

Crises in the course of lives, Crises in society: A Sociocultural approach

Tania Zittoun¹

Abstract: *Lives are constantly changing, and so are societies. Yet some changes seem more disruptive than others, and we tend to call them “crises” – and these are especially strong when they imply a mismatch between changing lives and their evolving contexts. How to understand these phenomena? Sociocultural psychology of the lifecourse offers us a theoretical frame to study the mutual making of people’s courses of life, and their changing social and cultural environment. It has especially examined the role of ruptures and transitions in the course of life, and their role in human development; it has also provided conceptual means to examine the link between social and historical changes, and courses of life. At a theoretical level, it has brought to the fore semiotic, dialogical dynamics by which history and courses of life are related; at a methodological level, it has promoted case studies, whether individual or regional, to make these dynamics visible. In this lecture, I will thus examine a series of recent studies showing the relation between crises in life, and crises in the context.*

Keywords: *Sociocultural psychology, lifecourse, semiotic, dialogical*

Κρίσεις στην πορεία της ζωής, Κρίσεις στην κοινωνία: Μια κοινωνικοπολιτισμική προσέγγιση

Tania Zittoun

Περίληψη: *Οι ζωές αλλάζουν συνεχώς, το ίδιο και οι κοινωνίες. Ωστόσο, ορισμένες αλλαγές φαίνονται πιο ανατρεπτικές από άλλες, και τείνουμε να τις ονομάζουμε «κρίσεις» – και αυτές είναι ιδιαίτερα έντονες όταν υπονοούν μια αναντιστοιχία μεταξύ της αλλαγής ζωής και των εξελισσόμενων πλαισίων τους. Πώς κατανοούνται αυτά τα φαινόμενα; Η κοινωνικοπολιτισμική ψυχολογία του κύκλου ζωής μας προσφέρει ένα θεωρητικό πλαίσιο για να μελετήσουμε την αμοιβαία διαμόρφωση των πορειών ζωής των ανθρώπων και το μεταβαλλόμενο κοινωνικό και πολιτιστικό περιβάλλον τους. Εξέτασε ιδιαίτερα τον ρόλο των ρήξεων και των μεταπτώσεων στην πορεία της ζωής και τον ρόλο τους στην ανθρώπινη ανάπτυξη. Παρείχε επίσης εννοιολογικά μέσα για την εξέταση της σχέσης μεταξύ κοινωνικών και ιστορικών αλλαγών και πορειών ζωής. Σε θεωρητικό επίπεδο, έχει φέρει στο προσκήνιο σημειωτική, διαλογική δυναμική με την οποία συνδέονται η ιστορία και οι πορείες της ζωής. Σε μεθοδολογικό επίπεδο, προώθησε μελέτες περιπτώσεων, μεμονωμένες ή περιφερειακές, για να κάνει ορατή αυτή τη δυναμική. Σε αυτή τη διάλεξη, θα εξετάσω έτσι μια σειρά πρόσφατων μελετών που δείχνουν τη σχέση μεταξύ των κρίσεων στη ζωή και των κρίσεων στο πλαίσιο*

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *Κοινωνικοπολιτισμική ψυχολογία, πορεία ζωής, σημειωτική, διαλογική.*

Introduction: Psychology and Crises

The Greek etymology of crises is “decision”, and in its next uses it came to designate the paroxysm of an illness during the 15th century; only later its meaning extended first to the psychological, then to the moral realm, and in the 17th – 18th century into the historical course of things (Portal, 2009). In any case, the notion now contains both the idea of a paroxysm and its resolution into, often, a form of regeneration. In psychology, crisis, a temporal notion, has become a key concept to address change and development, at different levels. First, Vygotsky

¹ **Tania Zittoun:** *Institute of Psychology and education, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, Email: tania.zittoun@unine.ch*

has tried to account for the crises in, or of psychology as a field, in the first half of the 20th century – a crises he saw as resulting because the tension between a subjective psychology, and an objective, perceptual psychology, which he hoped to resolve through methodology into a general psychology (Vygotsky, 1927). Second, classical authors did all, in their way, address crises as key moments: John Dewey’s irritation, Freud addressing the psyche, Piaget examining disequilibrium, or Erikson’s well-known work on identity crises. Third, social psychologists have focused on social dynamics and transformations, such as Moscovici’s work on minority influence and, in some ways, on social representations, or for instance Fathali Moghaddam’s recent work on mutual radicalization (Moghaddam, 2018). However there seems to be here a gap between accounts of crises in mind or people’s lives, and crises at the level of the social. When the first line of psychologists have tried to address more macro sociocultural movements, they have not been very less welcomed – whether we think about Freud’s *Civilisation and its discontents* in the aftermath of WWI in 1929 (Freud, 1989), or Lewin’s remarkable papers but often ignored papers on the specific transformation he observed in Germany in 1936 (Lewin, 1936). On the other hand, social psychologists have rarely addressed the person. Is it possible at all to address social and psychological crises, social and psychological crises at once? Should we not simply follow Doise, or Devereux and other’s recommendation, and say that sociocultural transformation and psychological change pertain to different and incompatible levels of analysis and explanation (Devereux, 1979; Doise & Mapstone, 1986)? May we also not just have to admit that we, as researchers, may be partially blind to the current sociocultural transformations²?

My response to this is that sociocultural psychology starts to have the means to address sociocultural transformation and its connections to psychological changes (see for instance (Ratner, 2012)), and I think it can do so only if its carefully accounts for the various layers of interdependent organization, from macro to micro, through specific groups, institutions and situations, and with appropriate theorization of time – as for instance in Michael Cole’s interesting model (2007), articulating cultural history with phylogeny and ontogeny in microgenesis. If we do so, perhaps we will be able to learn from close and distant past crises, to see patterns that we may recognize in the present and the future. Such attempts are currently done by intellectuals, political scientists, or philosophers, etc.; here I will only, very modestly, try to speak for a small range of studies in sociocultural psychology. Doing so, my key question is: how can we build an explanation that articulate and accounts for the mutual dependency of sociocultural transformations, local instances of change, and psychological development? On the basis of a series of recent studies, I would like to reflect upon the relations between crises in the course of people’s lives, and crises in the social worlds we inhabit. Learning from past crises, I will try to highlight concepts that may enable us to better understand present or perhaps even future ones.

Sociocultural transformation: Three levels of changes

Together with a network of colleagues (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016), I tried to work with a three-layers analysis of genetic dynamics, inspired by the work of Duveen

² Vygotsky himself started his youth and active years in a sociopolitical environment in radical transformation and permanent crises, experiencing the end of tsarism, the end of Jewish marginalization, the beginning of revolutionary bolshevism and its later more controlling side – while moving across the country, changing schooling, and together with the revolution of the field, first professional commitments from journalism and the arts to psychology and pedagogy (Zavershneva & Van der Veer, 2018). However, surprisingly, he addressed crises explicitly only... to speak about the crises of psychology! The crises he lived through mainly appear through the sense of urgency as well as potentialities he may have experienced (Zittoun & Stenner, 2021).

and Lloyd (Duveen, 1997; Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). This is a distinction between sociogenetic dynamics, micro and ontogenetic.

Sociogenesis designates the evolution of sociocultural phenomena: fields of social representations, nation-state, political systems, transnational dynamics, etc. – what is usually addressed by sociologists and political scientists. It is about the making of the social, and is important because it sets the material, symbolic and social conditions for people's lives. It is present in the world we inhabit, the walls of the cities, the transport system that enabled us to travel here, the institutions that regulate Universities and the cleaning of a city, or the ideas we share here. However, sociogenesis is fabricated, discussed, transformed in microgenetic instances: moment-to-moment interactions, encounters with the administration and the border guards, but also, classroom situated activities, or street-demonstrations (NB: CHAT analysis are usually located between micro-and sociogenesis). And ontogenesis is the scale of the course of a life – a life that develops over a period time, within certain sociogenetic changing conditions, through an infinity of micro-genetic encounters. From such reading, you see, micro-genesis is the point of binding and joining courses of lives and courses of society, yet society creates the conditions of living in a much more pervasive way and lives changes.

There are different ranges of concepts to account for phenomena at various levels of analysis. Sociogenesis is often described in terms of social psychology, in terms of social representations, ideologies, institutions, influences, and also if we borrow from various social and political sciences as well as social psychology. Microgenesis can for instances be accounted for by concepts such as settings and frames (à la Goffman), interactions and dialogical encounters, where mediated actions or situated activities take place, and where people engage in practices and use various forms of cultural and semiotic mediation. Ontogenesis is a realm where psychologists have more specific sets of concepts. Here, I work with the idea that people's lives are constituted by a movement between a variety of spheres of experiences.

Spheres of experiences, a concept built on the basis of Schutz's work, represents a configuration of experiences in which a person is regularly enough engaged to know that it is "the same": my work, dinner with my family, walking the dog. These engage knowledge, identity positions or relations, and specific sense-making activity. In the course of a life we alternate between these; on a daily basis this is smoothly done, yet some events are experienced as ruptures – these are so new that they demand the disappearance of some sphere of experience and the creation of new ones. It is this process of creation that we have called transitions – learning, identity dynamics, sense-making that enable to build a new sense of taken for granted. Among spheres of experiences, we have distinguished these that occur in the here-and-now of certain social settings – where people engage in activities that correspond to what is considered the "reality" of the situation – even a game!, from distal spheres of experiences: these are experiences that we attain through imagination, temporarily leaving the here and now: in the present, distal experiences can be past memories, alternative ideas of the world, or imagination of the future. Sense-making plays a key-role within and across spheres of experiences. Sense-making demands some semiotic work of linking and unlinking experience, distancing and differentiating, generalizing and elaborating new synthesis; in this dialogical process, I will argue, imagination may play a very important role.

Distinguishing these three levels of analysis also gives us a key to look at crises. Crises studied at the sociogenetic level are typically, a revolution, or social transformation, due to political, economic, natural or chemical causes (e.g., Fukushima) – retrospectively there are treated as historical event; crises dynamics at the microgenetic level are often examined as conflict or incident; and crises declined at the individual, ontogenetic level are what I have usually called a rupture. But can we observe and analyse them together? Can we examine how the same event is simultaneously a social transformation, displayed in specific moments and

settings as tensions or incidents, and at the same time, are experienced as ruptures and occasions for development?

To combine an analysis of changes at these three levels, we need to identify both a frame that “hold together” and articulates these phenomena, and a common denominator – a “substance” that circulates at both level and through both levels. The general principle that articulates both phenomena can be that of “dialogicality”. Inspired by Bakhtin, it mainly designates “the capacity of the human mind to conceive and communicate about social reality in relation or opposition to otherness” (Marková, 2003). From a dialogical perspective, we can conceive how any movement of mind is responding or anticipating other events, and how these are also always related to inner-dialogues, relations to present or distant others, cultural elements, social representations and more diffuse values and discourses, in their respective social and cultural anchorages (Grossen et al., 2014; Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011; Zittoun & Grossen, 2012). What is the “substance” of the dialogues, what circulates from social representations to mind, is made out of signs – it is of *semiotic* nature (Valsiner, 1998, 2001, 2006; Zittoun, 2006, 2009, 2011).

With these two theoretical principles – dialogicality and semiosis – we have thus a sociocultural psychology that enables us to theorize the mutual constitution of the politics and the mind. We can grasp dynamics by which social and political systems, expressed in discourses, structuring everyday life, organizing the urban space or the nature of formal and informal relations - also progressively shape and guide individual psychological life. In a well enough functioning society, semiotic streams circulate from society and its institutions to people’s lives and back. People internalize some aspects of the shared culture, and in unique ways constitute their personal culture. In most cases there is some degree of homology between shared and personal culture. Yet also, there can be discrepancies which can be more or less acceptable. These few ideas are at the background of my reading of crises.

My core argument here is thus that societal crises can be read as occurring through mismatches or gaps, that is, dialogical disruptions, between sociogenetic and ontogenetic dynamics, through specific microgenetic events, or their accumulation. But I also will suggest that crises are occasions for development. In what follows, I propose to address crises at three levels of sociocultural dynamics, through three case studies of crises, one on war, the second on a revolution, and the third on a social transformation. As I progress, I will introduce the concepts of imagination and engagement; as a whole, I will try to sum put the possible contributions of such an analysis to understand crises.

Crises I: War

The first study I wish to present has been undertaken by Alex Gillespie, Flora Cornish and Emma Louise Aveling over a couple of years on the basis of war diaries, that is, the diary of a young woman during WWII in England. We aimed at understanding how a massive crisis in which a country underwent – WWII in England – was affecting the courses of lives of people. For this, we combined an analysis of the sociocultural environment and its evolution, through historical and documentary material, and the close of analysis of the diary of one young woman, June, from 1939 to 1945 – a diary donated to the Mass Observation Archive, a public databases (Gillespie et al., 2008; Zittoun et al., 2008, 2012). My argument in this case is that the social and political crises – war – that affected the country transformed the many settings in which people were conducting their lives; and through these, it so deeply transformed sociogenesis that it further had effects on sociogenesis.

Here is the history: in 1939, the war is declared, and in 1941, Minister Bevin’s call is issued, urging women to join the Homefront – so as to support England while the men are fighting on the real front. June, our target woman, lived on the South-West of England at the

beginning of the war, then moved inland to work on a farm, and further East until the end of the world. Here, I focus on three key situations along the trajectory of June (as in (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015); these appear as “crises” in her life, or ruptures, notably signalled by the fact that June writes much more about them, and in a much more dialogical and tensed way. “Imagination” is the second notion we need to understand what is at stake for people in given social and political environment. Imagination as the process of

disengaging from the here-and-now of a proximal experience, which is submitted to causality and temporal linearity, to explore, or engage with alternative, distal experiences, which are not submitted to linear or causal temporality. An imagination event thus begins with a decoupling of experience and usually concludes with a re-coupling (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, p. 40).

Imagination is a core psychological dynamic, which allows enriching our daily life, in daydreaming, anticipating, creating or remembering (Zittoun et al., 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). The material of our imagining is given by personal past experiences, experiences of others, cultural elements, or any available semiotic materials, newly recombined and enrich in unique fashion by one’s experience (Vygotsky, 1931; Winnicott, 1991). Here, imagination is very useful to understand decision making in rupture in the course of a life.

The first setting I consider takes place in her environment. There, she works at the family garage where she sells petrol and sweets, goes to the beach, and takes care of the family garden with her sister and mother. At Bevin’s call, this is questioned: what shall she do to serve the country? She is also 18 and excited about these new options. So she reports as she actively engages in dialogue with her family, friends, teachers etc. She imagines possible futures; becoming a nurse, a teacher, or a gardener. In imagination, people draw on a variety of representation, acting as semiotic mediators: she cannot be a nurse because this would make her “that type of woman” who are men chasing; she could be a teacher; but eventually she draws on her own experience in the home garden to decide she will become a gardener – drawing on a specific sphere of experience as resource to imagine a future one. Here, note that the “crises” of war is mainly translated by this rupture and occasion to move, and also, the strength of social norms regarding what sorts of acts she can engage into if she wants to remain a “decent woman”.

Second, June is now working as land girl. In this new environment, her daily settings are mainly work in the field, activities with other land girls – showing their products, going to the movie theatre, living the life of a young woman. Through the hard work, June learns a lot – she reads books on gardening, develops her skill, transforms her body, becomes good, her expertise is recognized, and her identity transformed. However, the war brings also movement for young men, and here June has the occasion to meet all these young soldiers transiting through the hostel and the regions where they work. For the first time, June finds herself in multiple dating, and this causes a second important crisis in her life. In effect, now that she is dating these young men, what is becoming of her? She enters in dialogue with her past spheres of experience, imagining what her mother and community would tell her – she is now “that kind of girl”; she also is aware of her present spheres of experience, and the fact that she is currently member of a war community: this is where the main crises, or inner-conflict is generated – between her past and her present. Eventually, she will draw on available social representations, the available social discourse that “these are times of exception” – to do a semiotic short-circuit and conclude that she is young only once; this enables her dating and explorations. In that sense, the social crises create new fields of possibility, and for the young woman, it is now an occasion to question old guiding semiotic guidance.

The third interesting moment here takes place at the very end of the war. June now works as receptionist in a hostel where young land girls live. She is now at a third turning point: in 1945, the war comes to an end: what will she do? She again engages in an exploration of

various possible lives; she could go back to her hometown with her mother and sister and restore her older life; she could marry the young man she is now regularly dating and follow him to his farm, thus becoming a “decent” married woman, in some sense accomplishing the future she used to imagine in the past; or she could draw on her present experience of being a strong, capable professional woman, open to change and uncertainty, and see where life brings her. Interestingly, she will choose this third option, opening a path that was never considered before, but that can be read as resulting from the generalization of her experiences across the last few years; she also draws on the growing representation in these times of the possibility of being an independent woman. And so she will be, and even starts to join the young women’s socialist movement, thus apparently participating to an important movement at the end of WWII that did a lot for the independence of women.

Hence, in this case, the war transforms the social world – this is sociogenesis – which in turn brings people to experience new settings and engage in new activities – which is microgenesis. This in turn brings people to new experience that question their past spheres of experiences and imagined futures, and bring them to elaborated new engagement and imagination, through semiotic elaboration; this in turn radically transforms their course of life, that is, ontogenesis. Finally, at the scale of a country, when a whole generation of young people experience comparably life-transforming experiences, then it is likely that the social world will itself be transformed – here sociogenesis is about the place of women in the British society.

Crises II: revolution and courses of life

My second example concerns the so-called Velvet Revolution, that is, the end of communism in the Czech Republic – at that time Czechoslovakia – in 1989. Here, a whole society went into crises which led to reject communism. I draw here on a study I did as contribution to a volume edited Brady Wagoner, Ali Moghaddam and Jaan Valsiner on “radical social change” – the book examines social crises, or “revolutions”, such as the Russian or the Iranian revolution, as well as the Egypt spring and the Greek 2008 crises (Wagoner et al., 2018). My argument is that sociogenesis can create conditions of living which prevent societal dialogue and people’s engagement; this may bring, at an ontogenetic level, people to develop imagination which challenge the social. My proposition is that a crisis may precisely result from such mismatch between socio- and ontogenetic dynamics.

Methodologically, I combined an analysis of two sources of data: historical and social and political sciences work on the context, as well as literature and fiction; and a close analysis of a longitudinal documentary made by Elena Třeštíkova, *Manželské etudy po dvaceti letech* (Studies of marriage 20 years later, 2006), in which she followed 6 couples married in Prague in 1980 for 25 years – a fascinating series of films edited to show the slow development of young people and their families.

To analyse the crises here, I will draw on the idea of imagination, as individual and collective process, as well on that of engagement. This concept which has been worked out by Pernille Hviid on the basis of philosophy to designate what matters to people:

In a developmental perspective, engagements can be seen as situated zones of potential development. It unites potential interests of the child [or the person] with certain aspects of the environment. (...) In engaged situations human beings move and are ‘moved’. (Hviid, 2008, p. 184)

Engagement thus designates that what moves people, that is, dynamises their conduct; it allows conduct to make sense to the person in a given situation, and be future oriented. In that sense engagement is one of the conditions of development, and is also where people are mostly likely to engage their imagination.

So back to my case - here a bit of background information. Czechoslovakia was created as independent country in 1918 after World War I, with Tomáš G. Masaryk, a former philosopher and educationalist as president. This first republic ended in 1938, after the so-called Munich agreement, whereby the European allies advised the country to accept Hitler's conditions and eventually, was turned into a German protectorate in 1939. At the end of the war, in 1945, the country was "liberated" by the USSR, and in 1948, it became communist. After quite hard years, in 1968 control was released, bringing to the Prague spring in 1968, a very creative period for Arts and culture, again broken down by the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw pact in 1968.

The Velvet revolution took place in 1989 in Czechoslovakia, year of celebration of 39, 69, etc. Events have been summarized as follows (Radio Prague, 1997; 'Velvet Revolution', 2015). On the 16th of November 1989 a student demonstration took place in Bratislava to commemorate the 50th birthday of the death of the student Jan Opletal on November 17th, 1939, followed by persecutions of students and the closure of Universities in Czechoslovakia by the Nazis. The demonstration attracted a great number of students; the police was present but did not intervene. A similar event grouped 15'000 students in Prague on the 17th; this time, the police ended up the demonstration with violence, beating students. This immediately caused a massive reaction: theatres and arts went on strike, later joined by factory workers; public discussions were organized; and a Civil forum defending non-violence, was created. The latter asked the government to resign. Massive demonstrations (up to 500'000 people) followed in the next few days, followed by more general strikes. One of the very iconic scenes of that time is that of these hundreds of thousands peaceful demonstrators on Prague's main square, Wenceslas square – the equivalent of the Champs-Élysées – all shaking their keys. Eventually, the president Gustáv Husák announced his resignation on December the 10th. This Velvet revolution is often described as an exemplary non-violent revolution, made by people under the leadership of the intellectual figure of Vaclav Havel, philosopher and theatre author, bringing the end of communism in Czechoslovakia.

Obviously, the revolution was not only "caused" by the peaceful demonstration, how romantic the idea might appear. External economic and political games were getting to a tipping point, and internal dynamics were active for 40 years. On the external side, the world balance was changing in the late 80s, with the end of the Cold war, and overall, a general weakening of the Soviet influence. The Perestroika had started mid-80s under Gorbachev; early November 1989, East Germans escaped to West Germany through the Czech embassy, and then the Berlin Wall collapsed on the 9th of November. Hence, on the European map, the loss of communist influence in Czechoslovakia was part of a more general change, probably anticipated if not supported by the need of the communist countries to join the general economical market. On the internal side, 40 years of communism had let Czechoslovakia exhausted, the population being depressed because of years of deprivation of civil rights, but also as radically disengaged from the social world. Here it can be summarized as follows.

First, the economy during the war and after, during communist years, created repeatedly a massive devaluation of money and tight control over the economy. Whatever savings or property people or families had developed and accumulated over time as result of work, interest, or capacity, imagining about their future of that of their children – a house, a sewing machine, a cow or savings – was taken away from them during communist years. People who grew under the Nazi Germany and lived their adult lives under communism thus remember having lost two or three times their own goods and savings.

Second, along the same line, the socialism imposed in Czechoslovakia by Soviet Russia denied people the right to choose their life trajectories according to their interests and abilities. Young people were oriented towards studies according to the need of the economy, not their own interests or engagements; in some case access to education was denied to them as

retaliation against their families. People who did not comply with the regime usually ended up working in unqualified manual occupations regardless of their expertise (e.g., doctors, artists, or scientists working as porters, responsible of heating rooms or destroying garbage) (e.g., Hrabal, 1993; Křesadlo, 2015; Viewegh, 2015); conversely, people with lower expertise but strong allegiance to the Party would get higher positions, with collective responsibilities. This brought the country to an economic and cultural “stagnation” (Machonin, 2000, p. 112). At a more individual level, many people resigned to dull life occupations, while investing “hobbies” or side activities; many invested in their flourishing “cottage life” that allowed parallel modes of sociality (Reidinger, 2008); others could get very depressed or simply alcoholics (only a minority of the population engaged in “dissident” activities).

Third, at a more organizational level, in companies and public institutions, the economy progressively was dissociated between an official discursive game, and actual practices. On the one side, the discourse proposed was taking the shape of the socialist language of planning for the collective good; on the other side, the real socioeconomic game was a structure of informal power and networks, with its privileged and subordinated. Here again, people adopted a double language the official, while in everyday life they survived on the basis of informal networks and shadow economy.

Altogether, thus, there seemed to be a radical mismatch between the sociocultural discourses and processes, and what really mattered to people – their imagination and engagement. People living in such dual-mode life, author Křesadlo called “amphibian”. It is precisely against this double life that dissidents and especially Václav Havel, drawing on a Czech moral tradition going from Jan Hus to Jan Patočka, developed an ethical posture demanding to “live in truth” (Kohák, 1989; Marková, 2008; Zantovsky, 2015). But how long could people live as amphibians?

Straight after 1989, most people lived important ruptures in their lives – the loss of a job, the end of certitudes, the possibility to travel or to become one’s own boss – and thus initiated many transitions. So did people manage to quit their double life? If we now turn to Trestikova’s documentary, we have interesting insights. The documentary indeed shows how, during communist, all the men were deeply engaged in their hobby, next to their dull job. After the revolution, all of them tried to turn their hobby, their main engagement, in their new professional sphere of experience: that is, this is from where their possible futures. For instance, Václav, who likes working with wood, opens a furniture shop; Antonín, who likes playing with car pieces, will open a garage and later becomes specialized in selling wheel rims; Stanislav fabricates a satellite which enables him to capture foreign channels, and so learns German – which eventually will bring him to be translator; Vladimír who likes photography turns it into his job (Zittoun, 2017).

The revolution has thus seemed to liberate very powerful engagements in activities so far taking place in the shadow of society, as amphibian activity. These supported strong enough imagination of oneself in the liberal society, to bring people to engage strongly in new activities. This in itself supports our initial point: in effect, for such engagement to surface, these must have been active and repressed for long.

From such a reading, the revolution can be read as a societal crisis, a point of systemic transformation, due to the meeting of two main forces: at a sociogenetic level, geopolitical transformations; and at an ontogenetic level, a long disengagement of people towards the social, getting to saturation. The 1989 demonstration seemed to have enabled, at the microgenetic level, a powerful catalytic process, releasing the forces of a long cultivated inner-societal disruption. In that sense, the demonstrations of the Velvet revolution were the

temporary compound of such longer process, and Vaclav Havel played the role of catalyst³. The catalysis eventually resulted into a radical sociogenetic transformation, leading to democracy, and at the ontogenetic level, a transformation of people's courses of life (Zittoun, 2018).

Crisis III: Aging in a region

The third case I would like to present here is an ongoing research project on old people's modes of housing, "HomAge", undertaken with Michèle Grossen. The case was built on the basis of the studies just presented, reflections on dialogical case studies, and a sociocultural approach to the development of older persons. The argument is that people's lives are changing – ontogenesis – and with them, their daily living conditions; to avoid radical mismatches – inappropriate settings or microgenesis – then sociogenesis has to happen. In simpler words, if you want to avoid a crisis, change society. Our project actually aims not at that much, but simply at documenting and perhaps reflecting these transformations.

So here is one way to evoke the context. There is a "Silver revolution" in many European and American countries, a demographic change that has and will have massive implications. I will speak about the case of Switzerland, which I now best. Here the "upcoming crises" is due to the following: there is an important ageing of the population, due both to the increase of the life expectancy and the low birth rates – hardly compensated by immigration. This ageing is visible through the evolution of the pyramid of age, and has as consequences a transformation of relations of dependency: in the past, a wide active population was supporting a younger number of children and young people; with the current evolution, a smaller active population is supporting, through taxes and retirement money, a large proportion of older people. Concretely, it is a threat to the pension system, and also, raises the question of housing and care. Traditionally, people used to stay with their families, or be placed in retirement homes; the first option is rarely the case, and the second is not an option: there are not enough beds in full-time retirement homes, it is too expensive for the state and individuals, and there have been many problems in the quality of care, in isolation and ghettoization of the elderly, etc. Indeed, life expectancy in a retirement home is very short.

To this evolution, the Canton of Neuchâtel in French speaking Switzerland has devised a solution, which they call their "Medico-social plan", and by which they aim to limit retirement homes, and develop a very large number of "flats with social care": the flats are of easy access, affordable, not medicalised, yet social workers come to support social relationship between people and between them and their neighbourhood, and also to identify needs and possible organise support.

In that context, we defined as "regional case study", called the HomAge project. Indeed we found that sociogenetic movement very compatible with our reflection on the development of people with older age. In our own work, as part of a European network supported by EARLI (AGILE), we show that it is very important to reconceptualise ageing beyond decline and success, but in sociocultural terms. One of our propositions is that, for people to continue developing (engaging in transitions leading to learning identity transformation and sense-making), it is of primary importance that they can maintain their engagements – things that matter to them, spheres of experience that were important to them in their neighbourhood or at home and that will still matter to them even if they move house. Second, we identified, together with narrative gerontologists (Freeman, 2011; Gubrium, 2011), that people with age

³ Vaclav Havel was described by his biograph as playing the role of "carbon", a chemical element capable of linking with many others to create a compound of irresistible strength, filled with contradictions yet stable enough to set in motion the momentous transformation that led ahead" (Zantovsky, 2015, p. 299).

still need imagine and need to imagine – explore their past, imagine possible future, think about distant others and possible lives (Hviid, 2020, p. 202; Zittoun et al., 2021; Zittoun & Baucal, 2021; Zittoun & Sato, 2018). Third, we were also inspired by the concept of “landscapes of care” (Milligan & Wiles, 2010), which suggests the support to people’s quality of life are not only formal caring relationship, but can be distributed among present and distant others, and also assumed by places, urban arrangements, objects, etc. So our idea is that older people’s development needs to be understood within its actual settings – whether housing arrangements, neighbourhood or region, and through proximal as well as distal experiences.

Our project therefore aims at documenting and supporting the dynamics taking place, and that will take place; it is built as dialogical case study as follows. First, to analyse sociogenetic transformations, it is documenting the development and implementation of this new “medico-social plan”, the social discourses it triggers, the negotiations it gives rise to, what works, and the mishaps it generates. This we started to do by working on documents and talking to local politicians, and we will continue by following commissions, working group, etc (Gfeller et al., 2021). Second, we identified one of these new housing projects – flats with care – and again, document and follow its trajectory, from its planning to building, to its opening to new inhabitants and appropriation (Grossen et al., 2022). Here we are at the intermeshing of the socio- and microgenetic dynamics. Third, we identify and document everyday life settings and arrangements where older people’s engagements are supported, mediated, made possible (Zittoun et al., Submitted). Here, we think about local cafés accepting their older clients, giving them small jobs and cheaper prices, tolerating their day-long presence; the postman, which may simply check that someone is still fine while maintaining their engagements at home; but also, generative activities in institutions – that is, activities which are supporting people in what they are and are engaged by, their imagination, etc. Here we are at the crossing between micro- and ontogenetic dynamics. And finally, at an ontogenetic level, we follow longitudinally the trajectories of a few older people going through a variety of transitions related to their housing modes (from home to flat, or flat to other housing arrangements, or to retirement home).

This project thus considers socio, micro and ontogenetic at once, thanks to the unity of place of a regional case study. Attentive to changes and mishaps at each level, we thus wish to identify dynamics involved, and to dialogue with all actors involved, at all level, so as to accompany and support a smooth transformation. We mainly hope to be able maintain dialogical dynamics in/across levels, and to support older people’s sphere of experience, engagement and imagination of past, present and future. This project results from our learning from other projects on crises; perhaps here we can avoid one!

Implications

What did we learn from my three case studies of crises? First, to summarise my first argument, my proposition is that societal crises occur through mismatches or gaps, that is, dialogical disruptions, between sociogenetic and ontogenetic dynamics, in specific microgenetic events. These crises can be the result of such mismatch, as in the case of the Velvet Revolution, or their cause, as in the case of WWII in England; in either case, crises can also be occasions of systemic rearrangements, that is, individual or collective development. Through my analysis, I have highlighted the importance of mutually enabling dialogues; the key role of imagination, individually and collectively; and the importance of people’s engagements in the equation.

From this some methodological implications can be highlighted: if one wants to fully articulate socio, onto and microgenetic dynamics, in time of crises (or not), one needs to build complex, dialogical case studies. These require always, to some extent, to articulate description and analysis of the social world (3rd person perspective) and the person’s experience (1st person); it also demands highlighting circulation of sense-meaning from the social to the

person and back (Marková, 2017; Marková et al., 2020). Regional case studies are particular good entrances for the study of such phenomena (Pedersen & Zittoun, 2021; Zittoun et al., In press).

This proposition has also theoretical implications when it comes to the study of crises: in complex sociocultural analysis, I argued that we need to consider and distinguish crises as ruptures and transitions in the course of life, and crises as societal transformations and dialogical tensions. Sociocultural psychology, as other cultural-historical approaches, gives us precisely means to analyse and understand their connections through dialogical and semiotic processes. I especially believe that imagination plays here a key role. It may seem futile, but it is not so: all repressive states have tried to control their citizens' imagination, limit their access to symbolic resources, or punishing people who imagine beyond the limits of what is considering safe for the state; in turn, social crises can be seen as due to the liberation of frustrated imagination, in more or less constructive ways (Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018; Marková, 2018; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018). In any case, societies can nourish, prevent or punish people's imagination and engagements; and in turn, people's constrained imagination can trigger personal and collective ruptures.

Finally, such reading may have empirical implications. Here I move beyond my strict zone of expertise, and what I am saying here is very tentative and not based on any substantive analysis, but let us reflect one instant about current European crises: may we not say that the so-called "disconnection of the Elites" for instance in France appears as mismatch between societal discourses and values (as in the media) and people's daily experiences and imagination? Would it also not be possible that the current "youth walks for climate" result from the mismatch between young people who feel how their imagination of their future is endangered, and how their imagination of a future where nature may be protected is constrained and made impossible by the discourse of politicians and the liberal market – demonstrations also enabled by the catalyser that is Greta Thunberg? In any case, I hope that my reflections on crises of the past may give us a few means for imagining the possibilities of imagining the future to come, with or beyond its crises.

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