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Crises and contestation: Conceptual boundary work for a future yet to come

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Abstract:

Multiple *crises*, be they on a global or regional scale, currently confront International Relations and global politics. International organisations and other political institutions, it seems, can hardly keep pace in designing effective countermeasures and precautionary strategies, while a creeping sense of impasse and anxiety burdens the legitimacy of policy-making beyond the state. Academics, meanwhile, struggle to comprehend the crises and to disentangle their effects. In a parallel, though seemingly little connected development, interest in the *contestation of norms* has surged. Norms are of paramount importance for global governance, still, they are perpetually confronted with reinterpretations and challenges to their desirability. However, whether the contestation of norms has a strengthening or weakening effect on the robustness of norms and normative orders remains disputed – just as the effect of crises on international (institutional) orders. Can these parallel developments help researchers in understanding crises especially in times when they are multiple and mutually constitutive? Can a norm contestation perspective shed light on the “penumbra of doubt” (Hart 1961) of uncertainty surrounding crises and thus contribute to overcoming the sense of fatality that they seem to project upon the future? Indeed, crises may be understood as condensation points in which norm(ative) contestation becomes particularly visible, politically pertinent and, therefore, scholarly accessible. Conversely, crisis and (norm) contestation may be opposites of each other, as crises require swift action and emergency measures, which explicitly are deemed not to be debated and contested.

This workshop aims for a closer dialogue between scholars focused on crises and contestation. Such a conversation has the potential to develop a much-needed holistic perspective on the many facets of the crises of and within international orders, and hereby to make a constructive and problem-oriented impact. Workshop contributions may address the temporal, agentic and normative dimensions of crisis and contestation through the following questions:

- Which came first, the crisis or the contestation? Does one necessarily precede the other, so that (political) attention should be directed towards managing one so as to foreclose a potential escalation? How and under what circumstances does this process of radicalization and escalation work?
- How are crises, contestation and actorness related? Are crises constructed by actors and if so, to what end? How do the dynamics of crises and contestation reinforce hierarchical structures? Conversely, contestation has been lauded for ensuring an order’s inclusivity by granting voice to subaltern actors. Do crises come with a status quo bias, which counters such inclusivity? If so, should crises be deconstructed as a tool of the powerful for reasserting their dominance?
- Crises carry a negative connotation, whereas contestation has been variably defined as good or bad. Yet, what determines a positive or negative effect of crises and contestation? If crises are critical junctures, does the norm which is contested in a crisis determine whether it has a positive or negative effect? And do crises beget crises?
- How do the empirically observable varieties of both, contestation and crisis, reflect these conceptual dimensions?