IdeAs

Idées d'Amérique

4 | 2013

Crises et effets de crise dans les Amériques

« Crisis » in the Americas : Is there a Regionally Distinctive Kind ?

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/611>

DOI : 10.4000/ideas.611

ISSN : 1950-5701

Éditeur

Institut des Amériques

Référence électronique

Laurence Whitehead, « « Crisis » in the Americas : Is there a Regionally Distinctive Kind ? », *IdeAs* [En ligne], 4 | 2013, mis en ligne le 14 octobre 2013, consulté le 20 octobre 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/611> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ideas.611>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 20 octobre 2022.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Cet article est traduit du français par son auteur

Introduction

- 1 The concept – or at least category – of « crisis » is now so ubiquitous, and apparently also so indispensable, that if it were banished from common speech a synonym would surely take its place. But although most pundits and cultural commentators can hardly do without it, more rigorous analysts are not so sure. If unable to avoid its use they are liable to try to protect themselves by assigning it a precise meaning, or at least limiting its fluidity through some stipulative definition.
- 2 Still, the term remains elusive. Although some may try to confine it to a given sub-field (a financial crisis ; a crisis of the regime ; a moral crisis, etc.), it is more commonly observed that such dysfunctions tend to spill over from any one domain into adjoining territories. If so, then perhaps the notion of crisis is inherently systemic ? But if by crisis we are to understand some fundamental break with past structures, why do « post-crisis » outcomes not infrequently bear a strong resemblance to what went before ? Or, if we define a crisis as an intense but time-limited period of irresolution, does that not exclude the surely useful idea of a « chronic crisis » ?
- 3 Likewise, in current parlance, the global economic crisis dating from the autumn of 2008 has been followed by what some like to call a « new normal ». But that may

equally well be viewed as an apparently indefinite succession of aftershocks, each of which could well count as a crisis in its own right, although all seem linked together. Alternatively, delving into the medical genealogy of the term, a crisis could also be viewed as the point of inflection in the progression of an ailment (to be followed either by recovery or collapse), except that such an organic metaphor implies a unitary bearer of the condition, whereas many contemporary crises seem to leap continents and morph into unexpected forms (more like a pandemic than a personal sickness).

Broad Reflections on a Broad Concept

- 4 The polysemy of the word arises not so much from the vagueness of its definitional outer boundaries as from the vastness and diversity of the external referents to which it can relate. Even so, something reasonably definite can be proposed about its broad field of application. The idea of crisis presupposes a prior state of affairs characterised by normalcy/order/routine. Some relatively stable and well-structured arrangements are implied, for it is only when they are disrupted that the ingredients of a crisis begin to emerge. Whether referring to brief small-scale settlements (within the family, for example), or to the millennial features of certain macro-historical civilizations, or to any social system in between these extremes, apparently stable arrangements create expectations of regularity. Yet in human affairs all such expectations are fallible, and all such arrangements are prone to abrupt disruptions.
- 5 Whenever such collective assumptions are confounded, those who were enmeshed in the prior interactions lose their bearings. Normal routines lack their expected cohesion. This is the generic setting for any crisis. For at least some interval of time the preceding rules of order can no longer be relied upon. At best there follows an interlude of uncertainty, while participants contemplate alternative dispensations. During this period of crisis new expectations may be collectively negotiated, perhaps accompanied by some emerging explanation of the sources of prior overconfidence, possibly even some agreed assignment of responsibility for the resulting insecurity (perceptions of crisis typically invite attribution of blame). This process can generate shared guidance over how to operate the next phase of social co-operation. Although such smooth crisis management is one possible outcome, it is of course by no means the norm. Many crises generate anxiety and conflict that is not so easy to overcome.
- 6 Thus, the generic concept of crisis embraces a multitude of diverse possibilities. Its study spans disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences. It encompasses a wide – but not unlimited – array of timeframes, reflecting the requirements of collective reassessment applicable in each case. In genealogical terms, this concept follows on from the ancient Greek meanings of *krisis* (a turning point in a disease, in the lexicon of Galen), which include such interpretative elements as choice, decision, judgement, and verdict. Hence, although crises are generally feared there is also an underlying elective affinity with the idea of opportunity.
- 7 This leaves open the question whether only abrupt and adverse « shocks » to expectations can be counted as crises (arguably an unanticipated bonanza might also precipitate a disruption of normal expectations, although in this case it is plausible to assume that pre-existing elites would have the means to regain control of the collective agenda). On abruptness, the requirement would be for an event or trigger sufficient to thoroughly recalibrate collective expectations. But that need not be very sudden, as

doubts could accumulate gradually over an extended period before « the dam burst ». On whether shocks must be adverse to create a crisis, at least from an interpretivist standpoint, a crisis does not require objective harm. What matters is whether the participants in the system believe their old dispensation has become untenable.

- 8 In principle, these convictions might arise even in the absence of any genuine setback. In addition, of course, many forms of adversity do not deliver a belief shattering « shock » to prior expectations. Obviously there is usually some at least indirect link between subjective and objective components of a crisis, but so long as the former is lacking there is, on this view, no « crisis ». (Interpretativism can thus be distinguished from both subjectivism – in which only the perception of participants counts – and from constructivism – in which participants make their own reality. From an interpretivist standpoint there is an independent reality, but what turns it into a crisis is the way it is filtered through an interpretative lens). And from an interpretivist standpoint all crises, however varied they may be in other dimensions, must share at least one morphological feature ; they have to be crystallized through a moment of « crisis of confidence ».

The Americas

- 9 The chapters published here arose from the 2009 annual colloquium organized by the *Institut des Ameriques* in Paris. This was a multi-disciplinary academic gathering that convened just when the global economic crisis that had broken out in 2008 seemed most acute. The topic of crisis in the Americas had been selected before these developments were known, and the perspectives adopted were medium to long-term rather than immediatist, although no doubt the ongoing context coloured some of the discussions. More pertinent to the colloquium was the mixed history of episodes that had arisen within the western hemisphere before the Lehmann Brothers collapse.
- 10 At least since the debt crisis of 1982, if not before, the dominant view had been that Latin America and the Caribbean were relatively crisis-prone, whereas North America was normally crisis-free. The trans-American focus of the 2009 conference was in part an attempt to re-interrogate that assumption. A second concern was to examine whether the Americas as a whole manifested variants of crisis, or displayed attitudes towards the concept, that were in any systematic way distinct from non-American ideas and experiences on the subject.
- 11 If Latin America was differentially crisis-prone then it could be concluded that this part of the Americas was in need of guidance and stabilising orientations from the crisis-free north. This assumption pervaded the « Washington Consensus » orthodoxies of the 1990s, but as we can now see it has proved a transient view. In the background loomed a far more hubristic set of convictions. In contrast to Latin America, where expectations of disruption to established patterns were still widespread, recurrent, and endemic the then prevailing liberal internationalism was confident that North America's democracies had permanently consolidated their liberal political regimes. Moreover, they had entrenched human rights and an encompassing rule of law ; softened or even abolished the business cycle ; and were even on track to make peaceful globalization universal and irreversible. In sum they had « ended history ».
- 12 On the fullest version of that view, most (or all) of the variants of crisis that had historically disturbed mankind were on the way to being permanently abolished.

Provided that the rest of the Americas fell in behind the democratic north the continent as a whole could become the vanguard of this unparalleled transformation. Obviously, most observers could see that in its strong form this thesis must be overstated, but during the 1990s it proved to have considerable pulling power. The sense of « crisis » that built up from the Twin Towers attack through the Lehmann Brothers collapse reflected the extent to which such hubristic hopes precipitated intensified fears.

- 13 Although some leading opinion-formers in Latin America and the Caribbean may have been swept along by this euphoria at its height, neither the highs nor the lows of this cycle were so prevalent outside North America as within it. Long local experiences of recurrent disappointments may have helped inoculate southern opinion from this northern over-confidence, which in any case cast Latin Americans as the recipients of guidance from without, rather than the authors of their own progress. From this standpoint, in very general terms, one might both accept that Latin America's recent experiences of crisis distanced the southern part of the continent from the north, while also concluding that some « crisis-proneness » might not be so bad, if it also counteracted a potential for hubris.
- 14 Beyond this very aggregate level of reflection, the colloquium drew on a wide variety of disciplines and analytical perspectives from across France and the Americas, and uncovered a series of much more micro-level aspects of the theme. One recurrent issue reflects the underlying rationale of the Institute. If multi-disciplinary scholarship about the Americas is to generate otherwise unavailable insights, it will need to clarify what features are more prevalent in this large region than in the rest of the world, and to indicate why such differences have arisen.
- 15 In this case, therefore, the question necessarily arises whether there is something specific to the experience of « crisis » in the Americas, and/or its understanding thereof. The answers might prove continent-wide, but they could also turn out to highlight differences between north and south, or indeed other transversal dimensions.
- 16 But why entertain the possibility that the Americas could have a distinctive orientation to crisis, compared to the rest of the world ? This might not seem much of an issue if there was a single unitary concept of crisis, applicable across time and space and captured by a consensual stipulative definition. However, if the term is polysemic and, in particular, if its specific meaning depends heavily on the external circumstances under which it becomes operational, then there might well be an American context and set of understandings that merit separate evaluation. If, for example, the stability of collective expectations provides a critical backdrop, it is worth considering some proposals about « the new world » that could differentiate that context from elsewhere¹.
- 17 It is not outlandish to propose that the coastal geography and urban settlement of the continent, together with its experience of European colonization, and indeed the environmental dimensions of the « Colombian exchange » might well help shape such expectations. Underlying attitudes towards longstanding social hierarchies might be less deferential than those often prevalent in Eurasia. More generally, Americans could typically be less constrained by the weight of the distant past ; they might have more optimism about « progress » ; they could be more open to innovation, individualism, and mobility ; they could envision a favourable self-placement in a more « globalized » world system ; and so forth.

- 18 Such contextual factors, if indeed they really carry the weight that some observers have suggested, would surely inflect the content and significance of any « crisis » in the Americas. The word « inflect » is critical here. The hypothesis for investigation is not that a categorically different concept of crisis is needed to understand the Americas ; rather it is that, within the loose encompassing framework of the notion of crisis, the mix and balance of components likely to prevail in the western hemisphere may merit specific characterization.
- 19 With these analytical questions in mind, it is possible to distil five main aspects that were illuminated in this cycle of studies :
- The value of distinguishing between various kinds of crisis, as highlighted by scholars approaching the issue from a range of disciplinary and thematic perspectives
 - The need to explore the possible existence of certain categories of crisis that are specific to the United States of America, as opposed to present throughout the Americas
 - The contrast between more long-term and structural variants of crisis, and those that are more fleeting and *événementielles*, as seen in the course of 2007-2009
 - Some crises may prove catastrophic, but there are also versions that are revelatory, and that may even pave the way for constructive change
 - Finally, and at the highest level of abstraction, the comparative study of crises cast light on the sociological underpinnings of some core collective beliefs about stability and its disruption.

Different Kinds of Crisis

- 20 Consider first the central preoccupation of financial crisis. Comparing cases across the Americas, it is evident that these are a recurrent feature of the economic history of all parts of the continent, although they proceed according to diverse rhythms, and obey a variety of logics, according to time and place². One subset has been particularly salient in the region, and is especially longstanding in the United States of America : the financial « panic », in which a mass of market speculators create a selling frenzy as all try to exit ahead of each other. While this has a long pedigree in New York (the panics of 1837 and 1907 come particularly to mind) the one that erupted there in September 2008 was different to the extent that it proved so global. For at least a few weeks, and probably longer, it was plausible to fear that confidence in the means of payment would collapse so thoroughly that bank teller machines around the globe might no longer deliver dollars. This was a short but very intense episode, quickly obliterated from the collective memory, but it is a classic symptom of financial panic, reminiscent of the conditions in 1907 that gave rise to the creation of the Federal Reserve System.
- 21 Depressive crises are something different, they last much longer, and they produce structural consequences that can be far more profound. While it is true that a panic can lead to a depressive crisis the two need to be carefully distinguished. Some thirty per cent of panics pass without leaving any lasting effects.
- 22 In a quite different register, Pascale Absi gave an account of the economic situation normally prevailing in the mining cooperatives of Potosi, Bolivia³. Here, penury is the norm, the daily struggle for existence the routine. In this context, she suggests, a crisis arises not through a « crash », but rather as a consequence of a « boom ». This unfamiliar state of affairs brings about a sudden burst of good fortune, perceived as illogical, and experienced as disruptive of prior social *mœurs*. That signifies the scope

for crises at two extremes of the market, not just one. Different again were the analyses of the US labour movement and its pension system. Here one may identify very slow cumulative structural crises, without any necessary sudden moment of crystallization.

US-Specific Forms of Crisis?

- 23 On the political side it is worth noting that Tom Paine's thirteen « crisis letters » of 1776-83 had a huge impact on public opinion in the American colonies during the war of independence. He was following London radical ideas in transferring the notion of crisis from the medical level to the body politic. The first crisis letter of 19 December 1776 began: « These are the times that try men's souls »; and the final one of April 1783 began « The time that tried men's souls are over ». Thus, he clearly identified the seven-year struggle as the crisis. In consequence the concept was explicitly tied to the political independence from Europe, first of the thirteen colonies, but also subsequently across the rest of the Americas. Such early and widely disseminated « reflexivity » concerning crisis as the fount of national identity was characteristically American. Although not entirely absent from elsewhere it was less clearcut, not so collectively evident, and harder to date in other regions.
- 24 There is also an economic case for crisis exceptionalism in the United States. Thus, work on nineteenth century financial panics in the United States has highlighted the absence of state structures of supervision and control, by contrast with the European systems that existed during the same period. For example, there was a Bank of England and a *Banque de France* overseeing such episodes in Britain and France. One consequence of this difference was that financial panics spread with great ferocity into every aspect of the young republic's economic life. Another suggested result was that this may have intensified aggressive expansionism into new lands, and beyond into Mexico, as a safety valve and response to heartland economic dislocations.
- 25 While these are good historical points to consider, they refer most clearly to the early history of the United States. Between 1929 and 2008 the record was comparatively crisis-free at least in conventional terms (cultural change and foreign policy divisions were another matter), and – as we have seen – it even became possible to assume that Washington had learnt how to master political and economic crises that were still more out of control elsewhere, notably in Latin America. Although the events of autumn 2008 can be viewed through the lens of earlier US crisis experiences, this time the reach was global, and of course Europe is currently proving less well placed than North America to contain the instabilities of financial contagion. Beyond such possibly temporary variations, in the twenty-first century it seems most likely that as a part of globalization experiences of economic crisis round the world will have tendency to interact, and probably also to converge.

Structural vs. Conjunctural Crises

- 26 Although most understandings of crisis include a trigger and a point of resolution, it is also possible to envisage this on a variety of temporal scales. So the idea of a *longue durée* crisis is not oxymoronic. But when it comes to examining structural crises it may be as important to specify the sector, or domain in question as to pinpoint the timescale. The colloquium considered the university system, the labour movement, and

the consumption sector. It is possible to encounter a crisis in one of these areas, without it necessarily becoming generalized to the whole society. If so, that makes it critical to separate temporalities from institutional spheres when diagnosing a structural crisis.

- 27 As Jacques Pothier and Pascale Morvan⁴ emphasized, it may often be critical to examine the ideological and cultural dimensions of a structural crisis, and not to confine the analysis solely to the material sphere. But that broadens the focus of study and complicates the picture. By contrast, the study of a conjunctural or *événementielle* crisis may well benefit from a sharp delimitation of the field and a strong emphasis on tightly narrated progressions. Whereas it is hard to see how a structural crisis can be attributed to the intentional action of any particular power-holder, more conjunctural crises may in principle be attributable to identifiable acts of volition (Napoleon's « hundred days » comes to mind here).

Catastrophes vs. « Revelatory » Crises

- 28 Crises can be classified according to their origins, their dynamics, and their consequences. If the consequences are unremittingly destructive, leading to a disastrous cumulative downward spiral, they can be categorised as catastrophes. Jared Diamond has highlighted the examples of the Maya and the Anasazi prior to the arrival of the Europeans as North American examples⁵. Some catastrophes may be inevitable, but the comparative analysis of such processes is usually motivated by the thought that if they can be understood then perhaps lessons can be drawn, and future repetitions averted. So even the retrospective study of catastrophic collapses leaves spaces for the prospective consideration of « revelatory » crises.
- 29 Only a fine line separates the two. At the onset of what could turn into a collapse the participants discover the fragility of the assumptions of stability on which they had been relying. This could be a moment of revelation. If they are well advised and farsighted they may be able to profit from the shock of the initial crisis, changing their expectations and behaviour sufficiently to reverse the downward spiral. This is the sense in which crisis is sometimes cast as « opportunity ». In 2009 the Group of Twenty believed that they had grasped the message of the 2008 financial panic, and were capable of coordinated action in time to head off the risk of a repeat of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The full consequences of that sequence of events remain to be played out, and it is not always the case that a revelatory crisis can avert the impending catastrophe. (Certainly, in the case of the slow unfolding of the logic of anthropogenic climate change the signs so far are not encouraging).
- 30 What determines whether a crisis proves revelatory or catastrophic ? There is no single magic bullet. In addition to luck, accidents of timing and similar contingent elements, some driving forces are easier to grasp in advance and then deflect than others. Expert advice and lessons from the past may be helpful or misleading, usually a partial combination of the two. And, of course, the social science community has manufactured a whole edifice of theory accounting for « collective action » problems, and the role of institutions in managing them.
- 31 Two general propositions can be ventured. First, no matter how technically well equipped or institutionally prepared we may believe ourselves to be, the possibility of

catastrophe is always with us. Overconfidence in human mastery over the fates is called *hubris* for a reason, and still nurtures *nemesis*. Second, short of an ultimate global catastrophe, « revelatory » crises typically prove more opportune for some, while still turning out badly for many others. The recent European fashion for « solidarity » as a defence against crisis is hard to sustain when things get serious. In the Americas the « solidarity reflex » is still relatively weak, a drawback in quiet times, but possibly an advantage in seeking to escape from extreme shocks.

Core Assumptions about Stability

- 32 Independently from their consequences, the comparative study of crises uncovers hidden assumptions about the nature and sources of social stability. Ahead of a crisis it is possible to identify a « conventional wisdom » or set of simplifying operating assumptions, perhaps somewhat ideological in character, which help to justify the prevailing order and established ways of coping with discord and disturbance. But when a crisis unfolds it quickly becomes apparent that key elements of this outlook were either mistaken or at least incomplete. There will probably be a *stratum* of critics and intellectual dissidents who can claim to have foreseen in advance that the conventional wisdom was built on sand. In crisis conditions such standpoints can quickly acquire an unexpectedly large and enthusiastic following. With hindsight it suddenly becomes much harder to shrug off what now seem like well-founded and public spirited unmaskings of the previous convenient fictions. It is the collective shock of the crisis experience that creates the demand for a serious consideration of alternatives, and for a deeper probing of the underlying realities.
- 33 The colloquium highlighted a few examples that can be fitted into this framework. The « inevitable westernization of the world » was a tacit operating assumption expected to guide and stabilize the post-cold war international system and the end of the last century. Although dissident voices persisted throughout the Americas, they lacked credibility and impact, until the crisis of 11 September 2001. The ensuing « rise of Asia » and the Lehmann crisis cast doubt on the earlier conventional wisdom. (In the wake of those shocks to expectations some new ideas have gained more currency, but the old convenient fictions have not been comprehensively dethroned, and no consensual new stabilizing discourse has yet emerged. One could claim that the international sense of crisis will persist as long as the current incoherent jumble of ideas to be found in such gatherings as the G8 Summit persists).
- 34 On a more technical note Jaime Marquez Pereira made a strong case that it was only by revisiting some foundational assumptions about the logic of the modern market economy that the current propensity for unconstrained financial crisis might be tamed. Similarly Christian Azais and his colleagues posed some foundational questions about the workings of contemporary labour markets. The focus on the hidden divide between « insiders » and the rest was especially relevant⁶. To this I would add the increasingly stark divide between the interests of successive cohorts of the labour force, including the increasing veto power of pensioners with rapidly rising life expectancies.
- 35 Beyond these economic themes, the cultural realm is also generating dynamic challenges to past sources of conventional wisdom such as the printed press, the old book trade, ancient educational institutions, and so on, as the next generation turns away from these stabilizing and structuring authorities and turns to horizontal forms

of networking for its orientations. Mass political parties are coming to look like relics from the past century, as party membership ages and dwindles, together with trade union affiliations, church membership, traditional family structures, and similar lifelong commitments that used to stabilize western democracies - no doubt in association with « jobs for life » and an encompassing welfare state. By contrast the rising generations are more likely to be attracted to short term mass street protests that reject party politics and long term programmatic projects. Such generational shifts in participatory culture are reinforced by the larger transcontinental redistributions of power and opportunity that has accompanied increased global connectivity, the rise of Asia, and the shortening of time horizons that is integral to worldscale cycles of consumer innovation. In short, as such processes of social change accelerate, while life expectancies also increase, the cultural experiences of successive generations diverge, creating the potential for more inter-generational variants of « crisis ». There are still some distinctively « American » manifestations of this dynamic, but the main twenty-first century drivers appear to be increasingly global in nature.

Diamond, Jared, *Collapse : How Societies choose to Fail or Survive*, London, Allen Lane, 2005.
 Kindleberger, Charles, *Manias, Panics, and Crashes : A History of Financial Crises*, New York, Macmillan, 1989 (second edition).

Watson, Peter, *The Great Divide : History and Human Nature in the Old World and the New*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2012.

NOTES

1. A case can also be made for deeply contrasting beliefs about the stability of the social order in pre-conquest American civilizations, as compared to the Old World. Thus, Peter Watson has stressed the geographical and climatological factors (earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes) affecting the stability of religious authority in the Americas, and their fearful social consequences. See Peter Watson (2012).
2. For a classic comparative survey which gives due weight to the United States case, see Charles Kindleberger (1989).
3. To appear in *IdeAs* n°5 (January 2014).
4. To appear in *IdeAs* n°5 (January 2014).
5. See Jared Diamond (2005).
6. To appear in *IdeAs* n°5 (January 2014).

RÉSUMÉS

Bien que l'idée de « crise » soit indiscutable, elle exclue une définition catégorique à cause de sa polysémie. Ce que les nombreuses variantes du terme ont en commun, c'est la principale notion d'une sorte de normalité ou d'ordre. C'est ce que toute crise bouleverse. Mais les conceptions de l'ordre normal des choses sont variables dans le temps et l'espace. Les composantes de ce contexte sont-elles donc spécifiques aux Amériques (ou à toute partie interne du continent), différenciant ainsi leurs crises de celles qui surviennent ailleurs ? L'article explore les diverses pistes de cette possibilité, en disloquant les éléments clés de la situation américaine qui est largement répandue, et en élaborant d'autres, plus probants. La différence entre les Amériques et le reste du monde serait tout au plus une modulation, sujette à l'insistance, et non un contraste définitif (une accentuation américaine du phénomène « d'alerte sur le marché »). Il existe des preuves d'une enclave typiquement américaine sur l'idée de crise au cours des deux siècles derniers, mais dans les conditions actuelles d'une mondialisation accélérée, une telle différenciation locale va diminuer.

Although the idea of « crisis » is indispensable it eludes categorical definition because of its polysemy. What the multiple variants of the term share is a prior notion of some kind of normalcy or order. That is what every crisis disrupts. But conceptions of the normal order of things are variable across time and space. So, are there features specific to the Americas (or to some sub-regions within the continent) that differentiate their crises from those encountered elsewhere ? The article explores this possibility, by disaggregating key aspects of the broad concept, and by sketching some relevant aspects of the American context. At most, the difference between the Americas and the rest would be an inflection point, a matter of emphasis, and not a categorical contrast (for example an American accentuation of the phenomenon of « market panic »). There is some evidence of a distinctively American take on the idea of crisis over the past two centuries, but in current conditions of accelerated globalization such regional differentiation is on the decline.

El concepto de « crisis » es tan indispensable como difícil de precisar porque su polisemia no permite una definición categórica. Sus múltiples variantes presuponen un estado anterior de normalidad o de orden que la crisis desestabiliza. Pero nuestras percepciones de la « normalidad » varían según el lugar y el tiempo. Ante esto, será que las Américas (en su totalidad o en sus sub-regiones), con sus condicionantes espaciales y temporales, pueden generar un tipo de crisis diferente de las que se producen fuera del continente ? Este ensayo explora dicha cuestión, considerando varias dimensiones del concepto y conectándolas con ciertos temas relevantes en el contexto continental. Lo más que se puede esperar del contraste entre las Américas y el Viejo Mundo son variaciones cualitativas (por ejemplo, una variante más intensa del fenómeno de « pánico » financiero). Si bien existen indicaciones de que ha habido una versión específicamente « americana » del concepto de crisis en los últimos siglos, estas tendencias tienden a declinar y a desaparecer ante la globalización acelerada que vivimos.

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Mots-clés : Études américaines, analyse conceptuelle, crise, exceptionalisme, interpretavisme, paniques

Palabras claves : Estudios americanos, analisis conceptual, crisis, exceptionalismo, interpretativismo, panicos

Keywords : American studies, conceptual analysis, crisis, exceptionalism, interpretativism; panics

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