Crisis and Renewal in the History of European Political Thought

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BRILL

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Crisis as a Motivation for Innovative Reflection in Ancient and Modern Political Thought

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Crisis is not an idea. It is human experience, usually painful and agonising, and can afflict individuals, human groups and whole societies. Crisis is the sense of uncertainty and danger that arises when the normal pace of things in the life of individuals and collective bodies is overturned or broken. This results in insecurity and a feeling of loss and an intense craving for a recovery of normalcy, the overcoming of crisis. Social theory has not done very well in dealing with crisis. Although change is at the top of the agenda of social thought, crisis as a component, in fact as a major moving force of change, tends to be overlooked, because, I suppose, the results of change are more attractive as an object of observation and assessment. It might be added that this intellectual agenda cannot be dissociated from what has been described as the 'Whig' approach to the history of societies, which remains almost inescapable in the human sciences.

In contemporary social science, crisis has been accorded special attention in the field of international relations and, in particular, in the specialised branch of security studies. In this area we may encounter the most elaborate analysis of crisis, not without reason considering that crisis in the age of nuclear power can potentially escalate into the destruction of the planet and the real end of history. The most elaborate and detailed anatomy of crisis in security studies has been provided by Herman Khan in his classic work *On escalation* (1965), in which he lays out no fewer than 44 steps in the build-up of crisis between powers, from minor provocation or 'ostensible crisis', as he calls it, to full-scale nuclear holocaust, in his words 'spasm or insensate war'.[1]

If we look elsewhere in the social sciences, crisis as an object of reflection and analysis tends to be rather tangential and often incidental. It has been used in order to describe emergency situations: for instance, 'crisis government' or

'crisis management' in political science and economic crisis, which always baffles economists. In political science the concept of crisis was also employed in constructing theories of political 'development' back in the 1960s.[2] Of course, various versions of crisis are endemic in psychology and psychiatry in connection with the pathologies of human personality.

One important strand in social theory, Marxism, has been more systematically preoccupied with crisis than many other currents in social thought. It has made important contributions to reflection on the character of crisis primarily in economic relations. It has furthermore elaborated the concept of dialectical contradictions that move capitalist societies toward revolution and transition to socialism. Yet Marxism's contribution can be considered to have been not so much in what it says about economic crises and the contradictions of advanced capitalism, but in motivating critical thinking about ideology and the roles it serves in society, politics and intellectual life.

Historical scholarship seems to have done better in pondering over crisis than the social sciences. This could be argued on the basis of the range and quality of work that has been produced in modern historiography on identifying, describing and appraising crisis situations. As Randolph Starn reminds us in a seminal article of almost half a century ago, crisis has been on the minds and vocabulary of historians since Thucydides.[3] It has been modern history, however, that has found in crisis a recurring subject of preoccupation, reflection and research. Jacob Burckhardt in his lectures on world history established the 'crises of history' as a subject of historical reflection. An important tradition of historical writing has evolved since then, looking through the perception of crisis at major turning points and periods of change in European history, and trying to identify, to use Burckhardt's words, 'the impulse to great periodical changes rooted in human nature'.[4] Thus the early Renaissance in Italy, the Reformation, the upheavals of the seventeenth century, the period of escalating pressures and expectations preceding the French Revolution, have all been connected and considered through the prism of crisis.[5]

Crisis has been privileged as an analytical concept in economic history, perhaps reflecting the impact of Marx's thought on this particular field. It is more interesting to remark, however, the presence of crisis as a component

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2   See e.g. Leonard Binder et al., *Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) and Raymond Grew (ed.), *Crises of Political Development in Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

3   Randolph Starn, 'Crisis and the Historians', *Past and Present*, 52 (1971), pp. 3–22.

4   Quoted in ibid., p. 9.

5   The relevant historiographical debates are surveyed in the Introduction to this volume.

of historical narrative and an object of historical thought in a branch of historiography that programmatically focuses on the *longue durée*, on long-term trends and the unchanging determinants of historical life like geography, climate and the recurring patterns of social life and activity. I refer, of course, to the Annales School of historical writing from which I will cite only one important example. Fernand Braudel in his work on the Mediterranean world in the sixteenth century presents an imposing, occasionally breath-taking, account of the unchanging or permanent factors shaping collective life, but does not shy away from talking about crisis, primarily in economics but also in urban life, in politics and other domains of historical experience.[6]

The foregoing sketch of the treatment of crisis in the human sciences can perhaps provide an intellectual background for facing up to crisis. The latter remains around us in the contemporary condition of humanity as we constantly hear and share in the universal worries in connection with the global environmental crisis that threatens the survival of the planet and the financial crisis that illustrates fundamentally the deeper moral problems and hypocrisy of advanced societies. These concerns appear to be overtaken at present by the humanitarian and refugee crises in various parts of the world, including Europe, that put to serious tests not only the capabilities but especially the moral conscience and political integrity of our complacent civilisation.

The main problem with crisis, however, is not ethical but epistemological. No one can be so morally obtuse or cynical as to remain totally indifferent or apathetic before a critical situation, but the problem is to understand what is really happening in order to react in constructive, perhaps even salutary, ways. Intelligent understanding in crisis situations remains elusive and almost impossible to achieve on account not only of the opacity of politics and human affairs, but also because of the element of surprise and unexpectedness which exerts extreme and usually misleading strain on understanding. So, crisis is often difficult to recognise at first sight and tends to be usually misjudged, which makes its management perilous in the extreme. Epistemological uncertainty is endemic in the human condition and under the circumstances of global crisis it can turn out to be very dangerous indeed. Nothing could be seen to confirm and illustrate epistemological uncertainty in the face of crisis more than the global health crisis that has overtaken humanity in the year 2020, while these lines are being written. The ways that the lethal threat to humanity has been faced, or rather evaded, in the critical early period of its emergence,

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6   Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972; transl. Sian Reynolds), vol. 1, pp. 325–326, 338–341, 584–591, 599–602, 604–606; vol. 2, pp. 900, 1195–1196.

by societies and political leaderships dramatically illustrates the inability and lack of courage to prepare and confront crisis, what is contingent and unpredictable or what Machiavelli had long ago described as the inconstancy of *Fortuna*. This failure, even by societies which pride themselves on being free and advanced, offers a tragic warning concerning the severe epistemological limitations of the various forms the arrogance of secular modernity can take. It is also a sobering reminder of what we should learn to retain and respect from earlier moral and intellectual traditions, including the Greek caution about the dangers of hubris and the Augustinian insistence on the ubiquity of evil in the world. All these constituents of the human condition set a broader framework within which the challenges of crisis have to be faced and understood.

What does all of this have to do with the history of political thought? I do not think that in the history of political thought we can find any evidence of the precision with which crisis as a threat to humanity has been treated, for instance, in security studies. In this connection the main question to be raised concerns how political thought has addressed crisis – as an experience or as a concept? Political thinkers, that is theorists who have tried to write systematically about politics, especially the most original and influential among them, have responded to the experience of crisis in their societies, but they have not really attempted to conceptualise it as an analytical tool. They have seen it primarily as an opportunity to return to the fundamentals of their thinking, the necessary normative preconditions of viable and meaningful political existence.

Although both ancient and modern authors have tried to understand the various forms that crisis can take in human affairs (such as revolutions or emergency situations brought about by war), order rather than crisis has been the major preoccupation. This is of course understandable and justifiable because human beings and human societies are primarily interested in order and normality, so as to secure their survival and lead their lives in predictable ways that may satisfy their needs and aspirations. What they expect from political reflection are responses to these needs. Political thought has tried to respond to such expectations, providing answers on the organisation of society and power, and on the moral culture that may sustain various proposals and solutions. These responses do not always appear to be marked by realism, but there is no doubt that they are interesting and very often represent ingenious thinking on very difficult questions. In fact, if we take a global view of the history of political thought, and of the developing dialogue between reflection and politics, which has shaped its content through the centuries, we could read the whole tradition, but especially its most original and innovative components, as responses

to crisis, attempts to make sense and provide outlets in the direction of normality and order according to the cravings of individuals and societies.

I would like to illustrate this way of understanding the character of the history of political thought with two examples, one from the ancients and another from the moderns. Before undertaking this task, however, I should offer two clarifications. First, my claims refer to European or Western political thought. I make no claims about other traditions, which may have different agendas and orders of priorities. Second, what is particularly characteristic about the logic of the Western tradition is the tendency to transform the primordial striving to overcome crisis into reflection not just on order but invariably to extend this to reflection on justice. This is what gives the Western tradition its distinct character: the lively awareness of crisis and change, and the often unstated conception of justice as the necessary response.

From Ancient Yearnings …

My first illustration will take us back to the origins of the European tradition of political reflection, classical Greek political thought. In Greek culture reflection on the dilemmas of political life and on the appropriate normative standards necessary for their resolution was not limited to philosophy. It permeated the entire civic culture of the classical polis and found expression in many genres of literary expression. First and foremost among them was tragic poetry.

The period from the end of the Persian Wars in 480–479 BC to the end of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) was the great age of Attic tragic poetry, the inaugural and perhaps the greatest age in the tradition of European theatre, thanks to the genius of three poets, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, whose prolific output dominated the stage of the Theatre of Dionysos on the southern foothills of the Acropolis for almost eighty years.[7] There were several other playwrights who competed with the three masters and occasionally even beat them at the annual dramatic competitions. We know their names: from Phrynichos, Aeschylus' master, to the contemporaries and competitors of Euripides (Ion, Agathon, Kritias). However, posterity knows only the work of the three tragedians that has been transmitted through the manuscript tradition of medieval Byzantium. Even though we know their poetry through the surviving plays, this is only a tiny fragment of their oeuvre, but it is probably

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7 This section incorporates material from the author's 'discussion note', 'At the Origins of European Political Thought. Political Ideas in Aeschylean Tragedy', *Il Pensiero Politico*, 53 (2020), pp. 237–244.

the most important. All three of them produced scores of plays each, but what has actually been saved is made up of seven by Aeschylus (one of them, *Prometheus Bound*, of disputed authorship) out of 80, seven by Sophocles out of 123 known titles, and seventeen from between 75 and 78 by Euripides. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the disappearance of the greatest part of the corpus of Athenian tragic drama constitutes in fact the greatest loss suffered by the classical heritage in the Western intellectual tradition.

Tragic poetry was an organised form of literary production and was meant to be presented in the form of 'trilogies': namely, three plays – usually but not always – focusing on a developing mythological plot, *hypothesis*, which offered an indirect but unmistakable running commentary on major social and political issues. Among the latter were questions preoccupying public opinion in a city that had been engaged since the end of the sixth century BC in the first major and self-conscious experiment in democratic politics in the history of humanity. More explicit in the poetry of Aeschylus and Euripides, indirect and draped in exquisite lyricism and piety in Sophocles, these commentaries on public life, ideological conflicts and moral dilemmas constitute the earliest corpus of political reflection in the European tradition.

It is not possible in the space of this essay to do justice to a very big and complex subject. I will try to illustrate selectively the range of themes and problems in order to show how the Western tradition of political reflection began as a response to a series of political crises in classical Athens.

The oldest surviving tragedy is Aeschylus' *Persians*, dated with considerable certainty in the year 472 BC. The play is a reflection on crisis, on the monumental conflict of the worlds of Europe and Asia in the Persian Wars and an attempt to explain in political terms the victory of the Greeks.[8] Victory came as a surprise to the Greeks, who were well aware of the superior military might of the Persian empire (which they did not consider as either primitive or uncivilised). They called them 'barbarian' because they did not speak Greek, but this involved a primarily linguistic distinction. As we know from Herodotus, the Greeks had great admiration for the civilisations of their Near Eastern neighbours, especially the Egyptians. What they ignored and remained indifferent to until quite late in their historical experience was what was going on in the West. The Persian Wars contributed decisively to the politicisation of the linguistic distinction between Greeks and 'Barbarians', and this is primarily the subject of Aeschylus' *Persians*. As a young man, Aeschylus had fought in the

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8 All quotations and translations come from *Aeschylus* i and ii, in Alan H. Sommerstein, ed. and transl., *The Loeb Classical Library. Aeschylus* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2008).

battle of Marathon (490), where his brother Kyregeiros emerged as one of the iconic Athenian heroes. In the play, Aeschylus attempts to narrate the Greek victory at Salamis as perceived by the Persians themselves at the court of the empire at Sousa. The Queen mother Atossa cannot understand how it had been possible for the poor and ill-equipped Athenians to defeat the army and fleet of her emperor son Xerxes. The explanation comes from the messenger who brings the news of the defeat. To the Queen's question 'who is the master of this people?', he replies

οὔτινος δοῦλοι κέκληνται φωτὸς οὐδ' ὑπήκοοι

they are the slaves of no man, their master is the law (*Persians* 242)

Freedom and the rule of law thus offer the explanation for victory.

This is how the Athenians understood themselves politically. The rule of law emerges as their defining political value. This is an indication of the self-confidence and optimism with which the victories over the Persians, first at Marathon, and ten years later at Salamis and Plateae, had infused the newly founded democratic regime at Athens. Democracy, rule by the many, the δῆμος, had been introduced in 508 BC on the basis of the reforms proposed by Kleisthenes following the crisis connected with the expulsion of the tyrannical regime of the Peisistratids. The new democratic regime met its first major test in the crisis of the Persian Wars. Victory was largely due to the role of the navy, and this strengthened the lower social strata from the city and Piraeus, which supplied the sailors and other manpower needed to operate the fleet. This also reinforced the democratic element in the assembly against the claims of the aristocratic landed class, which supplied the cavalry. These developments contributed and sustained further democratic reforms from the 470s to the 450s, and all of this is echoed in Aeschylus' subsequent plays.

In the *Suppliants* (Ἱκέτιδες) from 460, Aeschylus reminds his audience through Pelasgos, the king of Argos, Athens' loyal ally in the Peloponnese, that decisions are not made by one man but only after consultation with the *demos*. The king appears to be the bearer of executive power, but decisions are made by the assembly through the democratic method of voting by raising hands:

δήμου κρατοῦσα χείρ

the governing hand of the demos (*Suppliants* 604)

is acknowledged as the decisive factor in the organisation of power in the state.

Aeschylus' greatest poetic triumph came with the *Oresteia* in 458. This is the only surviving complete trilogy in ancient tragic poetry and re-enacts the story of the House of Atreus, the mythical dynasty of Mycenae. The trilogy won Aeschylus first prize at the festival of the Great Dionysia, which along with the Panathenaic festival were the two major annual civic celebrations in Athens. The trilogy was in fact a political commentary on the latest constitutional crisis in Athens brought about by the reform of the Areopagus in 460–459 BC by the democratic leader Ephialtes. By this reform, the Areopagus, the ancient Athenian aristocratic body, was stripped of all political and legislative capacities and was limited to the function of a supreme court, whose field of competence was the trial of homicides.[9] Thus the last remnants of aristocratic government were removed from Athenian politics and the regime became an unfettered democracy, to the great chagrin of political observers like the so-called 'Old Oligarch', whose views came down to us from an Oxyrinchus papyrus.[10] The 'Old Oligarch' bemoaned the political influence given by the new political arrangements to the lowly orders in the city like the sailors of Piraeus. Ephialtes' deputy in the democratic alignment in Athens was the rising young political leader Pericles, son of Xanthippus, himself an aristocrat, who had been the sponsor of Aeschylus' *Persians* back in 472. Ephialtes himself paid with his life for the reforms, falling victim to the first political assassination in Athens since the time of the tyrannicides in the late sixth century. It was staged by followers of the oligarchic party in the city in 459. The great age of Athenian democracy, nevertheless, had been inaugurated by his reforms.

The *Oresteia* is a sublime poetic achievement. Inspired lyricism is combined with the expression of deep and conflicting passions in order to produce a powerful dramatic effect. The first of the three plays, *Agamemnon*, one of the longest (1673 verses) and arguably the most important Greek tragedy, is

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9   On Ephialtes' reforms and their significance, which meant the 'sovereignty of the people', see Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law. Law, Society and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 47–73. See also, most recently, Annabella Oranges, 'Themistocle e la riforma di Efialte. Osservazioni su Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 25, 3–4', in Cinzia Bearzot, Mirko Canevaro, Tristano Gargiuro and Elisabetta Poddighe (eds), *Athenaion Politeiai tra storia, politica e sociologia: Aristotele e Pseudo-Senofonte* (Quaderni di Erga-Logoi, 7) (Milan, 2018), pp. 253–273.

10 The criticism of democracy by the 'Old Oligarch' is usually attributed to 'Pseudo-Xenophon'. On the significance of this text, see Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens. Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 14–27 and passim. See also Dominique Lenfant, 'Quel modèle pour l'oligarque? Le passé, l'ailleurs et l'utopie dans la Constitution des Athéniens du Pseudo-Xénophon', in Bearzot et al (eds), *Athenaion Politeiai*, pp. 309–321.

in fact a dramatic reflection on legitimate government. Agamemnon returns to his kingdom at Mycenae after the victory at Troy to be greeted by the local elders as their legitimate ruler, who is expected to restore justice in a social world dominated by moral confusion and religious uncertainty. What is justice becomes a central question in the evolution of dramatic action, each of the protagonists putting forward their respective claims. The moral standards elaborated in Greek society in order to move away from the primitive tribalism of Homeric heroes, are repeatedly voiced by the chorus in the warnings against the violation of the principle of μηδὲν ἄγαν (nothing in excess) and especially in the second stasimon in which the blindness provoked by excessive passion (ἄτη) is pitted against the need for justice (δίκη) for communities to survive.

Agamemnon as legitimate ruler, and the elders who support him, make plain their devotion to political legitimacy by invoking the significance of public opinion and the need to respect it – a clear allusion to the requirements of democratic government:

φήμη δημόθρους μέγα σθένει

the buzz of popular talk is something very powerful (*Agamemnon* 938)

The model of legitimate authority of which both the king and the *demos* partake is also clearly delineated:

τὰ δ' ἄλλα πρὸς πόλιν τε καὶ θεοὺς
   κοινοὺς ἀγῶνας θέντες ἐν πανηγύρει βουλευσόμεθα
   As regards other matters concerning the community and the gods, we
   will hold public assemblies and discuss them before the whole people
   together (*Agamemnon* 844–846)

Against this model of government by consultation and public debate, which guarantees legitimacy through consent, the murder of the legitimate ruler opens the horrible prospect of *tyrannis*, tyranny. The latter part of the tragedy is a discussion of the evils of tyrannical government which is identified with Agamemnon's murderer, Aigisthos. The *demos* is openly against tyranny and the threat of tyranny is their greatest fear. This fear is confirmed at the end of the play, when Aigisthos, insolent upstart driven to folly by newly acquired arbitrary power, openly challenges the public's sense of justice in threatening to impose tyranny by force.

We are thus given to understand that half a century after the overthrow of the Peisistratids the fear of tyranny remained alive in Athens. Aeschylus is

giving voice to these fears and worries but also elaborates a response to them. The establishment of democratic government on firmer foundations provides the guarantee of security against the return of tyranny. This promise, and the cultural and institutional preconditions of actualising it, are outlined in the two subsequent tragedies of the trilogy.

In the *Libation Bearers* (*Χοηφόροι*), which by contrast to *Agamemnon*, is a short play of only 1076 verses, we are confronted with the tragic inner torment the two siblings, Orestes and Electra, are going through in view of the moral necessity they feel constrained by to restore justice by revenging their father's murder. The tragic conflict arises form the terrible fact that restoration of justice means the murder of their mother, Queen Klytemnistra, who bears primary responsibility for her husband's murder. The conflict, however, is wider and deeper than the act of revenge through mother-killing. The tragic antinomy has to do with the very idea of justice itself. The two siblings, young birds, *νεοσσοί*, as they are called by the poet (verse 501), represent a new generation with different sensibilities and worries concerning human community and justice. Although still unclear and inarticulate, this new sense conveys to the viewer, the audience of the tragedy, a deeper feeling – that revenge can no longer adequately satisfy the requirements of human justice. A different concept of justice and moral practice appears to be pressing on the tragic actor's conscience. The chorus seems aware of this need, too. In its closing song it laments the impasses of revenge, primitive forms of vengeance and reprisal, and looks forward to a humanised idea of justice:

> There is only one way you can be purified: Loxias, by laying
>   his hand on you, will set you free from these sufferings.
>   […]
>   May you prosper, and may god willingly watch over you
>   and protect you with timely strokes of fortune!
>   See, this is now the third tempest
>   that has blown like a squall
>   upon the royal house, and come to an end.
>   What first began it were the sad sufferings
>   of him who devoured his children;
>   the second time the victim was a man, a king,
>   as, slain in his bath, there perished the man
>   who led the Achaeans in war;
>   and now again, thirdly, there has come from somewhere
>   a saviour –
>   or should I say, death?

> So where will it end, where the power of Ruin
> sink into sleep and cease? (*Libation Bearers* 1059–1076)

Thus the stage is set for the third and most explicitly political play in the trilogy, the *Eumenides*. In the *Eumenides* we will watch an actual trial in which the new idea of justice will be put into practice. Orestes appears to be looking forward to that as a future liberation.

Freedom, ἐλευθερία, is sung in the closing verses of the *Libation Bearers* as another version of light, which earlier was used as a poetic metaphor to introduce the new idea of justice. We thus see a – poetically woven – theory of justice that is combined with the idea of personal freedom and liberation from the multiple forms of submission to the traditional compulsions of tribal society. It is very interesting to reflect on these scattered references to freedom in the closing verses of the play. They seem to suggest that along with the new idea of justice, the idea of freedom was also surfacing in democratic politics in Athens as public consciousness and morality were trying to build their defences, institutional, moral and political, against the lurking fear of tyranny and against the constant danger of relapse into various forms of primitiveness.

In the *Eumenides*, the scene shifts to Athens and we are given a chance to watch the recently reformed Areopagus in its new function as a supreme court for homicides. The play provides very important evidence on judicial procedure in ancient Athens through the dramatic re-enactment of the trial at the Areopagus. Orestes is acquitted on the basis of new legislation enacted by the Assembly and applied by the Areopagus. The tragic poet makes sure to connect the legislation with the democratic constitution, which possesses a unique feature. It was a regime which was neither anarchic nor despotic:

μήτ' ἄναρχον μήτε δεσποτούμενον (*Eumenides* 696)

This is how the Athenians understood their democratic constitution, and Aeschylus appears to be the earliest exponent of democratic political theory in the European tradition. Democracy, rule by the many, and the freedom of the individual citizen it guaranteed had been the key to the victory over oriental despotism at the Persian Wars and also the key to the protection of the citizen by due process of justice in domestic politics.

Democratic thought, however, in Aeschylus' hands appeared to be even more inclusive and sophisticated than a celebration of the achievements of popular participatory politics. The old world of tribal loyalties and blood ties represented by the Furies could not be simply ignored and suppressed. It had to be handled in ways that would turn it from a possible subversive force into

a psychological support for the civic world of the democratic polis. Thus in closing the play and the monumental trilogy, the chthonic deities are invited to be integrated into the politicised religious culture of the polis, to become *Παλλάδος σύνοικοι* (to reside with Pallas, *Eumenides* 916), to take residence in a shrine on the slopes of the Acropolis and to be transformed from Furies into beneficial patrons of the city, literally Eumenides.

In the *Oresteia*, and more directly and explicitly in the concluding play, we are given a complete record of the ideological and moral synthesis through which the civic culture of the democratic polis was hoping to overcome the persistent danger of crisis that it felt to besiege it. Secular justice and popular rule were combined with a culture of inclusion, aggregation of opposing forces and recreation of tradition in order to build the moral and psychological supports that would allow the fragile achievements of democracy to survive and flourish, forestalling a possible collapse that crisis might bring.

The tradition of tragic poetry as a medium of political reflection lived on after Aeschylus and produced further masterpieces by Sophocles and Euripides. The new crisis precipitated by the Peloponnesian War that eventually led to the defeat of Athens and the collapse of democracy in 404, motivated the criticism of democracy and war voiced by Euripides in several of his late tragedies. These works were produced after 415 BC and the fatal democratic decisions on the Sicilian campaign that ruined Athens. Euripides whose critical mind and religious scepticism invite rethinking and reconsideration of the entire range of conventional truths prevailing in democratic Athens, including the distinction between Greeks and 'Barbarians', was called 'a philosopher on stage'.[11] In fact, from the perspective of the history of political thought, we might argue that it was the spirit of criticism that pervaded his reflective poetry, in conjunction with the criticism of knowledge and conventional morality voiced by his contemporary Socrates, that paved the way for systematic political theory in the subsequent century. To a considerable extent the agenda of philosophical reflection that reached its highest achievement in the writings of Plato and Aristotle had been set not only by Socrates but also by Euripides. In a real sense political philosophy in the fourth century was a response to the problematisation of political thought that permeates Euripides' poetry – and all this had to do with the crisis of Athens and its democracy.

It is interesting to notice, nevertheless, in order to appreciate the inherent difficulties and the fragility of the democratic achievement, that a century later, in 354 BC, the orator Isocrates, at the opening of the last major crisis of

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11   Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 5.70.2.

Athenian democracy brought about by Macedonian intervention in Greek politics, remembered and bemoaned the reform of the Areopagus by Ephialtes. In his speech, *Areopagiticus*, Isocrates warns about the pending dangers to the freedom and prosperity of the city and points out that the only defence would be the restoration of the city's original democratic constitution as it was legislated by Solon and Kleisthenis, who had expelled the tyrants: 'we could not find a more popularly inclined and more to our interest than this constitution'.[12] That constitution, however, according to Isocrates, had been weakened by the reform of the Areopagus, which had been the school of virtue and respect for the law for the citizens.[13] What Isocrates was criticising was '*ἄκρατος δημοκρατία*', untempered democracy, that was brought about by Ephialtes' reforms and was connected by later critics with the self-destructive decisions that had ruined Athens in the Peloponnesian War.[14] This, however, was a judgement that could be seen to reflect the appraisal of Athenian democracy by Thucydides, Xenophon and other late fifth- and early fourth-century critics. The Aeschylean pristine vision could only perceive the optimistic prospects and possibilities of democracy, which the poet saw as a form of redemption from the passions and compulsions of tribalism and the culture of the irrational.[15] This was a 'culture of freedom', as it has been aptly characterised, and it forms the point of departure of the European tradition of political reflection.[16]

... to Modern Ambitions

If my first example attempted to illustrate how crisis motivated the articulation of political reflection at the origins of the Western tradition, the second one will be just a reminder of the significance of crisis in tracing the inception

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12   Isocrates, *Areopagiticus*, 15.

13   Ibid., 37.

14   On Isocrates' critique of Athenian democracy, see further Georges Mathieu, *Les idées politiques d'Isocrate* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966), chapters 11 and 12, especially pp. 126–127, 136–139, 143–148, 150–152.

15   As elucidated by Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951).

16   Christian Meier, *A Culture of Freedom. Ancient Greece and the Origins of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). The appraisals by John Dunn, *Democracy. A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), pp. 23–57, and Paul Cartledge, *Greek Political Thought in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and idem, *Democracy. A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 61–227, are also directly relevant at this point.

of modern political thought. Here we have to turn to the contribution of a truly seminal work of modern scholarship to the delimitation of a whole field of research within which we can recognise the role of crisis in shaping the foundations of modern politics and modern political ideas. I refer to Hans Baron and his idea that the crisis of the year 1402 in Florentine politics, caused by the defeat of Florence by the tyrant of Milan Giangaleazzo Visconti, gave rise to civic humanism, which represented an intellectual revolution at the origins of modern political theory.

I cannot at this point enter into the debate on Hans Baron's thesis or on the broader issues and questions in the interpretation of civic humanism. Civic humanism, obviously, constitutes one of the major subjects in the history of political thought as a whole: it forms the point of departure of modern political reflection at the crossroads of ancient and modern political thought. Academic deontology, therefore, makes it necessary to recognise Hans Baron's seminal contribution in first enunciating this understanding of the history of political thought by coining the term 'civic humanism' back in 1925 in the *Historische Zeitschrift*.[17]

Thinking about civic humanism and its place in the history of political thought can be an eye opener for scholars of the subject – at least, if I may be permitted to refer to my personal experience, it had that function for me and my effort to understand the complex trajectory of political ideas in historical time. Baron's concept of civic humanism, nevertheless, has elicited considerable criticism.[18] His approach has been criticised most influentially by Quentin

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17 The original term, *Bürgerhumanismus*, was introduced by Baron in a short review published in *Historische Zeitschrift* (see James Hankins, 'Introduction', in idem (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism. Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1–13). On Baron's contribution, see also William J. Connell, 'The Republican Idea', in ibid., pp. 14–29, esp. pp. 15–16 on Baron's thesis and its significance for understanding the emergence of 'a distinctly modern culture'. On the significance of Baron's ideas as a motivation for writing the history of political thought, see John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 55–58. On the historiographical importance of Baron's work, see further Riccardo Fubini, 'Renaissance Historian: the Career of Hans Baron', *Journal of Modern History*, 64 (1992), pp. 541–574 and most recently, and quite notably from the perspective of writing the history of political thought, John Robertson, 'John Pocock's Histories of Political Thought', *Storia della Storiografia*, 75 (2019), pp. 11–46, esp. pp. 24–25.

18 The appraisal of the chronological basis of Baron's thesis forms the main object of criticism by Gene Brucker, 'Humanism, Politics and the Social Order in Early Renaissance Florence', in Sergio Bertelli, Nicolai Rubinstein, Craig Hugh Smyth (eds), *Florence and Venice: Comparisons and Relations*, vol. 1 (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1979), pp. 3–11.

Skinner on two counts: first, with regard to the emergence of civic humanism in connection with the crisis of 1402 and, second, vis-à-vis the main philosophical influence that shaped civic humanist political theory. Concerning the emergence of civic humanist discourse, it is rightly pointed out that there had been an earlier tradition in Trecento Florence, that is during the fourteenth century, represented most eminently by Coluccio Salutati, that expressed views on politics identical with those that Baron ascribes to civic humanism after the crisis of 1402. As for the philosophical inspiration of civic humanism, it is suggested on the basis of extensive textual evidence that it was Stoicism, especially in its Ciceronian guise, rather than Aristotle's political thought that provided the main philosophical framework for the articulation of civic humanist thought.[19]

All this is true and it has been convincingly documented. What has been missed, nevertheless, is the broader epistemological significance of Baron's thesis as it emerges especially from the connection of crisis with new departures in political reflection. Obviously, the chronological framework can be broadened into a more inclusive pattern beyond the year 1402. It was that early fifteenth-century crisis, however, that set the preconditions for strengthening popular republican government, thus providing the stimulus for civic humanism to develop its theoretical quests focusing on liberty, virtue and corruption, issues and claims that defined the new language of the politics of modernity in the self-governing cities of Northern Italy. It was primarily this politics that dominated Leonardo Bruni's thought: to express his concerns, Bruni employed the language of virtue he had found especially in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. His reflection was not delimited by rhetoric and moralism alone. It possessed a pronounced sociological dimension that revealed an epistemological affinity with Aristotle's *Politics* and was most eloquently and effectively expressed in the treatise *Περὶ τῆς Πολιτείας τῶν Φλωρεντίνων* [On the constitution of Florence] he had composed in Greek in 1438 for the instruction of the Greek delegation at the Council of Florence.[20] It is quite probable that this important source did not receive the attention it deserves by historians of political thought because it is composed in Greek. It is rather paradoxical that although Greek was one of the languages of humanism and encounters with the Greek classics had in fact shaped the civic content of humanist ideas, still civic humanism's foremost expression in Greek, Bruni's treatise on the Florentine constitution, remained marginal and rather neglected in pertinent

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19   Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. xiv–xv, 27, 69–71, 102–103 and passim.

20   See Anna Pontani, 'Firenze nelle fonti greche del Concilio', in Paolo Viti (ed.), *Firenze e il Concilio del 1439. Convegno di Studi*, vol. 2 (Florence: Olschki, 1994), pp. 753–812.

literature, with the exception of Baron's own work. In fact, Leonardo Bruni is the main hero in Baron's work, where the *Politeia* receives its due.[21] If this particular work had received the attention it deserves, perhaps Baron's insistence on humanism's Aristotelian substratum might have been better understood.

The significance of Bruni's Greek treatise was recognised by contemporaries, including Greek humanists like the neo-Platonist political philosopher George Gemistos Plethon. The latter is said to have taken with him back to Mistra in the Peloponnese a copy of the work, in all likelihood in order to use it as a model for his own reform proposals for the political and moral transformation of the truncated East Roman Empire.[22] Bruni's terminology for the description of the institutions of the Florentine republic was also employed by the Greek humanist Laonikos Chalkokondyles in his own description of the Florentine regime to be found in his historical work.[23]

Despite its appeal to contemporaries, Bruni's *Politeia* fell out of sight in subsequent generations and the printing of the Greek text and its Latin translation in 1755 seem to have been generally ignored.[24] This also explains why the work was never included in the canon of political thought before Baron. Baron called the work 'a masterpiece of early humanistic sociological reasoning'[25] and pointed out that its significance consisted in describing Florence as a model of a mixed regime. This was the Aristotelian element which Baron recognised in his treatment of Bruni and civic humanism.[26] This interpretation is also shared by John Pocock, who underlines the importance of Aristotle's constitutionalism to civic humanism, especially in connection with the theory of the mixed regime. Pocock suggests that Aristotle's *Politics* is necessary in understanding the constitutional commitment of civic humanism, which Cicero's conception of the *civitas* could not serve.[27]

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21   Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 54–66, 191–254 and especially 412–439.
22   Pontani, 'Firenze nelle fonti greche', p. 773.
23   Ibid., p. 773.
24   *Τοῦ Λεονάρδου Ἀρετίνου Περὶ τῆς Πολιτείας τῶν Φλωρεντίνων / Leonardi Aretini de Florentinorum Republica* (Florence, 1755). Pamphlet available from Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence.
25   Baron, *The Crisis*, p. 427.
26   See further Athanasios Moulakis, 'Leonardo Bruni's Constitution of Florence', *Rinascimento*, Second Series, 26 (1986), pp. 141–190, which includes the first modern English translation of the work, and Russell Dees, 'Bruni, Aristotle, and the Mixed Regime in "On the Constitution of the Florentines"', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, New Series, 15 (1987), pp. 1–23.
27   Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 66–73 and passim.

So after all Baron had not been so wrong about the significance of Aristotle's language and concepts in the articulation of civic humanism in response to crisis. Bruni's reflections on liberty and the social dynamics of republican government paved the way that led up through many intricate twists and turns to Machiavelli's political thought. Even a slight knowledge of the history of Florence and Florentine politics in the course of the fifteenth century, as recorded primarily in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, can allow us to appreciate the significance of civic humanism as a therapeutic project for the passions of modern politics.

The therapeutic purpose was the deeper ambition of civic humanism. Appraised in this perspective, civic humanism can be seen to have been engaged in a direct conversation with real-world social and political problems, especially with the issues of civil strife and corruption in public life. This pathology, widely observable in the Florentine experience at the dawn of the modern age, was not very much removed from the political sociology of the ancient city recorded in Aristotle's *Politics.* Thus considering the present from the normative vantage point of Aristotelian political theory, civic humanism hoped by means of its rhetoric of civic virtue, devotion to the *patria* and *libertas*, to procure remedies for specifically modern problems that threatened the survival of the republic. This is how its therapeutic ambitions might be understood.

The significance of Baron's work for understanding the role of crisis in shaping the history of political thought has relatively recently been effectively illuminated by the biographical researches of Renaissance historian Anthony Molho. Molho has worked on a broad range of primary source material in trying to reconstruct the genesis of Baron's great work. What emerges with convincing clarity from Molho's analysis is that Baron's immersion in the study of 'crisis' in the history of Florence, and its impact on the prospects of *libertas* in the Florentine republic, was motivated by an enduring deeper preoccupation with the crisis he had witnessed and experienced in interwar Germany and in wartime Europe and its impact on the prospects of liberty in his contemporary world.[28]

This, I think, is an important perspective for understanding the psychological and intellectual dynamics that come into play in the writing of the history of political thought. It is a perspective that suggests the multiple levels

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28   Anthony Molho, 'Hans Baron's Crisis', in David S. Peterson with Daniel E. Bornstein (eds), *Florence and Beyond. Culture, Society and Politics in Renaissance Italy. Essays in Honour of John M. Najemy* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), pp. 61–90.

of interpretation and understanding at which the history of political thought should be studied and practised as perhaps the central axis of research and education in the Humanities – a field of intellectual endeavour replete with possibilities for the development of intellectual criticism.

The brief reconsideration of Baron's ideas suggests that an essential task in the practice of the history of political thought involves revisiting the accumulated heritage of knowledge, understanding, reappraising and rethinking – not rejecting or, worse, forgetting and ignoring – the earlier tradition of scholarship and reinventing the wheel with every new generation of scholars.

Concluding Caveats

In drawing this essay to a conclusion, it would be probably advisable to share with the reader a few words of caution but also to briefly attempt to place what has been proposed above in a broader methodological perspective. The cautionary remarks I would like to put forward regard primarily the concept of crisis itself and its usage in writing the history of political thought. It is difficult to come up with a definition of crisis that might prove satisfactory in its applicability as a general concept. I have used it rather as an analytical concept and short-hand description of situations of anxiety and emergency arising either from radical political change or from war that threatens the survival of a community. Athens in the opening two decades of the fifth century B.C. and Florence at the dawn of the fifteenth century found themselves in exactly such situations. In both cases it is not at all clear whether the concept of crisis was available to contemporaries as a way of understanding their predicament. The experience of crisis itself, however, and the sense of urgency it generated provided motivations for rethinking or reformulating earlier traditions of discourse and conceptions of collective identity and destiny. The reappraisal of the character of the community and the sense of its past made possible the visualisation of new shapes of collective life as a strategy of survival. Such visions possessed considerable power and gave rise to new normative frameworks of collective life and action. In Athens, as articulated by Aeschylus, this was the ideology of democracy; in Florence, with Leonardo Bruni as its initiator, it was expressed in the language of civic humanism. In Florence, thanks to Hans Baron and to all those who wrote after him or in response to him, the record of civic humanist thought is marked by remarkable density and complexity. By contrast, our impression of the elaboration of the democratic political vision set out in Athens in works from Aeschylus' *Persians* to Pericles'

'Funeral Oration' (as recorded by Thucydides) is marked by many uncertainties.[29] In both cases, nevertheless, the central message is clear: following a situation of acute crisis resulting from a mortal external threat to the survival of the community, the new normative framework proposed self-confidence and optimism in reshaping the present and facing the future.

All this could be described, I would think, in a broader methodological sense as a transition to a new normative paradigm of political discourse in a sense not very different from Thomas Kuhn's understanding of scientific revolutions. Scientific revolutions involve the questioning and destruction of paradigms of 'normal science' and their replacement by new paradigms that manage to accommodate the 'anomalies' that initially undermine and eventually overturn conventional scientific truths and theories.[30] The narrative of these transitions makes up the content of the history of science. Political thought, ancient and modern, can be seen to follow a more or less cognate itinerary in historical time with moments of crisis operating as catalysts in the process. This essay has attempted to illustrate this way of understanding political ideas.

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29   See Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens. The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1986; transl. Alan Sheridan), pp. 172–220.

30   Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Fourth edition with an Introductory Essay by Ian Hacking (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). Note particularly Kuhn's discussion of crisis in ibid., pp. 66–91.

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