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Reflections on the concept “crisis”



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Abstract. In the preface to the book “The Crisis of Our Age” its author Pitirim Aleksandrovich Sorokin argues that “every important aspect of the life, organization and the culture of Western society is in extraordinary crisis”. And he continues his words of prophecy: “Its body and mind are sick and there is hardly a spot on its body which is not sore” [Sorokin, 1948 (1942): 7]. Sorokin, of course, was not the only one who perceived their modernity as being in a crisis. T.G. Masaryk wrote about many aspects of the “crisis” of his time in the late 19th century. Georg Simmel studied the crisis of culture in the beginning of the 20th century [Simmel, 1983]; Sigmund Freud warned about the dangerous potential of human destructiveness, Oswald Spengler announced the “decline of the West” [Spengler, 2011], and Joseph Alois Schumpeter argued that cyclical manifestations of economic crises¹ relate to the economy like heartbeat to a living organism. While Adolf Hitler was consolidating his power, Edmund Husserl [Husserl, 1972] lectured on “the crisis of the European Sciences”, and Georges Friedmann spoke about the “crisis of progress” [Friedmann, 1937]. The subject of “crisis” is still relevant and it continues to hold a special position in the context of the social sciences after World War II, when political and international crises become a frequently discussed issue. Since the 1970s the energy crisis and environmental crisis have been widely discussed. The late 1980s witnessed the collapse of the socialist system, and the onset of postmodernism emphasizes the issue of identity crisis. And that is not all: the warnings and critical visions of that time are highlighted also due to other concepts, which easily become an integral part of the conceptual luggage of social scientists from many countries – the concepts of “risk”, “catastrophe” and “collapse”.

Key words: concept of crisis, manifestations of crisis situations, cycles of development, crisis in society, theories of social change, resolution of crisis situations.

¹ The French economist Clément Juglar was the first to discover and describe economic cycles in the 1860s.

On the etymology and semantics of the concept “crisis”

The roots of the concept “crisis” come from the Greek language. The expression “krisis” is derived from the verb “krino” which meant to separate, to choose and to decide between two opposing choices, life and death, success and failure [Koselleck, 1992: 47; Koselleck, 2006: 203]. The word “krisis” itself indicates a hazardous condition, a heavy decisive moment, a fundamental moment in which a crucial issue (concerning the result, subsequent existence or subsequent development) should be handled, a moment in which people feel uncertainty, confusion and difficulty.

The spread of the concept “crisis” is a merit primarily of Hippocratic medicine, which with the help of this concept denotes a brief period in the course of illness when the question is decided whether the patient would live or die.

Thucydides used this concept to depict political events and military conflicts [Prisching, 1986: 19; Koselleck, 2006: 204]; it has also become one of the main components of a drama or literary work which contains the climax of the plot; in classical drama it comes from the collision of opposing forces and trends.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the concept of “crisis” is spread under the meaning of a difficult decisive moment in the debates about politics and war of that time. Not later than before the French Revolution this concept, according to Reinhart Koselleck, becomes the central interpretive tool of political and social

history and, therefore, finds itself between the main historical concepts [Koselleck, 2006: 206]. The expression “economic crisis” emerges in the 19th century and it refers to a radical, pronounced deterioration of the economy.

Koselleck who is interested in the crisis primarily as one of the basic concepts, by which we try to understand history, highlights three semantic models, which contained this notion [ibid: 207-213; Koselleck, 1992: 50-52].

The author explains the first model by citing Schiller: “World history is the trial of the world”, which, in his opinion, expresses “a kind of temporary inherent similarity of the last court held constantly and tirelessly” [Koselleck, 2006: 208]. History in this concept is viewed and interpreted as a continuing crisis. The very concept of “crisis” here becomes a procedural category, which expresses a constant, immutable feature of human history.

Crisis in the second case is associated with the intersection of different eras, with rapid transition from one stage to another. We are talking about the iterative conception, according to which crisis periodically appears in history as a driving force of development or progress. In this case, crisis is perceived as a one-time, accelerating process, in which a new situation arises and develops out of the destruction of the existing system.

Historian Jacob Burckhardt dwelled upon the matter of historical crises in the 19th century in the framework of this concept [Burckhardt, 1971 (1873): 125-160].

In the third case crisis is perceived as the final crisis of history, metaphorically speaking, as its “judgment day” or “Grande Crise Finale” [Koselleck, 2006: 212].

Koselleck states that in this case crisis, in contrast to previous concepts, is the notion of “pure future nature”, associated with a specific anticipated “final solution”, after which history would look very different than before. This notion, according to Koselleck, in the 19th century had utopian character, but “with modern tools that allow for self-destruction, it has all the chances to come to be” [Koselleck, 1992: 51].

Risk, crisis, catastrophe and collapse

In today’s social science crisis is particularly close to concepts such as “risk”, “catastrophe” and “collapse”. We are talking about the terms that are often used for the expressing concerns that in certain cases even take apocalyptic dimensions.

Risk is usually associated with what may precede a crisis and influence its appearance; disaster or collapse, on the contrary, are associated with the result, which arise out of the development of risk factors or uncontrollable crisis.

Thus, a crisis is perceived as what directly precedes a catastrophe or collapse, what creates and invokes them. Catastrophe and collapse, in turn, are perceived as a higher phase or the final phase of crisis, as a negative climax of crisis development. Actually, catastrophe can be perceived as a synonym of collapse, or collapse can be considered as a disaster that is absolutely destructive in nature.

The concept of “risk” became popular and this problem became widely known in the second half of the 1980s, due primarily to Ulrich Beck [Beck, 2004 (1986)], who postulated that modern industrial society produces, as an unconscious consequence of its economic growth and technological development, such risk, which exceeds the measure of tolerance and becomes self-destroying passion. A society that creates danger and risk on a massive scale, is a “risk society”.

British sociologist Anthony Giddens [Giddens, 2000: 33-50] states that the idea of risk originates in the insurance system, which was born in connection with sea voyages in the 16th and 17th centuries. Risk is a potential hazard, it is something that may, but need not necessarily happen.

Originally this notion referred to the danger connected with covering long distances. Later it was applied to banking operations and investment activities, which are associated with time and with consequences of economic decisions.

Thus, risk is associated with the recognition of probability and uncertainty. Capitalism that emphasizes the scope of the future in such a way that continually calculates prospective profits and losses, is inextricably linked to risk, and so it is widely used in the sphere of insurance systems.

Thanks to insurance, people start believing that they have the opportunity to influence the future and to manage it.

Thus, the idea of risk was from the beginning an integral part of modernity,

however, the nature of today's risks is new and substantially different. The industrialism of the 19th century, which established an insurance system against its risks, which is based on the exact calculation of the level of risk and on the substantiated calculation of the compensation for the losses incurred, tried to introduce certain rationality in the field of uncertainty and potential threats.

However, with regard to current risks, such protective measures of the past years are inefficient. These are the risks that cannot be limited socially; their new feature is that the threats concern not just some specific place (e.g., industrial enterprise), but the life on our planet in all its manifestations as a whole – in short, these are global risks.

A characteristic feature of modern risks is their “insuperability”, which is connected with the way they spread: they become “stowaways in normal consumption. They travel with the wind and water, they hide in everything and with everything that is most necessary for life – the air we breathe, food, clothing and household – they overcome every strictly controlled security zone of the present” [Beck, 2004: 11].

Another important characteristic of these risks is their “latency”, i.e. their certain “invisibility”. It makes us face a problem that was not known in the conditions of industrial society of the 19th century: how to distinguish risks? They are incomprehensible for our inherent feelings, their detection requires measuring instruments and scientific equipment.

The threat and destruction that people experienced during the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on site and in remote areas are beyond human perception.

Thus, first of all, risks need to be identified and named. This is a task that is often complicated not only by the very fact of their latency, but also by the fact that we are talking about multilayer complexes of causes and effects beyond the boundaries of everyday knowledge.

Science plays a key role in their identification and determination. In this regard, Beck modifies the well-known statement of Marx and says that in the risk society “it is consciousness that determines being”. Risks become what they are only because they are recognized by experts. However, it is true that while they are “not recognized scientifically, they do not exist, at least not in the legal, medical, technological and social sense”.

So they are not suppressed, not overcome or compensated” [Beck, 2004: 95].

Beck states that the emergence of the risk society, which is a consequence of existing modernization risks, represents a radical social change, which, however, happened not openly, but secretly, in the form of a “quiet revolution”; it is a revolution without a subject and without a change of elites; it is an overthrow that affects the common destiny of all living beings on our planet. And if today, as a result of global interdependence and global context, certain types of threats are intertwined and amplified, then it is necessary to talk about the “world society of risk” [Beck, 1999].

Catastrophe – a word of Greek origin – indicates an event that adversely modifies the previous state of affairs and leads to large damage. Catastrophe theory is developed as a branch of mathematics (its founders include René Thom [Thom, 1989]), which is also applied in other disciplines, such as biology, psychology and medicine.

Therefore, the conceived theory examines, first of all, the problem, how important events of a catastrophic nature can happen as result of the accumulation of small effects [Buchanan, 2004]. In the field of social sciences the interest to disasters, particularly environmental ones, was caused by the work of Charles Perrow “Normal Accidents: Living with High Risk Technologies” [Perrow, 1984] and was further developed due to the focus on the problems of modernization risks, which was initiated by the work of Ulrich Beck.

René Thom highlights and examines, inter alia, the question of whether the crisis is manifested through any visible signs or morphological symptoms. He states that risk factors in the case of living beings remain relatively invisible and sometimes even non-existent.

This is due to the fact that usually, while the function is amenable to adverse effects during the crisis, the structure often remains intact [Thom, 1992: 23].

From this point of view, according to the author, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between crisis and catastrophe. Catastrophe “is a phenomenon that is, by its nature, visible; it is a definite observed discontinuance, an obvious “fact”.

Crisis can be latent or it can sneak up insidiously. Quite often it is manifested only in a quantitative (but not qualitative) failure of a specific regulatory process: this is < ... > the case of inflationary crisis in the economy.

However, there is an obvious correlation between crisis and catastrophe: a crisis often informs about a catastrophe, anticipates or provokes it” [ibid].

If disasters are characterized by a decline or system failure which occurs as unmanaged and uncontrolled fall, then we can talk about collapse. In 1988 American archaeologist Joseph A. Tainter in his book “The Collapse of Complex Societies” raised a question: why in the past there was a fall of many civilizations, governments or other complex forms of organization of human society? The author provides nearly two dozen cases of public collapses that occurred in the past (Maya cities is the most famous among them) [Tainter, 2009 (1988)]. The topic raised in this work, has become popular, especially thanks to the book by Jared Diamond [Diamond, 2008], and it has been discussed in scientific literature [Taylor, 2008; McAnany, Yoffee, 2010; Bárta, Kovář, 2011]. It is obvious that the motivation for such a broad interest in the issue of collapses is supported by the fear of possible danger that something similar would happen to our modern civilization as well.

One concept – many different manifestations

It has been said that the original meaning of the term “crisis” is connected with the last, decisive moment of development in

which the question of existence or nonexistence is decided. People confront crises and must overcome them for centuries. They represent something like “*conditio humana*” [Úvodem: 5] – that, which people face from time immemorial. At that, we can talk about the crises of a single and unique character, and the recurrent crises. Very often, crises can be a transitional stage between the two stages of development.

Moreover, the course of crises can be different. In some cases we can speak about a slow, smooth or approaching process, in other cases – about a sudden and rapid turn of events. Crisis is perceived by some thinkers as an attribute of modernity, as something that is “genetically” related to its development and accompanies it from the very beginning. In this sense, the signs of crisis are identified by many theorists constantly, throughout the entire modern history.

Theories that study crises usually trace several major issues, which include their causes, driving forces, individual and collective actors, structures and functions, causality and interdependence, regularity and randomness [Prisching, 1986: 38-58].

We can consider crises on different levels. We can talk about the crises of individual human life [Lay, 1980: 175-181], which are studied by the natural sciences and psychology, or family crises or the crises of interpersonal relationships. The social sciences are interested, primarily, in the society crises. They can be limited in nature and concern only individual areas of society or individual social subsystems (economy,

politics, religion, culture, science); we can also talk about crises of a holistic and complex (national, public) nature. Crises can be manifested on a wide-scale basis as international (global) crises.

Paul Ricoeur speaks of “regional” concepts and of a “general” concept of crisis. He points out several “foci” from which stems the “regional” use of that term and asks whether it is possible to move from them to the “general” or “global” concept [Ricoeur, 1992: 29-42].

The first “focus”, which is the basis of one of the “regional” concepts, is medicine in which a crisis is the moment in the course of a disease when its “hidden pathology” is revealed and the question is whether the patient will recover.

The second focus lies in the area of psycho-physiological development, where this term is used not for expressing a threat of a disaster, but in order to emphasize those periods of development, which are characterized by higher imbalance and vulnerability (e.g., growing-up).

The third case, referred to as the “cosmopolitan” model, concerns the discourse on crisis in global political history.

The fourth, “epistemological” model is associated with the development in science (in the interpretation of Kuhn it is paradigmatic crisis). In the fifth case it is an economic concept. It is the economic crisis characterized by autonomy, periodicity and global nature, which, according to Ricoeur, is one of the main driving forces in the development of a general theory of crisis. The author, on the basis of analysis, comes to a general concept in which crisis is

defined as “the pathology of the process of history temporalization”, which “consists in the dysfunction of normal relations between the horizon of expectations and the area of experience” [ibid: 42].

In this regard, it is appropriate to recall the idea of Knut Borchardt (inspired by Marx) that it is useful to distinguish between crises “in themselves” and crises “for themselves” [Borchardt, 1992: 105]. The crises “in themselves” is an objective reality that people are not (yet) aware of, while the crisis “for themselves” is a situation in which its manifestations become an integral part of human experience and self-perception.

We add that, nevertheless, in the framework of this self-perception, crisis can be viewed in different ways: it can be perceived as a “warning” (in the sense that something has to be done to avoid the worst, i.e., catastrophe or collapse); as a “malignant disease”, which must be treated in order to live a healthy life; as a “benign disease”, which it does not make sense to treat, and it is necessary to suffer through this disease in order to strengthen the immune system of our “organism”; and also as a “fate”, against which it is useless to do anything. The awareness of a crisis is characterized by a sense of threat or even fear of death. The thought of a crisis is often associated with a moment of surprise, because moments of crisis usually occur suddenly, unexpectedly and with strong intensity. This causes an acute necessity to search for a solution, which, however, is associated with a feeling of lack of time and with uncertainty.

Attempts to resolve crisis situations can assume a form of intervention that relates to their real sources and problems and tries somehow to overcome them, but it happens that, in particular in the cases of political crises, a search for their “spare” solutions is undertaken. Lewis Coser in this context speaks of “fake” or “unrealistic” conflicts that can take place in two ways [Coser, 1965: 57-66].

In the first case a “venting” institution, according to Kosher, is used. Their task is to maintain the system by weakening excessive pressure originating from hostile and aggressive emotions so as to move it to another sphere, for example, to dramatic mass spectacle or satire and joke, which can contribute to relaxation without any serious consequences.

The second method of solving unrealistic conflicts is called the method of “scapegoat” and it entails much more harmful consequences.

In this case a conflict situation develops in such a way that the enemy’s emotions turn against the “substituting” object in the form of a certain group of people who are called persons responsible and on whom others vent their anger. This “scapegoat” is usually represented by ethnic minorities or religious groups.

Pluralism of the framework for interpretation

A look at the crises, catastrophes and collapses in historical-sociological study depends on the fact, what is the frame of interpretation that contains the problems associated with these concepts, and also on the fact in which theoretical and spatial-

temporal relationships they are discussed. All these notions can be referred to the general concept of social change. The way, in which the very problem of social change is reviewed and interpreted in the context of various concepts, largely determines and differentiates the perception, as well as the use, of these concepts.

Maureen T. Hallinan, asking the provocative question whether is it possible to develop a theory of social change, provides three arguments that could be voiced by those who deny this possibility [Hallinan, 2000: 181].

The first argument is put forward by historical relativists who argue that the conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of a certain specific historical event can not be generalized and used for explaining other specific events, because they never happen under identical conditions.

The second argument uses the idea that every social change is so complex a phenomenon that it is virtually impossible to take into account all significant relations that may affect the causes and process of change.

The third argument concerns the fact that the formula of changes, which is usually contained in the corresponding theory, can not be derived directly from the facts that are used by historical science and that it is always the result of the definite intellectual imagination.

These examples show that the arguments against theorizing about social change are provided mainly by historical science. Sociology, on the contrary, considered from

its very beginning the historical view to be, in a sense, a narrow and limited description devoid of the desire to generalize.

If we do not take into account the chronology of how the topic of social dynamics and change appeared and again disappeared in the history of sociological thinking, then we can conclude that several types of theories of social change can be defined from the viewpoint of the principles of interpretation.

The first type is cyclical theories, according to which social change has a cyclic way of development.

The second type contains the theories, which emphasize the aspect of discontinuity that may be a revolutionary jump or turning point.

The third type includes the theories of linear and continuous development, which are mostly (but not always) related to the idea of evolution.

The theories of cyclic development and change have two main options for development. The first option, which considers history in a monistic way, suggests that it represents a single stream internally divided into recurrent periods.

The second option considers history in a pluralistic way: history is not uniform, it is formed due to the existence of separate cultures or civilizations, each of which undergoes its own development, following the circle from birth through maturity, toward decline and disappearance.

The first option can be demonstrated on the example of the theory of the circulation of elite by Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto [Pareto, 1968], and the concept of change

of cultural super-systems formulated by Pitirim Sorokin [Sorokin, 1937–1941].

The second option contains the approach developed by German philosopher Oswald Spengler [Spengler, 2011], and, in particular, by British historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee in his monumental twelve-volume treatise “The Study of History” [Toynbee, 1934–1961].

Crisis has its important place in both cases of the cyclical theories. In the first case it is associated with the situation that precedes the transition to another phase of development (see [Sorokin, 1948: 10–20]), in the second case – with the transition to the declining, decadent phase of the historical cycle, directed toward disappearance.

The theories that emphasize the aspect of discontinuity, which may have the character of a revolutionary jump or turning point, include Marxism and some historical sociology concepts that develop it [Moore, 1966; Skocpol, 1979].

However, the concepts of revolution and turning points in development can be found in some other approaches.

An example is Michel Foucault’s post-structuralism [Foucault, 1987] that considers historical gaps, and Thomas Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions [Kuhn, 1997]. In all these cases crisis is that what indicates the end of one historical period and announces the arrival of a new and qualitatively different period.

The theories of linear development emphasize the continuing course of history, which flows in a linear manner. Change in this case is usually perceived as a process

and result of shifts that gradually lead to an increase or decrease in a particular area or traceable parameter.

These theories in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century were largely influenced by the idea that human history has a rising development and follows the path of progress. This view is consistent with the original theory of evolution, which was born in the 19th century. In the framework of sociological thinking we can distinguish classical evolutionism, which is represented by Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim, and neo-evolutionism, especially developed in the framework of structural functionalism and systems theory (Neil Smelser, Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann).

Manfred Prisching considers the theme of crisis in his book from the perspective of the theory of evolution. This author connects evolution with the problem of the need for social equilibrium and adaptation in the sense of adjustment to life conditions in which the society functions, and he considers the crisis in this context as the “adaptation deficit” [Prisching, 1986: 66].

The notion of crisis, perceived in this way, in turn, refers to a variety of public events such as the economic and financial crisis, the environmental crisis, the crisis of growth, the crisis of the social state, the crisis of public administration, the crisis of legitimacy and the crisis of identity.

In addition to various concepts of the theory of social change, the point of view of spatial-temporal framework also plays

an important role in the subject matter of crisis, catastrophe and collapse. French historian Fernand Braudel notes that in the variety of times, which reveals the study of history, we can distinguish: a) short time processes, “courte durée” associated with individual lives and individual events; b) cyclic processes, the examples of which are economic cycles (“environments”); c) (very) long periods of time – “longue durée” [Braudel, 1972: 189-215].

Similar to the three types of time, we can distinguish three different speeds of historical movement:

a) rapid movement related to chronology (“temps individual”, in: “histoire événementielle”);

b) slower, but still visible, rhythm related to changes in the political, cultural and economic system (“temps social”, in: “histoire conjoncturelle”);

c) almost invisible flow of “geohistory”, i.e., the history of relations between man and environment (“temps géographique”, in: “histoire structurelle”); a history as if without movement, a history of constant repetition and constantly returning cycles [Baert, 1992: 42].

Braudel’s views were later supplemented by Immanuel Wallerstein’s views, who emphasizes that time and space cannot be analyzed separately, because each time has its place, and every place has its time, so certain kinds of time and space are related to each other.

Wallerstein creates the concept of the five different types of space-time: 1. “Occasional geopolitical space-time”; 2. “Environmental-ideological space-

time”; 3. “Structural space-time”¹; 4. “Eternal space-time”²; 5. “Transformational space-time”³ [Wallerstein, 2000].

What is important in Braudel’s and Wallerstein’s typologies is that different historical events, including crises, catastrophes or collapses, can be viewed from different perspectives, which are uncovered at different levels of time or space-time. Each perspective offers a slightly different view on the studied events. While from the perspective of “histoire événementielle” we consider crisis as a specific historical event or series of events, from the point of view of “histoire conjoncturelle” the same crisis can be presented in a different light, namely, as part of a larger whole of long-term ups-and-downs development cycles.

¹ Wallerstein’s notions of “occasional-geopolitical”, “environmental-ideological” and “structural space-time” correspond to Braudel’s ideas concerning the different dynamics of historical movements that occur at the level of “histoire événementielle”, “histoire conjoncturelle” and “histoire structurelle”.

² Wallerstein’s idea of eternal space-time was, no doubt, influenced by a concept of Pitirim Sorokin, whose work “Sociocultural Causality” (1943) discusses three levels of socio-cultural time, which, inspired by medieval philosophers, he names by the notions “tempus” (time), “aevum” (century), “aeternitas” (eternity) [Sorokin, 1964: 216]. “Tempus” refers to such phenomena that are in the process of change. The sphere of “aevum” is associated with the majority of socio-cultural realities, truths and values, for which it is assumed that they will (like “semi-eternal”) act for an indefinitely long time. “Aeternitas” represents the level at which there are eternal realities, truths, pure meanings and values; it is the light of their eternal, unchanging and timeless existence.

³ Transformational space-time is connected with the question: are there any historical transitions, revolutions or moments of choice, and how do they exist? The author states that “transformational space-time” is associated with the concept of “structural space-time”, because it can emerge only if there are patterns of development that lead to a bifurcation with an uncertain end. At this point the question arises whether the events under discussion are the very moment in which such a bifurcation takes place. And if so, what historical alternatives does this system have?

Finally, from the perspective of “histoire structurelle” this event can be also viewed a bit differently: either as a manifestation of a certain long-term recurring structural pattern, or, on the contrary, as a moment when the current development is violated and referred to the establishment of another pattern, another structure.

Wallerstein himself studied this problem on the example of the Soviet Union collapse [ibidem: 114–116]. At the level of “histoire événementielle” we can consider it as a chain reaction of certain historical events, which have been already analyzed in detail in a number of studies.

However, “histoire structurelle” is given several opportunities simultaneously depending on the explanatory framework (“structural space-time”) we will follow. They can be:

a) historical development of the world economic system (expressed by means of the categories “center”, “periphery” and “semi-periphery”);

b) history of the part of the world, which takes the path of modernization and development;

c) or that part which was industrializing;

g) and space-time, defined by the religious and cultural way (Constantinople, Byzantium, Moscow).

However, at the same time, there appear the approaches, which are based on the “eternal space-time” assumption; they consider the USSR collapse as an inevitable event, which was, in essence, preceded by the vain attempt to confront natural human inclination to private property. And, finally, you can also follow the “transformational

space-time” approach, which, according to Wallerstein, is associated with the structural concept of space-time, as it occurs only when there are development structures that lead to branching (bifurcation) with the uncertain end. In this case, you need to ask yourself whether the issue under consideration is a moment when bifurcation occurs and what historical alternatives can follow it.

Conclusion

The sociologists are not unanimous on the issue of crises. Economics is unique in this sense, it has been studying crises since the late 19th century [de Soto, 2009].

However, according to K. Borchardt, many economists do not view this phenomenon as something unusual, due to the frequent nature of crises in the capitalist economy. From the perspective of cyclic development the crisis seems to be something that, in essence, is “as normal” as every other phase of the cycle [Borchardt, 1992: 95].

In addition, many theorists consider them healthy, as the subsequent process can transfer to a new upward phase, state of affairs. In that context there was the only exception— the 1929 world economic crisis, which differed from its predecessors and had unprecedented destructive consequences [Smiley, 2009; Vodička, 2009]. Borchardt warns against exaggerated optimism and hope for the functionality of economic crises. He emphasizes the necessity to study crises for the “adjustment of structural dissonance” [Borchardt, 1992: 104].

In this regard, today the key issue is how much attention should be given to modern

manifestations of the economic crisis [Foster – Magdoff, 2009; Varoufakis, 2013; Lynn, 2013]. Does it entail one of many descending phases within the recurring economic cycles? Or is the crisis nature different, more profound and meaningful? P. Robejšek believes that the recent financial industry crisis has been only “intermission in the growing global crisis”.

To support this thesis he advances 4 important reasons:

1. There is an increasing trend to create too large economic units (conglomerate firms) for democratic management.

2. Today authoritarian regimes “can promote its economic potential more effectively than western democracies”.

3. In the developed western countries “for a long time there has been a decrease in the number of jobs that will feed on average gifted people”, who, thus, lose hope for the preservation of existing living standards.

4. “Developing countries can achieve western levels of prosperity neither through division of labor, nor through developed economies” [Robejšek, 2010: 38-41].

Immanuel Wallerstein, Randall Collins, Michael Mann, George Derluguian and Craig Calhoun [Wallerstein - Collins - Mann - Derluguian - Calhoun, 2013: 163-192] are even more radical in their forecasts. These authors state that in the modern world the light is at the end of the middle-term historical phase, which goes

back to the 1970s crisis. They agree that we have entered into a stormy and dark period of history, which will last for several decades and can lead to significant structural changes worldwide. They believe that there are three development alternatives as a minimum: one of them is an ultimate crisis of capitalism as a world system; the second is a decline of the capitalist hegemons and their replacement with new ones; the third alternative is a global environmental shock, causing other subsequent changes [ibidem: 178].

According to the authors’ data, it can be expected that the systemic crisis of such scale will bring destruction and encourage violent actions.

So, it is high time to think about the possibilities of collective strategies in order to address the challenge and prevent violent acts.

Let us add that these opinions represent only some forecasts, which are discussed nowadays. These forecasts are often different in concrete aspects, but many of them suggest that the problems of today are obviously deeper than we often admit. And this can be dangerous: if the modern phase of modernity development is associated with the premise of reflexivity (reflexive modernization), the insufficient and inadequate reflection of the processes can contribute to the fact that the crisis can become a warning of break-up, i.e. collapse.

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The formation of the scientific personnel with an active life position, a great demand for Institute's investigation, academic community's support of the new journal published by ISEDT RAS, which combined efforts of the economic institutes of RAS in the Northwestern Federal District, and furthermore development of international ties have become the main outcomes of the last years.

MAIN RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Due to the Resolution № 96 by the Presidium of Russian Academy of Sciences dated from March, 31 2009 ISEDT RAS carries out investigations in the following fields:

- problems of economic growth, scientific basis of regional policy, sustainable development of territories and municipalities, and transformations of socio-economic space;
- regional integration into global economic and political processes, problems of economic security and competitiveness of territorial socio-economic systems;
- territorial characteristics of living standards and lifestyle, behavioral strategies and world view of different groups of the Russian society;
- development of regional socio-economic systems, implementation of new forms and methods concerning territorial organization of society and economy, development of territories' recreational area;
- socio-economic problems regarding scientific and innovative transformation activities of territories;
- elaboration of society's informatization problems, development of intellectual technologies in information territorial systems, science and education.