

## Stability, Crisis and Breakdown: Some Notes on the Concept of Crisis in Political Analysis\*

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The argument of the paper is that political science would benefit from clarification of the concept 'crisis', and that this clarification should be related to neighbouring concepts such as 'stability' and 'breakdown'. It is suggested that the stability of a political regime is demonstrated by its ability to avoid transformation as well as breakdown at times of crisis when the continuity of the regime's identifying characteristics is threatened.

### Introduction

The basic question behind this paper is to what extent assertions about a crisis of democracy are well-founded, when such assertions are made about the political regime in a particular country such as Denmark.<sup>1</sup> Surprising as it may seem, there has been much talk about a political crisis and a crisis of democracy in the public debate in Denmark during the 1970's, and even political scientists have seriously discussed the possibility of a breakdown of 'a working multiparty system' (Pedersen 1981). It should, however, be made clear from the outset that it is not the intention of the present paper to give an answer to this question. My ambition is more modest, because a reexamination of the central concepts seems to be necessary before going into detail about the empirical problems which the basic question raises. In journalism and public debate, terms such as 'stability', 'crisis' and 'breakdown' are widely used and generally without any clear definition. As it seems to be a reasonable assumption that the concepts behind these terms are related, the question to be dealt with in this paper is how these concepts can be defined in a meaningful way and how their relationship can be understood more precisely. The aim of this paper is, accordingly, to bring together some theoretical notions and to formulate a basic conceptual framework for the study of the crisis of democratic regimes. Even if the concepts are sometimes discussed in the abstract, it is primarily the stability, crisis and breakdown of democratic regimes which I have in mind in the following.<sup>2</sup>

\*Paper originally presented at the ECPR Workshop on 'The Stability and Instability of Democracies', Barcelona, 25 - 30 March 1985.

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### Introduction

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## The Concept of Stability

At first glance political science literature does not seem to be of much help concerning the first concept of 'stability'. Even if the literature on this topic is extensive, it is also rather confusing. There is no need to review the many different ways in which the concept of 'political stability' has been used, since this has been done at length in other places (see for instance Hurwitz 1971, 1973, Sanders 1981, 1-21, Dowding & Kimber 1983, 229-236, Ersson & Lane 1983, 245-250). Suffice it to say that the concept of 'stability' in general and of 'political stability' in particular is both ambiguous and multidimensional (Ersson & Lane 1983).

The concept is ambiguous because the term is not connected with any generally accepted definition. Apparently, the theoretical situation described more than ten years ago by Leon Hurwitz still exists.

The concept of 'political stability' is an excellent illustration of the fuzziness and confusion existing in political science research regarding concept formation, operationalization, and measurement. The concept of stability means all things as various individuals attempt to measure the degree or amount of 'political stability' present in their particular universe. ... Although there are strands of common agreement in most of the literature as to the basic broad meaning of the term, confusion abounds due to the lack of agreement concerning the meaning of the terms employed to define 'stability'; and there is also a lack of consensus regarding the operationalization of these latter terms (Hurwitz 1973, 449).

The concept is multidimensional because various political scientists and sociologists use it about different objects and about different properties of those objects. First, 'political stability' has been applied to different levels of the political system such as the community, the regime and the authorities, to use David Easton's terminology (Easton 1965). Second, there is no general agreement about the property associated with 'political stability'. For some authors the term is connected with the absence of a specific property, for instance violence or change, whereas for other authors it is connected with the presence of a specific property, in particular continuity, durability, longevity, endurance, persistence or some other term signifying a long and uninterrupted existence. Thus, Hurwitz identified no less than five different approaches to stability: (1) the absence of violence; (2) governmental longevity/duration; (3) the existence of a legitimate constitutional regime; (4) the absence of structural change; and (5) a multifaceted societal attribute (Hurwitz 1973, 449).

It may be tempting to conclude from this theoretical situation that at present the search for a definition is a premature task (Ersson & Lane 1983, 250). However, not every one is willing to draw this conclusion, and recently an attempt to clarify the concept has been made by Keith M. Dowding and Richard Kimber which deserves serious consideration. Perhaps the theoretical situation is not so confusing as it appears?

The definition of 'political stability' suggested by Dowding & Kimber is basically in accordance with David Easton's conceptual framework of systems analysis, which makes it well suited for the study of crisis and breakdown of democratic regimes. The minor differences which they state in relation to Easton are mainly explained by a difference in perspective. Whereas Easton seeks to formulate a theory for the persistence of the political system as such, Dowding & Kimber want to formulate a general concept of stability which could be applied to governments, regimes, institutions etc. (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 236). However, Easton makes it quite clear that his conceptual framework might also be useful for the study of democratic regimes (Easton 1965, 481).

Dowding & Kimber define political stability as the state in which a particular political object exists when it possesses the capacity to prevent threatening contingencies from forcing its non-survival – i.e. from forcing a change in one or more of that object's criteria of identity (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 238–239). In this definition it is essential to note that the concept of stability is neither defined in terms of the mere absence of change of a political object nor in terms of the mere survival of a political object.

First, Dowding & Kimber argue that the absence of change is not necessary condition of stability, and this may be said even of large or sudden changes. An object may be stable even if a large number of its elements are changed. The important thing is what kind of elements are changed and under what circumstances. Whereas the continuity of some elements is needed, it is only the defining or identifying characteristics of the object which have to remain unchanged:

... in general, we may say that the survival of any given political object consists in the continuity of those elements by which that object is identified (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 237).

Furthermore, not any change of the identifying characteristics of a political object is a proof of instability. Only the changes of such characteristics which are a response to challenges and which are necessary to avoid the non-survival of the political object represent a case of instability:

Change that is accepted voluntarily by any political object is not proof of instability, even if the change results in a complete discontinuity (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 238).

Applying this conceptualization to a political regime, the stability or instability of a particular political regime is dependent on the way in which the political regime is defined. The identifying characteristics of a political regime can, of course, be specified more or less in detail. When we talk more generally about the stability of a democratic regime and define 'democracy' as 'polyarchy', we can only classify this regime as stable if there is no forced change in the inclusiveness and the liberalization of the regime (cf. Dahl 1971, 1–16) or no forced change in the rights, institutions, and processes that define polyarchy (cf. Dahl 1982, 10–11).

When we talk about the stability of a particular democratic regime, as for instance the Danish regime, we have furthermore to specify the characteristic features of the Danish democracy before saying anything about the stability of this particular regime. This means that we have to distinguish between the stability of the regime, the democratic (or polyarchical) character of this regime, and the specific national version of the democratic regime. It is, for instance, quite possible that the specific Danish combination of democratic characteristics may be unstable in a given period without the more general democratic character of the Danish regime being unstable.

Second, Dowding & Kimber argue that the mere survival of an object is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of stability:

The question of survival and non-survival is important because it is obviously connected with stability, though it is not what stability means. In common with other writers on stability, we would not wish to say that all systems that survive are stable; nor can all non-surviving systems be said necessarily to have been unstable (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 237).

Some political objects have a natural lifespan, which means that a change of the identifying characteristics – which for Dowding & Kimber is the same as the non-survival of the object – at the end of such a lifespan is no evidence of instability. Whereas this line of argument is clearly relevant for governments, it hardly seems valid for democratic regimes, which do not, as a rule, have any natural life time. Survival does, indeed, seem to be a necessary condition for the stability of democratic regimes. It is not, however, a sufficient condition, because an object may exist without being stable. If an object is not confronted by any challenges which are threatening its identifying characteristics, it may survive or persist even if it lacks the capacity to cope with threats (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 241). This state could, accordingly, be called ‘an unstable persistence’.

To summarize the argument of Dowding & Kimber, a political object – for instance a democratic regime – may either be in a state of stable or unstable persistence, but the former state can only be identified in a situation where some kind of challenges are threatening the continued existence of the identifying characteristics of the object. Even if this definition of stability may to some extent differ from the usual language of journalists and politicians,<sup>3</sup> and even if stability may be difficult to identify in empirical analysis, this definition is nevertheless clear, and in addition it seems to go well with recent attempts to define our next tricky concept.

## The Concept of Crisis

Undoubtedly, the concept of ‘crisis’ is rather vague and diffuse (Zimmermann 1979, 68 ff.). This is not only the case in the public debate, but also in the political science literature. As James A. Robinson notes:

'Crisis' is a lay term in search of a scholarly meaning ... Because of its varied meaning the term 'crisis' has not been useful in building 'systematic knowledge' about social phenomena. Terms that cover almost any situation are not helpful in analysis that emphasizes variables and the relations among variables. If many different kinds of situations are labeled crisis, then the factor becomes a constant and cannot be related to variations in other aspects of social process (Robinson 1968, 510).

There have, however, during recent years been some promising developments in crisis research, and models have been constructed which can be applied to comparative research (see for instance Verba 1971, Flanagan 1973, Morlino 1979, 1981, 1983, Zimmermann 1979, 1981, 1984). Central to this theoretical development is that the concept of 'crisis' is connected with challenges to the political system of such a kind and degree that the persistence of the system is threatened. The system is facing a potential breakdown, and this breakdown is likely to occur unless the system itself or its environment is fundamentally changed (cf. Janicke 1971, 531 f.).

Thus, Ekkart Zimmermann in an energetic contribution to the analysis of crisis and crisis outcomes has defined a crisis of the political regime in this way:

Political crises are here understood in a wider sense than mere government crisis: they more or less call for and possibly lead to *substantial* changes in policies or the political order, respectively, not to a mere replacement of personnel (Zimmermann 1979, 69 emphasis in the original).

This definition of crisis is based on the definition suggested by Sidney Verba who defines it as

a change that requires some governmental innovation and institutionalization if elites are not seriously to risk a loss of their position or if the society is to survive (Verba 1971, 302).

In almost the same way Scott C. Flanagan defines a system crisis as

a challenge to the authority of the constituted decision makers expressed through extralegal means of protest on a scale sufficient to threaten the incumbents' ability to maintain order and continued occupancy of authority roles (Flanagan 1973, 48).

He underlines that – when he is speaking about a 'systemic crisis' – he is limiting his definition to those challenges that threaten the constitution of the polity, i.e. the established rules of the game for allocating authority and rewards.

The only difference between Verba and Flanagan seems to be that Flanagan specifies the challenges to the system as 'extralegal means of protest' such as civil disobedience, strikes, assassination, sabotage, rioting etc. In this respect Flanagan is in line with Ekkart Zimmermann and Leonardo Morlino both of whom in their models point to some kind of political violence as challenges that might lead to the breakdown of the political system (Zimmermann 1979, 90, Morlino 1979, 68). Even if it may be important to look for political violence in crisis situations, and even if political violence has been of vital importance in the cases in which democratic regimes have broken down following a crisis, it seems inappropriate

to make it a definitional feature of crisis. It is more reasonable to advance an empirical hypothesis that political violence is one of the kinds of challenges that may threaten the survival of democratic regimes.

On the other hand, Verba and Flanagan agree that some kind of structural change is a part of the crisis concept:

Systematic crisis and structural change suggest something more than a shuffling of personalities, as when one cabinet falls and is succeeded by another. They imply a fundamental change in regime that alters the institutional power balance among the contenders (Flanagan 1973, 48).

As pointed out by Brian Barry, this seems an unnecessary limitation of the concept. If the political system is able to eliminate the challenges to its continued persistence by changing the environment, it seems reasonable enough to say that a crisis has been survived (cf. Barry 1977, 102 ff.).

These conceptual considerations imply that the concept of 'crisis' has to be clarified along at least two dimensions. Whenever the concept of 'crisis' is applied, one must first specify which kind of object has come to a crisis, and secondly specify how this political object has been challenged.

Concerning the first dimension, it seems perfectly reasonable to speak about a governmental crisis, a crisis of the party system, a crisis of democratic regime etc. In this context my argument is that a crisis for one part of the political system or one level of the political system does not necessarily lead to a crisis for other parts of the system. This is a question to be studied empirically in different countries under different political, social and economic circumstances.

It seems, however, to be a reasonable hypothesis that the less comprehensive components of the political system could come to a crisis without the more comprehensive components coming to a crisis at the same time, whereas the opposite is less likely to occur. It is quite conceivable, for instance, that the party system could come to a crisis, without the democracy regime coming to a crisis at the same time. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that democratic should come to a crisis in a country without having any effect on the party system.

Concerning the second dimension of how the political objects are challenged and changed, it should be made clear that it is not reasonable to speak of a crisis whenever a political object faces problems, new problems or even severe problems. Nor is it reasonable to speak of a crisis whenever a political object undergoes changes, sudden changes or even extensive changes. Only the combination of challenges that could lead to the breakdown of the object or to structural changes of a fundamental character constitutes a crisis.

At this point the relationship between the concepts of stability and crisis has to be clarified. As the two concepts have been defined here it is evident that they are closely connected. Political stability has been defined as the state in which a political object has the capacity to prevent challenges from forcing a change in one or more of that object's criteria of identity, whereas the central meaning of a political crisis has been outlined as the combination of challenges which could lead to the breakdown of a political object or structural changes of a fundamental character.



A consistent relationship between the two concepts is obtained if the somewhat vague notion of 'substantial changes' or 'fundamental changes' in the concept of crisis is replaced with the more precise formulation of 'changes of the identifying or defining characteristics'. Thus, the stability of a political object can only be demonstrated during a crisis, when the capacity of the object to cope with challenges is put to a test, and when a forced change of the identifying characteristics of the object is a possibility. In this crisis situation the stability of the object is demonstrated by the avoidance of a forced change of the object's criteria of identity.

## The Concept of Breakdown

The political science literature on breakdown of political objects in general and political regimes in particular is as comprehensive as the literature on political stability and crisis, but it is also much more blurred because it covers topics such as political violence, military coups, revolutions etc. (see for a review, Zimmermann 1981).<sup>4</sup> However, as pointed out by Juan J. Linz, despite some overlapping between the phenomena of breakdown of democratic regimes and revolutions, there are also important differences. Most of the breakdowns of democratic regimes have been counterrevolutionary in the sense that they have aimed at preventing radical changes of the social structure, and none of the breakdowns of the relatively stabilized democracies has been caused by the left. Revolutions and breakdown of democratic regimes should therefore be studied separately (Linz 1978, 14). Only recently have some comparative analyses been published on the political dynamics of the breakdown of democratic regimes in the historically most important countries such as Italy, Germany, Austria, Spain and Chile.

Juan J. Linz does not explicitly define what constitutes a breakdown of a democratic regime, but it is evident that for him it means the end or the death of the specific democratic characteristics of the regime (Linz 1978, 5–8, cf. 75–86). Following this argument, it is suggested that a breakdown of a democratic regime be defined as the complete disappearance of those elements that constitute the democratic identity of the regime and that distinguish a democratic regime from an authoritarian and a totalitarian regime.

Concerning the relationship between the concepts of 'stability', 'crisis' and 'breakdown', a clarification of the definition of stability, which is suggested by Dowding & Kimber, seems to be needed in order to obtain a consistent conceptual framework.

Dowding & Kimber explicitly define 'survival' of a political object as the continuity of those elements by which it is identified and the 'non-survival' of a political object as a change in one or more of these criteria of identity (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 237, 239). However, in my view this terminology of 'survival' and 'non-survival' is not well chosen, because 'non-survival' is easily taken to mean 'collapse' or 'breakdown', i.e. the complete disappearance of the political object. Dowding & Kimber themselves contribute to this interpretation, because they



are very close to identifying 'instability' with 'collapse', when they emphasize that 'stability' is a dichotomous concept and illustrate this point by an example of different levels of violence as a threat to political systems:

We may ask in respect of any system which is under some kind of pressure which may cause it to collapse, whether it is able to avoid, stand up, or overcome the forces lined-up against it. If it is, then the system is stable ... The level of violence *per se* has no necessary connection with whether the system is stable or unstable. Consider a system that would collapse at a certain level of violence, say R riots per week; that is, the system lacks the capacity to deal with violence at this level or above, and thus has the property of being unstable with respect to this contingency even when R riots have not occurred. ... At violence level R the system is in a state of being unstable and this violence causes it to collapse (Dowding & Kimber 1983, 239).

Even if it is accepted that the concept of stability is a dichotomous concept, it does not follow that instability is the same as collapse and breakdown. It seems to be quite possible that the system could transform itself by changing one or more of its identifying characteristics as a response to the threats of increased violence and in this way obtain the ability to cope with the violence level R. This is certainly a forced change of identifying characteristics and consequently a proof of instability, but the question is whether it should be taken as a breakdown of the system. If it is taken as a breakdown, what should we then call the case in which *all* the identifying characteristics of the system are changed?

My argument is that the relationship between the concepts under discussion could be made clearer and more consistent by separating the concept of breakdown (or collapse) from the concept of instability. Only the forced change of all the identifying characteristics of a political object constitutes a breakdown. When only one or some of the identifying characteristics of a political object are forcefully changed during a crisis, we have a form of instability which might be called a *transformation* of the object<sup>5</sup> in order to distinguish it from the kind of instability or unstable persistence discussed above (the case in which a political object may persist in a state of instability because it lacks the capacity to respond to challenges without having been confronted by such challenges. This unstable persistence might also be called a latent instability, because the instability has not yet been openly demonstrated).

A clear illustration of a regime crisis and political instability without breakdown is the political development in the Weimar republic from 1930 to 1932, where parliamentary rule was gradually transformed to a semiparliamentary rule with government 'above the parties' and responsible only to the president. M. Rainer Lepsius concludes his analysis of this period before the final breakdown of the Weimar republic:

It is likely that the combination of presidential rule, politics of issue coalition, and short-term crisis management could have been carried on for a longer time and that total collapse of democracy could have been avoided, despite the economic crisis that was further weakening the traditional structure of the German society and polity. There might also have been a chance for a revitaliza-

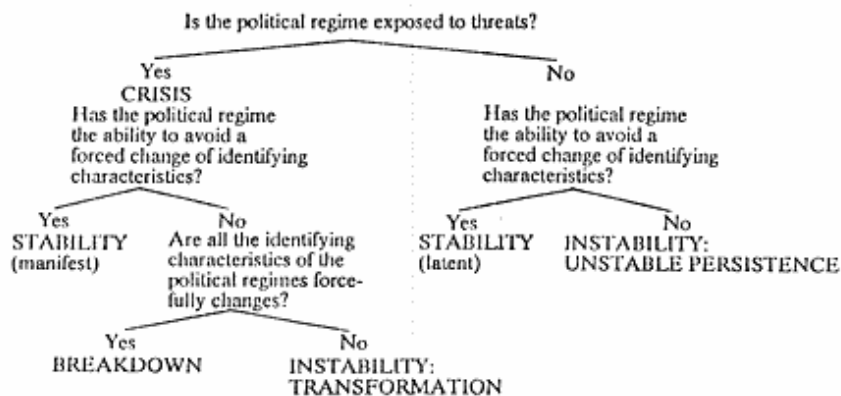
tion of the party structure in 1934 or 1935 when the international economy recovered. However, the fragmentation of the party system and the strategy of temporary retreat from government participation and crisis management by emergency decrees were certainly preconditions for the breakdown of democracy (Lepsius 1978, 46, cf. 48).

Of course, this distinction between a transformation and a breakdown of a political regime raises the classical question about when an old system is transformed, and when an old system has broken down and been replaced by a new system. It also raises the related question of the importance of several identifying characteristics of a political object, in this case a political regime. Undoubtedly, this is to some extent a matter of definition. As discussed above, a political regime may be defined more or less in detail. When the study concerns the crisis of democracy, it would be relevant to apply the definitions of democratic regimes in relation to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (Linz 1975). A forced change of the identifying characteristics of a democratic regime is accordingly a transformation of the regime, if its democratic nature is maintained – for instance a transformation from parliamentary rule to presidential rule – whereas a breakdown of the democratic regime is followed either by the disappearance of the political system (in David Easton’s sense) or the subsequent establishment of an authoritarian or a totalitarian regime.

## Conclusion

The discussion of the conceptual framework has led to a definition of the central concepts, which is outlined in Fig. 1, and a relationship between these concepts, which – regarding democratic political regimes – can be described briefly in this way: The *stability* of a democratic regime can only be demonstrated during a *crisis*, where challenges are threatening the continuity of the identifying characteristics of the regime, and where both a breakdown and a transformation of the democratic regime is avoided.

Fig. 1. Classification of Different States of Political Regimes



Following this conceptual clarification, the crucial question is to determine what more precisely constitutes 'threatening contingencies' or 'challenges' to democratic regimes, and how such challenges are differentiated from other problems facing a democratic regime and government. The study and development of generalisations about challenges of this kind will be an empirical task falling outside the aim of this paper, which has concentrated on conceptual problems.

#### NOTES

1. This paper is a revision of parts of a paper on 'The Crisis of Democracy or the Democracy of the Crisis? A Discussion of the "Crisis" Concept and its Application in the Danish Case', which was presented at the panel on 'Crises and Breakdown of Democratic Political Systems' during the Sixth Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, St. Catherine's College, Oxford, 19–22 July, 1983. The revision solely concerns the conceptual problems of that paper and it is particularly inspired by my reading of the article of Dowding & Kimber (1983), which was not published when I wrote my paper. The present paper has been worked out during my stay at the Badia Fiesolana, Florence as a Jean Monnet Fellow. I wish to thank Jesper Jespersen and Richard Sinnott for valuable suggestions and comments.
2. 'Democracy' is in this paper used as a descriptive term indicating the kind of political regimes which are common in Western countries. It does not mean that the democratic ideal of political equality is realized. Accordingly, it would be more correct to speak about 'polyarchy' in Robert A. Dahl's sense (Dahl 1971, 1982). In this paper 'democratic' is, however, used synonymously with 'polyarchy' (cf. Linz 1975, 182–185). 'Regime' is in this paper used in David Easton's sense signifying the values (goals and principles), norms, and structure of authority (Easton 1965, 193).
3. It could be argued, however, that this definition of political stability comes very close to the concept of 'adaptability' that is often applied in the political science literature. For instance the dependent variable suggested by Ekkart Zimmermann is very similar to the definition of political stability of this paper: 'Strictly speaking, adaptability is the ultimate variable researchers (and politicians) want to know more about. What is needed is knowledge about the efficiency of a political system, not merely about its continued existence. The ultimate goal would be to use persistence and adaptability (cf. Gurr 1974) as a measure of successful coping with changing environments' (Zimmermann 1979, 94).
4. My reference is to the German edition of the book, because I have had no access to the English version: Ekkart Zimmermann, *Political Violence, Crises, and Revolution: Theories and Research*. Cambridge, Mass.: Alfred Schenkman, 1983.
5. I am less happy with the term 'reequilibration' suggested by Juan J. Linz, although it is intended to cover almost the same concept: 'Reequilibration of a democracy is a political process that, after a crisis that has seriously threatened the continuity and stability of the basic democratic political mechanisms, results in their continued existence at the same or higher levels of democratic legitimacy, efficacy, and effectiveness' (Linz 1978, 87). First, I am generally sceptical about the application of the concept of equilibrium in political analysis, and second, I don't find it appropriate to link by definition a transformation of a democratic regime and the outcome of this transformation. A transformation of a democratic regime does not necessarily lead to a new stability and 'equilibrium'. Perhaps, Linz's 'equilibration' is to be taken as a particular kind of transformation of a democratic regime?

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