

Critical Times

Austrian Sociological Association's (ÖGS) Congress

Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien
July 3rd to 5th 2023

Energy crisis, Ukraine war, global warming and worldwide epidemics - in view of the multitude of current crises, conflicts and catastrophes, voices are being raised that speak of a "turning point in time" or an epochal upheaval (Epochenbruch). What is meant by this is that, as a result of global threats, established practices, institutions and ways of thinking are coming under pressure and making way for a rethink or political change of direction. The return of geopolitics and the (tentative) abandonment of fossil fuels are just as worthy of mention here as the growing criticism of the Western growth and prosperity model or the dispute over the right immigration policy. However, these examples also show that, especially in times of crisis, established routines, thought-styles and behavior have a high degree of persistence.

Of course, the pressure that contemporary society experiences does not only come from outside, in the form of new kinds of risks or ongoing global conflicts. This pressure also results from society's expectation that - to paraphrase Max Weber - all things can in principle be controlled and enhanced by calculation and technical progress. This typical modern optimism reinforces the mood of crisis. One could perhaps even say that it is the firm belief that there must be large, centrally coordinated solutions to large problems that, in the face of constant disappointments, gives rise to the feeling that we are in a permanent phase of crisis.

The close link between crisis and critique is reflected today on several levels. On the one hand, we are experiencing criticism that has been stimulated or radicalized by the crisis. In the climate dispute, for example, new forms of action and protest have developed to persuade hesitant politicians to act. In the pandemic, many disputes revolved around whether the crisis was correctly recognized, interpreted and combated by politics with the appropriate measures. Second, in the course of these conflicts, we are witnessing that criticism itself is in crisis. Increased visibility of conspiracy myths, the revival of a fundamental skepticism of science, and hatred in the social media directed against the "big-headed" elite are becoming a stress test for democracy and make it clear that critique does not necessarily have an emancipative effect.

If one follows current crisis diagnoses, the crisis dynamics extend not only to certain areas of society (such as health, mobility or migration), but also to the core of the social, namely to the way in which solutions to these problems are struggled for and who feels responsible for these problems or is even heard in these disputes. Here - usually under the title of "polarization" - radical political differences are thematized, which result from new inequalities and differing perceptions of conflict. The dispute over the adequate policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic in particular has shown the potential for radicalization that is unleashed when acute crises turn into intractable, chronic crises.

There is no doubt that we are living in critical times, if we understand this to mean the widespread feeling that many things we take for granted are being put to the test, be it on the level of identity, belonging and individual life planning, be it with regard to our relationship with nature, the socio-technical change (digitalization) or the future of democracy. Whether these crises actually lead to a turning point, i.e., whether they usher in something like an epochal break, or whether the forces of persistence prevail, however, is an open question. For this, sociology would have to determine to what extent central institutions and subsystems of society are actually limited in their function or are subject to profound change.

At this congress, therefore, we will discuss in an open-ended way what explanatory content the striking phrase "critical times" has for the current constellation, which developments are to be seen as a serious test of society's endurance, and which constructions of relief can be found. In a series of

plenary events, ad hoc groups and section events, the sociological content of the basic thesis of a turning point in time will be put up for discussion.

AdHoc Groups

Applications for ad hoc groups may be submitted until February 1st, 2023. The selection of ad hoc groups will be made by a jury composed of members of the ÖGS Board. Contributions from Austrian research institutions or research cooperations with an Austrian share will be given priority in the selection process.

Information on the submission and application procedure will be available shortly on the [ÖGS homepage](#).

Contact: Philipp Molitor, General Secretary of the ÖGS Office, office@oegs.ac.at