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Americas, a continent in crisis?

Les Amériques, continent de la crise ?

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- 1 The first decade of the third millenary ended with a crisis of the Western world. Whether it was a crisis of the capitalist system, of the Western version of development, or a crisis of Western values, its effects unfurled globally, hitting Europe more strongly than any other region on Earth, and it continues to shake the foundations of the Eurozone – or even those of the entire European model. But it was really in America that it all started, when Lehman Brothers collapsed in September 2008, sending shock waves throughout the financial system.
- 2 Since the American housing mortgage crisis of 2007, the crisis that is still going on today – much like the emblematic crisis of 1929 – remains associated to America, its starting point. Could America be the continent of “crises”? It seems tempting to say so. From the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, it was in the United States that capitalism underwent its most violent crises. As for Latin America, one may remember the great turbulence it went through over the 20th century’s last decades, when confronted to the plague of hyperinflation and debt – not to mention social convulsion and politico-institutional instability.
- 3 The present issue is the fruit of a collective reflection that started during IDA’s annual colloquium held at the Sorbonne on November 19 and 20, 2009 by IHEAL-Université Paris 3, Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines and the CERALE-ESCP Europe around the theme “Confronting the crisis in the Americas.” Once the latter was defined, a number of diverse academic events contributed to further enrich the reflection, such as IDA’s “Economies and economists in the Americas seminars and the conference organized by CERALE on November 16, 2011 that reflected on, among other issues, that of “Inflation and the monetary management of crises within the Group of Twenty (G20).”
- 4 It does not seem irrelevant to analyze the crisis at the level of the American continent, all the more so in the context of *IdeAs*, the keystone publication of the Institut des Amériques. This continent spreading from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego shows the face of a

complex and “extreme” Western world where, for a hundred years, the capitalism of the 19th century’s central and hegemonic power has coexisted with “peripheral” Latin American capitalism, to finally witness, since the first part of this century, the rise of new emerging countries – with Brazil leading the way.

- 5 The aim of the articles contained in this issue is not so much to answer the question raised above by looking for some permanent continental features behind the present disruptions than to offer a variety of outlooks on the ongoing ruptures from North to South and evaluating the latter’s impact. Could the crisis be seen as a test revealing a certain type of American identity? Or should it rather be considered a stage in an American chronology inescapably destined for an apocalyptic future? Rather than seeking continental coherence where there has always been a disparity of situations, standards of living and levels of development, the present authors chose to analyze the crisis in the Americas in its various dimensions, whether economic, social or political... As far as the temporal horizon is concerned, even if 2009 is considered pivotal, certain authors go back in time to illustrate their views, while others deliberately look to the future.
- 6 One thing seems to be clear: capitalism really is in crisis. What used to serve as a model until recently, at once from an economic, political and social point of view – and even a model of civilization associated with the Western world –, has lost part of its attraction for the rest of the planet. Deindustrialization, unemployment, inequalities, disowned political parties and the prevailing malaise are hardly the stuff our dreams are made on, even if the appetite for consumption in emerging countries leads one to believe that the general desire to catch up with the “model” has not lost all of its strength.
- 7 The concept of “crisis” creates through its omnipresence a conceptualization challenge that Laurence Whitehead tries to answer. In “Crisis in the Americas: Is There a Regionally Distinctive Kind?” the author suggests a number of approaches for tackling the concept and the possible American specificities regarding crises. The essays that follow are presented so as to facilitate the reader’s global comprehension of the crisis. Jean-Luc Tendil offers an approach to North American crises examined in the light of the past 170 years (“Les crises aux États-Unis depuis 1837 : facteurs de renouveau et de redéploiement”), while Carlos Quenan presents a Latin American interpretation of the crisis (“América Latina frente a la crisis económica internacional : buena resistencia global y diversidad de situaciones nacionales”). The latter text not only examines the effects produced by the crisis but its pedagogical aspects illustrated by the analysis of the various reactions that it has given rise to among the different States involved: can the macroeconomic management of the crisis in Latin America teach us a lesson for the future? Could we better prepare ourselves to the crises of tomorrow? Likewise, in the article “Paying your Visa with your Master Card : la spirale infernale des cartes de crédit aux États-Unis,” Marie-Christine Pauwels analyzes the crisis’ impact on a specific sector of economic, political and academic activity from the perspective of personal debt. As for Jean-Baptiste Velut (“Les États-Unis et “l’autre crise”: l’aide extérieure américaine à l’épreuve de la crise alimentaire mondiale”), he examines the role played by American politics in the food crisis of 2008, and observes the mechanisms of United States foreign aid. In her article, Carole Massey-Bertonèche, does not only illustrate the effects of the crisis in a specific field, but also analyzes the State’s answer to the problems caused by the crisis in the realm of higher education.

- 8 The issue will then focus on various ways of relating the crisis, notably through fiction. Jacques Pothier's article ("From Intrinsic to Radical Crisis in the United States : A Cultural Perspective") resituates the current crisis in the history of literary representations of crises in North America since Puritan apocalypticism. André Cartapanis, in his prospective analysis on the monetary and financial challenges of the post-crisis era in Latin America ("Les défis monétaires et financiers de l'après-crise en Amérique latine"), questions the long-term impact of the counter-cyclic system adopted in Latin America which, even though it was less affected than other regions of the globe, nonetheless presents certain existing fragilities that necessitate a degree of wariness. Finally, Florence Pinot de Villechenon ("Los perímetros Americanos frente a la crisis y a la globalización") examines the role played by the crisis in the re-composition of American regional and sub-regional spaces, and in the setting of new geopolitical balance.
- 9 This reflection on the various types of integration in the Americas will find an echo in Bernardo Sorj's text, "A dinâmica Regional além dos mitos," published in the section "Eclairages." In the same section, Jean-Michel Saussois's contribution ("Les solutions de sortie de crise sont en crise") revisits the observation that capitalism is in a crisis even to explore the possible exits and solutions. The issue ends on Edgar Morin's text ("Les Amériques face à la Crise : exposé"), which consists in a reflection on shaken up beliefs, questionings, contradictions and ruptures within American societies.
- 10 It is thus via a deliberately composite approach that this issue handles the question of crises and their effects on the American continent: how do crises emerge? What effects do they produce? What kind of response strategies do they give rise to? What lessons do they teach? The authors' intention is none other than to provide the reader with a number of elements that will enable him or her to better understand the crisis phenomena on this continent, while illustrating the contribution of American crises to the comprehension of the global crisis – hence the wide array of contents in this issue, the plurality of languages and the great variety of expressions, manifestations and representations regarding the crisis.
- 11 The reader is invited to an eclectic experience with its spatial and temporal discrepancies. In no way do the authors wish to indulge in Cassandra-like predictions and try to foretell the future: their sole aim is to allow the reader to better understand the ongoing mutations.
- 12 Such preoccupations will be further dwelt upon in the next *IdeAs* issue devoted to the social manifestations of the crisis and its impact on the working world: the mutations of wage labor, the evolution of trade union activity in the United States, the response strategies of a certain professional category – miners – in Bolivia... a number of topics that, thoroughly developed, will shed light on the conception and organization of work in the Americas.

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Florence Pinot de Villechenon es profesora asociada en ESCP-Europe, donde coordina la cooperación académica con América Latina y dirige el CERALE (Centro de Estudios e Investigación América Latina-Europa). Egresada de la Universidad de Buenos Aires y de la Universidad Paris IV-Sorbonne, obtuvo su doctorado en la Universidad Paris VII. Sus trabajos de investigación se centran en la política latinoamericana de la UE y de los países miembros, las relaciones Europa-América Latina, las estrategias de internacionalización de las empresas europeas - particularmente las PYMES- en América Latina y la gestión de grandes proyectos culturales internacionales. Florence Pinot de Villechenon también imparte clases en el IHEAL y trabaja como experta en cooperación académica para los ministerios franceses de Asuntos Exteriores y de Educación. Es miembro de la Chambre du Brésil en France. Entre sus publicaciones figuran: « Cooperación descentralizada Europa-América Latina: contribuciones de la política de cooperación comunitaria a la consolidación de la democracia en Latinoamérica », Política pública y democracia en América Latina, F. Maríñez y V. Garza Cantú ed., Ed. Porrúa, 2009 ; L'Argentine, terre d'investissement ?, (Ed.) Harmattan, Paris, 2008 ; « La latinidad: una cuestión de afinidad cultural en las relaciones eurolatinoamericanas », Homenaje a Carlos A. Ronchi March, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2003 ; Fêtes géantes. Les expositions universelles pour quoi faire ?, (Ed.) Autrement, coll. Essais, 2000. Pinot@escpeurope.eu

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