Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **13**, 1 (2021) 1–17

DOI: 10.2478/ausp-2021-0001

# Post-Crisis Reckoning: Making Sense of Early 21st-Century Civilizational Ruptures

György KALMÁR
University of Debrecen (Debrecen, Hungary)
Department of British Studies
kalmar.gyorgy@arts.unideb.hu

**Abstract.** As the world is struggling with the Covid crisis and its numerous aftereffects, it is easy to forget that the present pandemic is only the latest of a whole series of paradigm-changing 21st-century crises. Indeed, the word "crisis" has become one of the key concepts for the understanding of the early 21st century. Thus, crisis seems very much to be the default position of the 21st century, the new norm. In this paper, I argue that the 21st century has a recognizably different cultural logic from what the previous one had: most of our social, ideological, political, financial, and ecological paradigms are either changing or will (or must) change soon. As most of our critical concepts, intellectual tools, and ideological frameworks were made during the boom years of the late 20th century, they are clearly outdated and inadequate today. Thus, in this paper, through taking account of these shifting intellectual and artistic paradigms, I attempt to indicate how the present crisis of knowledge and sense-making may be turned into a process of knowing and making sense of crisis, and thus help us meet the challenges of the new century. It is often through these fault-lines, breakdowns, and inconsistencies of our narratives that one may recognize those pre-crisis assumptions that we have to critically re-evaluate and update in order to understand the new century.[1]

**Keywords**: crisis of knowledge, 21st century, ideological crisis, modernity, Covid pandemic

As the world is struggling with the Covid crisis and its numerous aftereffects, it is easy to forget that the present pandemic is only the latest of a whole series of paradigm-changing 21st-century crises. Indeed, the word "crisis" has become one

1 This article is the written form of the keynote lecture delivered at the conference *Crisis, Change and Perspectives*, on 17 April 2021. The article was supported by the János Bolyai Research Grant of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Research Grant of the New National Excellency Programme (ÚNKP) of the Hungarian Ministry of Human Resources. Some of the ideas I put forward here were first formulated in my recent book *Post-Crisis European Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

of the key concepts for the understanding of the early 21st century. A large and rapidly growing number of publications discuss 9/11 and its consequences, the current security crisis caused by international terrorism, the 2008 global financial crisis as well as its social and political knock-on effects, the 2015 European migration crisis and the ensuing melting of the political centre, the (now official) global climate crisis and its various manifestations worldwide, the damaging effects of social media and its confirmation-bias-produced alternative realities, or the crisis of liberal democracy, to mention only the most memorable examples on this long and gloomy list.

What I wish to explore here, however, is not so much this series of crises per se. What interests me is rather the *crisis of knowledge* we face: the breakdowns, the ruptures, the paradigm shifts, the changing perspectives; in other words, the ways we try to make sense of this crisis situation, the kinds of theories and narratives we make up in order to grasp what is going on. I will argue that our narratives of crisis reveal a profound crisis of narratives. It is getting clear that the above list of crises was caused by human error, miscalculation, misjudgement, and, of course, deliberate blindness to certain systemic issues. In other words: *we* messed it up, *we* had it wrong, the crisis is a result of failures in our social apparatuses, from the media to academia, from fiction to finance. If today there is a perceptible distrust towards the so-called elites, including not only the political class and the financial sector but also the global academic community, that is not without a reason. As uncomfortable as it may sound, we, the intelligentsia, are part of the problem.

Since 2016, when I started working on the representations of crisis in European cinema, I have attended numerous conferences and all sorts of other academic events on the related social, economic, and political issues. While there were innumerable talks about the aspects and manifestations, that is, the symptoms of crisis, there was very little about what we, the intellectual elites had messed up and should do or think otherwise. Did we see the financial crisis coming? Or Trump or Brexit? Or the rapidly growing social inequality, social polarization, and the tribalization of knowledge? What topics did we publish about in all these years? Did we analyse or raise awareness about potentially disruptive social phenomena? And even after the fact, since these crises erupted, have we understood the causes of these disruptive events, and have we changed our institutions, conceptual frameworks, regulations, and policies? Have we re-examined critically the kinds of assumptions, approaches, theories, and concepts that we have been relying on, the ideas that *did not* prepare us for these crisis situations? Have we really started thinking differently?

I am not convinced that we have. In other words, behind these well-known crisis situations there is a profound and increasingly disconcerting crisis of knowledge, one that we are just beginning to address, one that we should take

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

very seriously if we are to live up to our responsibility as members of the 21st-century global intelligentsia. Needless to say, it is a most timely task. So far in the 21st century, each and every crisis situation came as an unforeseen shock and was perceived at the time as the worst in living memory. As archived media coverage clearly demonstrates, this was the case with 9/11, with the 2008 financial crash, with 2016 (Brexit and Trump) as well as with the Covid pandemic.

To get a bit of historical perspective on this rupture we are trying to make sense of here, it may be worth remembering 2016, at the end of which the year was declared by many to be "the worst year ever". Today, in 2021, most of us probably only remember 2016 for the Brexit vote and Trump's election victory, yet it was also the year of a new and unparalleled wave of Islamist terror attacks in Western Europe, Aleppo's long siege and eventual destruction during the Syrian Civil War as well as the Zyka epidemic. The media craze was also fuelled by the sudden death of a series of pop culture icons, such as Leonard Cohen, David Bowie, and Prince, towards the end of the year. Thus, in late December, not only was social media swarming with "worst year ever" and "f*ck you 2016" memes: it seemed that every self-respecting (and less self-respecting) newspaper felt the need to address the issue, take stock of the damage, declare the end of the world, bathe a bit in self-pitying apocalyptic sentiment, or simply put the year's events in historical context. Penguin even took the opportunity to publish a whole volume, *F*ck You 2016: A Look Back on the Worst Year Ever.* What is worth remembering about these events, in my opinion, is the drama of a historical turning point, the experience of witnessing the unprecedented, and a sense of a cultural readjustment to the possibility of a gloomier future.

When brought into one single context, 2016 and the Covid pandemic constitute one single crisis narrative, in which the surprising shocks of disruptive events are far from being mere accidents but rather symptoms of untended malfunctions, results of certain fundamental issues relating to environmental change, liberal democracy, or neoliberal capitalism. The Covid pandemic – whether it proves to be a "regular" zoonotic disease caused by shrinking natural animal habitats or a lab leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology – can certainly be regarded as yet another symptomatic effect of our global, systemic, civilizational malfunctions.

In *State of Crisis*, Zygmunt Bauman calls attention to the paradoxical nature of this situation: we become conscious of how critical it is to respond quickly and appropriately to a crisis situation in a moment when (precisely because of that crisis) we suddenly feel ignorant and uncertain:

> [T]he idea of "crisis" tends to drift nowadays back to its medical origins. It was coined to denote the moment in which the future of the patient was in the balance, and the doctor had to decide which way to go and what treatment to apply to help the ill into convalescence. Speaking of crisis of

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

> whatever nature, including the economic, we convey firstly the feeling of *uncertainty*, of our *ignorance* of the direction in which the affairs are about to turn – and secondly the urge to intervene: to *select* the right measures and *decide* to apply them promptly. […] And let me add that there is an endemic contradiction involved: after all, the […] state of uncertainty/ignorance doesn't bode well for the chance of selecting "right measures" and so prompting things to go in the desired direction. (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 7)

Consequently, such a state of crisis also entails a fair amount of confusion and bewilderment. So far, the early 21st century has been a time when our late-20th-century grand narratives repeatedly come to be shaken, undermined, and discredited. Most of the old signposts, maps, and know-hows are gone. Our concepts and opinions of historical progress, social development, liberal democracy, or capitalism are all changing with amazing speed. As a result of all these crises, breakdowns, and rearrangements, one can easily have the impression that the new century's dominant cultural logic is markedly different than that of the previous one. Trying to comprehend current events through our late-20th-century concepts seems to be as frustrating as futile. Those concepts (and economic policies, political ideologies, and financial strategies) were all forged during the boom years of the late 20th century, during a time when we did not (want to) seriously calculate with some of the most definitive and disruptive conditions that we face today. Thus, our time is a time of reckoning: the overall feeling seems to be that we used to be blind and ignorant, we strayed far off the right track, and now our ignorance has a high price to pay. This is a radical moment in our intellectual history too: a time when complacency equals betrayal, business as usual is by definition failure, and a radical re-examination of our pre-crisis conceptual frameworks is essential in most academic disciplines. Every crisis situation we experience must be a wake-up call, meant to awaken us from the slumber of pre-crisis intellectual conformism. Thinking through the crisis, we must learn to think otherwise.

The first sweet dream that we had to wake up from was probably that of "the end of history". Today, when pre-crisis expectations are upset on an almost daily basis, it is almost embarrassing to realize how much our vision of the future used to be shaped by Francis Fukuyama's vision of a "happy ever after" global community that is finally relieved of the burden of paradigm shifting, reinvention, or critical thinking. In order to understand the historical process between the pre-crisis and the post-crisis world, one should not forget that *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) was an elaboration of an article from a much more symbolic year, 1989, and was inspired by the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the cold war. Fukuyama's main argument was that with the demise

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

of these communist regimes, "liberal democracy as a system of government […] conquered rival ideologies", and thus it "may constitute the endpoint of humankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government", and as such it brings about "the end of history" (1992, xi). He contended that "the twin principles of liberty and equality" are faultless, and therefore "the *ideal* of liberal democracy could not be improved on" (1992, xi). Fukuyama's books from the 1990s reveal a profound optimism about our economic, political, and technological advancement: according to his vision, we are on the right path towards a "posthuman future" of ever longer and healthier lives, stable and ever more tolerant liberal democracies, continuous technological and economic development, and a happy, affluent, and therefore peaceful global community. The best of it all is that in order to achieve this global utopia we do not really have to do anything extraordinary, we only have to let the machine roll.

It is truly remarkable that only thirty years after the heyday of this paradigm (formulated by undoubtedly one of the best minds on the planet) everyone with a BA degree or with a broadsheet newspaper subscription could mention several reasons why Fukuyama's vision was doomed to fail. To be fair with Fukuyama, however, one must not forget that the nineties produced several "best years ever". Communism collapsed, "the West" won the Cold War, the nuclear disarmament agreements finally relieved humanity from the threat of imminent nuclear war and extinction, the unimaginable affluence that neoliberal capitalism produced silenced most of its critics, and much of the intelligentsia of the developed world seemed to be quite happy with its position of limited cultural responsibility. A whole number of outstanding books were written in both the human and the social sciences (for the context of this paper, the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Ajun Appadurai, and Jean Baudrillard come to mind), yet compared to the role of intellectuals in communist and state socialist Eastern Europe, 1968 France, or the crisis-stricken 21st century, one cannot help but associate that pre-crisis era with intellectual conformism. This attitude was mostly due to an acceptance of the basic social, economic, and cultural settings of the system and a withdrawal into academic practices and ways of thinking that only challenged the status quo on paper, in theory, and in small academic circles. In other words, it was not only Fukuyama who thought that we should just let the machine roll.

When trying to define our present condition as a crisis situation encountered at the failure of a much-wished-for utopia, it is important to widen the historical context and look for the deeper causes of our present situation. It is easy to blame neoliberal capitalism and the senseless, irresponsible greed that fuels it for the social and environmental damage it caused; and it is similarly easy to ridicule the utopian vision that rapid technological progress and the fall of communism led Fukuyama to. The point to keep in mind, however, is that such wilful blindness to the collateral damages that come with material wealth or the utopian wishful

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

fantasies associated with the idea of progress are systemic issues resulting from the very spirit of modernity. The fantasy of transcending the human condition, of becoming superhuman (or post-human) is as central to the modern world as our habit of turning a blind eye to the long-term consequences of short-term economic gains. Though we often associate modernity with science and rationality, arguably it has always been partly based on unquestioned, non-empirical assumptions (for example, about the source of happiness, free will, or the desirability of control over nature), and it has always been propelled forward by the (almost religious) belief in progress, which will eventually lead us to a utopian state of affairs. The key point for my present argument is that our late modern pre-crisis worldview, which we recognize as ignorant, irresponsible, and detrimental today, was not simply a result of greedy bankers, cocaine-sniffing stock investors, or utopian technophiles. This worldview was very much rooted in modernity's core assumptions, which often function like objects of faith. No doubt, it is partly this irrational, secular belief-system-like aspect of modernity that is responsible for the above mentioned systemic blindness and detrimental side-effects as well as for the difficulties of changing course. The 21st-century crisis of grand narratives also involves the crisis of our previous beliefs, the correction of which is much more difficult, emotionally challenging, and time-consuming than, for example, changing the regulations of the financial sector or modifying an algorithm. In other words, dealing with such a pervasive crisis as the early 21st-century one is never simply a matter of rational, practical, or intellectual rearrangement.

The above considerations may also explain why most academics working in the human and social sciences were fascinated by Fukuyama's utopian vision, why we were more than happy to believe that we only have to fight such good old, well-defined enemies of modern social emancipation as bigotry, autocracy, racism, and sexism, and then everything was going to be awesome. These well-known social maladies, I would argue, were inherited from the dominant post-Second World War intellectual mainstream (or, more specifically, from the influential social movements of the late sixties). Before the crisis situations of the early 20th century, it seemed that the work of the 68-ers was successful, that these mediaeval leftovers were in retreat. It often seemed that we had won all the important historical battles. Most of our concepts, theories, and academic practices reflected this comfortable and comforting view.

Retrospectively, however, looking back from 2021, it appears like a very different story. Now it seems that by the time the new century arrived, this post-1960s intellectual paradigm had gradually turned into a gilded cage, a noble, rewarding, yet intellectually restrictive, potentially treacherous trend. It was and perhaps still is a *gilded*, rewarding paradigm: one that clearly puts "us" on the "right side" of history, one that comes with the feeling of moral superiority, and one that we can practice comfortably, since the ideological metanarrative of

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

this paradigm often works as a safety net for our analyses and interpretations. Yet, this paradigm was also a *cage* in some ways that we realize only now. Looking back from 2021, does not this paradigm seem a bit *too* comfortable, *too* gratifying, offering a position a bit *too* narcissistic? Was it this feeling of moral and intellectual comfort that effectively blinded much of the intelligentsia to the "new" set of maladies we are facing today? Were these systemic errors of our pre-crisis grand narratives that assisted the rise of such issues as growing inequality, the rise of segregated and selfish elites, the birth of the global precariat, the return of religious fundamentalism, or political tribalism?

In the light of this (relatively) new set of social maladies, Fukuyama's 1990s vision, as well as the intellectual paradigms built around it, seem both utopian and naïve. As Fukuyama himself has also pointed out with unparalleled clarity in *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018), a whole number of previously unrecognized damaging processes came to fruition in the new century, resulting in a profound shift in our thinking. Fukuyama's main topic in this book, identity politics, is one of the best examples of the crisis of late-20th-century approaches and the grand narratives they were built upon. About thirty years after his end-of-history narrative went global, here Fukuyama demonstrates how an intellectual paradigm that seemed to enhance emancipation and social justice may also fuel social polarization, political tribalism, and the decline of tolerance. Such examples have woken us up to the fact that history is far from being over, some of humanity's most dramatic battles probably lie ahead of us, and in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century, we, intellectuals must leave our comfort zones, sort out our intellectual heritage, and learn to think more critically and more responsibly.

Of course, such paradigm shifts are less of a novelty for Eastern European intellectuals. After all, we did not have so much time to get *that* comfortable in that utopian bubble. Our institutions and positions were never made of ivory. My guess is that to many Eastern European intellectuals, such as Svetlana Boym, who witnessed the false promises and eventual demise of the communist version of the "end-of-history" narrative, the fact that history did not have a sublime end-point (contrary to Hegel, Marx, and the early Fukuyama) did not come as much of a surprise. As opposed to Fukuyama's distinctly modern concept of a "coherent development of modern societies" into "liberal democracies and technologically driven capitalism" (Fukuyama 2002, xii), Boym called attention to the utopian wishful thinking underlying (and potentially undermining) the project of modernity, and the characteristic instability of modern societies. Boym was also keen to highlight the ways our desire for a better future are repeatedly compromised by our yearning for (the fantasy of) a home outside or before history. Boym's crucial insight was that this interminable nostalgia is inextricably intertwined with the very idea of progress: "the sentiment (of nostalgia) [...] is at

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

the very core of the modern condition" (2001, xvi), and "nostalgic manifestations are side-effects of the teleology of progress" (10).

A comparative reading of Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) and Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future* (2002) may offer one the possibility to notice some of the mistaken assumptions and systemic blind spots that led to the 21st-century crisis of grand narratives. Reading these two books together one has the impression that Fukuyama's statistics-based, informative, rational arguments about the intoxicating prospect of eventually transcending the human condition feel overly cerebral and somehow reductive of what we know about the driving forces of history. Interestingly enough (and most gratifyingly for those of us who work in the humanities), Boym's observations, made on the grounds of cultural and art history, prove to be more "rounded", more sensitive, and thus more accurate with regard to the possible blind spots of modernity. One of the most obvious points where Boym got it right (and Fukuyama did not) is the issue of nostalgia. In Boym's formulation, "modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space: before entry into history" (2001, 8).

History proved Boym right: in the post-crisis world, this kind of nostalgic longing for imagined pasts is one of the most stable currencies. It was a main factor in the Brexit campaign's emphasis on Britain's past greatness, in Trump's idealization of America's "great" industrial past as well as in the rhetorical patterns of countless right-wing populist politicians over the world. It seems that the nostalgic, almost religious longing for a pre-historical edenic time and place can be successfully covered up by (and projected into) a utopian view of the future as long as modernity is delivering on its material promises. However, as soon as the rapture of ever-increasing material affluence is threatened by a crisis, this projection collapses, we lose hope of a fantasy future that could bring us what we lack, so we fall back on the regressive trails of nostalgia. This is precisely what we may witness in the post-crisis world: it is this temporal reorientation of desire and fantasies from the future to the past that delegitimizes progress-oriented metanarratives, re-tribalizes human communities, and causes a major ideological crisis that echoes through the entire social, political, and cultural sphere. There is a number of intellectuals, such as Stuart Sim, who regard this as a sure sign that we are approaching the end of modernity (as we knew it):

> Financial crisis, environmental crisis: what is the combination of credit crunch and global warming telling us about the way we live? I would contend that such events signal modernity has reached its limit as a cultural form. In consequence, we have to face up to the prospect of life "after

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

> modernity" where a very different kind of mental set than the one we have been indoctrinated with will be required. Modernity, my argument will go, has collapsed under the weight of its internal contradictions; the modern world's insatiable need for technologically driven economic progress has finally been revealed as unsustainable and, even more importantly, potentially destructive of both the planet and the socio-economic systems so painstakingly developed over the past few centuries. We have been encouraged to believe that those systems would roll on into the indefinite future, yielding ever better returns as they went; now, we shall have to think again. (Sim 2010, ix)

It is hard to deny that the series of the above mentioned 21st-century crises have seriously undermined the fundamental belief system of modernity. This is especially true, and is not likely to change any time soon, if one includes, like Sim, the effects of the ongoing ecological crisis as well. Bauman and Bordoni come to the same conclusion in *State of Crisis*, arguing that "the crisis facing the Western world is not temporary, but the sign of a profound change that involves the whole economic and social system and will have long-lasting effects" (2014, vii). Such studies of the post-crisis world and dramatic social, cultural, and economic realignments are convincing, and it is clear that we are living a "state of crisis", during precarious, transitory times, yet whether this amounts to the "end of modernity" remains to be seen. When declaring such a dramatic end point of modernity, are we not influenced by the very same cultural logic that we are trying to understand? Is it not possible that, somewhat paradoxically, it is the very cultural logic of modernity that would make us announce yet another historical turning point, this time the end of modernity?

As opposed to Sim, I would argue that it is too early to announce the death of the modern project. Perhaps ours is just another shift in the history of modernity: a turning point for sure, definitely crisis-like, a drastic change of direction with screaming tires and burning brakes, yet more likely a time of sorting out the heritage of modernity than moving "beyond" it entirely. Thus, as a safeguard against dramatic declarations of Fukuyama's and Sim's style, I would rather resort to a Boym-like definition of the present, early-21st-century crisis of modernity, which highlights its instability, uncertainty, and loss of direction. Thus, in order to denote the present stage of modernity, I propose appropriating Boym's concept of the *off-modern*. In the context of architecture and art history, Boym defines off-modern in the following ways:

> In the twenty-first century, modernity is our antiquity. We live with its ruins, which we incorporate into our present. Unlike the thinkers of the last *fin de siècle*, we neither mourn nor celebrate the end of history or the end

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

> of art. We have to chart a new road between unending development and nostalgia, find an alternative logic for the contradictions of contemporary culture. Instead of fast-changing prepositions—"post," "anti," "neo," "trans," and "sub"—that suggest an implacable movement forward, against, or beyond, I propose to go off: "off " as in "off the path," or way off, off-Broadway, off-brand, off the wall, and occasionally off-color. "Off-modern" is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history, at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress. (2017, 3)

Thus, Boym's concept of the off-modern, when applied to the post-crisis world, may well denote the present crisis of knowledge, the sense of confusion, the loss of direction, and the general questioning of modernity as a solid, well-founded, forward-moving, progressive historical movement. In other words, the concept of the off-modern signifies the feeling that we have lost our way, we have gone off the right track, this is not where we are meant to be, that something feels *off* with the project of modernity. As I propose it, the term signifies this crisis in our worldview and systems of knowledge, it stands for a socio-cultural dysfunction, an unravelling of little-understood fantasies, a painful disenchantment about our (almost religiously held) beliefs about some utopian, teleological metanarratives. In this sense, the off-modern is not meant to be the new name of the next historical era. It may always turn out to be a temporary dysfunction; one can never rule out the possibility that we will eventually sort out the heritage of modernity, get rid of the malfunctions, clarify our misguided preconceptions, throw out the garbage, recycle modernity in a purified, friendlier, smarter, more habitable way that does not feel this off. Hence the feeling of temporariness and transitoriness of our era: only time will tell how long this sorting out will take and how much damage we (and the planet) will have to endure before it does not feel so off anymore.

If you love films or have a cinematic imagination, you may imagine the situation in the thinly disguised allegory of a Danny-Boyle-style thriller. There is a group of hikers in the high mountains, on an excursion that looked like fun, the scenery is amazing, the challenges are thrilling and motivating. We already got quite far and feel quite high on our advance. The top seems so near, yet there are ominous signs, first easy to miss, later more pronounced, and the most experienced/learned/traumatized/sceptical one in the group keeps reminding us of the dangers that this altitude naturally entails. And then, suddenly, something bad happens. We realize that we have lost our way, that the path we have been following is a treacherous and dangerous one, causing the death of one of the hikers. The group is shocked. This is not what we signed up for, this was not part of the plan, this is not what the excursion was meant to be. Who is to blame? What shall we do?

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

When did we lose our way? Which decision was wrong? Suddenly we would all like to go home (*nostalgia*), and forget about this foolish trip altogether. But the damage cannot be undone, someone is dead, we are all in danger, and time is running out. It is hard to keep panic under control or not to resort to blaming each other. Some of us are still in the phase of denial, repeating our pre-crisis account of events, claiming that the damage has nothing to do with the path we have been following. But nobody can really keep a clear mind. The loss and the danger pushes the group towards emotional outbursts and irrational, excessive responses. Fraternity, solidarity, and friendship are unravelling. This is the moment of crisis in the medical sense of the term, the time when the future of the patient hangs in the balance (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 7), when we need clear thinking and solidarity most, yet that is swept away by fear and anger. In Danny Boyle thrillers – as in *Shallow Grave* (1994), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Sunshine* (2007) –, such unexpected events easily let loose the pathological, destructive underside of human beings, so we have to understand where we are and find the best possible track while also wrestling with all the dirty stuff that was buried (in shallow graves) underneath the nice and proper surface we maintained while everything looked alright. Will history follow the storyline of Boyle's thrillers? If so, more of the previously buried, off-smelling foul stuff is likely to emerge, and we are to see plenty of gore before we can reach any kind of narrative closure.

Such a Danny-Boyle-style thriller gets frighteningly close to the off-modern early 21st century. This is the time when the smell becomes intolerable, so we start opening the shallow graves of the modern project. As it turns out, most of our glittering modern skyscrapers have been built on these shallow graves, so the structures are compromised and instable. We are only beginning to understand why we are being visited by so many "ghosts of the past", those obscene creatures that are so off-sync with what this project was meant to be. The off-modern is also the time of encountering these bizarre, pre-modern leftovers, behaviour types, social processes, irrational responses that we thought we had already moved beyond (Boym 2017, 5). The grand project of modernity is sick, wounded by the failure of its latest utopian vision, tormented by its costly past mistakes, so it easily falls prey to all those who would like to feed on it: nationalist populists (like Trump or Orbán), shady autocrats (communist China, Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey), and religious fundamentalists (mostly the Islamists). Their critique of "the West", modernity, or capitalism is often correct, yet their responses to the crisis situation tend to be regressive and cynically opportunistic. In the present, off-modern ideological landscape, these regressive answers (that offer discount tickets to different historical or mythical times) are at war, at *the* culture war, with the (increasingly more confused, irrational, dogmatic, militant, and panicky) modernist progress beliefs. This confused and confusing, off-modern dispute takes place in an institutional and legal environment that was designed during

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

the good days, for the good days to come (no wonder that it fails so often and so spectacularly in times of crisis), and is mostly still run by a political élite and its supporting technocracy and epistemocracy (journalists, academics, government advisors, think tanks) who were educated and rose to their status during the glorious pre-crisis years.

One of the best examples of this off-modern confusion of historical grand narratives and the corresponding social imaginaries is the rise of a new kind of hybrid political formation that we usually (somewhat simplistically) refer to as nationalist populism. Let me refer to an example "close to home": the Orbán governments, which have been governing Hungary since 2010, can be regarded as a typical post-crisis, off-modern political formation. First, their breakthrough landslide election victory in 2010 was in no small part a reaction to the 2008 global financial crisis, and the ensuing disenchantment with global neoliberal capitalism (and the political mainstream that had decided to let it loose). In other words, the political formation and ideological narrative established by the Orbán governments would be unimaginable without the crisis of our pre-crisis grand narratives. What we have seen in Hungary since 2010 (and probably elsewhere in the world too) is a typical crisis response, a reactive political-ideological makeshift fabricated as an answer to the delegitimization of the pre-crisis mainstream.

The Orbán regime's policies and political messages also reveal a profound shift in the political narratives of late modernity: in an increasingly threatening, confusing, rapidly changing world, the Orbán regime offers more predictability and security at the price of less freedom and less democratic values. This is a clear reversal of our modern assumptions about progress and democratization, which entails many characteristically off-modern inner contradictions. One of these is the paradox of freedom: Orbán's 19th-century style narrative of constant fight for national freedom and independence (usually understood as freedom from the EU's supra-national bureaucracy) is accompanied by a strong state power (with few checks and balances) that does not regard individual citizens as capable of making informed, free decisions and upholds a system that reduces free democratic citizens to obedient followers of an autocratic, semi-religious personality cult.

There is a similar, off-modern mismatch between Orbán's recycling of 19th-century nationalism, his conservative critique of late-20th-century modernity, and his characteristically postmodern operational definition of truth. The media and communications apparatus of Orbán's hybrid regime seems to be founded on the recognitions that human beings relate to the world through narratives (see Lyotard's elaboration of narrative knowledge in *The Post-Modern Condition*), that "metaphors are more tenacious than facts" (so as to use Paul de Man's famous phrasing from *Allegories of Reading* 1979, 5), that cognitive dissonance created by empirical evidence never seriously endangers the popularity of emotionally

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

embedded, reassuring political narratives, hammered by a professional media empire. In other words, the system's regressive, anti-modernist nationalism (in which "postmodern" is a swearword) is promoted by a characteristically postmodern, "post-crisis" and "post-truth" media apparatus, which relies on some of the very principles and technologies of power that it criticizes in Western democracies.

My goal here is not so much to reiterate a liberal critique of the Orbán regime. Rather, I wish to emphasize the extent to which this (apparently very successful) political formation manifests many characteristic features of the above described, crisis-ridden, off-modern cultural logic of the early 21st century. Is it possible that Orbán understands something about the 21st century that politicians in more affluent countries, in more privileged circumstances have failed to comprehend? Is it possible that after all Orbán has a more accurate view of some problematic issues of modernity, for example, about the human need for security, the irrational aspect of politics, the illusionary nature of free will, the nature and need of dignity, or the seductiveness of tribal identity narratives?

As such examples may indicate, our current off-modern world and its crisis of grand narratives can be intellectually fruitful because such symptoms of the post-crisis, off-modern world reveal questions about some of the fundamental assumptions of modernity, and as such they are to be studied and learnt from. Ironically, our "post-truth" era has revealed several "truths" of late-20th-century capitalism and liberal democracies that were effectively covered up or neglected during our intoxicating pre-crisis dream of the end of history.

Such examples may explain why I associate the off-modern with the state (and sense) of crisis, which is not only financial or environmental but also social, political, cultural, and ideological (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 21–25). This is why one could argue that the disorienting time of the off-modern amounts to nothing less than what Foucault used to call a *coupure épistémologique*, an epistemological break (Foucault 1997). In other words, in the 21st century, the *meaning* of things (in the most general, radical, and philosophical sense) has changed. Democracy, progress, citizenship, free will, equality, liberalism, capitalism – none of the keywords of our late-20th-century worldview were left unaltered by this profound shift. Things simply do not mean the same as they did before the crisis, and they probably never will. Furthermore, true to the spirit of an epistemological rupture, now several of our key pre-crisis concepts seem naïve, ideologically motivated, or simply based on mistaken assumptions (Fraser 2007, xvii–xviii; Foucault 1997, 4). This is why the temporality of crisis is also that of a cut, a break, a moment when the constructedness and discontinuity of history comes to light (Foucault 1997, 4–22; Webb 2013, 12). This is also why the off-modern is also a time of intellectual reflection and comprehension. We are disoriented beings living the times of an epistemological rupture, a profound and

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

radical socio-cultural and political rearrangement that Western societies have not experienced since the Second World War.

Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic can be regarded as only the latest, albeit loudest, and so far most devastating wake-up call. It reminds us of how degrading ecosystems make such infectious diseases become more likely, how globalization has made humanity vulnerable to the spread of deadly viruses; it revealed the fragility of economies reliant on global supply chains, highlighted the value of stability and safety in a global system designed with the sole goal of profit-maximization, increased the social rift between white-collar workers (whose jobs can be easier done online) and manual workers, and, in the long run, it is further increasing inequality both in individual states as well as in the global context. It is a wake-up call reminding us that the most important challenges of our times can only be solved on a global scale, and that we need to readjust, get rid of our previous blind spots, and develop the kinds of institutions, theories, policies, and narratives that enable us to tackle such crises. We need to understand that not only the job descriptions of physicians and medical workers changed overnight: the intellectual elites have to wake up from their comforting slumber too. Talking about culture is not a comfortable classroom task anymore. What we think, how we interpret texts, how we conceptualize social and cultural phenomena have acquired a new significance. We need new stories about ourselves, new concepts and theories about humanity, new priority lists, and a newly engaged intelligentsia to help humanity through the challenges of the new century.

## Appendix: Questions and Answers

*Boróka Prohászka-Rád*: Is it possible that the crisis of humanities, which we have been talking about for decades, can be surpassed exactly at this point when the humanities seem to have a vital role in re-shaping narratives about humanity?

*György Kalmár*: I do hope that that is the case. I agree that in recent decades the social and cultural role of the humanities have been continuously decreasing. I see this as a mistake that can be traced back to some misconceptions that our dominant cultural logic dictates. Misconceptions, for example, about how to build a good human society or what constitutes a good life. (I use these seemingly anachronistic terms with reference to Aristotle.) It seems that we have to reinvestigate some of our key ideas about such issues, such as what a good life is or what we really need. The 21st century will have to challenge our current ideas about materialism, individualism, or consumerism. This cultural mythology will have to change, and the humanities as well as social values and cultural values will have to re-emerge as important elements of the new cultural logic.

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

The humanities should have a crucial role in this process. That is us. Therefore, what we do, what we think and write do matter.

*Renáta Zsámba*: What is your opinion about Huntington's concept of the clash of civilizations and his critique of Fukuyama? Do you find Huntington's ideas relevant to the present-day crisis?

*György Kalmár*: That is an important question, and also a difficult one. Some political and ideological tribes still consider Huntington's vision crucial; they think that the future is going to look like that. I think it is possible that in certain parts of the world events will unfold according to this vision. However, in my opinion, the challenges that lie ahead of us can only be answered globally, by getting beyond this tribal, "clash-of-civilizations" logic. If we keep fighting these tribal wars, then we are basically finished. Perhaps this is the greatest social experiment in human history, whether the better angels of our hearts will prevail. The results are not in yet. I hope Huntington was mistaken, but I have the feeling that there will be many moments in the next fifty years when we think that after all he was right. Perhaps those will be the times when you do not want to watch the news or switch on the TV because you do not want to watch what is going on.

What I focused on in this lecture, however, was not intercivilizational conflict but rather the crisis and inner shifts in what Huntington refers to as Western Civilization. In my opinion, the present crisis is mostly due to the inner problems of modernity. I hope I could also indicate why what Huntington calls Western Civilization cannot be treated as a solid, distinct, monolithic entity with a transhistorical essence. It is changing right in front of our eyes.

*Constantin Parvulescu*: You are an intellectual working at a university and supported by national funds. As an embedded intellectual within these institutions, do you feel that your ideas are supported institutionally? How do you see our institutions? In the processes you described, institutions are quite important.

*György Kalmár*: I think there is an institutional crisis, mostly because our institutions were designed in the pre-crisis, "good years", with that Fukuyama-style vision in sight, with the idea that it is going to be plain sailing. If, for example, you look at how the European Union treats the pandemic, how slow and clumsy it is, you realize that when a crisis hits, these institutions do not really work. Ironically, the best advertisements for nationalist populists has been probably the European Union itself, by being so clumsy in these crisis situations. Marginal political figures on the other hand, such as nationalist populists, responded to the crisis better than the establishment. They were quicker to understand what is going on, what the weak points of the mainstream are and how to exploit that. I think they surf these waves of change better than the mainstream. My theory is that the more privileged, powerful, and wealthy an institution is, the more protected it is from crises, the longer it can pretend that everything is okay, and

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**

the later it will respond. That is why the more mainstream an institution used to be, the clumsier it became after the crisis. Smaller and perhaps more marginal institutions were quicker to respond. That is why we have to think and find ways to reform our institutions for the new century. We need to put thinking into it. That is where we can intervene.

*Anna Menyhért*: I do not see the channels and the frameworks how this change in the status of humanities can happen. What we can see is the general devaluation of humanities at all levels. You talked about Fukuyama being naïve and too optimistic, but now I think that *you* are a bit too optimistic because you did not say *how* this change will happen.

*György Kalmár*: Perhaps if you enlarge the time frame, it becomes easier to understand. It is hard to make predictions. I do not have my crystal ball with me right now, but my bet is that by the end of the century the humanities, and all the cultural and social values they promote, will be more important. But before we get there, we have some radical and shocking crisis situations to live through. Probably the global population will be halved by then, our institutions and political formations will be quite different, our concepts of life and what is a good life will be quite different. The present form of modernity will probably look like a historical relic. But it is a long way till there, and we have to reach several historical breaking-points before we start changing these paradigms, because we are so deeply rooted in this form of modernity. We have been practising this for at least three hundred years. That does not change from one decade to the other. Twenty bad years of crisis, like the ones we have behind, will not change a cultural logic practised for three hundred years. But I think it will eventually change. One of the things that will change it is a whole new series of crises that will break this cultural logic. The other, hopefully, will be a whole set of new discoveries, not just technological but also about human beings and communities. In my opinion, we have to start putting ideas into this change, to create a pool, so that when a crisis hits we can rely on these ideas and theories. They should be around, in the minds of policy-makers. We have to start working beforehand; it is not enough to react when something hits us. At least, that is what my crystal ball told me last night, but it is not always reliable, you know…

BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)

## Works Cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt and Carlo Bordoni. 2014. *State of Crisis.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

2017. *The Off-Modern*. New York: Bloomsbury.

de Man, Paul. 1979. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale UP.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* London: Routledge.

Fraser, Zachary Luke. 2007. "Introduction: The Category of Formalization: From Epistemological Break to Truth Procedure." In Alan Badiou. *The Concept Model. An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, ed. and trans. by Zachary Luke Fraser and Tzuchien Tho, xiii–lxv. Melbourne: re.press.

Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

2002. *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution.* London: Picador.

2018. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment.* London: Profile Books.

Sim, Stuart. 2010. *The End of Modernity: What the Financial Crisis Has Taught Us.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Webb, David. 2013. *Foucault's Archaeology. Science and Transformation.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

**BDD-A33002 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:20 UTC)**