

Reinterpreting the “times of crisis” based on the asymmetry between chronos and kairos

Reinterpretando os “tempos de crise” a partir da assimetria entre cronos e kairós

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that the concept of crisis entails a particular form of experiencing and thinking historical time that can only be properly grasped by considering the asymmetry between *chronos* and *kairos*. After exploring the main meanings of these two Greek terms for "time", I show that the *chronos* paradigm holds hegemony in contemporary theorizations on historical time. Reinhart Koselleck, who construed an influential conceptual history of "crisis", reiterated such hegemony in his interpretation of the concept's temporal sense by associating it with the phenomenon of temporal acceleration. This article argues that Koselleck's interpretation is insufficient since "crisis" encompasses certain dimensions of temporal experience that can only be understood through the notion of *kairos* – namely, the temporality of decision, urgency, imminent rupture, and uncertainty about the future.

KEYWORDS

Theory of History. Historical Time. History of Concepts.

RESUMO

Neste artigo, argumento que o conceito de crise implica uma forma particular de experiência e compreensão do tempo histórico a qual só pode ser apreendida adequadamente quando se considera a assimetria entre *cronos* e *kairós*. Após explorar os principais significados desses dois termos gregos para "tempo", demonstro que o paradigma de *cronos* possui uma larga hegemonia nas teorizações contemporâneas sobre o tempo histórico. Reinhart Koselleck, em seu influente trabalho de história conceitual sobre "crise", reiterou tal hegemonia em sua interpretação sobre o sentido temporal do conceito ao associá-lo com o fenômeno da aceleração temporal. O artigo defende que a interpretação de Koselleck é insuficiente, pois o conceito de crise envolve certas dimensões da experiência temporal que só podem ser entendidas por meio da noção de *kairós* – a saber, a temporalidade da decisão, urgência, ruptura iminente, e incerteza quanto ao futuro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES

Teoria da História. Tempo Histórico. História dos conceitos.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global crisis of enormous proportions. The new coronavirus has contaminated millions of people worldwide causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and the collapse of health systems. Many countries have been forced to adopt social isolation measures, which in turn severely impacted the global economy and people's mental health. Although it is not yet possible to know exactly the extent of the impacts engendered by the so-called "coronacrisis", there is no doubt that global society is facing a pivotal and *critical* moment in its history.

The pandemic's impact on the way individuals, communities, and institutions relate to time is significant, as Mateus Pereira, Mayra Marques and Valdei Araujo (2020) have thoroughly discussed in a recent book. The uncertainty about the future, the suspension of daily habits, the deep changes whose extent cannot yet be fully determined, the pressure of taking urgent and timely actions; these are all dimensions that characterize a particular way of experiencing historical time – which, at the conceptual level, is conveyed by the term *crisis*.

How to theoretically characterize the form of historical experience to which the concept of crisis refers? This is a highly relevant question for the field of Theory of History, not only because of the current global moment caused by the pandemic, but also because of the ubiquitous presence of the term in the contemporary world, thus leading to a problematic situation whereby the semantic content of "crisis" – in general lines, a state of anomaly, dysfunction and emergency – seems to have become "normalized", embedded into daily life. The pervasiveness of "crisis" suggests, on the one hand, that the concept occupies a central place in the way that current societies perceive themselves in history and make sense of the world (JORDHEIM; WIGEN 2018); on the other hand, the trivialization of its uses often blurs its semantic definitions. Being everywhere and at any moment, "crisis" becomes commonplace and ceases to be elaborated as a historical-social concept. Thus, it is necessary to rethink the experiential dimension of "crisis" from a historical-theoretical point of view.

In this article, I argue that the concept of crisis denotes a particular form of experiencing historical time. However, despite being a central *topos* in modern historical thinking, the latter is ill-prepared to theoretically describe the temporal sense of that concept. My hypothesis is that such a paradox is due to the tendency, largely established in modern historical thinking, to assume the phenomenon of time exclusively through the notion of *chronos*. This tendency often conceals other possible temporal frameworks

such as the idea of *kairos*, which denotes an understanding and experience of time that is not entirely opposed to *chronos* but is nonetheless irreducible to it. I argue that retrieving the difference between *chronos* and *kairos* is crucial to understand how historical time is articulated by the concept of crisis.

In the first section of this article, I explore the main meanings associated with both the notions of *chronos* and *kairos*,¹ as well as the relationship between them – which I qualify as an *asymmetrical difference*. In the second section, I demonstrate that the hegemony of *chronos* is still present in the contemporary theoretical-philosophical debate regarding historical time, even if the idea of *kairos* has occasionally been discussed in some recent works, as I show in the third section. Finally, the last two sections show how the difference between *chronos* and *kairos* is crucial to interpret the temporal sense of “crisis”. In these sections, I engage in critical dialogue with Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual history of crisis, which remains a major reference for the current debate on this topic (GILBERT 2019; ROITMAN 2014). After summarizing the main historical transformations of the concept (fourth section), I demonstrate in the fifth section that Koselleck reproduced the hegemony of *chronos* by interpreting “crisis” as a concept of temporal acceleration. I claim that this interpretation is insufficient to characterize the temporal meaning of “crisis”, for it *can only be properly exposed if one considers the asymmetrical difference between chronos and kairos*. Retrieving the idea of *kairos* is crucial to capture the sense of urgency, imminence and uncertainty, characteristics that compose the experiential meaning of “crisis” and that cannot be reduced to the issue of temporal acceleration. I conclude by drawing a parallel between the modern idea of absolute, universal *chronos* and the conceptual changes undergone by “crisis” in the context of progressive philosophies of history; then, I point towards a possible way to rethink the “times of crisis” in our pandemic world.

Chronos and kairos: an asymmetrical difference

To introduce the difference between *chronos* and *kairos*,² I begin by quoting a verse from the book of *Ecclesiastes* (3:1). A comparison of two versions of this verse is relevant. The first one is from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old

¹ Both *Chronos* and *Kairos* are gods in Greek mythology. The former is the youngest son of Gaia (earth) and Uranus (sky) and represents absolute time; the latter is the youngest son of Zeus and Tyche (fortune) and represents the “right time”.

² Ancient Greek language also had the term *Aion*, which could mean “age”, “timeless”, or “eternity”. For a thorough theoretical reflection on *Chronos*, *Kairos* and *Aion* in relation to historical time, see Andrade (2019).

Testament), whereas the second is a translation for modern English. I highlight in bold characters the words used for “time”:

τοῖς πᾶσιν χρόνος καὶ καιρὸς τῷ παντὶ πράγματι ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανόν

There is a given **time** for everything and a **time** for every happening under heaven.³

The same word “time” was used to translate the Greek words *chronos* [χρόνος] and *kairos* [καιρός], their respective meanings, however, bear a significant difference that is crucial to understand the way the verse expresses the experience of time. On the one hand, it is true that every event *occurs in a certain instant of time (chronos)*; on the other, it is also true that every event *has its own appropriate time, that is, its proper occasion to take place (kairos)*. In this second meaning, time is not independent from experience; instead, it reveals its qualitative aspect and, precisely for that reason, time is presented as heterogeneous. Thus, as the excerpt goes on, there is *kairos* for giving birth and for dying, for killing and for healing, and so on. In short, an event does not simply occur *within chronos-time*, for it also has its *own kairos-time*.

This example shows that *chronos* and *kairos* refer to two experiences of time that are irreducible to each other. Concisely put, *chronos* designates time as a *continuum* of successive instants; it expresses the conception of time as a grid upon which events can be situated, a medium through which one can locate any event by determining its “hour” or “date”. *Chronos* refers to the quantifiable, measurable and numerable character of time that is presented in instruments that measure the length of duration, such as clocks or calendars. The measurability of *chronos-time* also implies its homogeneity, as Martin Heidegger has already demonstrated:

What do we learn from the clock about time? Time is something in which a now-point may be arbitrarily fixed, such that, with respect to two different time-points, one is earlier and the other is later. And yet no now-point of time is privileged over any other. [...] This time is thoroughly uniform, homogeneous. Only in so far as time is constituted as homogeneous is it measurable (HEIDEGGER 1992, p. 4E-5E).

The pervasive presence of these chronometric instruments in daily life creates a strong tendency in people to identify the whole phenomenon of temporality, with all its

³ The Greek text is available at: <https://bit.ly/2DoeaZa>. The English translation is available at: <https://bit.ly/2EGOI1M>. Accessed: May 12, 2020.

complexity, as exclusively related to the specific notion of *chronos*-time that appears in these instruments. However, the experience of time cannot be entirely grasped from a chronological framework. Another possibility is to conceive of time as *kairos*, which refers to the “right time” for doing something, the “timing” one must consider to achieve a desired outcome, the “opportune moment” to act “timely”. The idea of *kairos* is traditionally understood as a special *moment* that potentiates an action or speech, one that is also associated with moments of great instability that require a resolute and active stance. *Kairos* conveys the experience of a singular moment that marks the “occasion” for taking a critical decision or performing an action that will produce effects that would not be possible in a previous or later instant in *chronos*-time (FRIESE 2001; SMITH 1969).

Many authors conceive *kairos* as the exceptional character of opportune time, whose emergence cannot be predicted, but, once it emerges, enables potentially radical transformations in the world. According to Felix Ó Murchadha, whereas *chronos* emphasizes the *passage* of time, *kairos* emphasizes time as *emergence*. In this sense, *kairos* refers to a “turning point” in time, to a rupture within the existing state of affairs in such a way that a “new order becomes possible, in which new possibilities for life, knowledge and the whole of human conduct open up, but it is also a time in which new misfortunes become possible” (MURCHADHA 2013, p. 7).

In short, while *chronos* is the time one can *count*, *kairos* is the time one can *seize*. However, the relationship between both terms should not be understood as an opposition, but rather as an *asymmetrical difference*. The aphorism that opens Hippocrates’ book *Precepts* illustrates this point:

χρόνος ἐστὶν ἐν ᾧ καιρός, καὶ καιρὸς ἐν ᾧ χρόνος οὐ πολὺς.

Time is that wherein there is **opportunity**, and **opportunity** is that wherein there is no great **time** (HIPPOCRATES, *Precepts* I, 1923, 1).

Contrarily to the excerpt from the *Ecclesiastes*, the English translator of this aphorism (W. H. S. Jones) used the word “time” only for *chronos*, whereas *kairos* was translated as “opportunity”. The effects of such choice are that not only it reinforces the traditional point of view which associates time exclusively with *chronos* but most importantly that it masks an important point Hippocrates had in mind when he wrote the aphorism: that one time is literally *within* the other. There is no suggestion that *chronos* and *kairos* are two separate types of temporality because *kairos* “does not have another time at its disposal; in other words, what we take hold when we seize *kairos* is not another

time, but a contracted and abridged *chronos*” (AGAMBEN 2005, p. 69). Hippocrates’ aphorism asserts a clear difference between both ideas of time; nevertheless, this difference cannot be grasped as a mere opposition between two poles. One is within the other, but not symmetrically: *chronos* contains *kairos*, and *kairos* contains “no great” *chronos*. Being distinct and closely interlocked, the relationship between the Greek terms must be understood in terms of an *asymmetrical difference*, as they refer to distinct characteristics of the phenomenon of time.

This asymmetry evinces that the *kairos*-moment is not any instant in chronological time. It is neither determined simply by the precise amount of *chronos*-time it may contain nor by the position it occupies within a chronological order. *Kairos*-time, always brief and fleeting, refers to an incalculable moment that marks an opportunity for changing a particular state of affairs. This is why *kairos* is often associated with experiences of crises and ruptures. This association is once again demonstrated by Hippocrates, whose philosophy of medicine considered that diseases evolve in the human body until they reach the *krisis*, that is, the “critical moment” that defines whether the diseased body will be cured or not. Thus, the good physician is the one who is able to identify and act in this precise moment, that is, they must seize the *kairos* that is announced by it: the opportune occasion for intervention, the favorable instant for the right action (ESKIN 2002). Crisis and opportunity go together in the sense that the combination of both generates a special temporal structure: a brief moment that may interrupt the ‘regular’ progression of a disease, optimizing medical action (RAMALHO 2020, p. 466).

However, there is no guarantee that a specific *kairos* will be properly seized amid a crisis. *Kairos*-moment announces the *possibility* of changing a state of affairs, even though it does not assure by itself that change will be either for better or worse. *Kairos* expresses a time of uncertainty because it implies that the “regularity” of daily life has been broken up by a set of circumstances and destinies. A kairological experience of historical time means to be faced with a singular, critical moment, full of danger, but also full of possibilities to transform the course of history. *Kairos* represents “momentous time connected to a situation of taking or leaving an opportunity, the moment in which things might develop in very different directions and everything may change or collapse” (STRÅTH 2015, p. 354). In fact, one can say that *kairos* interrupts the ordinary progression of *chronos* in such a way that it makes it impossible to understand time homogeneously. According to Heidrun Friese (2001, p. 2), the *kairos*-moment has become “a central concept in all attempts at questioning the idea of empty, homogeneous and

continuous time”. *Kairos* is the mode of temporality in which a radical break is enacted, in contrast both with the representations of time as cyclical repetition and as continuous progression.

The hegemony of *chronos* in contemporary theories on historical time

There is a strong tendency in modern historical thinking to identify “time” exclusively with *chronos*.⁴ Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage describe and criticize the general characteristics of the dominant conception of time among academic historians, which is in clear association with the chronological paradigm of time:

Most historians seem to have assumed that time is what calendars and clocks suggest it is: 1. time is homogeneous – meaning every second, every minute and every day is identical; 2. time is discrete – meaning every moment in time can be conceived of as a point on a straight line; 3. time is therefore linear; and 4. time is directional – meaning that it flows without interruption from the future, through the present to the past; 5. time is absolute – meaning that time is not relative to space or to the person who is measuring it (LORENZ; BEVERNAGE 2013, p. 17).

Besides these five characteristics, there is also the general assumption about time as a universal *chronos*, that is, a single stream of time in which all events in all cultures can be placed (LUNDMARK 1993, p. 62-63). However, the idea of universal, absolute *chronos* is essentially modern, as Donald Wilcox (1987) has already demonstrated.⁵ In fact, the incorporation of universal *chronos*-time in historical thought is the basis of many historical concepts of modernity. According to Giorgio Agamben (1993, p. 97), “Under the influence of the natural sciences, ‘development’ and ‘progress’, which merely translate the idea of a chronologically orientated process, become the guiding categories of historical knowledge”. The introduction of universal, absolute *chronos* in modern historiography was a response to the demands for an objective criterion for historical time and thus sustain the scientific claims of historical research (KRACAUER 1966, p. 66).

⁴ For a thorough historical analysis of the Western philosophical traditions of time, see Carvalho (2017).

⁵ According to Wilcox (1987, p.4), the idea of absolute, universal *chronos* was established by the scientific revolution during the seventeenth century.

The hegemony of *chronos* can also be seen in many theoretical and philosophical works that address the issue of historical time, of which Paul Ricœur's trilogy *Time and Narrative* is a notable example. In the chapter titled "Between Lived Time and Universal Time: Historical Time", Ricœur argues that historical time constitutes a "third time" located at the threshold between cosmological time and psychological time. According to the author, this third time is articulated through the support of some "temporal connectors", namely the calendar, the idea of succession of generations, and the recourse to archives, documents, and traces.⁶

Ricœur implicitly suggests that the calendar has a privileged position in the constitution of historical time over the course of his argument, not only because the author presents it as the first temporal connector, but, above all, because the calendar provides the foundation for the other connectors. Ricœur considers calendar time as the basic model for the constitution of historical time because it participates both in cosmological and psychological time, without being reduced to any of them. This "third time" construes and reflects the mediation between nature and consciousness, thereby taking on a special status that Ricœur, quoting Émile Benveniste, calls "chronicle time":

The invention of calendar time seems so original to Benveniste that he gives it a special name, "chronicle time", as a way of indicating, through the barely disguised double reference to "time", that "in our view of the world, as in our personal existence, there is just one time, this one (RICŒUR 1988, v. 3, p. 106).

However, in the essay by Benveniste that Ricœur is referring to – titled "Language and Human Experience" –, it becomes clear that the notion of "chronicle time" has very precise limits that the author of *Time and Narrative* did not mention. Benveniste's chronicle time is associated to the calendar as it is irreducible both to physical and lived time. Nevertheless, the categories of past, present and future are, according to the French linguist, totally alien to chronicle time because the latter is merely a way to order time in a series of constant units (days, months, years). Benveniste expressly states that situating an event in chronicle time is not the same as inserting such an event in the time of language; furthermore, the author makes it clear that only in "linguistic time" – as opposed to chronicle time – human temporal experience can be articulated:

⁶ Ricœur calls "temporal connectors" thinking devices "that, in their composition, contain elements of both the objective and subjective time, enabling the constitution of historical time through historiographical practice. See also Mendes (2019, p. 138).

Chronic[le] time arrested in a calendar is foreign to and cannot concur with time as it is lived. Precisely because it is objective, the measurements and divisions it offers can situate events but cannot coincide with the categories of human experience in time (BENVENISTE 1965, p. 7).

Now, is not the “human experience in time” the aspect of most interest to historians? My point here is not to deny that the calendar mediates nature and consciousness, but rather that the limits of this mediation should be questioned for a theoretical reflection on historical time. If Benveniste spoke about chronicle time, it was not because, as Ricœur suggests in the previous quotation, the French linguist conceives it as the only existing time by naming it “through the barely disguised double reference to ‘time’”. On the contrary, it seems to me that the adjective “chronicle” was employed by Benveniste precisely to stress that it is *not* the single form of temporality, because it does not account for its articulation in and through human experience.

More recently, many authors have challenged the idea of a universal, absolute *chronos* as the single possibility for thinking about historical time. However, works that theoretically reflect more thoroughly on other temporal frameworks, that is, beyond the chronological paradigm, remain rare. In two recent edited volumes on historical time, the editors explicitly advocated for a multilayered perspective on temporality. In the book edited by Marlon Salomon (2018), the main category is that of “heterochronies”. In the volume edited by Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier (2019), the authors speak in terms of “multitemporal” and “polychronic” temporalities. In both volumes, the notion of *kairos* appears only occasionally, never being the subject of in-depth reflection. Even in Stefan Tanaka’s provocative article entitled “History without Chronology”, in which he proposes that “history must embrace the richness and variability of different forms of times that exist throughout our lives” (TANAKA 2015, p. 167), the concept of *kairos* is not even mentioned by the author.

I am not suggesting that historians should stop thinking of chronological time. Chronology is an important frame of reference for historical inquiry but this does not mean that one must accept *chronos* as the single, absolute framework of historical time. By referring to other temporal conceptualizations, such as *kairos*, the hegemony of *chronos* can be exposed, which is the first condition to criticize it. This is theoretically relevant because pluralizing the way one conceives time is a crucial step to enrich the ways one thinks of history. By considering a kairological view of time, the investigation of how historical agents experience time beyond the strictly chronological framework becomes possible.

Kairos in contemporary theoretical debate

Despite the hegemony of *chronos*, there is an important bibliography in Theory of History that has approached *kairos* to reflect on historical time.⁷ In a famous essay, Giorgio Agamben, inspired by Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, elaborates a critique of continuous time (*chronos*) claiming that the task of “chang[ing] the world” presupposes a revolution in our conceptions of time; such a revolution, in turn, requires a kairological understanding of time, as the latter reveals the most authentic dimension of human historicity: “The chronological time of pseudo-history must be opposed by the cairological time of authentic history” (AGAMBEN 1993, p. 105).

Agamben’s radical praise contrasts with Rik Peters’ argument that the idea of *kairos*, as elaborated in ancient rhetorical tradition, is “not a truly historical concept in the modern sense of history” (PETERS 2018, p. 83). Peters claims that, in ancient rhetoric, *kairos* expressed a belief in a set of unchangeable values, a worldview that can no longer be tenable since the cultural revolution of historicism in the nineteenth century. However, such a contrast between *kairos* and the modern concept of history depends on a reductionist view of the former within the ancient rhetorical tradition. As Carolyn Miller (2002) demonstrates, *kairos* had two meanings in this tradition. The first, on which Peters’ argument is grounded, conveys the idea of *decorum*, the notion of proportion or exact measure based on fixed values. The second understanding of *kairos* stresses the exceptionality of the opportune moment, the spontaneous and unforeseen time. In this second meaning, which can be found in Gorgias and Isocrates, *kairos* expresses precisely the absence of a fixed and immutable order in the world – the opposite of the former meaning.

Diogo Quirim (2014), reflecting on the use of *kairos* in Isocrates’ rhetorical system and its relations to historiography, reached quite different conclusions from those of Rik Peters’s. According to Quirim, *kairos* implies a contextual form of knowledge that does not require any escape from time. Thus, when *kairos* refers to historiography, it does not relate to a reconstruction of a specific circumstance in the past – as if the latter remained immutable – but rather as a principle that calls historiography to constantly revisit the past according to the demands of each present moment. Therefore, *kairos* does not conceal but rather illuminates and reinforces the historicity of historiographical activity, as well as its political functions.

⁷ Insofar as I do not aim to present in this article an extensive bibliographical review on the uses of *kairos* in Theory of History, this section only briefly comments on a few recent works that have explicitly dealt with the concept.

From a different perspective, Marcelo Rangel also addresses the relation between *kairos* and history. Reflecting on the dimension of the *Stimmungen* (mood, atmosphere) in historical thought, Rangel claims that the primordial function of engaging with the past is to destabilize the set of fossilized references of the present. Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s writings, Rangel considers the past as the temporal dimension that opens the field of possibilities that can potentially transform the present, instead of a deposit of facts linked to the present through a temporal *continuum*. Now, the idea of time that emphasizes such a dimension of historical possibilities is *kairos*; it expresses the ability of certain “images of the past” to find the present in unexpected and dangerous moments in order to open the horizons of the present for other possible configurations (RANGEL 2019, p. 57).

Moments of danger are essentially moments of crisis. The relationship between crisis and *kairos* was discussed in two recent texts⁸, although none of them addressed this issue as their main subject. Interestingly, both texts dealt with this issue by referring to Reinhart Koselleck’s work. Bo Stråth (2015, p. 356) claims that crisis and *kairos* are conceptual “tools for historical understanding. They focus on the role of human action in terms of failure and success, responsibilities and escape from responsibilities”. Stråth suggests that Koselleck himself would have shown the relevance of *kairos* in his conceptual history project; however, instead of making a textual reference to Koselleck, Stråth refers to an article by Helge Jordheim; the latter, however, explicitly states that “Koselleck, as far as I know, never uses this Greek term [*kairos*] in any systematic fashion” (JORDHEIM 2007, p. 137).

The second text is written by Helge Jordheim and Einar Wigen (2018). It begins with an analysis of two speeches by Barack Obama at the United Nations in September 2016, showing that the concept of crisis, in contrast with the notion of progress, was used by the former President of the United States to reinforce the perception that the world was facing a *kairos*-moment in the sense of a fateful decision that imposes urgent choices without any guarantees that success will be achieved. Then, the authors argue that “crisis” is about to replace the concept of progress as the main tool of historicization in the Western world and beyond. They support this argument by retracing the conceptual history of “progress” and “crisis”, relying on Koselleck’s work. In the course of the article, however, the topic of *kairos* was not furthered by the authors.

⁸ After this article was already finished and accepted for publication, I had access to François Hartog’s newest book, which also addresses the *chronos-kairos*-crisis triad. So, I was unable to establish a dialogue with Professor Hartog’s approach here in this article.

The next two sections aim to fill this gap. As I mentioned, kairological experiences of time are intimately related to crisis situations. In the following pages, I elaborate on this point from a historical-conceptual point of view. I aim to demonstrate that *the concept of crisis expresses a form of experience of historical time that can only be properly understood by considering the asymmetrical difference between chronos and kairos*. To develop this argument, I build on Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history of crisis, a topic that the German historian had worked on since *Crisis and Critique* (1988). He later wrote a long entry for the *Dictionary of Fundamental Concepts* dedicated to the history of "crisis", which was translated to English (KOSELLECK 2006). He also wrote an essay that summarizes the main findings of the entry (KOSELLECK 2002).

Koselleck's conceptual history of "crisis"

Koselleck begins by retracing the etymology of the concept. The Greek word *krisis* [κρίσις] derives from the verb *krino* [κρίνω], which could mean "to cut, to select, to decide, to judge" (KOSELLECK 2002, p. 237). The ancient uses of *krisis* implied a definitive and irrevocable decision pointing towards strict alternatives that allow no further revision: success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, salvation or damnation. More than the act of judging itself, *krisis* referred to the precise moment in which such a decision is needed, in the sense that one must act timely to achieve a desired outcome. As Koselleck puts it, *krisis* expressed the idea that "the right point in time must be met for successful action" (KOSELLECK 2002, p. 237). From the outset, one can notice the close relationship between crisis and *kairos* – even though Koselleck himself has never employed the latter term.

In the ancient world, *krisis* was used primarily in three domains: law, Christian theology and medicine. It was a recurring concept, used to refer to electoral decisions, government resolutions, death or exile punishments, and declarations of war or peace. This legal-political usage was appropriated by Christian theology, although given a new connotation. The concept came to refer to expectations of the apocalypse: the *krisis* of the end of the world that would finally reveal divine justice. The Christian sense of *krisis* pointed towards the eschatos [ἔσχατος], the time of the end of the world – the Last Judgment, whose hour, time, and place remained unknown, but whose inevitability was certain. However, the outcome of the cosmic judgment was anticipated by a certainty of redemption and eternal life guaranteed by God to those who were faithful and just – therefore, the judgment yet to come is experienced as something already present in Christian conscience and faith.

In the first section, I already commented on the uses of *krisis* in ancient medical philosophy – the crucial moment of a disease that defines whether the patient will be cured or not and that optimizes medical intervention. Considered in tandem, the legal, theological and medical usages of *krisis* referred to a specific form of experience wherein “a decision is due but has not yet been rendered” (KOSELLECK 2006, p. 361). *Krisis* referred to a turning point in time wherein a decisive action is still impending but that must be taken *now* in the present. This close relationship between *krisis* and an impending and urgent decision expresses the original temporal dimension of the concept, whose meaning is in clear relation to the idea of *kairos*.

The concept remained relatively stable until the seventeenth century, when it started being employed in political and social language based on a metaphorical expansion of the medical usage of crisis to refer to “body politic” or to its constituent parts. However, the uses of “crisis” were relatively rare at that time. During the eighteenth century, Koselleck identified a major conceptual change whereby “crisis” became a historical-philosophical concept. Rather than referring to specific historical events – a usage that already appears in Thucydides (STARN 1971, p. 4) – “crisis” came to encompass the entire course of history itself [*Geschichte*]. In this new sense, “crisis” brought together not only a diagnosis of past and present experiences, but also a prognosis of historical future. The concept became a tool for interpreting historical time (KOSELLECK 2006, p. 371).

According to Koselleck, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the first author that used the concept of crisis in the historical-philosophical sense. In his book *Emile, or On Education* (1762), Rousseau stated that there was a general dissatisfaction with the existing social order of his time because the division of society into three estates was the biggest obstacle to achieving equality as a natural human need. Because of this incompatibility, Rousseau reached the prognostic that the existing social order was about to collapse, a destiny that could neither be avoided nor predicted as to its precise date or its concrete outcomes. Radical changes appeared on the horizon:

You reckon on the present order of society, without considering that this order is itself subject to inscrutable changes, and that you can neither foresee nor provide against the revolution which may affect your children. The great become small, the rich poor, the king is a commoner. Does fate strike so seldom that you can count on immunity from her blows? *The crisis is approaching, and we are on the edge of a revolution.* Who can answer for your fate? (ROUSSEAU 1921, p. 157, emphasis added).

Rousseau used “crisis” to present a future prognosis, asserting the inevitable and uncertain character of the profound changes that were to come. It was a “crisis” because nothing could assure that equality would prevail in the coming future. As Koselleck clarifies, the Genevan philosopher employed the concept directly against the optimistic faith in progress shared by many other philosophers of that time.⁹

Nevertheless, the tension between crisis and progress was quickly replaced by a subordination of the former to the latter. Koselleck himself discussed this conceptual change since *Crisis and Critique* (1988). Integrated into the meta-narrative of progress, “crisis” began to take on a more optimistic meaning: a historically immanent transitional phase that accelerates the coming of the future. This new sense appears in the work of progressive philosophers of history, such as, for example, Marquis de Condorcet, who wrote in 1794: “The stormy and arduous transition of a rude society to the state of civilization of an enlightened and free people, implies no degeneration of the human species, *but is a necessary crisis in its gradual advance towards absolute perfection*” (CONDORCET 1802, p. 38, emphasis added). The unpredictability is replaced by the certainty that the future will be better than the present. Thereafter “crisis” becomes a means of accelerating the human saga towards perfection.

Isaak Iselin’s 1764 book *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit* (“History of Humankind”) gives another example of this progressive sense of “crisis”. In its fifth edition, published in 1786, Iselin stated that some “tragic events” that were occurring at that time in Poland, the United States, England, and other “less important states in Europe”, suggested the existence of a “moral thunderstorm” which, in the end, would “purify the air and produce serenity and silence”. These events, Iselin continues, “seem to justify the conjecture that Europe is now in its greatest crisis since its politicization process began; and *instead of thinking that we should consider this crisis as a danger, it fills us with hope and comfort*” (ISELIN 1786, v.2, p. 380, emphasis added, my translation). In clear contrast to the use of “crisis” by Rousseau, Iselin introduced it within his progressive philosophy of history. Thus, “crisis” is shorn of its meaning as pointing to an uncertain future between opposing and inescapable alternatives.

One consequence of the integration of “crisis” into the progressive view of history is the understatement of the concept’s kairological dimension insofar as it came to be subsumed under a chronologically-oriented view of historical time implied by the concept of progress. The latter translates at the historical level a notion of time as a *continuum*

⁹ In this same vein, Johann Gottfried von Herder used “crisis” to go against the coeval progressive philosophies of history (KOSELLECK 2006, p. 377).

that runs towards a predetermined direction – in this case, a progressive improvement. Therefore, when “crisis” was integrated into the meta-narrative of history as progress, its temporal meaning was transformed. Since the bright and better future is previously assured by the ideology of progress, the very sense of unpredictability and urgency to make critical decisions in the present (which portrays the kairological features of “crisis”) loses its former prominence and therefore tends to remain undertheorized. Hence, “crisis” came to refer to one of the ways in which history moves forward, that is, its progressive improvement.

This new progressive sense of crisis would become dominant in the nineteenth century, especially among liberal economic theories: “For liberal optimists, every economic crisis became a step on the ladder of progress” (KOSELLECK 2006, p. 393). Nevertheless, this progressive sense of “crisis” was also shared by socialist authors, including Marx and Engels, who thought of crisis as a historically inevitable – and ultimately fatal – mechanism of the capitalist system (STARN 1971, p. 7).

As a result of these semantic transformations, “crisis” acquired new meanings and uses. On the one hand, it became a concept of iterative periodization, designating phenomena and processes that have definite beginning and end points that mark the process of history (as used in economic history: crisis of 1929, crisis of 1973, etc.). On the other hand, the introduction of “crisis” into philosophy of history led to an extraordinary expansion of its uses: it started being applied to many different domains of human activity such as economic theory, arts, literature, psychology, journalism, among other fields. The concept began to encompass virtually all spheres of life. The cost of such an expansion, however, was the growing blurring of its semantic contours: “From the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision” (KOSELLECK 2006, p. 397).

The temporal sense of “crisis” and the asymmetrical difference between *chronos* and *kairos*

Whether in its ancient or modern uses, the concept of crisis “always posited a temporal dimension, which, parsed in modern terms, actually implied a theory of time” (KOSELLECK 2002, p. 237). The German historian sought to develop such a “theory of time”; however, he did so without mentioning at least once the close and evident relationship between crisis and *kairos*. Therefore, a critique of Koselleck’s interpretation

becomes necessary since the theory of time implied by the concept of crisis *can only be properly exposed if the asymmetry between chronos and kairos is taken as the starting point*.

First, one must ponder over the reasons that led Koselleck to disregard the notion of *kairos* in his interpretation. My hypothesis is that this is because he framed his analysis of “crisis”, especially in its modern sense, as a key to interpret the (modern) phenomenon of temporal acceleration. By structuring his analysis in this way, Koselleck set aside fundamental aspects of the theory of time implied by the concept, namely, the temporality of decision, urgency, imminent rupture and uncertainty about the future.

The crucial element of that theory of time lies in the idea that crisis “pointed toward the *pressure of time*, so to speak, which constituted the understanding of the sense of the concept” (KOSELLECK 2002, p. 238, emphasis added). Undoubtedly, this is an accurate characterization of the temporal sense of “crisis”. My disagreement lies in the way Koselleck interprets the notion of “pressure of time”. It is interesting to note that when the author exposes his interpretation, he refers exclusively to the Christian origin of the concept. In fact, the section from his essay in which he develops this topic is titled “‘Crisis’ as a Question Posed to the Christian Tradition”. As previously stated, Christian theology appropriated the term *krisis* to designate the expectations concerning the Last Judgment and, therefore, the concept’s temporal sense came to be related to *eschatos*, the time of the end.¹⁰ Furthermore, Koselleck retrieves the gospel teaching that, before the end of the world, God makes worldly time pass more quickly: “So that if the Lord had not shortened that time, no one would survive; but he decided to shorten it for the sake of some of his chosen” (Mk 13:20).

Thus, Koselleck interprets the “pressure of time” based on the Christian idea of temporal foreshortening carried out by God to accelerate the Last Judgment (*krisis*), and he then draws a parallel with the historical use of the concept. According to the author, the historicization of the Christian concept of crisis is already found in Martin Luther, for whom temporal foreshortening was not the work of time itself, as if years turned into months, and months into days. Instead, Luther had already interpreted the foreshortening of time historically: “Events themselves, with the disintegration of the church rapidly rushing onward, were for him [Luther] a harbinger of the coming end of the world” (KOSELLECK 2002, p. 245). The evidence of an accelerated passage of time was found in the observation of the very historical events.

¹⁰ For a critique of the conflation between *chronos*, *kairos* and *eschatos* in Christian theology, see AGAMBEN 2005.

From a different perspective, Koselleck adds, the history of discoveries in the natural sciences was similarly interpreted. Francis Bacon stated that scientific inventions and developments would happen in increasingly shorter periods of time. "*From the apocalyptic foreshortening of time came the acceleration of historical progress*" (KOSELLECK 2002, p. 245, emphasis added). This perception of temporal acceleration not only resulted in the concept of *progress*, but it would also have constituted the very temporal sense of the modern concept of *crisis*:

Even the acceleration of the modern world, the reality of which is not to be doubted, can be comprehended as crisis. [...] The generic concept for the apocalyptic foreshortening of time that precedes the Last Judgment, and for historical acceleration, is 'crisis'. Should that only be a linguistic accident? In Christian and in non-Christian usage, 'crisis' indicates in every case a growing pressure of time that appears inescapable to humanity in this earth (KOSELLECK 2002, p. 245).

This citation synthesizes Koselleck's interpretation on the theory of time as implied by the concept of crisis. It consists of an association between the notion of "pressure of time" with the phenomenon of temporal acceleration, taking as its starting point the Christian sense of *krisis*, which highlights a foreshortening of worldly time (*chronos*) towards the end of times (*eschatos*). This temporal foreshortening is also the common origin that crisis shares with progress as historical-temporal concepts.

Now, does the notion of "pressure of time" simply mean the perception that (historical) time runs more quickly? What about the sense of urgency for making a decision and performing timely actions? Or the uncertainty about the historical future that emerges from situations of a radical break in the present? Clearly, positing that crisis is a concept of temporal acceleration is not enough to characterize the theory of time that underlies it. Framed between *chronos* and *eschatos*, Koselleck's interpretation disregarded the idea of *kairos*, which, as I demonstrated in the previous section, is constitutive of the temporal sense of "crisis" since its etymological origins. Although the conceptual changes undergone by the term with the emergence of modern philosophy of history have resulted in a gradual concealment of its kairological sense, this does not mean that the latter has been completely eliminated, nor that it can be ignored when it comes to understanding the form of temporal experience denoted by the concept. The following paragraphs show that the notion of "pressure of time" unmistakably involves a kairological sense of temporal experience.

To say that time is under pressure presupposes a kind of temporal contraction. However, such a contraction of time does not simply mean that the chronological stream moves more or less rapidly. The pressure of time also denotes a situation in which an action is urgent, that is, it cannot wait a long time (*chronos*) to be taken, because there is a risk of missing the right moment (*kairos*) to perform it. The pressure of time is also the pressure of making tough decisions and taking timely actions in a situation of discontinuity and uncertainty about the historical future. This reformulation of the notion of “pressure of time” combines *both* ideas of time I have discussed throughout this article, as well as the asymmetry between them. It is precisely in this sense that *kairos* does not represent a totally separate and symmetrically opposite temporality to *chronos*; it is rather, as I argued before, a contracted and abridged *chronos*.

In proposing this reformulation, I do not claim that relating crisis and temporal acceleration is a misinterpretation. Crisis situations certainly suggest an experience of accelerated changes. What I do argue is that insofar as the asymmetrical difference between *chronos* and *kairos* is considered, it becomes possible to grasp certain aspects of “crisis” that cannot be reduced to the issue of temporal acceleration. The latter, in general lines, refers to a circumstance wherein historical events accumulate within a shortened chronological duration. The flow of events is compressed, changes pile up in a quantitatively shorter chronological interval, thus generating the perception that time *passes* more rapidly. In short, the issue of temporal acceleration implies and reflects a chronological idea of historical time.

However, to experience a critical situation also means that expectations about the future are disrupted by a circumstance of dysfunction and anomie. Insecurity about the future leads to the *emergence* of other possibilities hitherto unforeseen: the historical future may take different directions according to the actions and choices taken in the present. “We are touching on a crisis that will lead to slavery or freedom”, said Denis Diderot in 1771 (*apud* KOSELLECK 1988, p. 172). In this example, “crisis” refers to a future yet undefined, torn between radically opposed possibilities. Such a way of relating to historical future implies a sense of urgency to make difficult decisions in the present aiming to shape the future towards certain possibilities (freedom) over others (slavery), without assuring, however, that success will be necessarily achieved.

Therefore, “crisis” implies a specific kind of future anticipation that is not compatible with that of “progress”: rather than a time of perpetual improvement, the future is anticipated as *possibilities* still open, thus requiring an active stance in the present *moment* to fulfill one or another possibility. In fact, when social actors are faced with such critical situations, they search for possible responses they can enact, thus guiding their

actions according to the horizon of possibilities they find in each particular circumstance. As Andrew Gilbert (2019, p. 71) posits, “crisis” implies that what is presently the case can be or could have been otherwise, and that is the reason why the concept relates to *kairos*: it denotes “the qualitative possibilities of each particular moment rather than time as a process or measurable quantity”.

From this point of view, the performative function of “crisis” is moved to the forefront – an important feature that Koselleck’s interpretation tends to disregard. As Gilbert convincingly argues, “crisis” is often employed as a conceptual device to construct worldviews and political narratives. In addition to a descriptive dimension, by which the term refers to events and states in the observed world, “crisis” holds a performative force. The concept is often used by political actors to drive their audience towards a decision, to perform an action or to come to a resolution, by stressing the urgency of the present moment. Thus, identifying an existing state of affairs as “crisis” entails a prescriptive function: “Crisis is a call to take action, to adopt a different perspective, to see something revealed to us, or even simply be aware of the crisis and to pay attention” (GILBERT 2019, p. 10).

Furthermore, highlighting the kairological sense of crisis is an alternative to an issue that Koselleck did not problematize – even though he admits it at certain moments – namely, the Christian teleological view of history (*krisis* as the Last Judgement). As previously mentioned, Koselleck’s understanding of crisis as a concept of temporal acceleration is derived from such teleological view. In the context of modern philosophy of history, this sense of “crisis” was maintained and gradually subordinated to the idea of progress. Crisis is thus seen as a moment that accelerates the coming of a better future, implying that historical time has a predetermined direction. The uncertainty of the future tends to be obfuscated by such an interpretation.

In contrast, the medical origins of *krisis* do not imply such a teleological view. The shape of the future will be defined according to the actions taken in the present. Success or redemption cannot be previously guaranteed; they will be achieved only to the extent that social agents take initiative and perform the right action at the right time. Therefore, “crisis” implies a sense of radical discontinuity, as a deep transformation in the world is taking place in the present but whose final outcome has not yet been fulfilled nor can it be predicted. The uncertainty of the future meets the performative force of “crisis”: one must act *now* in the present (*kairos*), while there is still time to avoid the worst possible scenario or to actualize the desired possibility. This sense of discontinuity tends to be blurred by interpretations that prioritize the relationship between crisis and temporal

acceleration because the latter reintroduces a crisis situation within the chronological flow, represented as a *continuum* that moves more or less rapidly, instead of the very breaking of such a *continuum*.

Final Remarks

It is often said that global society is currently living in “times of crisis”. As one comes across this expression in 2021, it is quite likely that the reader will associate it with the COVID-19 pandemic – often considered as being *the* crisis of the current generation. Notwithstanding its unique characteristics, impacts, extent and intensity, the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis is one of several other global dysfunctional situations that global societies have been facing recently in the economy, politics, the environment, and so forth. “Times of crisis” holds several faces and comprise multiple temporalities.

How can we think of these “times” that we name as “crisis”? First, we must reflect more closely on the very concept of crisis and its constitutive temporal dimensions. In this article, I demonstrated that such dimensions can only be properly understood if one considers the asymmetrical difference between *chronos* and *kairos*. The tendency in modern historical thinking to identify historical time exclusively with *chronos* often relegates the kairological aspect of “crisis” to the background. Thus, when it comes to reflecting on the way the concept of crisis expresses and elaborates forms of temporal experience that would differentiate it from other historical-temporal concepts (such as progress, development, or evolution), the chronological paradigm stands out, whereas that kairological aspect ceases to be thought of as such.

I do not intend to totally reject the interpretation of crisis as a concept of temporal acceleration, as Koselleck (and others) proposed. Such an interpretation, however, does not exhaust the possibilities of signifying the historical time that “crisis” brings. Crisis is a concept of acceleration *and also* of urgency, uncertainty, and imminence. Times of crisis are times of accelerated transitions. But they are also *moments* whose distinctive quality is not defined by the extension or position of its chronological duration but rather by its reference to situations of great instability that call for the agents’ resoluteness. Times of crisis are also *critical moments* that can potentially define a war, a cure, or that will seriously impact a country’s political future.

By shedding light on these characteristics of “crisis” through the asymmetry between *chronos* and *kairos*, several issues potentially relevant to the current theoretical discussions on historical temporality are raised. In this article, a parallel was evinced

between the modern conception of time and the semantic changes that “crisis” went through when it became a historical-philosophical concept. As I indicated in the second section, many authors claim that modern thinking merged the plurality of temporal notions and representations into a single, universal, and absolute *chronos*-time. According to Russell West-Pavlov,

The recent history of time since the Enlightenment has evinced a progressive narrowing of the spectrum of temporal modes. The gradual streamlining of temporality down to universal linear time as the self-evident calibration of human existence has repressed and elided other possible temporal structurings of individual and global existence. It inherently claims, ‘There is no alternative!’ (WEST-PAVLOV 2013, p. 6).

Such a narrowing of the temporal modes can be related to the semantic transformations of “crisis” since the eighteenth century. Whereas in its ancient uses the kairological sense of “crisis” was more prominent, it became gradually concealed insofar as, in the context of modern philosophy of history, the concept was subordinated to a progressive view of history – which, as I stated previously, translates at a historical level the notion of a chronologically-oriented processual time.¹¹

Concealment, however, does not mean total erasure. “Crisis” and “progress” express two conceptions of time and historical change that are ultimately incompatible with each other. On the one hand, “progress” implies a linear and continuous *chronos*-time within which events unfold and thus configures history as a process that runs toward a predetermined (progressive) direction. “Progress” encompasses historical change, but to the extent that this change is subsumed to a temporal *continuum* that makes sense of it. On the other hand, “crisis” emphasizes discontinuity and rupture, ultimately challenging the idea of history as a continuous process. “Crisis” thus points to a disruptive notion of change, whose outcome cannot be determined beforehand, urging a decision that must be made in the present *kairos*-moment.

Now, as many scholars have already stated, the modern metanarrative of progress has been increasingly challenged in the contemporary world; conversely, the concept of crisis does not seem to be shrinking, on the contrary, it has been used more and more extensively. Jordheim and Wigen even claim that “the concept of crisis is about to replace the concept of progress as the main tool of historicization in the Western world

¹¹ On the concept of “processual temporality” as opposed to “evental temporality”, see Simon (2019).

and beyond” (JORDHEIM and WIGEN 2018, p. 425). The authors state that the concept has been applied to so many different domains of contemporary life that it has become more and more often to using the term not only to describe this or that particular field of human activity whatsoever, but also to designate a whole historical “age”:

We live in a *time of crisis*, conceptually speaking, where concepts of ‘crisis’ are proliferating and increasingly more areas of society or human life enter into an alleged stage of crisis, not just the economy and the climate, but identity and culture, as well. Furthermore, these different crises are drawn together, into the collective singular, indicating a crisis of global, even universal, scope (JORDHEIM and WIGEN 2018, p. 437).

In order to understand the way “crisis” works as a “tool of historicization”, that is, as a concept that signifies and articulates historical sense, its proper temporal dimensions must be reconsidered instead of subjecting it to the same temporal logic of progress. To do so, the first step would be to retrieve or “unconceal” that kairological dimension which constitutes the temporal sense of crisis and assess how this dimension structures concrete historical crisis experiences. Such a theoretical task acquires an even greater relevance in a world increasingly perceived as living in “times of crisis”.

The current pandemic situation has provided plentiful practical proofs of the way temporality has been experienced in a kairological sense. On many occasions, social and political actors have been constrained to make tough decisions under conditions of great uncertainty, without much *chronos*-time to ponder on them. Take, for example, the tragic situation that physicians and nurses found themselves in, having to choose who should receive medical treatment amid the collapse of healthcare systems; or the pressure of time that many politicians found themselves under, having to decide in haste the right moment to start, suspend, or retake social isolation measures to curb the virus circulation.

By considering such kairological characteristics of crisis experiences, a new set of issues opens up for further investigations. At this point, it bears reminding that experiencing time in a kairological sense does not necessarily mean that the right action was effectively performed, nor that the occasion was properly seized. *Kairos* is a time of big risks, including the risk of missing the opportune moment to act. But at the same time, the very sense of having seized the moment is politically disputed. A good example of that is a statement delivered by Boris Johnson on March 16th, 2020, when the UK Prime Minister, for the first time, asked British people to stay at home to avoid

unnecessary physical contact. After having neglected the seriousness of the pandemic for weeks, Johnson was accused of not taking the right measures in the appropriate moment, thus furthering the crisis. In his statement, Johnson addressed these charges with the following words:

And if you ask, why are we doing this now, why now, why not earlier, or later? Why bring in this very draconian measure? The answer is that we are asking people to do something that is difficult and disruptive of their lives. And the right moment, as we’ve always said, is to do it when it is most effective, when we think it can make the biggest difference to slowing the spread of the disease, reducing the number of victims, reducing the number of fatalities (JOHNSON 2020).

Johnson claimed that his office took the right decision at the right moment for the best of the country. The fact that the United Kingdom has become one of the main European and global hotspots of the pandemic demonstrates, however, that claiming to have acted in a timely manner is very different from actually doing so. Whatever it may be, this example shows that seizing or missing the right moment to take initiative is a structural dimension of crisis experiences. Hence, from the point of view of Theory of History, it is crucial to retrieve the idea of *kairos* to investigate the ways in which the experience of historical time has been reshaped in our pandemic world.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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