we may talk about the normalisation of crisis we should not confuse normalisation and routinisation with indifference: crisis, when it is chronic, may become normal in the sense that it is what there is most, but it does not become normal in the sense that this is how things should be. The normalisation of crisis leads to tentative orderings of disorder (cf. Taussig 1992:17) – it does not lead to indifference to disorder.

Seeing crisis as context thus reveals an interesting facet in our understanding of what constitutes the ‘normal’ as it makes us aware that ‘normality’ has both qualitative and quantitative aspects (Vigh 2006a). ‘Normal’ can both be seen as that which we do most and/or that which there is most of. It can, in this perspective, become the predominant state of affairs leading us toward an understanding of the concept that is quantitatively based. Yet, normality equally has a qualitative – or normative – dimension to it, in which ‘normal’ relates to how things should be or how we would like them to be. Crisis in this perspective is constantly judged against the way things could or ought to be. It is measured and defined in relation to ideas of other lives and societies: ideas that are constructed through spatial or historical analogy; in relation to how life is presumed better elsewhere and how life was better or could be better in other times.

In Bissau, which has, as said, been marred by decline, poverty and political instability for decades, people see hardship and suffering as a fact of social life (cf. Jackson, this issue). Yet, they are equally aware that life is lived differently and better elsewhere. Though crisis might constitute the local, quantitative, normality it is not necessarily seen as positively or qualitatively so. This point may seem banal, yet for a lot of people, working in or researching areas characterised by prolonged crisis, the two versions of normality have a tendency to conflate into an empathic relativism in which we presume that the miserable state of affairs that we are witnessing is probably not that miserable for the
people in question, as they must have got used to it. However, where the routinisation that follows prolonged crisis may enable people to act and go about their lives, it is important to emphasise that it does not automatically ease and alleviate the suffering. Hence, it does not reduce our obligation to work against oppression, suffering and hardship. On the contrary, the fact that crisis becomes routinised implies, as Das, following Cavell, states, that anthropology is obliged to remain ‘tireless, awake, when others have fallen asleep’ (Das 2006:79).

**Anthropology’s Critical Core**

And anthropology is awakening. Twenty-eight years ago William Torry was able to state that ethnographers ‘treat loss and vulnerability as remote and peripheral’ (1979:521). Currently we see the exact same issues placed in the very centre of our discipline. No longer perceived as ‘isolated and annoying interruptions of the norms [...] hanging in a sort of conceptual limbo’ (Wallace in ibid.) loss and vulnerability have become significant areas of ethnographic insight and theoretical innovation. When researching crisis in other words, one does not have cause to engage in the tiresome excoriation of the discipline but rather in the celebration of it. If we look through contemporary monographs we see that the discipline is increasingly focussing on conflict, violence, suffering and marginalisation, and that this focus has caused a perspectival shift from order and imponderability (Malinowski 1971) to ordered disorder and reflexivity, granting anthropology the conceptual tools to engage analytically not just in the third world but in the globally wretched of the earth; in the invisible and marginal lives of the world’s besieged and downtrodden minorities.

What distinguishes situations in which crisis becomes context from other scenarios, is, as said, that the troublesome events, with their convulsions and ramifications, acquire an air of social and existential constancy. When crisis becomes context it gains an oxymoronic permanence. No longer temporary it becomes instead a state of ordered disorder (Taussig 1992); a fact of social life and a point of departure for the production of social rules, norms and meaning. Instead of being a passing period of chaos it settles as a social state. Rather than seeing social processes implode and disintegrate, what we see in situations of prolonged crisis is that the state of emergency becomes a ‘situation of emergence’ (Bhabha 1994:41) whereby social life is made sense of and unfolds within a terrain of risk and uncertainty (Whyte 1997). Social positions, institutions and configurations do not just disintegrate but
are reconfigured and reshaped in relation to stable instability and chronic crisis. ‘Knowledge systems are introduced, argued, revised, philosophized and shared’, Nordstrom states in her theoretically superb book on the war in Mozambique (1997:28). They become shaped to uncertainty, opacity and volatility creating a string of tentative and tactile first order – rather than pre-reflective second order – constitutions and constructions. In this manner, habitus, to use a Bourdieuesque term, may very well become attuned to prolonged conflict and decline (Shaw 2002:14–15) but as it becomes adjusted and attuned to volatility and opacity we see the constitution of a very different way of understanding the world and a much more tactile way of acting in it (Vigh 2006a, c).

The Context of Crisis
As with the twofold version of normality that it highlights, crisis as context can in itself be divided into two interrelated dimensions, namely social and personal crisis. In fact, seeing crisis as context allows us to see ‘the contexts in crisis’ and to analyse ‘crisis embedded in crisis’ (Carolyn Nordstrom, personal communication). The perspective allows us to move from the social to the local and illuminate the many factors that influence the emergence of crisis as well as the many layers through which it impacts upon us. Whereas social crisis relates to dynamics within political, economical and social processes, personal crisis is associated with a state of being, defined by the experience of an aggravated limitation of agency, a truncation of horizons and opacity of futures and possibilities.

Personal and Existential
Just as the quantitative dimension of normality will often spill over into the qualitative, social crises lead to personal or existential ones, as people have to work on regaining their possibilities and positions within their social environments. Malformations of societal or social processes often result, in other words, in personal crises.

The personal and experiential aspects of crisis have been illuminated within the existential or phenomenological work on the issue. In an inspiring book Jackson puts the idea of balance, control and, not least, lack of control to work in our analysis of suffering, loss and vulnerability (1998). He argues that when struck by crisis, we feel unable to control the exterior forces influencing our possibilities and choices: we lose control of our lives and struggle to regain and re-establish social order (1998:171). In Habermas’ words,
crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it – the patient experiences his powerlessness vis-à-vis the objectivity of the illness only because he is a subject condemned to passivity and temporarily deprived of the possibility of being a subject in full possession of his powers.

We therefore associate with crisis the idea of an objective force that deprives a subject of some part of his normal sovereignty. To conceive of a process as a crisis is tacitly to give it a normative meaning – the resolution of the crisis effects a liberation of the subject caught up in it (Habermas 1992:1).

In accordance with Jackson, Habermas sees crisis as associated with a feeling of powerlessness in relation to the forces affecting our lives in a negative manner. Combined with an experience of deterioration, the above quotation leads us as close to a non-slippery definition of the concept as we can get, whereby crisis is an experience of fragmentation and deterioration coupled with an inability to change the forces affecting our lives in a negative manner.

**Social and Societal**

The social or societal dimensions of crisis, on which most of the work on the phenomenon has been concentrated within the social sciences in general, seem, however, to have been left out of the definition above, veering as it does towards personal experience. In fact, the large-scale politico-economic aspects of social life have not been well represented within anthropology of late. In relation to the above, crises are seen as either temporary abnormalities intersecting lines of development or as points of structural change – of revolution or revolt – in which new configurations of power sequester and replace old ones; that is, as either a momentary malformation or a catalytic event punctuating a progressive movement into the future. Similarly, a listing of social or societal crises is often featured in introductory chapters of monographs where the historical contextualisation of the impending ethnographic description is provided. Social crises are in this perspective syntagmatically connected as decisive events that have led us to the present.

Anthropologically, social crisis is commonly illuminated in relation to the way it affects current social formations and with an eye to the way it affects our informants’ lives. In fact, anthropology, with its attention divided between the field on one hand and theory and policy on the other, and constantly engaged in dialogue between the two positions, is uniquely able to demonstrate the consequences of large-scale global processes on lived life. These processes are often forged at such a distance from the lives they affect that they appear to be not only unrelated to but even indifferent to the
consequences they produce (Ferguson 1999; Nordstrom 2004). However, as Scheper-Hughes so eloquently shows in this issue of Ethnos, large-scale global, regional or societal malformations are intimately tied to social and personal crisis.

The Consequence of Chronic Crisis

In fact, one of the most notable aspects of crisis is that it illuminates how and to what extent our selves are intimately tied to the social and the way in which deterioration in one aspect of our existence will, almost by definition, affect other areas of our lives. Social crisis often results in individual or existential crisis, just as much as the latter, through the acts of the desperate or despairing can cause societal breakdown and crises. Researching crisis makes us aware of the relationship between the personal and the social, in ordered layers of concentricity, precisely because crisis destabilises the way we have constituted and constructed ourselves as parts of larger entities. Crisis corrodes the constructions of meaning by which the different spheres of our existence are interwoven. In other words, though the perspective is deemed analytically null and void, researching the phenomenon of crisis leads us back to a rethinking of holism not as an etic reality but as an emic one. I am not advocating a return to an idea of unchangeable systems or bounded entities, but rather calling attention to the cycle of configuration, deconfiguration and reconfiguration through which we order and systematise our social environments and horizons in different situations. The interesting thing about the perspective of ‘crisis as context’ is that it leads us to realise that new configurations are sought established, even in situations where social instability and volatility prevail, and that it grants us an analytical optic able to engage anthropologically in such social processes.

Instability and Unpredictability

Social crisis is defined by periods of instability and unpredictability in which we see social formations lose control and expediency and find ourselves unable to halt the deterioration of the social fabric. Yet, if we, in situations of prolonged crisis, see people attune and adjust their lives to it – constructing, as said, environments in which disorder becomes the expected order of things – we need to question in which way the everyday of crisis is different from our usual understanding of the concept as an imponderable, unreflected flow of life. The answer is that the normalisation of crisis leads to an acute awareness of social movement and change as well as the imagining of lives...
elsewhere. It is this imaginative impetus which underlines the heterodoxic aspect of crisis as a result of which the social world loses its character as a stable order (Bourdieu 1992: 166–169). As Sorokin states, in relation to the intellectual movement of the social sciences, it is ‘when people find themselves ruined, uprooted, mutilated and their routines of life upset’ that they ‘ask themselves why and how this has come about’ (1963: 3). Habituation leads to the establishment of social facts, yet when paired with chronic crisis we see a continuous critical assessment of the social, its movement, one’s position and the possibilities of action available within it.

Loss

When crisis becomes context the order of our social world becomes in other words questioned and substituted by multiple contestations and interpretations leading to the recognition that our world is in fact plural rather than singular: social rather than natural. When initially confronted with crisis formations and configurations become de-institutionalised. It is this demise of ‘the taken for granted’ which means that crisis is often experienced as a feeling of loss . . . a loss of stability, security or clarity: a loss of order affecting our ability to plan ahead, to actualise our dreams and hopes. When crisis becomes context we find ourselves mired in a situation in which we have lost our consolidated horizons and trajectories (see Pedersen & Højer, this issue). The point is, of course, that the fragmentation and instability of crisis lead to uncertainty and unpredictability, which is the point of departure for Habermas’ definition of crisis. Crises are, as such, situations where overviews cannot be taken for granted but must be constantly gained.

Temporal and Spatial Horizons

This leads to a change in our way of reading our social environment and our positions and horizons within it (see Schutz & Luckman 1995). The concept of horizon becomes analytically interesting in this perspective as it contains both a temporal and a spatial dimension. Defined as ‘the line behind which a new space of experience will open, but which cannot be seen yet’ (Koselleck in Greverus 1996: 125), our horizon spatially distinguishes our current terrain from the unknown with the imaginable being that which constitutes the multiple possible terrains on the other side of the line of demarcation (cf. Crapanzano 2004). When in continuous social crisis this line of demarcation that separates the actual from the possible moves considerably closer to the individual, as we cannot take the structure of our social world as given. What
we see in such situations is that the coherent progression of time becomes lost, as Pedersen and Højer so forcefully illustrate (this issue), with the result that history is experienced as an externally induced and uncontrollable succession of changes (cf. Hastrup 1992; Kosseleck 2002:8), and this alters the way we interpret the unfolding of events, namely from linearity to analogy. Taking a Massumi quote out of context, one could say that in chronic crisis:

> Time is no longer a progression to and from privileged points — beginnings, climaxes, and ends — that give a priori order and a depth of personal or historical meaning to the course of things (Massumi 1997:746).

In fact, in many areas of the world that are characterised by conflict and war, the social world seems so fluid that it is experienced as having lost its course; as being in perpetual but ‘progressless’ motion: not as field or structure but as moving environment in which one constantly has to adjust one’s trajectory and praxis to the shifting terrain (Vigh 2006a,b; Vigh et al. 2006). Predictability is minimised as one constantly needs to be attentive toward — and act in relation to — the shifts of social forces. ‘You speak with one eye and look out with the other,’ a Protestant paramilitary soldier told me when referring to the constant attentiveness required to live in a small Loyalist enclave in Belfast. The consequence of such constant attentiveness is a relentless unease, as Jackson shows in his description of Sewa’s life in this issue (pp. 57–72). Having to repeatedly regain a hold on the world and on one’s positions and possibilities in it, in order to ensure one’s well-being, leads one to experience the world as ‘perplexing and perilous’ so that ‘one readily falls prey to fears that forces, named or unknown, are conspiring against one when, in reality, it is simply one’s powerlessness and estrangement that produces this erosion of self-confidence’ (ibid. 71). Prolonged crises lead, in this manner, to what Taussig has called the ‘nervous system’ (Taussig 1992) seen as a system that is simultaneously constantly shifting and unstable, trying to settle and find ease but unable to, as well as constantly attentive and alert, seeking to predict and move in relation to perceived and experienced social stimuli, oncoming movements and possibilities.

**Theoretical Challenges in the Attunement to Crisis**

Analysing how agents act *in* crisis, instead of *through* it, thus challenges our regular analytical categories. Though the last ten years have seen an increasing focus on issues related to the way people act in difficult situations, such as their coping and survival strategies, we are still to thoroughly realise the deeper
effect that persistent instability and uncertainty have on both our informants and the conceptual apparatus we utilise in order to understand their lives. Bringing together a number of different approaches to the phenomenon, which all build empirically on situations of prolonged crisis, the articles in this issue further our knowledge on exactly this issue. In general, we can say that crisis as context draws our attention towards three key theoretical areas in need of re-examination, namely ‘praxis’, ‘routinisation’ and ‘narrative’.

**From Praxis to Navigation**

One of the first things we realise when researching crisis is changed patterns and possibilities of action. Rather than necessarily resulting in apathy, this experience of agentive reduction seems to result in changing modes and means of action. When analysing practice in situations of crisis we see, as such, people attuning their idea of movement and action to an opaque and fluctuating social environment (Jackson 1998; Vigh 2006a; Vigh et al. 2006). In such situations act and environment are in constant dialogue, and this simultaneous construction of act and plot counters our dominant ideas of practice. In other words, rather than the portrayals of practice we see in, for example, game-metaphors, where people act in bounded and solidified one-dimensional space, and in which there is relative agreement on the rules being played by and the price at stake; or the praxis we see in Bourdieu’s field, ultimately mirrored on an idea of stable, class-structured nation-states (1992), we see that situations of crisis force agents to take into account not only how they are able to move within a social environment, but also how the social environment moves them, and other agents within it, as they seek to traverse envisioned trajectories. Crisis as context leads us, as such, to notice provisional praxis and navigation (Ingold 2000; Vigh op.cit.). It clarifies the extent to which action must be seen as motion within motion, and the limitations of a faulty understanding of the relationship between act, environment and plot.

**From Habituation to Reflexive Routinisation**

This is further clarified when we look at the social construction of reality in such situations (cf. Berger & Luckmann 1967). The agentive stagnation, mentioned by Habermas in the earlier quote is only dominant during the time it takes for people to routinise the state of ‘disorder’ that they find themselves in, in order to be able to act and live in it (cf. Weber 1965:363–373; 1982:98). This routinisation of crisis does not, however, mean that the experience of crisis disappears. When in crisis people reflect upon their lives in order to gain
an element of control (cf. Jackson op. cit.) as well as to mirror and compare the hardness of their lives with the perceived life of imagined others.

So what happens to constructions of meaning and ideas of our social worlds in situations of profound instability and unpredictability; when history is not constructed from smooth chains of internalisations and improvisations, but from crisis and tentative routinisations; when social positions (both affiliations and configurations) are constantly changing, and the demarcated space for the game (to stay within Bourdieu’s game metaphor) – is constantly in flux, expanding and contracting in relation to shifts and pulls that move between the local, regional and global; that is, when the terrain is in motion rather than being solid and stable? The question is best answered by paying attention to the resulting increased social reflexivity, the heightened awareness of the way we interpret the social environment, our perspectives and our horizons. What occurs, I hold, is a process of increasingly becoming ‘conscious of the eye through which one looks’ (cf. Benedict 1989:14), conscious, not only of the constructed character of routines, discourse, interpretations and action, but of our modes of constructing meaning.

Social reflexivity, in this perspective, involves people becoming aware of how they interpret the social terrain, simply because the speed and/or unpredictability of change within the social world they inhabit is such that the agent must constantly check the efficacy of his interpretation in relation to changes in the environment he seeks to move in. Generally, we are made aware of our social routines when they are challenged, lose expediency or create novel results. In situations of turmoil, therefore, it becomes increasingly necessary, even critical, for the agent to reflect upon reflections; to scrutinise his way of anticipating and predicting what was, what is and what is about to happen. Rather than this ideational constitution of one’s social reality being imponderable (Malinowski 1971) or constituted via unconscious second order routinisations (Berger & Luckmann op. cit.) we see that crisis results in a continuous process of first order constitutions and reflexive routinisation (cf. Giddens 1984; Beck et al. 2003). Importantly for the present discussion, reflexivity is, thus, not confined to the realm of the social-scientific observer and praxis, but is part of all social praxis as humans seek to live their lives as best they can. An agent has, Giddens holds, ‘reasons for his or her activities’ and is ‘able to elaborate discursively upon those reasons’. In fact,

Continuity of practices presumes reflexivity, but reflexivity in turn is possible only because of the continuity of practices that make them distinctively ‘the same’ across space and time. ‘Reflexivity’ hence should be understood not merely as
‘self-consciousness’ but as the monitored character of the ongoing flow of social life (Giddens 1984:3).

In this perspective, sedimentation and habituation – both connoting slow and subconscious processes of constitution – give way to a perspective that opens up a much more negotiable and plastic constitution of meaning attuned to the aspect of unforeseen events, rapid change and volatility.

**From Narrative to Social Imaginaries**

Finally, the perspective of crisis as context leads us to notice a prospective constitution of meaning. As people struggle to find their bearings and gain possibilities of action, within a terrain over which they have very little control, they imagine the possible unfolding of their social environment and negotiate this in dialogue. In other words, where anthropologists in the last decade have focused increasingly on making sense of events, on life story and narratives as the process through which people construct a meaningful relationship between their past and their present, very few have actually dealt with the future, Malkki (1995) being the exception. Although most scholars agree that narratives do point into the future, exactly how they do this has rarely been explored or demonstrated.

Understanding crisis as context grants us, as such, a window to illuminate the prospective dimension of our lives. As it allows us to see how people struggle to find their bearings, gain a sense of control and balance, and navigate their life through difficult environments, we become aware that people constantly produce future scenarios and terrains of action by anticipating and predicting the near and distant future through the social imaginary (Castoriadis 1997; Goankar 2002; Taylor 2002; Vigh 2006 a, c). It is through the social imaginary that we locate ourselves in the world, position ourselves in relation to others and seek to grasp that sphere of our existence which we have not yet experienced but which we nonetheless act towards in anticipation, and this constant endeavour becomes no clearer than in crisis.

**Social Forces and Resilient Agents**

Yet, in order to properly illuminate the way people attune their lives to situations of prolonged crisis we need to move from theory into ethnography. Building on fieldwork spanning from Recife to Ulan Bator, the articles in this special issue of *Ethnos* demonstrate the analytical and theoretical vigour currently emanating from the anthropological focus on crisis and chronicity. Common to all the contributions are their foundation on fieldwork with people
whose lives are trapped in situations of structural, social and existential crisis. The people and processes featured in the articles demonstrate how agents struggle and cope in environments characterised by uncertainty and volatility, revealing both the brutality of social forces and the resilience of agents.

Resilience is exactly the theme of Nancy Scheper-Hughes contribution, entitled ‘A talent for life’. Through ethnographic illuminations of Brazilian shanty towns and South African townships she shows how people make lives for themselves under conditions of extreme scarcity and adversity, and how these conditions influence conceptions of life and death, suffering and survival. Instead of showing how crisis is overcome Scheper-Hughes focuses on how people act and shape their lives to abject poverty, violence and marginalisation as well as on the way crisis materialises within bodily states and perceived pathologies. She analyses the way the experience of social crisis become embodied and mirrored in bodily states and in so doing offers a fascinating critique of the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a concept that makes invisible the density of suffering and the ability of people to survive via alternative modes of human hardiness.

Jackson’s article, ‘The shock of the new’, equally follows the ‘clash’ between different worlds, though in a single location. Illuminating and analysing the way a young Sierra Leonean migrant struggles to find his feet in London he portrays the stress of irregularity and the vulnerability of migrants living their lives under the constant threat of being deported. The article reveals the level of stress that follows from being a voluntary stranger and the sense of being at the mercy of an abstract, impersonal bureaucratic order. We get a unique insight into the lack of security and recognition that mar the life worlds of marginalised migrants and their attempts at gaining balance and finding paths towards acceptable lives.

Pedersen’s and Højér’s article, ‘Lost in transition’, is equally focussed on estrangement, but where Jackson illuminates the social position and difficulties faced by a young man who has migrated to a different society, their article provides us with a description of the difficulties faced by a family whose world seems to have moved on without them. It describes the troubled position of a Mongolian family whose social worth and possibilities are located in the deceased Soviet system in Mongolia and who are trying to attune their lives to the transition to market economy. The article analyses the social collapse of the family and their experience of loss and being lost within a rapidly changing society, battling against the volatility and opacity of unpredictable change. In unison the articles thus grant us a point of departure for making explicit not
just a central anthropological line of enquiry but also the unique contribution that anthropology can make to the study of crisis and chronicity.

Notes
1. The capital of the West African country of Guinea-Bissau.
2. This is not to say that our lives are otherwise coherent and harmonious, but rather that our attempt to make the world meaningful is related to our ability to envision it, situationally or positionally, as a contingent whole.
4. Of the underlying logic behind this idea of crisis as rupture seems to be that we transpose the temporality of individual lives and bodily states onto social processes.
6. At least not since the demise of evolutionism, modernisation theory and Marxism.
7. Totalitarianism, in this manner, does not reduce alternative orders. Rather, oppression incites them, as it spurs us to ponder and imagine alternatives.
8. I do not refer to the concept of the imaginary in the sense of fantasy or fiction but rather as related to the Husserlian protention, as an induction built on former experience.
9. I must here apologise for a deliberate omission. Ruth Benedict actually states that ‘it is hard to be conscious of the eye through which one looks’ (op. cit.), yet the fact is not whether it is hard or not, but rather that it is necessary. Reflexivity has, in this perspective, been the trademark of modern anthropology, logically arising from within a discipline in which one is confronted with an array of descriptions of social perspectives and facts. Yet much the same multitude of encounters with other social realities constitute the horizon for many youths today, as they are constantly made aware of ‘alterities’ that challenge their own norms, positions and perspectives.
10. Through the concepts of routinisation and reflexivity Giddens develops an approach to social structuration that implies that agents continuously recreate the social praxis they enter into and thereby express themselves as agents (1984:2).
11. Giddens, however, sees certain types of knowledge as more accessible to reflection than others, such as practical knowledge. He differentiates between the unconscious and the discursively conscious, but nonetheless criticises the psychoanalytical understanding of unconscious forces as foundations for social action for their failure to take into account the level of autonomy agents are able to sustain reflexively over their own conduct.

References
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