

CRISIS IN THE MODERNIST PERIOD: DMITRY MEREZHKOVSKY'S INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT: *This article looks at the topic of crisis in general and its interpretations exemplified by the creative legacy of Dmitry Merezhkovsky, one of the brightest representatives of Russian symbolism. History shows that the crisis had a manifold influence both on social development and all spheres of human activity and changed the character of communications and the vector of development of spiritual culture and civilization. Such transformations explain the strong interest of Russian and foreign researchers in studying the phenomenon of crisis, its characteristics, and role in social processes. Special attention is paid to the interpretation of crisis as a socio-cultural phenomenon and as a contradiction between culture and civilization, which manifested distinctively over the period of modernism and Russian symbolism. It is shown that not only did Merezhkovsky create his classification of crisis based on historico-cultural analysis and project the historical experience on the then-current cultural situation but also tried to forecast the future by offering his vision of overcoming the crisis.*

KEYWORDS: *crisis, social diagnosis, spiritual culture, civilization, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Russian religious renaissance, modernism, symbolism.*

Introduction

Crisis has become one of the central concepts and symbols of the modern time, an integral part of everyday life, “an all-pervasive rhetorical metaphor” (R.J. Holton), and a typical thing, although, by its definition, it represents an abnormal state or situation. Reasons for crises vary from socio-economic to anthropological, from environmental to political, from local to global, from short-term to permanent, which testifies that it is difficult to define crisis as a phenomenon. The issues that concerned and are still of interest to researchers remain the same: the definition and interpretation of crisis, its nature and development, historic continuity, and correlation with the social environment and human actions and practices.

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The normalization of a sense of crisis has, however, blurred the conventional distinction between crisis as a decisive moment in the resolution of a narrative or illness and normality (Holton, 1987).

The theme of crisis is one of the main and widely discussed topics in the history of philosophical thought. Studies of crisis in European and Russian modernism have become a stand-alone area of research. On the one hand, over the whole history of modernism, representatives of this movement faced different kinds of crises (scientific or technological, aesthetic or philosophical, artistic or creative). On the other hand, modernists were often accused of provoking crises since the very phenomenon of modernism was initially associated with the crisis of positive thinking and the morality of positivism, crisis of identity of faith, art, and culture.

What is meant by the term “crisis”? Do crises spanning several centuries have a common denominator? What were the views on crisis shared by modernists themselves? The purpose of this article is an examination of these issues considering their interpretation in the works by Dmitry Merezhkovsky, a famous Russian writer, literary critic, and religious philosopher.

Historically, the term “crisis” has had a wide range of meanings and connotations, starting from various political and economic events to natural disasters. Crisis was associated with instability and unpredictability, threat and danger, duration and transformation. The feeling of crisis has accompanied mankind virtually at all stages of its development. Therefore, researchers have always been interested on the parallels between the past and the present, which allowed them to predict the future. Today, one may talk not so much of “crisis society” and “crisis consciousness” typical of modern society as of general crisis tension and the consequences of crisis that can be faced by man and society.

Methods

In the course of the research, a set of approaches and methods was employed: in the first place, the historical and systemic, historical-philosophical and historical-cultural approaches, as well as the methods of historical and logical reconstruction and comparative, textological, and hermeneutic analysis. Conducting reconstructive analysis was of great significance for this research – it involved examination and interpretation of primary sources, their theoretical comprehension, hermeneutic interpretation of texts, and comparative analysis of ideas and the philosophical quest of thinkers considering

the worldview and socio-cultural context at the turn of the 20th century (Pchelina, 2015). The usage of comparative analysis allowed us to identify the common and unique features of conceptual approaches to understanding crisis developed by Merezhkovsky and his contemporaries. Textological analysis of works by Merezhkovsky helped us to identify the logic of development of his thoughts and determine the specific features of his interpretation of the phenomenon of crisis. The research also required examination of the works by Russian philosophers (first of all, N.A. Berdyaev, V.V. Zenkovsky, I.A. Ilin, F.A. Stepun, and others) and symbolists (V.Ya. Bryusov, Andrei Bely, A.A. Blok, and others) and modern Russian and foreign sociologists and historians of philosophy.

Results

Despite the diverse range of examined issues (reflections on the nature and characteristics of crisis, its components, and the specific features of its manifestation, consequences, and impact), one of the key aspects can be identified that determined the vector of research into the phenomenon of crisis for centuries ahead, i.e. the relation/correlation between culture and civilization. At the same time, thinkers shared the understanding of crisis as a socio-cultural phenomenon disrupting the harmony and balance between “high” culture and “spiritless” civilization. Historical and cultural coordinates were changing, while the time parameters remained the same – the turn of a century, change of generations, and the given circumstances as a manifestation of the following exacerbation of the antagonism between culture and civilization.

The relationship between culture and civilization became a keynote of European philosophy, which has received continuous development. This issue was discussed as early as in the writings by Hesiod, who described crisis as the process of regress from the Golden Age to the Iron Age (Hesiod, n.d.) and the contradiction between things due and existent. This subject was also brought up by Alfred Weber, who analyzed the opposite laws of development of culture and civilization (Weber, 1998), René Guénon, who believed that a civilization whose objective was “either computers or sausages” was doomed (Guenon, 1994), Jean Baudrillard with his famous social diagnosis “consumer society”, and a few other thinkers.

In the Russian discussion field of the first half of the 20th century, the issue of the relationship between civilization and culture was declared by the book written by Oswald Spengler, “a philosopher previously unknown to anyone”. The first volume of

“The Decline of Europe” (“Der Untergang des Abendlandes”) gained fame due to F.A. Stegun, who, after reading “the book received from hostile Germany”, at N.A. Berdyaev’s request made a report at the public session of the religious Philosophical Academy and then, later, gave a talk at the Pirogov Congress at the theological faculty of Moscow University. As Stegun remembers, the report he made was not only a great success with the numerous audience but also “Spengler’s book <...> captured the minds of the educated Moscow society so strongly that it was decided to publish a special collection of articles devoted to it” (Stepun, 2000), the authors of which aimed to “introduce the reader to the world of Spengler’s ideas” (Berdyaev et al., 1922). The European “alarm” (Huizinga, 1997) was heard in Russia, and Russian thinkers got an opportunity to evaluate “the decline of culture” based on the experience of the “metaphysically impoverished soil of the West” (Spengler, 1993). The last circumstance largely explains the interest of Russian thinkers in the book by the German philosopher since “this issue was very acute”, and Russian philosophers “had understood the difference between the type of culture and type of civilization long ago and made a connection of this topic with the relationship between Russia and Europe” (Berdyaev, 1990).

The turn of the 20th century, known as the epoch of modernism or symbolism (“As a brand, symbolism gained fast traction and fairly wide recognition in the mid-1890s”) (Stone, 2017), as well as the Russian religious renaissance, was a transitional historical period associated with different kinds of crises: from Christian to civilizational. As T.Yu. Sidorina noted, “the Russian thought is distinguished by the width of examination of the topic of crisis: from theoretical and historico-cultural analysis of the issue to poignant socio-philosophical journalism” (Sidorina, 2001). As we see, it is no coincidence that the issue of crisis was of interest to many Russian thinkers and representatives of the modernist movement, including Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky (1865–1941) — a significant figure in Russian culture, a symbolist, poet, prose writer, translator, and philosopher, who played an important role in the establishment and development of Russian modernism.

The issue of crisis became one of the keynote topics in Merezhkovsky’s works. Merezhkovsky interpreted crisis in different ways: as a contradiction, disproportion, and the division between the conscious and unconscious, as the depreciation of ideas and disruption of the balance between the material civilization and spiritual culture, and as godlessness. Understanding crisis as a social diagnosis, Merezhkovsky compared crisis

with the turning point in the course of a disease, when its outcome and the future of the patient are decided — “whether he/she is going to survive or not” (Merezhkovsky, 2001, p. 384-385). Merezhkovsky believed that the initial source of all crises was “the main and the hardest crisis” — the spiritual crisis.

For deeper comprehension of the crisis state of society, Merezhkovsky conducted a cultural and historical analysis of historical eras and said that “there is World History: the answer should be sought there”.

Relying on the experience of great cultures, Merezhkovsky identified historical parallels and analyzed the interconnections between different cultures and civilizations hoping to understand the nature of the then-current crisis, find an opportunity to project the vast historical experience on the current cultural situation, and predict the future, “unwillingly, you look back on the great ancient writings with a vague hope to find the echo of these days” (Merezhkovsky, 1995, p. 395). The approach “I’m looking for the present in the past” became his research method.

For instance, comparing the epoch of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius with the end of the 19th century and emphasizing the internal and external correlation between these two historical periods, Merezhkovsky came to the following conclusion. The blessings of the Roman civilization together with “external happiness — education and material well-being” did not bring people inward peace and satisfaction. On the contrary, in this flourishing state, one could feel tension and anxiety, and the feeling of “inexplicable anxiety growing every day” (Merezhkovsky, 1995, p. 363) was identified by Merezhkovsky as a typical premonition of crisis in various historical periods.

Analyzing the historical eras, the thinker pointed out that the destruction of spiritual ideals had been underway for several centuries and the consequences of such “work” can be unpredictable. The lack of “spiritual health” was manifested in all spheres of life; the thinker warns the readers against replacing the true value of life with success in the quest of utilitarian values and against becoming “barbarians among dull and ridiculous luxury and awe-inspiring technical inventions”. According to Merezhkovsky, the external aspect of life only — convenience and comfort — does not satisfy the spiritual needs of a personality, and a person “can live their whole life in loneliness, as a real savage, <...> surrounded by great comfort, in majestic hotels looking like palaces, among the advances of scientific engineering” (Merezhkovsky, 1991, p. 174).

In Merezhkovsky's opinion, the dominance of civilization over culture was reflected in the creative nature of man: from a creator, man turned into an inventor, whose main goal is to improve living conditions by inventing modern types of devices. Within this approach, the foundation of cultural creation — religion — is dismissed, and the creative process, as well as the very personality of the creator, are depreciated. Merezhkovsky compares denial of religion in culture with “savagery”, which led to a crisis in culture and creativity, when an artist was not able to overcome the contradictions between mind and feelings, knowledge and faith, flesh and spirit and turned from a magician and “prophet” into a “blind chief” (D.S. Merezhkovsky: *between Culture and Civilisation...*, 2013).

Analyzing the then-current social situation, Merezhkovsky points out the contradictions between the moral standards and changed social conditions, raises the issue of the value of human life and preserving the environment in the context of the advent of industrial civilization. Comparing the events happening during his lifetime and civilizational crises taking place in different historical periods, Merezhkovsky concludes that the collapse of such great cultures and civilizations as the Assyrian-Babylonian, Roman, and Hellenistic, was directly connected with longing for “malign infinity”. The thinker understood “malign infinity” as the theory of progress, a typical symptom of which is the “drive to impersonality”, transformation of man into an “empty persona” and personalities — into “atoms of the human mass” (Merezhkovsky, 1925, p. 101). Merezhkovsky interpreted crisis not only as the depreciation of ideas but also as the period of “gloomy days of all kinds of crises”: political, social, economic, the end of mankind's development.

Raising the issue of revolutions and wars, Merezhkovsky viewed these phenomena as a crisis stage sharpening the premonition of the coming revolutionary and social disasters, interpreted them as an anthropological and paradigm crisis, and called the future “anthropophagy”.

Merezhkovsky concluded that, when faced with a crisis, mankind inevitably comes to the idea of the necessity to review and change the goals and ideals that have fuelled this civilization, starts to think over the issues of faith, and reacts alertly to the demands of spirituality. Relying on the belief that “any society is based on <...> the will to good, being, and creation”, Merezhkovsky concludes that the ideal of a powerful industrial civilization, i.e. fascination with “the material aspect of culture, the power of equipment, and considering suspicious bounties of civilization” (Merezhkovsky, 1991,

p. 173) at the expense of spiritual culture initially contained a threat to the existence of mankind as a whole.

Reflections on the value foundations of social development led Merezhkovsky to the thought that crisis had determined the objective of the future development of society, namely to make spiritual culture the guiding principle of civilizational development, for since the earliest times the path of mankind is the path to divine society and the Kingdom of God.

In this context, Merezhkovsky appeals to humanity to rely on historical experience, refuse to participate in the civilizational progress, and “step up the ladder” — i.e., choose the path of spiritual cultural creation. For Merezhkovsky, the epoch of the Third Testament was connected with the crisis of “historical” Christianity and the quest for “new” Christianity, faith in a different understanding — with new religious consciousness, new society, and new ideals.

The idea of the Third Testament, the Kingdom of Spirit with the ideal of “Holy flesh” was suggested by Merezhkovsky as a project of future society.

Merezhkovsky saw the power of holiness of the Third Testament in the social (rather than personal) salvation and believed that salvation of man and recovery from all kinds of crises lies in the resolution of the “conflicts between mind and heart” and will be possible in the future human culture — the religion of Trinity joining “mind — will — feeling” like “spirit — soul — flesh” are all combined in man.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of works by Merezhkovsky, one can conclude that his interpretations of crisis over the modernist period were reasonable. Moreover, Merezhkovsky went beyond the scope of the process that originated in the sphere of culture and showed that the crisis process, which at first developed as a socio-cultural and civilizational phenomenon, embraced all aspects of life and identified contradictions in the issues of the ontological foundations of human existence. Merezhkovsky concluded that the dominance of the material civilization over spiritual culture disrupted the balanced unity, led to opposition between civilization and spiritual culture and to a social crisis.

Merezhkovsky interpreted social crisis as a disaster, depreciation of ideas, a period of all kinds of crises, and the collapse of social development. Merezhkovsky created his concept of crisis and identified its types: cultural, civilizational, social,

axiological, ontological, religious, anthropological, spiritual, political, economic, and paradigm.

Conclusion

Merezhkovsky's interpretation of crisis in many ways describes the state of modern industrial society, which is now facing yet another crisis and choosing its further development path. Merezhkovsky found that the fact that people feel the pointlessness of life is the result of moral crisis connected with rejection of traditions and religious values, Christian ethics, and oversaturation with blessings of civilization. Having assessed the manifestations of crisis in then-current society, Merezhkovsky was one of the first philosophers to feel such things as "bewilderment of mind" (F. Nietzsche) and "existential vacuum" (V. Frankl).

Merezhkovsky analyzed the social, religious, and psychological roots of the spiritual and moral crisis and interpreted crisis not only as a destructive but also a constructive phenomenon that can set a vector of social development. It was the spiritual culture that Merezhkovsky put his hopes on in the sphere of overcoming the crisis state of society, which appears to be an especially productive and valuable result of his creative legacy.

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