

SOCIETIES IN TURMOIL AND THE DYNAMICS OF CRISES

PRESENTATION AT THE COLLOQUIUM: "ECONOMIC CRISIS: CONSEQUENCES ON THE FAMILY AND THE MORAL VALUES"

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About six months ago about my daughter, talking to a classmate who wanted to buy a new computer, said:

"We have crisis now. Don't you understand?"

This phrase encapsulates for me the sense of the crisis. Crisis is when a 10-year-old child consciously uses in his or her vocabulary that keyword.

What is Crisis?

The story of a crisis cannot be written in one or two years after it starts. It will take time in order for social scientists to calmly look into and explain the causes and effects of what we now call the crisis. Crises do not appear out of nowhere. They are the result of complex social structures. The researcher of this issue is required to interpret the processes leading to a situation in order to understand the dynamics of any crisis.

Additionally, the term "crisis" is problematic because it is not value neutral. If you define something as a crisis, this introduces a personal element: whether it influences ourselves and therefore the interpretation we give. Because there is this dimension as well: Is this a crisis that we are going through? Sure it is a change experienced massively. Allow me, then, not to call a crisis what we are going through, but to use a more dynamic term: social change.

Societies in Turmoil

We live in an era characterized by large and sudden changes. Changes in social institutions and social structure are experienced in a more direct way by more and more people. One can say that this was always the case. The difference is that we believe that these changes are more massive and faster. We respond this way just because we are in the midst of all the changes and we have not figured out how to adapt.

Starting with the social institution of the family, we experience changes that tend to relax the previously rigid structures. The definition of 'family' is ever-changing, including new, non-standard structures. Examples are single-parent families, one-person families, same-sex parents. Additionally, the typical family in economically developed countries is smaller due to the reduction in the number of births. Another structural change is the increase in the divorce rate.

Continuing with the social institution of religion, levels of faith and support decline as a result of major scandals coming out in public every so often. Regardless of the scandals, the role of religious faith and the church representatives is progres-

sively declining in economically developed countries. Two other social institutions, education and politics, are characterized by uncertainty and inability to provide safe leadership.

On top of all these come the all too familiar economic consequences of the crisis. However, this period of social change we are experiencing is not an economic crisis. That is how it is presented by the media. It is a deeply social challenge experienced as an economic crisis. What we are experiencing today is what scientists call paradigm shift. These paradigmatic shifts always occur and are structural components of social change. Let us think of the 1960s that brought serious challenges in status quo through constant questioning of extremely powerful institutions. Long-standing political, military and racial practices were challenged. Let's not go too far back. The early 1990s brought the questioning of socialism through a paradigm shift with huge political, cultural and economic changes that we are experiencing today.

The current situation is perhaps the most serious challenge of capitalism as a social and economic system and essentially results in a critique of globalization. This critique is socially important and extremely difficult. This is happening because on a daily basis millions of people feel that the system within which they grew up betraying them and has turned against them. They lose their jobs, their assets, and their faith in long-standing standards.

Consequences

Due to continuous and rapid changes which we experience and because the process of challenging reality was never convenient, we begin to fail to find sufficient explanations. This alone creates insecurity. As a result, a growing number of social groups give up the effort and remain inactive, accepting the futility of the exercise. This is the beginning of alienation.

Karl Marx was the first to describe the condition as "weakness due to isolation." Examples of this alienation are the increase in the number of suicides, increased individual and social isolation and changes in the work environment that tend to isolate people.

These examples delineating the four main pillars of alienation: alienation from one's comrades, acceptance of personal inability to react, loss of meaning, and social isolation.

The Dynamic of Crises

Only if we comprehend the period we are going through as a dramatic social change and not just a crisis, we will be able to see something dynamic and positive from this

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whole situation. Understanding social change allows us to see a different tomorrow. The crisis, however, does not. The crisis, unfortunately, is an acute condition, beyond “normalcy” and when it is over we expect to go back to the previous condition.

In our case, this does not and should not apply. Social change means that something else will come, not the same. It gives us the right and the responsibility to change. If this change is for the better and for the wider social benefit, it's up to us to make it happen. I think this is starting to happen. Questioning and maintaining a critical approach to everything brings many positive results.

Through critical stance, the situation may change and the reality may become less grim. Within this sludge of alienation we may begin to see some signs of social recovery. The examples are many and increasing: communal groceries, mutual aid networks, free lessons, bazaars at the neighborhood level, applications of exchange economy, social movements such as the potato movement, fun at home with friends.

All these actions and practices tend to reduce many of the components of alienation. Significant numbers of people reunite with their comrades and try to regain control by rejecting simplistic fatalistic attitudes of personal weakness. Through this process, social groups reinvent the meaning that was lost, and as a result they fight social isolation.

Nevertheless, the question remains: can we completely eliminate alienation? No. But we are witnessing a trend, exactly because there is a “crisis” that begins to create a response to alienation. After all, this is indeed the basic rule of nature: action and reaction. The situation that we are living in, has forced us to have more solidarity, even if only out of necessity.

Social solidarity is important because it is the linchpin that holds the individual pieces of society tied together. According to Emile Durkheim, the great French sociologist, social solidarity is a key feature of all societies and is manifested in various ways. The reactions described above can be seen as an attempt to restore the balance in the society.

Conclusion

In a perverse way, there are some aspects of this situation that have positive elements. I do not expect immediate results, but there is something uncomfortable positive when residents from a neighborhood gather to organize an exchange bazaar. Inconvenient, because unfortunately there had to be an economic disaster for it to happen. Positive, because this is a way to combat alienation. So, like my daughter, I can say: “We have crisis now. Don't you understand?”-