



Doing urban geography in times of crisis: introduction to the forum “Urban geography in times of crisis”

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Abstract. Crises dominate current political debates. They shift the spaces of possibility for geographical research practice and global theory formation. Our starting point in this forum is the diagnosis of a dual crisis: on the one hand, the epistemological crisis put forth in post- and decolonial scholarship and, on the other hand, the ubiquity of worldly crises – variously described as the pluri-crisis, polycrisis, or socio-ecological crisis. This pervasiveness poses new questions about how the entanglement of these diagnoses operates in the realm of geographical knowledge practice.

Clearly, crisis phenomena have always conditioned the production of geographical knowledge. As crises restrict mobility or create precarious working conditions, they have not only shaped the everyday research life of many scholars worldwide, but also defined current knowledge (production) through the absence of certain scholars’ voices at international conferences or in international publications. Having patterned global theory formation in this way, crises are firmly embedded in any knowledge canon.

This forum discusses the transformation of urban geography in times of multiple crises. In our introductory reflections, we highlight some of the forum contributions’ crosscutting insights, weave a common thread through this dialogue, and discuss obstacles to as well as critical resources necessary when rethinking and possibly changing practices of knowledge production.

1 Introduction

Crises predominate the contemporary moment. These times of crisis shift the spaces of possibility for geographical knowledge production. Our starting point in this forum is the diagnosis of a dual crisis: on the one hand, the epistemological crisis put forth in post- and decolonial scholarship raises concerns about injustices and silences in the making of geographical research and theory. For decades, researchers have criticized the Eurocentric premises of dominant parts of geographical theory and have called for its provincialization (Myers, 1994; Watson, 2009; Peake, 2016; Palat Narayanan, 2020). At the same time, they have asked questions about the possibility for a globally just, decolonial, and contemporary knowledge practice (Roy, 2009; Schwarz and Streule, 2020; Hilbrandt and Ren, 2022). On the other hand, there is

the ubiquity of worldly crises – variously described as the pluri-crisis, polycrisis, or socio-ecological crisis. While the recurrent invocation of crisis times has drawn criticism for its “totalizing and epochal thinking” (Larner, 2011:331), geographical debates inscribe the current moment through this terminology, as global systemic risks permeate all realms of life in unprecedented ways.

This pervasiveness poses new questions about how the entanglement of these diagnoses operates in the realm of knowledge practice. Crises in health, climate, economy, finance, war, and energy increasingly limit the possibilities of geographical research practice. The environmental impact of research and conference travel makes data collection in distant sites largely incompatible with ecological sustainability goals. While economic crises have led to the cancellation of research funds, repressive political regimes and interventions

in academic freedom constrict research in urban geography and the discipline at large. Further complicating knowledge production practice in crisis times is an increasingly tense relationship between academic and non-academic actors, such as the media and political and public actors. Academics are increasingly asked to step up to the challenges of the contemporary world, be accountable to publics, legitimate their research with societal relevance and address practical rather than scholarly problems, and advance applied rather than blue-sky research. The lack of long-term and secure contracts, the dependency on visa and residency permits, and the paradoxical expectation and limitations of international mobility render these different roles difficult, if not inaccessible, for many academics (Palat Narayanan, 2024). Simultaneously, academics are increasingly attacked, often personally discredited in the media in an overall atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust (Nkula-Wenz and Larsen, 2024).

Clearly, crisis phenomena have always conditioned the production of geographical knowledge. As crises restrict mobility or create precarious working conditions, they have not only shaped the everyday research life of many scholars worldwide, but also defined current knowledge (production) through the absence of certain scholars' voices at international conferences or in international publications (Appelhans, 2024; Hussein de Araújo, 2018). Having patterned global theory formation in this way, crises are firmly embedded in any knowledge canon.

Our forum addresses ways to practice geography (differently) in times of crisis. We specifically address urban geographical knowledge production, but the insights gained in this field of geographical research will broadly apply to others as well. The forum's 10 contributions refer to institutional practices, such as the building of collaborative projects with "local" research partners; they consider research practices, such as the handling of methods, when restrictions in data collection exist; they reflect on teaching practices, such as the selection of student readings; they rethink valuation practices, such as the question of what counts as theoretical; and they discuss publication practices, for example, in the selection of references. All are relevant to knowledge production and frequently overlap.

Though these contributions take off in varied trajectories, they are connected by a shared starting point: to better understand the consequences of these crises on knowledge practice, to explore academic practices that adequately respond to their entanglement in worldly crises, and to consider how they can be translated into the institutional structures of the academy. Moreover, running through the forum is the question of who is to do the work, receive recognition, and reap the benefits of a different geographical practice. As the contributions show, dealing with the crises may provide new impulses and ideas, but the costs are unevenly distributed and the price individualized, paid frequently by scholars of the Global South. In our introductory reflections, we highlight some of these contributions' crosscutting insights, weave a

common thread through this dialogue, and discuss obstacles to as well as critical resources necessary when rethinking and possibly changing practices of knowledge production. We hope these contributions provide insights into how "another science is (to become) possible" (Stengers, 2018).

2 Expanding research practices

Central to this forum's aims is the exploration or reappreciation of different practices required in times of crisis to conduct research. These practices expand the realm of research itself into classrooms, infrastructures of funding, and the realm of publishing.

First, the contributions evidence the need to facilitate connective spaces that encourage new ways of unexpected thinking. They variously speak of weaving, making, and holding space (Schwarz, 2024); building bridges (Streule, 2024); or developing ecosystems (Sami, 2024) to describe practices that generate such connectivity. Moreover, they highlight how the resulting social and spatial relations reshape knowledge production. Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch proposes that the researcher as teacher plays such a facilitating role when managing the social relations shaped by and in the classroom. Beyond long-standing calls to respond to epistemological crisis through curriculum reform, in Houssay-Holzschuch's reading, teaching emerges as a crisis response when positioning the "classroom a space for theory formation by students" (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2024:248). In this way, the creation of a classroom space "in which other ways of thinking and theorizing can find shelter" (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2024:250) opens new ways to "making geography and theory formation more just" (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2024:247). Similarly, for Anke Schwarz (Schwarz, 2024), facilitating spaces to think with students can make room for the possibility of unexpected strangeness, i.e., "future thinking". In the face of her students' anxieties and feelings of desperation in crisis times, Schwarz's teaching works with science fiction "to transport protagonists and readers to imaginary worlds where unquestioned assumptions are challenged" (Schwarz, 2024:279). In Monika Streule's contribution, building knowledge relations takes the form of translation. Here and in other contributions (Schwarz and Streule, 2020), Streule translates the concept of *territorio* as "a non-imperial geohistorical category" (citing Coronil, 1996) into the widely self-referential canon of Anglo-American geography, thereby building bridges through conceptual translations (see also Carstensen-Egwuom, 2024).

Neha Sami stresses that the ability to work in crisis times involves "the development of a research ecosystem that will be able to weather shocks and be able to bounce back with more agility than is currently possible" (Sami, 2024:264). Sami explicates the strategic efforts and personal investment necessary for building such an ecosystem and consequentially the need to ensure that researchers fairly reap the re-

wards of such practices. Writing from the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) in Bengaluru, Sami contends that the sustenance of a long-term research program in that institution largely relied on the ability of researchers to establish enduring collaborations and secure research funding from sources abroad. Such partnerships, Sami proposes, are a prerequisite for those researchers positioned in less well resourced institutional contexts, whereby the practices of building relations to scholars with access to funding streams are paramount. Sami calls for fortifying these practices in infrastructures that facilitate research in the long run.

Writing about a different infrastructure, Nadine Appelhans reflects on the crisis of representation in urban knowledge production and the role of publication practices and academic journals in that crisis (Appelhans, 2024). Building on a problematization of dominant citation practices, review processes, the diversity of editorial boards, and publication economies, amongst other aspects, she shares her experiences as the editor of the journal *TRIALOG* and the challenges of changing dominant publication practices in this role. In contrast to the malleability of relationships that might facilitate access to research resources, academic publishing evidences the perseverance of established practices shaped by norms beyond the scope of single institutions.

This variation across different realms of research shows how the practice of unlearning is a prerequisite in order to begin practicing geography (differently). But how do we actively practice unlearning (McFarlane, 2010; Lawhon, 2020)? And what needs to be unlearned? In the context of epistemic injustice, unlearning becomes a practice of epistemic disobedience (Bruns, 2022; Castro Varela, 2017). Unlearning implies breaking the dominance of knowledge regimes that stabilize white supremacy and universalizing approaches to knowledge. For instance, Streule posits that “to see the social privileges from which such ideas benefit and originate” (Streule, 2024:241) is critical to unlearning. In this way, unlearning opens up an avenue to overcome the normalization of these privileges. Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch fosters her students’ unlearning when she posits that rational incomprehension is not necessarily problematic. Instead of, for instance, grasping the lyrics of a poem, she suggests accessing its meaning through its “rhythm and sounds” (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2024:249). In doing so, Houssay-Holzschuch intervenes in long-standing epistemic norms.

3 The subjects doing research

Reflecting on the practices emergent in these times of crisis, this forum also turns our view to the subjects that are central in responding to or otherwise anticipating crises. It offers an additional way of “understanding these series of interwoven crises, or ‘multiple crises’, by focusing specifically on the subject in crisis” (Bashovski and Rossi, 2023:2). Bashovski and Rossi treat crisis as a “constitutive episte-

mological condition of modern subjectivity” (Bashovski and Rossi, 2023:2), thereby echoing the reflections of Mbembe and Roitman about the “crisis of the subject” and the co-constitution of crisis and subjectivity (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995:323). For these authors, the subject today is shaped by crisis, just as the crisis is shaped by the subject; one is not the consequence of the other. One avenue suggested for making sense of crisis and the way the world is changing “requires interrogating how *we* ourselves are changing: as worker, as citizens, as subjects” (Bashovski and Rossi, 2023:2). Our forum extends this interrogation to consider our role as urban geographers, researchers, and experts. Three insights drawn from forum contributions are noteworthy as they highlight different aspects of subjectivity and subject positions specific to these times.

First, Su Su Myat’s contribution to the forum evidences the intersection and co-constitution of various crises (the eruptive crisis, the less eventful epistemic crisis) as they are faced by an increasing number of researchers (Myat, 2024). Myat documents how the 2021 coup d’état in Myanmar and the COVID-19 pandemic, which were disruptive, eventful, and distinct, fomented uncertainty for both her PhD research on Myanmar and her personally, grappling with distance from family and suddenly faced with immense precarity. Her practice of adaptation was defined by this intersection of world-shifting events and her positionality in the academy. For instance, the choice to shift her research gaze from Myanmar, now inaccessible as a field site due to travel restrictions, amongst other reasons, to Switzerland, where she was temporarily confined, reflected a mode of adaptation that challenged epistemological, institutional, and financial norms of research. These norms were tied to her position as a doctoral candidate on a grant, which implied set expectations about the cost of her PhD and the realm of her expertise. The funding institution’s response to her adaptation to crisis – to deny the costs of translation necessary to do research in Switzerland – highlighted how the issue of cost is also connected to expectations about the researcher’s position: the researcher of Switzerland is expected to speak the local languages, whereas the researcher of Myanmar (presumed not to be from Myanmar) is justified in hiring a translator, also since it is affordable to do so.

The epistemological consequences of such institutional norms have long been evidenced in the body of work documenting the politics and norms about geographers – where they are from and where they go to research (Sidaway, 1992; Allouache, 2023). Indeed, by re-centering the researcher rather than the outcomes of the research, Nipesh Palat Narayanan’s reflection in this forum draws connections between the choices available to the researcher and the ontological view on urban studies overall (Palat Narayanan, 2024). Both Palat Narayanan and Myat’s contributions point towards the consequences for researchers themselves in terms of the experiences of supplication and exclusion. They identify the differentiated costs

of research for different researchers, the price and limits of gaining “global” perspectives, by underscoring how the choices available to researchers are multiply bound in different crises. They also highlight how the distinctions between the epistemological crises within the discipline of geography and the idea of worldly crises erode when thinking from these positions within the academy.

Second, shifting from a notion of crisis exclusively tied to world events to the everyday experiences of crisis brings different experts on crisis into view. In their research on domestic violence, GenUrb’s forum contribution explores the subject of crisis by directing the research gaze towards the domestic space. Rather than viewing the subject of crisis as either the victim or the recipient of intervention, reframing her as a source of insight into crisis disrupts both the epistemological conventions of authority and the predominant assumptions of crisis as tied to world events (Peake et al., 2024). Feminist scholars have long shown how the domestic space is not only an object of empirical exploration, but also a site from which to reshape our field in terms of its ontologies and epistemologies (Brickell, 2020). Indeed, these first reflections on subjects and the perspectives they are expected to take evidence a contradiction in current norms about the production of knowledge: while research funding explicitly seeks out missing perspectives, it continues to operate on a competitive “value for money” logic that does not support the cost of that perspective (Marchais et al., 2020) but loads it onto the shoulders of individuals. The logic of equality versus equity in terms of allocating funding does not work in a research landscape that is deeply unequal. Allocating funding equally in an unequal landscape instead reproduces knowledge inequalities. GenUrb’s contribution in this forum shows how alternative practices are possible – not only as researchers producing work as a collective, but also in the formation of new expert subjects.

Third, the transformation of the researcher into a public subject raises questions about the (un)making of academic legitimacy. In their forum contribution, Laura Nkula-Wenz and Maren Larsen reflect on the role of media in shaping university practices, specifically the politics of critical urban research under a crisis condition that empowers the media to question the legitimacy of research they disagree with politically (Nkula-Wenz and Larsen, 2024). Universities that are publicly funded state institutions like the authors’ institution in Basel, Switzerland, are scrutinized anew in changing political landscapes, as academic engagement for Palestine has evidenced most recently. Notably, the scrutiny resulted not in a renewed commitment to academic freedom and a defense of scholarly rigor by the university but in a silencing of certain positions and removal of certain publications from university websites. In this context, the significance of their international partnership with the University of Cape Town and grant funding is existential – these resources help to establish the majority of their professorial staff. Moreover, these exter-

nal bridges expand the public that the researcher is a part of or responsible to.

Yet this expanding public role also points to a tension: the extent to which the researcher should be accountable to local communities or interests is viewed variably as either reactionary (bending to the will of conservative media) or progressive (pushing for critical debates in the classroom) depending on the community. The relation with various communities is both a product of crises and generative of new academic, institutional crises themselves. The epistemological crisis that forced the ivory tower to take down its walls has also forced it to contend with the instability of changing politics. This is important, but it also limits the scope of practices and topics that researchers may feel able to pursue. As shifting political landscapes constrict university budgets or reassert local priorities, this may also have longer-term impacts on dampening the enthusiasm for certain kinds of institutional arrangements and even certain kinds of researchers.

4 The normative horizons of research

Crises, as Neha Sami writes in this forum, have fostered a “re-thinking and re-evaluating [of] the value and aims of research” (Sami, 2024:263). Indeed, the current conjuncture of crisis has deepened long-standing doubts about dominant values that guide geographical knowledge production. The urgencies of the ongoing crisis have challenged the prioritization of neoliberal productivity norms above all else: when subordinating the choices of research themes to career goals, measuring productivity in quantity only, or devaluing care within university settings, to name a few examples. Moreover, debates on the epistemic injustices of geographical knowledge production, coupled with an increasing awareness of the uneven vulnerability of researchers to crisis times, have heightened the need to extend geography’s ethical worries. They have forced academics to expand the scope of institutional ethical reviews – largely about doing no harm, confidentiality, reflexivity, and honesty – to reflect on the extractivism of research practices, i.e., on how to practice geography in ways that fairly acknowledge all participants’ intellectual contributions in an institutional landscape permeated by relations of epistemic injustice.

In following diverse critical traditions that address epistemic justice, research discussed in this forum shows how putting these values into practice also yields new insights into the crisis itself. As the GenUrb collective demonstrates in their piece, notions of solidarity were paramount in driving their research on economic precarity and violence against women (Peake et al., 2024). While reflecting on their own collective approach to doing research, they demonstrate how to couple a feminist research ethics with Black radical traditions of thought in ways that foster mutual care and learning with one’s research participants (see also Nkula-Wenz and Larsen, 2024:257, on this point). Vis-à-vis imaginar-

ies of crisis “permeated with sharp disjunctures and interruptions, dichotomous portrayals of extraordinary versus ordinary, and capitalist linear temporalities of ‘befores’ and ‘afters’” (Peake et al., 2024:284), these analytics forefront how everyday urban life is permeated by violence. Inken Carstensen-Egwuom’s contribution advocates for an epistemological ethics of reparative justice. For Carstensen-Egwuom this implies consciously contextualizing geographical research in the histories of violence that are relevant to a given site (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2024). Particularly for geographic research “in historically *white* European academic institutions” (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2024:291), this provides, as she contends, a starting point for “doing less harm in the conceptual work of urban geography” (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2024:291). Re-centering research in this way not only permits overcoming universalizing approaches and Western, Eurocentric epistemologies, but also surfaces overlooked storylines and opens up new perspectives in understanding them.

The autonomy of research is another value on which this forum reflects. While academic freedom (or freedom as such) has always been a concern for researchers across the globe (see Makaremi, 2025), debates around these values have gained renewed attention in the recent crisis of right-wing populism and related attacks on academics in Europe (Giudici et al., 2024), the USA (Bennett, 2024), or Latin America (De Ambrosio and Koop, 2024). Nkula-Wenz and Larsen’s contribution calls for the critical importance of sustaining academic freedom vis-à-vis the press and one’s own institution (Nkula-Wenz and Larsen, 2024). As previously mentioned, their piece recounts the impact of the press’s scrutiny on their institution in the context of the Hamas 7 October 2023 attack, the resulting war on Gaza, and the ensuing debate of these horrendous events in European universities, resulting, amongst other things, in the termination of contracts of scholars (e.g., Nancy Fraser, Ghassan Hage) who hold positions about these events that universities and research institutions perceive as anti-Semitic (Conolly, 2024). The ongoing crisis of that war got entangled in an epistemic crisis as their university began investigating their institute and individuals’ research rather than protecting these against public allegations.

Less political at first sight only, scholars around the world have seen shifts in the foci of funding streams, in both their thematic orientations and their methodological predispositions. As Sami notes in her contribution, funding streams have been determined by political agendas with “less and less room for open-ended research with grant timelines become shorter and more projectized” (Sami, 2024:266). In the face of the climate crises, the call for universalized and increasingly data-driven knowledge (for instance in relation to research that responds to Sustainable Development Goal indicators) is stabilizing certain crisis solutions under the primacy of scientific objectivity, thereby normalizing interventions in academic research. Both Sami and Nkula-Wenz and Larsen indicate how crises can be instrumentalized, as they

justify interventions in academic work and, in doing so, narrow down crisis resolutions.

In this forum, thinking about the normative horizons brings into relief the challenge of doing geography in crisis times. While geographers have been quick to call for decolonized publication practices, for building more collaborative relations to local communities (Oldfield, 2018), or for slower science (Schwiter and Vorbrugg, 2021), even engaged researchers may fail to translate these ideas into practices. Crises may render some of these practices more feasible than others. Contrasting the possibilities of transforming the classroom (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2024; Schwarz, 2024) with the difficulties of changing publishing practices (Appelhans, 2024) illustrates room for individual interventions as well as structural hurdles. When confronted with the institutional conditions of our crisis times, the normative values underpinning knowledge production may come into conflict with the challenges that condition academic work and the experiences of different researchers in times of crisis.

Interrogating the subjects who face these challenges and the ways in which their realm of influence is co-constituted by crisis brings more nuance to this impasse. It reshapes who is conceived of as an expert of crisis (Peake et al., 2024); it evidences that crisis is not only “out there”, but also an embodied experience; it demonstrates how these experiences shape the selection of sites and topics (Palat Narayanan, 2024); and it exposes the institutional norms concerning the expectations placed on the researcher (Myat, 2024). Considering the practices they pursue despite or perhaps because of their multiple entanglements in crises highlights the breadth of knowledge work needed to advance geography in these times and the uneven distribution of such labor.

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