

## RESEARCH

## Political sociology of crisis in times of crisis: introducing the augmented discrepancy approach

Johannes Kiess\*, Jenny Preunkert\*\*, Martin Seeliger\*\*\*, Joris Steg\*\*\*\*

### Abstract

Sociology has evolved and developed as a *crisis science*. But although the concept of crisis is central to the history of sociology, there is no common notion of crisis in (political) sociology today. In this paper, we address the relationship between political sociology and crisis, explicate what a political sociology of crisis might look like, and discuss possible characteristics of a genuine political-sociological approach to (political) crisis. Here, we propose the *augmented discrepancy approach* as a heuristic framework for the empirical analysis and comparisons of (political) crises. This reflexive approach interprets political crises as resulting from a gap between (liberal, republican, and/or social) democratic ideals, i.e., the self-understanding or legitimization narratives within society, and real-existing political practices. From this angle, a social constellation can convincingly be named a crisis if the material conditions and practices constituting it (considerably) deviate from a certain understanding of democracy and if members of society perceive this deviation to matter to a relevant extent.

**Keywords:** crisis, sociology, politics, democracy, theory of democracy, power, inequality, refugee crisis, augmented discrepancy approach

- 
- \* Johannes Kiess (Else-Brunswik-Institute, University of Leipzig, Nikolaistraße 6-10, 04109 Leipzig, johannes.kiess@uni-leipzig.de)  
\*\* Jenny Preunkert (University of Kassel, Nora-Platiel-Straße 5, 34127 Kassel, jenny.preunkert@uni-kassel.de)  
\*\*\* Martin Seeliger (Institute Labor and Economy, University of Bremen, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, seeliger@uni-bremen.de)  
\*\*\*\* Joris Steg (Institute for Sociology, University Wuppertal, Gaußstr. 20, 42119 Wuppertal, steg@uni-wuppertal.de)

## 1. Introduction

*Crisis* remains an important concept in modern society, as public debates frequently – and, it seems, increasingly so – label various situations as *crisis*. A cursory glance at various crisis phenomena of the last two decades illustrates the omnipresence and ubiquity of crises: The global financial crisis and the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009, the sovereign debt and Euro crisis, the refugee crisis, the climate crisis, the covid-19 pandemic, the inflation crisis and the energy (price) crisis, and so on. We live in times of crisis, a fact that is mirrored by many recent conference themes in sociology and political science. Though not in all of the above-mentioned cases to the same extent, crisis very often refers to democracy, the state, or political institutions – either because these institutions are themselves in a state of crisis or because these institutions are forced to act in crises –, and global or international political arrangements. Indeed, the political systems all over the world are undergoing critical developments. Be it the increase of armed conflicts, the institutionalization of authoritarian systems such as in Turkey or Hungary, the retrenchment of welfare state institutions, or the rise of populist, nationalist, and far-right parties and movements. This raises the question of whether we observe multiple societal and political crises and how to conceptualize these from a political sociology perspective. In this paper, we develop a theoretical approach designed to frame and interpret such crises.

Sociology has historically constituted and established itself as a crisis science (Repplinger 1999; Steg 2020, 2023): The central impulse for the genesis of sociology was the observation of manifold crisis phenomena and the major social transformation processes in the 19th century. The industrial revolution, urbanization, and capitalist pervasion of economy and society with all its consequences – the cyclically recurring economic and political crises, pauperism and the emergence of the social question, as well as the emergence of a working class, to name just a few – changed societies permanently; hence, “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx and Engels 1990: 465, own translation).<sup>1</sup> The concept of crisis, which indicates an open, uncertain, and highly dynamic development, was virtually predestined to characterize this complex and contingent phase of rapid social change. However, this social change is continuing. Indeed, modernity is more a process than an epoch, an upheaval of living conditions, a “complexification” of society (Graham 2019: 5) set to last and, hence, more than ever active today. In modernity, change is set to be the new normal – “La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent” (Baudelaire). While the notion of “permacrisis” (Brown et al. 2023) or speaking of a permanent crisis in light of current events, too, is not without (definitory and logical) problems, the political sociology of

---

1 While “solid” implies durability and permanence, the German original from 1848, which reads “Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft”, is less romanticizing of a once stable, pre-modern era.

crisis needs to consider both: a current crisis as well as the rapidly changing (*crisis-like*) modern society that is additionally disrupted by that current crisis.

By its founding scholars, sociology was explicitly conceived as a science that should deal with the diagnosis and analysis of the causes, reasons, courses, and consequences of social crises in modern times. Indeed, the term sociology was decisively coined in the first half of the 19th century by the French mathematician and philosopher Auguste Comte. He popularized using the term crisis, which in antiquity was primarily a medical category denoting the final phase of a disease in which the fate of death or survival is decided. From now on and as a social-theoretical category, *crisis* became a central analytical category of the newly emerging science of *sociology*. Likewise, sociologists today are frequently asked to explain the characteristics of a crisis, the social conditions, and the structural mechanisms and dysfunctions that led to the crisis, as well as to process the social and political consequences. When it comes to political crises or crises that have far-reaching political consequences, political sociology, which inquires into the relationship between society and politics, is particularly in demand. Although (political) sociology has developed historically and genetically as a crisis science, there is no genuine (or common) understanding of crisis within the discipline. It is by no means clear and undisputed what constitutes a crisis, when exactly a situation should be considered a crisis, what the causes and conditions are, what consequences are associated with crises, how crises should be assessed, and how to react to crises. Nor is there a clear analytical framework within (political) sociology with which crises can be empirically examined and compared.

Over the last decade, it has been highlighted by countless contributions that the present modern society has taken on a quasi-permanent crisis mode. Pathologies in terms of public communication, bureaucratic structures overwhelming collective decision-making, and a continuous increase in social inequality among citizens have brought critical observers to diagnose an overall crisis of democracy (e.g., Calhoun et al. 2022). Against this background, we address the relationship between political sociology and crisis and discuss possible characteristics of a genuine political-sociological approach to (political) crisis. Here, we develop an *augmented discrepancy perspective* as a heuristic framework for the empirical analysis and comparisons of (political) crises. To make this contribution, we bring together and discuss different terms, main perspectives, and theoretical approaches. We proceed as follows: In section 2, we discuss what we mean when we speak of political sociology and democracy. In section 3, we explicate what crisis means, what a political sociology of crisis might look like, and what the objects, tasks, function, role, and goals of a political sociology of crisis – especially in times of crisis – are, in order to develop a specific political-sociological approach to crisis in times of crisis. This will be done in section 4, where we present – by using the example of the so-called refugee crisis – what we term the *augmented discrepancy approach* (ADA): This approach or perspective

interprets *political* crises as resulting from a gap between democratic ideals, i.e. the self-understanding or legitimation narratives within society, and real-existing political practices. From this angle, a social constellation can convincingly be named a crisis if the material conditions and practices constituting it (considerably) deviate from a specific understanding of democracy and if members of society perceive this deviation to matter to a relevant extent. In the final section, we conclude on the merits of the discrepancy perspective for the sociological analysis of (political) crises.

## 2. Political Sociology, democracy, and the question of power

On a very general level, political sociology inquires about the relationship and the interaction between society and politics. Power is its key concept, and participation in power relationships is its key question (Pizzorno 1971; Faulks 1999; Orum and Dale 2009; Graham 2010; Dobratz et al. 2012). More precisely, political sociology deals with the social conditions and consequences of the political, the relationship between the economy, politics, and society, and more generally with power, domination, inequality, crises, and conflicts. With politics summarizing the mode and practices of collective rule-setting and decision-making, the concept of the political refers to the specific features of the elements at work in the process. It is since the 1970s that political science and political sociology have increasingly been claiming “the fusion of political and nonpolitical spheres of social life” (Offe 2019a: 255). “The delineation”, Offe (ibid.) further explains, “between ‘political’ and ‘private’ (in other words, moral or economic concerns and modes of action) is becoming blurred.” As a consequence, the range and scope of political sociology have since extended beyond the framework of what has usually been referred to as the political system and the institutional structure of collective rule-setting (Herberg et al. 2023).

Looking at the history of the subdiscipline, a genuine connection between political sociology and the political form of democracy becomes apparent. As the foundational studies of Ostrogorski (1922) and Michels (1915) show, political sociology emerged as an approach to empirically inquire the democratization of modern industrial society and its political organizations. As a branch of social science aiming at the study of democracy, political sociology inquires about institutions and processes of interest mediation based on bureaucracy, political communication, and the application of executive means of political domination, such as police or military force. While the formal transition to democracy had inflicted new norms and ideals, both Ostrogorski and Michels criticized undemocratic rigidities within their political practice. The questions of the conditions under which democracy flourishes, when democracy crises occur, and what political and social consequences these crises have, as well as of the extent to which representative democracy represents the will of the

people, have been the focus of political sociology ever since. It is against the background of this legacy that Lamla (2021: 289) insists that “political sociology should study the way democracy comes into being, how it is performed and renewed under societal conditions of strain and crisis.”

Hence, the connection between political sociology and democracy is close. On a very general level, one may argue that democracy means rule by the people. Again, this needs further explication. To develop a concept of democracy more precisely, we are borrowing from the field of political theory, which centers around ethical questions and problems of legitimation concerning democratic order. According to Offe (2019b: 331), four standard features of liberal democracy characterize these systems – their arrangements within national states maintaining political order through public administration (1), the rule of law (2), standardized processes of political competition between contending groups (3), as well as general accountability of ruling elites (4).

From this perspective, democracy can be understood as a mechanism to solve (or mediate) conflicts arising between adversary groups (such as political parties, capital and labor, or civil society fractions). Besides its constitutional and institutional dimensions, it is necessary to look at democracy as a historically evolving relationship. Hence, the scope, range, and stability of democratic political order are subject to constant restructuring through institutional change and negotiation. Consequently, no general democratic condition of the political system or political culture can be pre-assumed. Viewed from an action-theoretical angle, democracy has to be maintained through concrete practices of political actors on the ground – i.e., within the political bureaucracy and organizations, the public sphere as the locus of collective debate, the educational system as the training ground for mature citizens, the procedures and rules of distribution, such as taxing and collective bargaining, and so on.

It is mostly since the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries that legitimation of political rule has been fed by the principles of democratic state orders, structures, and governance. In the light of political theory, three components of the concept of democracy can be distinguished – namely the liberal, the republican, and the social democracy theories – which entail to varying degrees different participatory rights (Marshall 1950). Each of these principles, therefore, emphasizes specific aspects of democratic rule and its political legitimacy. The respective political theories focus on these aspects differently:

First of all, proponents of liberal democratic theories set their focus on the citizens’ possibility of individual fulfillment. The liberal tradition is rooted in the idea of citizens being able to participate in collective decision-making on an eye level. Generally, the state legitimizes itself through the protection of individual interests. Central for democratic order are, from this perspective, public debates in which potentials for collective reason can be mobilized (Bessette 1980, 1994; Habermas 1989, 1992;

Fishkin 1991, 2009). Liberal democratic theories assume that modern societies solve their fundamental problem through deliberation and collective debates to integrate a plurality of ideologies and worldviews, the diversity of which could cause frictions and conflicts. One general problem of liberal approaches to democratic theory concerns the preconditions to be met for people to become responsible citizens in alignment with the theory's expectations. For public reason to emerge, citizens must not only be well informed about the topics of ongoing public debates. They must, moreover, be able and willing to engage in public debates that are directed at identifying rational solutions. In order to achieve this "civic culture" (Almond and Verba 1972), proto-political institutions, such as education or the media, have to be designed in a particular way. Thus, it is often objected by opponents that such theories are based on unrealistic expectations regarding both citizens and (proto-) political institutions. Regardless, proponents of liberal democracy attribute crises of democracy to a lack in civic culture and its preconditions.

Secondly, republican theories of democracy emphasize the procedural elements of democratic polities. This perspective on democracy rests upon claims made early on in Western history of thought, in particular by Aristotle, who claimed that the state structure is superior to individual dispositions because it enables their development. At the same time, the political system must be protected from the impact of elites, who might impose their particular interests onto the political process. Transparency and rule compliance constitute, from this point of view, the central objectives of the democratic political process. How far democratic decision-making appears legitimate in the light of these theories depends on how far procedural norms are being followed (Luhmann 1969). This, in turn, depends on the ability and willingness of political elites to limit their impact on the political process through complying with formal bureaucratic rules. From the common people, republican theories of democracy expect a general interest in political participation that manifests itself, e.g., in electoral participation. The shrinking turnout in elections (Schäfer 2015) and the overall decreasing membership in parties (van Biezen et al. 2012) and interest organizations (e.g., Bucci 2019; Schnabel 2020), as well as the erosion of labor market institutions (Baccaro and Howell 2017) in countries of the global North, are then perceived as crisis symptoms of democracy from the perspective of republican theories.

Thirdly, theories of social democracy (Bernstein 1899; Marshall 1950; Meyer 2005, 2006) center around the division of labor in society as well as questions of resource distribution among its members. The classical approach to the distributional aspects of democracy can be found in the opus of Karl Marx, who emphasized differences and contradictions between the social classes in society. With capitalism as a social system being based on the principles of economic growth (see, for example, Baccaro et al. 2022), its legitimacy has depended over the last centuries

in particular on the promise of the continuous improvement of the living conditions for the working class. Viewed from this perspective, the equality norm of democracy does not only concern equal participation rights but also entitlements regarding access to economic resources. A welfare state that provided collective goods and a certain degree of decommodification in the labor market was, in most countries of the Global North, secured through redistribution mechanisms in the political system and collective bargaining institutions (Korpi 1974; Esping-Anderson 1990). However, since neoliberal globalization has put most countries under constraints of downward competition, these institutions of social democracy have constantly been eroding, which has led to an increase in social inequality within and among nation-states. These developments have consequently been identified as leading to a democracy crisis.

Hence, from all three traditions, political crises and, more specifically, crises of democracy can be detected. As we will further explicate below, the political systems of Western democratic countries are, respectively to a certain degree, built around the principles contained in these three realms of democratic theory, expanding the possible number and variations of crisis diagnoses.

### **3. Political sociology (in times) of crisis**

Historically, sociology formed as a crisis science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Modern society is indeed characterized by constant change, ever-new crises, and complexification. Still, against the backdrop of political theories of democracy sketched out above, the notion of crisis and what it means to live in a time of crisis need to be specified. First, we distinguish between the general assessment of modernity as being in constant change (or of society being in crisis virtually all the time) from crises in the sense of specific developments observed and interpreted by society – or at least relevant social actors – as crises. Norris (2011) has identified long-term trends leading to a loss in legitimacy and a sense of crisis of democracy (in the sense of a structural democratic deficit) through changes in the dimensions of demand, in particular higher aspirations for democracy and information, i.e., constant availability of negative news, and supply, i.e., an actual lack of performance of democratic government. While constant criticism of government is essential for democracy (Rosanvallon 2008), without a certain threshold of diffuse political support (Easton 1965), any democratic regime loses its legitimacy and can be considered in crisis (Schoen 2013).

We maintain, secondly, that the cascade of crises since 2007 – including the world financial and economic crisis, the Euro crisis, the political crisis over migration policy, the covid-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, as well as the crisis of the political world order and the global economic system after the Russian invasion of Ukraine – is not only an expression of a deep crisis of democratic capitalism (Streeck 2011, 2014; Wolf

2021, 2023), but is also accompanied by a crisis of liberal democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Merkel and Kneip 2018; Mounk 2018; Runciman 2018; Przeworski 2019; Calhoun et al. 2022; Balz and Morse 2023). At least in their accumulation, these crises touch the fundamental principles of democracy explicated above. Indeed, we are witnessing that liberal, political, and social rights are questioned as (the liberal idea of) the public debate is no longer able to bridge political polarization. Post-democratic and TINA politics let participatory elements and even majoritarian choices (see the Troika policies in Greece) crumble, and social inequalities are skyrocketing with tremendous effects on not only political inclusion. Here, political sociology is asked to take over from economics, virology, international relations, and other disciplines as the public and (sometimes) political elites seek analyses and answers for what these crises mean for societies, the institutions, convictions, and behaviors of people taken for granted in normal times.

Although crisis is central to (the history of) (political) sociology, the term “crisis” is not easy to define. Nevertheless, some core definitional features of crises and central building blocks for a sociologically appropriate understanding of crises can be identified to sharpen the concept analytically (Steg 2020, 2023; see also Kiess 2019; Kiess et al. 2023; Preunkert 2011). On a general level, crises can be defined “as phases of decision-making that come to a head, with an open outcome” (Steg 2020: 430, own translation). Hence, crises are characterized by a special temporal structure. First of all, crises always refer to the temporary deviation from normality, or more precisely to the unintended deviation from a state identified as normal. By definition, crises cannot be a permanent or normal state. Crises are always temporary and, therefore, finite exceptional situations. Every “crisis concerns a temporal period that is short relative to those that precede and follow” (Walby 2015: 20). If crisis were the normal or the permanent state, the concept of crisis would no longer be necessary. Crisis would be identical to normality.

Crises are always the result of preceding processes and the preliminary stage of future processes; crises are thus both a product of development and a producer of development. Moreover, crises denote a liminal phase, a specific threshold state, or a state of suspense. Crises represent transitional phases that point to a contingent future. Antonio Gramsci once aptly defined crises from a Marxist perspective as an “interregnum”, being an interim period in which “the old dies and the new cannot come into the world” (Gramsci 1991: 354, own translation). Because their consequences are not predetermined and their outcome is open, crises systematically produce a moment of ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity.

However, crises are not only phases of uncertainty but also of unsecuring and repeal. Crises can discredit and delegitimize old, self-evident truths and traditional beliefs. They irritate routines, forms of action, ways of thinking, structural patterns, and systems of order. Crises reveal undesirable developments, dysfunctionalities,

and pathologies so that the previous mode of development is called into question. Crises thus point not only to an open future but also to a future that can be shaped: They open up opportunities for criticism and intervention, they open up windows of opportunity, and they enable alternative development paths that would be inconceivable without a crisis. Crises are, therefore, decision-making situations in two ways: On the one hand, in acute crisis phases, decisions must be made under time pressure to deal with and overcome the crisis; on the other hand, crises represent crossroads and junctures in which the further course of development of the phenomenon in crisis is decided.

Even if the outcome of crises is contingent, the concept of crisis should not be trivialized with everyday linguistic and scientific arbitrariness. The term should – in a sociologically meaningful way – not be used for every problem situation but exclusively for drastic deviations and divergences from normality and for critical, potentially existence-threatening processes and phenomena in which the further course of development is decided. Further, a sociologically appropriate concept of crisis should be reserved for phenomena relevant to society as a whole. *Crisis* should and must be understood and conceptualized as an explicitly political term and as a genuinely social-theoretical category since “crisis” refers to society and social development. Here lies a fundamental problem since some social actors may insist that a particular situation be a crisis or a particular development to eventually lead to a crisis and, hence, demand action, while others insist on the assumption of *normality*. Moreover, a society may ignore a crisis until its consequences are felt, and some may even deny such consequences. A political sociology perspective has to take into account the framing of crises by social actors while at the same time remaining critical of the various crisis narratives. If political sociologists speak of crisis, they need to explicate why a particular situation is a crisis and how it affects relevant parts of society and/or the political system.

In crises, the ability to reproduce is no longer guaranteed. Crises are characterized by the fact that the structure, functionality, or existence of a social system, a social organism, or a social context is endangered. In this respect, crises can be seen as “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions” (Rosenthal et al., as cited in Boin et al. 2018: 24). Crises are particularly serious when they directly or indirectly affect a very large number of society members and/or when they affect the substance of the political system and/or its system and/or its social and economic conditions. To put it simply, crises are serious for a society when they affect the foundations of its legitimacy. Legitimacy, in turn, is based upon fulfilling ideals rooted in the three principles of democracy spelled out above, namely liberal, political, and social rights. If crises affect these

principles, and people conceive these consequences as unjustified violations of these principles, legitimacy deteriorates.

Like every thorough crisis analysis, a political-sociological crisis analysis should focus on and aim to explain the relevance of a given crisis, the causes of that crisis, and the consequences as well as the possible paths of development after the crisis; it is a matter of identifying, diagnosing, and criticising those structures, mechanisms, actions, and conditions that generate crises in the first place; and it is a matter of identifying, diagnosing, and criticizing those factors and forces that determine concrete developments in times of crisis and drive or hinder social, political, and economic change. Put in other terms, a (political) sociological crisis analysis should contain three central dimensions: motivation (actions, intentions, and goals of central actors), diagnosis (description and attribution of causes), and prognosis (assessment of consequences and outcome). And it needs to reflect on dominant narratives of these three dimensions within society, for the discursive struggle about which crisis narrative prevails is an integral part of the crisis under investigation and how it plays out (Kiess 2019; see also Bohmann and Vobruba 1992): “Moments of crisis open up struggles for hegemony between competing strategies” (Fairclough 2005: 55; see also Jessop 2002). A political sociology of crisis, in this sense, needs to be reflexive.

This leads to another requirement for a political sociology of crisis deriving from its subject matter. Since its emergence, sociology has been not only a science of crisis but also of critique (Müller 2021, 2023; Steg 2023). A political sociology of crisis, therefore, should be able to explain, interpret, and historically classify crises and assess the potential consequences of a crisis, not only descriptively and affirmatively, but critically. And in the sense of a public sociology (Burawoy 2005, 2015, 2021; see also Aulenbacher et al. 2017; Dörre 2015), a political sociology of crisis should be intervening in political and social debates – especially in times of crises.

Times of crisis are always times for fundamental questions and debates. Crises open up opportunities for criticism and intervention; they enable alternative paths of development that would not be possible without the *window of opportunity* that a crisis opens up. In a crisis, “there is the possibility of large-scale change” (Walby 2015: 34). However, crises do not automatically change anything. For changes and social learning processes to occur in and after crises, criticism is needed, followed by concrete action. Criticism in turn depends on crises as a fundament.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, (political) sociological crisis analyses can promote collective learning processes, which are indispensable for working on social and political-economic alternatives and equally protect against fatalism, defeatism, attentism, possibilism, and pure voluntarism – which are widespread in times of crises.

---

2 Indeed, crisis and critique share the same Greek origin *κρίσις* (e.g. Koselleck 2006, Steg 2023).

Further, a genuine political-sociological crisis analysis should take the following aspects into account: First, crises should be analyzed as both political and social categories in the sense of social constructivism (Coleman 2013). Crises do have a political impact. And even though they might have objective criteria, as social phenomena, crises must and can only be analyzed as a perception or construction of actors, i.e., their active-strategic framing as well as the discursive production of crisis in the public sphere (Kiess 2019). Hence, crises are politicized and politically instrumentalized by different forces and actors with different interests regarding crisis diagnosis and crisis management strategies. In this view, crises always refer to a struggle for hegemony.

Last but not least, critical political sociology needs to reflect on what is taken for granted in so-called normal times, how democratic political systems stand in reference to democratic ideals, and how crises and their consequences are related to power and inequalities. At this point, we argue, it is helpful and productive for political sociological crisis analysis to adopt what we call the augmented discrepancy perspective, or the augmented discrepancy approach (ADA): *The discrepancy perspective interprets political crises as symptoms of a gap between democratic ideals, self-understanding or legitimation narratives applied by modern societies, and their real-existing political practices.* From this angle, a social constellation appears as a crisis if the material conditions and practices constituting it deviate from a certain understanding of democracy.

#### **4. Political sociology of crisis in times of crisis: the augmented discrepancy approach**

While over the last centuries, democracy has become fundamental for the self-understanding of most nation-states, so much so that even clearly non-democratic states use the term, its concrete manifestations appear vague and oftentimes little substantial. For established democracies in the West, discrepancies between democratic ideals and actual political practice largely derive from a structural conflict between democracy and capitalism. As highlighted by a number of contemporary diagnostic and political theory contributions over the past two decades, these deficiencies and dysfunctions appear in all three dimensions introduced in section 2. Crouch (2011), for example, observes a republican crisis in Western societies stemming from the increasing influence of economic elites on the political process as well as a “stealth revolution” (Brown 2015) of market-based social control. Streeck (2014) described the erosion of democratic procedures in the wake of the austerity policies of the Troika in the Euro crisis. Furthermore, an extension of the executive force of judicial courts has been observed (Höpner 2010). Also, with regard to parameters of liberal notions of democracy, an increasingly long series of contributions

pointing to dysfunctions in the democratic process can be found in the course of recent years: Müller (2016), for example, laments the decline of public debates as a result of the rise of populist parties. At the same time, Schäfer (2015) notes that political equality is being lost by showing how the poor in income and education are losing their belief that they can achieve social change through political engagement. Finally, from a social democratic viewpoint, an erosion of the nation-states' capacity has been observed, while supranational governance institutions remain largely ineffective when it comes to social distribution (Streeck 2021). Against this background, Nachtwey (2018: 116) also recognizes a "regression of social rights" by identifying the dismantling of welfare state institutions and progressive erosion of the tariff system as causes of growing income and wealth inequalities (on this, see also Piketty 2014, 2020; Milanovic 2016).

These and other current political crisis diagnoses are connected to a specific democratic understanding and emphasize discrepancies between an ideal and the practice. Even if such crisis diagnoses are coherent and plausible, they all have in common that they are largely untransparent when it comes to their reference point. By introducing the discrepancy approach and herewith explicating and in the further course including considerations of (dominant) understandings of democracy within society, the different crisis interpretations, diagnoses, and prognoses become visible. With this relational approach, political sociology can conceive of a *crisis* based on the various facets of democracy. Then, the search for the constructional flaws and procedural deviations determines the program of a sociological perspective that persistently contrasts the ideal and practice of (post- or pseudo-)democratic order. Taking the case of the so-called refugee crisis, we want to briefly sketch out what this perspective is meant to introduce into crisis discourses.

The summer of 2015 is often described as the height of a refugee crisis. However, even though the term has been and continues to be widely used, it often remains unclear what constitutes a crisis here. Moreover, one could get the impression that there was not one but several migration (policy) crises. Using the discrepancy approach, it becomes apparent that even within the scientific community, the crisis diagnoses and prognoses differ(ed) from country to country depending on the different political understanding and the different institutional framework. For instance, comparing the dominant crisis diagnosis in Germany with the crisis diagnoses in the Mediterranean countries, it becomes apparent that the same empirical developments are interpreted differently and result(ed) in quite different crisis understandings.

In Germany, the debate focused less on refugees and how they were treated and more on the consequences of the increased ratio of refugees for public discourse (Bade 2018). A common argument was and still is that the official refugee policy has contributed to a polarization of the political debate in general (for a critical analysis,

see Mau et al. 2023) and has therefore contributed to the rise of the extreme-right Alternative for Germany (AFD) (Geiges 2018). From the perspective of republican theories, the so-called refugee crisis is connected to a cultural conflict between liberal groups, who support what was termed the *welcome culture* for refugees, and conservative groups, who favor a stricter migration policy (Wiesendahl 2016). The analysis of the so-called refugee crisis refers to a debate on the nationally conjugated question of what the German mainstream culture (Leitkultur) of coexistence is and how people should live together in Germany. It is also about who has which legal rights in Germany. European refugee policy, its legal structures, and the distribution of European costs are often only given minor consideration.

In contrast, the analyses of the so-called refugee crisis in Mediterranean countries focus on European refugee policy (Christodoulou et al. 2016; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016). Here, questions about European solidarity are raised, and it seems to help to analyze it from the perspective of social democratic theories, e.g., it is asked to what extent the refugee crisis has been called a crisis of European solidarity (Takle 2017). Moreover, the Mediterranean academic debate focuses on how the costs of securing the border and the refugees are distributed at the European level. Consequently, the so-called refugee crisis is linked to European diagnoses of solidarity and questions of redistribution within Europe.

Political initiatives, social movements, and sea rescue organizations have yet another perspective on the so-called refugee crisis. In this crisis diagnosis, the focus is not on the consequences of migration for the host countries but on the humanitarian disasters that lead to flight and migration in the first place and the situation and treatment of refugees. From a liberal perspective, the violation or non-observance of individual human and fundamental rights, such as the right to asylum or the right to freedom of movement, and the general violation of human dignity are deplored. In addition, a restrictive border and migration policy in general and specific state measures such as pushbacks in particular (as a violation of international law) are criticized.

Ultimately, in different contexts, the so-called refugee crisis is considered as or contributing to a crisis of democracy. Liberal (e.g., respect for human rights), republican (e.g., principles of coexistence within a polity), and social democratic (e.g., solidarity at the European level) dimensions of democracy are perceived to be violated. We claim that such violations of democratic ideals should be clearly stated and, more importantly, that the democratic ideals themselves have to be clearly named. We augment this discrepancy approach with the consideration of (dominant) understandings of democracy within society. Hence, instead of choosing, for example, a social democracy basis for analysis, a political sociology of crisis asks what (dominant) idea of democracy is lending legitimacy to a political system. If this idea – be it

liberal-meritocratic, political-republican, or social-democratic – is perceived as being violated by an economic, social, or political crisis, we consider this a crisis of democracy.

## 5. Conclusion

We began this article by stating that there is neither a common concept of crisis in political sociology nor a clear analytical framework with which crises can be empirically examined and compared. We, therefore, set out to draft what we call the *augmented discrepancy approach*. We argue that (a) political sociology (in times) of crisis needs to be reflexive in a number of ways. Most importantly, it needs to consider power struggles and framing strategies of social actors when it comes to calling a situation *crisis* while at the same time maintaining a critical perspective on what is taken for granted in so-called *normal* times. If the political and social consequences are to be investigated, there is hardly a way to engage in a political sociology of crisis without having some comparative pattern in mind, be it implicitly or – better – explicitly. Thus, secondly, we argue that spelling out and reflecting on the discrepancies to liberal, republican, or social democratic ideals provides a blueprint that is flexible – one may fill it with the democratic theory of her liking – yet verifiable at the same time. Moreover, if the discrepancy approach is augmented by including an analysis of the democratic ideals of a given society, a third requirement of a reflexive political sociology of crisis is met.

The augmented discrepancy approach can be applied to the analysis of any given crisis in modern society precisely because we conceive of it not as a strict research program or normative framework but rather as heuristic or methodological orientation. Considering the multiple crises of today, we believe that the analysis of such diverse crises like the crisis of democracy, the climate crisis, the inflation crisis, the so-called refugee crisis, and so on can all benefit from the augmented discrepancy approach because, as a common analytical framework, we would always refer to a particular democratic ideal and its (potential) violation by the crisis in question.

## Literature

- Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba. 1972. *The civic culture: political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Aulenbacher, Brigitte, Michael Burawoy, Klaus Dörre, and Johanna Sittel (eds.). 2017. *Öffentliche Soziologie. Wissenschaft im Dialog mit der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Baccaro, Lucio, and Chris Howell. 2017. *Trajectories of Neoliberal Transformation*. Boston: Cambridge University Press.
- Baccaro, Lucio, Mark Blyth, and Jonas Pontusson (eds.). 2022. *Diminishing Returns: The New Politics of Growth and Stagnation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Bade, Klaus J. 2018. "Von Unworten zu Untaten: Kulturängste, Populismus und politische Feindbilder in der deutschen Migrations- und Asyldebatte zwischen ‚Gastarbeiterfrage‘ und ‚Flüchtlingsskrise‘." *Historical Social Research Supplement* 30: 338-350.
- Balz, Dan, and Clara Ence Morse. 2023. *American democracy is cracking. These forces help explain why*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/08/18/american-democracy-political-system-failures/> [last accessed on 22.8.2023].
- Bernstein, Eduard. 1899. *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*. Stuttgart: J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger.
- Bessette, Joseph M. 1980. "Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government." Pp. 102-116 in *How Democratic is the Constitution?* Edited by R. A. Goldwin, W. A. Schambra. Washington/London: American Enterprise Institute.
- Bessette, Joseph M. 1994. *The Mild Voice of Reason. Deliberative Democracy and American National Government*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Bohmann, Gerda, and Georg Vorbuba. 1992. "Crisis and their Interpretations. The World Economic Crises of 1929 ff. and 1974 ff. in Austria." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 17(2): 145-163.
- Boin, Arjen, Paul 't Hart, and Sanneke Kuipers. 2018. "The Crisis Approach." Pp. 23-38 in *Handbook of Disaster Research*. Edited by H. Rodriguez, E. L. Quarantelli, R. R. Dynes. Cham: Springer.
- van Biezen, Ingrid, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke. 2012. "Going, going... gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe." *European Journal of Political Research* 51(1): 24-56.
- Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, Gordon, Mohamed A. El-Erian, and Michael Spence. 2023. *Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World*. New York: Simon & Schuster UK.
- Bucci, Laura C. 2019. "Civic Engagement in Decline: Deunionization and a Fifty State Solution?" *Labor Studies Journal* 44(4): 382-387.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2005. "For Public Sociology." *Soziale Welt* 56(4): 347-374.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2015. *Public Sociology. Öffentliche Soziologie gegen Marktfundamentalismus und globale Ungleichheit*. Herausgegeben von Brigitte Aulenbacher und Klaus Dörre mit einem Nachwort von Hans-Jürgen Urban. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2021. *Public Sociology. Between Utopia and Anti-Utopia*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Calhoun, Craig, Dilip P. Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor. 2022. *Degenerations of Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Christodoulou, Yannis, Evie Papada, Anna Papoutsis, and Antonis Vradis. 2016. "Crisis or Zemblanity? Viewing the 'Migration Crisis' through a Greek Lens." *Mediterranean Politics* 21(2): 321-325.
- Coleman, Stephen. 2013. "How to Make a Drama Out of a Crisis." *Political Studies Review* 11(3): 328-335.
- Crouch, Colin. 2011. *The Strange Non-death of Neo-liberalism*. London: Wiley.
- Dobratz, Betty A., Lisa K. Waldner, and Timothy Buzzell. 2012. *Power, Politics, and Society: An Introduction to political Sociology*. Boston: Pearson.
- Dörre, Klaus. 2015. "Über Ulrich Beck hinaus. Öffentliche Soziologie und die Suche nach der besseren Gesellschaft." *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 60(7): 89-100.
- Easton, David. 1965. *A systems analysis of political life*. New York: Wiley.
- Esping-Anderson, Gøsta. 1990. *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, Norman. 2005. "Linguistics and English Language Associated Organisational Unit Centre for Law and Society View Graph of Relations Critical Discourse Analysis in Transdisciplinary Research." Pp. 53-70 in *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis*. Edited by R. Wodak and C. Paul. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Faulks, Keith. 1999. *Political Sociology. A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Fishkin, James S. 1991. *Democracy and Deliberation. New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Fishkin, James S. 2009. *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Geiges, Lars. 2018. "Wie die AfD im Kontext der „Flüchtlingskrise“ mobilisierte. Eine empirisch-qualitative Untersuchung der „Herbstoffensive 2015“." *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaften* 28: 49-69.
- Graham, Taylor. 2010. *The New Political Sociology. Power, Ideology and Identity in an Age of Complexity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1991. *Gefängnishefte*. Band 2, 2. und 3. Heft. Hamburg/Berlin: Argument.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1992. *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Hammond, Timothy G. 2015. "The Mediterranean Migration Crisis." *Foreign Policy Journal*, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2015/05/19/the-mediterranean-migration-crisis/> [last accessed on 4.6.2024].
- Herberg, Jeremias, Martin Seeliger, and Kolja Möller. 2023. "What Is Political Sociology, When Politics Is Everywhere? An Invitation to a New Journal." *Journal of Political Sociology* 1(1): 1-14.
- Höpner, Martin. 2010. "Von der Lückenfüllung zur Vertragsumdeutung. Ein Vorschlag zur Unterscheidung von Stufen der Rechtsfortbildung durch den Europäischen Gerichtshof (EuGH)." *Der Moderne Staat* 3(1): 165-185.
- Jeandesboz, Julien, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins. 2016. "Crisis, Routine, Consolidation: The Politics of the Mediterranean Migration Crisis." *Mediterranean Politics* 21(2): 316-320.
- Jessop, Bob. 2002. *The future of the capitalist state*. Cambridge: Malden.
- Kiess, Johannes. 2019. *Die soziale Konstruktion der Krise: Wandel der deutschen Sozialpartnerschaft aus der Framing-Perspektive*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Kiess, Johannes, Jenny Preunkert, Martin Seeliger, and Joris Steg (eds.). 2023. *Krisen und Soziologie*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Korpi, Walter. 1974. *The democratic class struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 2006. "Crisis." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67(2): 357-400.
- Lamla, Jörn. 2021. "Political Sociology". Pp. 287-300 in *Soziologie – Sociology in the German-Speaking World*. Edited by B. Hollstein, R. Greshoff, U. Schimank and A. Weiß. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1969. *Legitimation durch Verfahren*. Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand.
- Marshall, Thomas H. 1950. *Citizenship and Social Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1990. "Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei." Pp. 462-493 in *Marx-Engels-Werke Band 4 (MEW 4)*. 11. Auflage. Unveränderter Nachdruck der 1. Auflage 1959. Berlin: Karl Dietz.
- Mau, Steffen, Thomas Lux, and Linus Westheuser. 2023. *Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Merkel, Wolfgang, and Sascha Kneip (eds.). 2018. *Democracy and Crisis. Challenges in Turbulent Times*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Meyer, Thomas. 2005. *Theorie der sozialen Demokratie*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Meyer, Thomas. 2006. *Praxis der sozialen Demokratie*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Michels, Robert. 1915. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Ontario: Batoche Books.
- Milanovic, Branko. 2016. *Global inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mounk, Yascha. 2018. *The People vs. Democracy. Why Democracy Is in Danger & How to Save It*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Müller, Hans-Peter. 2021. *Krise und Kritik. Klassiker der soziologischen Zeitdiagnose*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Müller, Hans-Peter. 2023. "Krise und Kritik. Das schwierige Geschäft soziologischer Zeitdiagnose." Pp. 63-78 in *Krisen und Soziologie*. Edited by J. Kiess, J. Preunkert, M. Seeliger, and J. Steg. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.

- Nachtwey, Oliver. 2018. *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*. New York: Verso.
- Norris, Pippa. 2011. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Offe, Claus. 2019a. "New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics." Pp. 255-294 in *Institutionen, Normen, Bürgertugenden*. Edited by C. Offe. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Offe, Claus. 2019b. "Crisis and Innovation of Liberal Democracy: Can Deliberation Be Institutionalized?" Pp. 327-354 in *Liberale Demokratie und soziale Macht*. Edited by C. Offe. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Ostrogorski, Mosei. 1922. *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, 2 vols. Translated by Frederick Clarke. New York: Macmillan.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2020. *Capital and Ideology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pizzorno, Alessandro. 1971. *Political Sociology. Selected Readings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Preunkert, Jenny. 2011. "Die Krise in der Soziologie." *Soziologie* 40(4): 432-442.
- Przeworski, Adam. 2019. *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Replinger, Roger. 1999. *August Comte und die Entstehung der Soziologie aus dem Geist der Krise*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Rosanvallon, Pierre. 2008. *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Runciman, David. 2018. *How Democracy Ends*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schäfer, Armin. 2015. *Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Schnabel, Claus. 2020. *Union Membership and Collective Bargaining: Trends and Determinants*. IZA DP No. 13465. Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA).
- Schoen, Douglas E. 2013. *The end of authority: How a loss of legitimacy and broken trust are endangering our future*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Steg, Joris. 2020. "Was heißt eigentlich Krise?" *Soziologie* 49(4): 423-435.
- Steg, Joris. 2023. "Die Soziologie als kritische Krisenwissenschaft – Geschichte, Gegenwart und Perspektiven." Pp. 49-64 in *Soziologie und Krise. Gesellschaftliche Spannungen als Motor der Geschichte der Soziologie*. Edited by N. Holzhauser, S. Moebius, A. Ploder. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 2011. "The Crises of Democratic Capitalism." *New Left Review* 71: 5-29.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 2014. *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 2021. *Zwischen Globalismus und Demokratie. Politische Ökonomie im ausgehenden Neoliberalismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Takle, Marianne. 2017. "Is the migration crisis a solidarity crisis?" Pp. 116-129 in *The Crisis of the European Union. Challenges, Analyses, Solutions*. Edited by A. Grimmel. London: Routledge.
- Walby, Sylvia. 2015. *Crisis*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press.
- Wiesendahl, Elmar. 2016. "Der Kulturkonflikt um die Flüchtlingskrise und die politischen Folgen." *Zeitschrift für Staats- und Europawissenschaften* 14(1): 53-79.
- Wolf, Martin. 2021. *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/the-crisis-of-democratic-capitalism> [last accessed on 22.8.2023].
- Wolf, Martin. 2023. *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. New York: Penguin Press.