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PhD Programme in Historical, Geographical, Anthropological Studies

**Crisis and infrastructures: responses to change between materiality and
immateriality**

A dialogue between Anthropology, Geography and History

The Seminar is organised by the PhD students, cycle XXXIV of the PhD Programme in Historical,
Geographical and Anthropological Studies
(University of Padova, University Ca' Foscari, University of Verona)

Padova, 5th-6th-7th May, 2020

Department of Historical and Geographical Sciences and the Ancient World - DiSSGeA
Via del Vescovado, 30 – Padova – Sala Bortolami



Introduction

The category of *crisis* has long been used by the historiographical tradition to describe moments of transition in which fresh and original responses were prepared to address new problems and phases of persistent instability. Some contributions, such as the one edited by Paolo Pombeni and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (2013), have provided a long-term interpretation of these dynamics, identifying the period between 1494 and 1973 as a "transitional age" in which "Western modernity" first shaped itself and then dissolved. Other approaches, on the contrary, turned their attention towards some of the most disruptive and critical moments of history, trying to identify acute fractures and turning points. The debate on the so-called "Mid-fourteenth century conjuncture" (Carocci, 2016), which developed inside the field of medieval historiography, could be a good example of that. But one could also think about the global perspective adopted by Parker (2013) in analyzing the relationships between 1640's climatic anomalies and the individual crisis of that time; or, with regard to the contemporary age, to the studies of Italian institutional ruptures such as the fall of the liberal State or the 1968-1980 political crisis (Taviani and Vacca, 2016).

The very word "crisis" has thus gained an ever-growing polysemy, aided in that by the constant media coverage, and the term have been ubiquitously used not only to talk about the 20th century (the "Age of Catastrophe" par excellence), but also in reference to other periods of time.

Starting from these observations, the conference will ponder the concept of *crisis* by taking into account the different approaches proposed by the anthropological and geographical communities of scholars, focusing in particular on the category of *infrastructure*.

Since the late 1980s, in fact, both these disciplines started to reflect on the various material and immaterial tools that humans conceived, on the basis of a shared system of values, to overcome potentially disruptive periods. The concept of *infrastructure* has therefore made its appearance in the anthropological vocabulary to indicate those "socio-technical apparatuses" and those "material constructions" that "structure, facilitate and regulate the circulation, not only of energy, information, goods and capital, but also [...] of people, practices and ideas" (Burchardt and Höhne 2013: 3). Material structures, ideological devices and relational weavings are all part of the conceptual category that British anthropologists have been exploring steadily. The choice of the term "infrastructure" is driven by the need to enhance cultural and anthropological variables, in order to overcome the static nature of the structural-functionalist vision and to give priority to the conflictual dynamism that usually arise during critical moments.

Victor Turner, for example, considered his notion of *social drama* as being made up of various phases: first a moment of "breakdown", fed by a crisis where every threshold is vague and liminal, then a "post-liminal" phase of openness and transformation. It is in this very time that the situation can give birth to a renovated "aggregation" or, on the contrary, redescend toward a further "break".
"A social drama manifests itself primarily as a breaking of a rule, as an infringement of a rule of morality, law, custom or etiquette in some public circumstance. [...] It produces an ongoing crisis, a break or an important turning point in the relations between the members of a social area."
(Turner 1986: 131)

The purpose of the conference is to explore the interactions between *crises* and *infrastructures* starting from a pivotal question: is it possible to consider transitional processes as moments of "a



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transformation that [...] includes some essential elements of the previous phase"? (Pombeni 2013: 12) Or are they to be intended just as dramatic interruptions and breaks?

The duration of the analyzed phenomenon, thus, is a key factor to take into consideration when examining both gradual transformations and deciding ruptures, in order to assess the potential heritage left from a crisis to the following period.

PhD students, post-docs and research fellows of historical, geographical and anthropological training are invited to participate in the construction of a moment of dialogue and exchange. The aim is to stimulate an interdisciplinary discussion that will encompass all historiographical epochs, from antiquity to the present day, and question not only the role of infrastructure in the resolution of crises, but also the various implications of critical moments and of their conception.

Some examples of topics to be addressed are:

- *Possible responses to political and social crises;*
- *Visions and perceptions (endogen or hexogen, emic or etic) with reference to crises and infrastructures;*
- *Crises of economic or demographic nature and the use of infrastructures for problem solving;*
- *Social actors, their interactions and the possible reconfiguration of social infrastructures;*
- *Real or imagined crises of moral values;*
- *The value attributed to the terms "crisis" and "infrastructure";*
- *The symbolic techniques used to describe crises and infrastructures within the public discourse.*

Information, deadline and how to apply

The Conference will be held next 5th, 6th, 7th May 2020 at the Department of Historical, Geographical Sciences and the Ancient World - DiSSGeA, in Padua.

Italian and international PhD students, post-docs and post-doctoral fellows, coming from historical, geographical and anthropological fields of study, are invited to participate. Contributions in Italian, English and French will be accepted.

Those interested in submitting their proposal should send a PDF file to crisieinfrastrutture@gmail.com, specifying:

First name

Surname

Home university

Position

Working title of the intervention

Abstract with a maximum length of 1500 characters (spaces included)

Presentations will have a maximum duration of 20 minutes. The deadline for submitting abstracts is 3th January 2020. The Organizing Committee will deal with the evaluation and the selection of the abstracts.



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The Committee will give notice of the acceptance of the abstracts received by the end of January 2020.

The Organizing Committee

Anna Karin Giannotta XXXIV Cycle, Sector M-DEA / 01 Cultural Anthropology

Chiara Nozza Bielli XXXIV Cycle, M-STO / 02 Modern History

Cristina Arcari XXXIV Cycle, M-STO / 01 Medieval History

Giulio Argenio XXXIV Cycle, M-STO / 04 Contemporary History

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