

Civil disturbance: an unconventional crisis

There have been signs of discontent in urban areas in both the UK and France this year, and the emergency services are in the front line (see following pages). Just before CRJ went to press these rumblings erupted into full blown violence in France. **Patrick Lagadec** comments on the recent riots

FRANCE IS CURRENTLY in the grip of a 'social Katrina'. Exactly as in the United States, the first response to events was characterised by stupor and absence. It is now of paramount importance for everyone involved to avoid the lethal 'bad old ways', the inevitable state of confusion and abdication.

Haemorrhage

When faced with a major haemorrhage, the priority is to save the patient, and to a certain extent this has been done with the response to the riots in France. But the situation has taken on such a dynamic of its own that clear strategies must be evolved to go beyond damage limitation. The question is what should these strategies be? Experience shows that four main questions must serve as a framework...

Firstly what is the nature of this crisis? As in all 'out of the box' crises, the riots in the French suburbs lie outside of both our mental maps and our established codes of governance. Obviously there are some well known ingredients: Crowded suburban estates with run-down tower blocks, poverty, unemployment and desperation. However, a double threshold has been crossed, that of the unacceptable – marginalised

neighbourhoods – and that of the non-negotiable – confiscation of certain areas of the Republic.

Dodging the problem is not an option, given the real danger that parts of the population are threatened by a total loss of a framework of values, starting with the loss of authority – a fundamental founding principle of democratic society. We are clearly faced with a situation of collective responsibility.

It is in this well known breeding ground, currently stirred to a foment in France, that new trends are erupting and pulverising existing schemes of interpretation and planning. We are confronting events that occur within a worldwide context of gross uncertainty and major, even brutal changes. We are also facing the construction of a personal identity based on violence and death.

These issues are by no means restricted to one particular country or region. It was in utter disbelief that the world watched as the destitute and deprived people of New Orleans fired at helicopters sent to help and rescue them, forcing Washington to take action which seemed more appropriate for a country on the brink of chaos than for the world's superpower.

The context for these events is a world of

endlessly proliferating networks, which are prone to triggering stupefying chain reactions, where whole units of society can be smashed to pieces or subject to massive and instant coagulation and where extremes become the norm.

What are the pitfalls? 'Unthinkable' crisis situations provoke structural responses which very quickly turn out to be serious dead ends. First, negative words were used to describe some of the youths in these areas of France. An inappropriate response could also include sanitised speeches, limp consultation or the rubber stamping of groups determined to impose the worst sorts of measures. Others suggest sending in the army, which is totally irrelevant. The semantics of war are no solution for what is essentially a problem of civil law and (dis)order.

Manipulation

Another pitfall is the intellectual trap; it is important not to confuse current events with those of May 1968, a period of student protest, rioting and unrest in France. In these confrontations, children of 13 years old are in the 'visible' front line. They have no spokespeople, they have no claims, they have no revolutionary dreams.

The very expression of the situation is biased:

television broadcasts are largely what has been formatted by those interviewed, and manipulation can be child's play in every sense of the word.

Secondly, there is the economic trap. Given that this revolt is to a certain extent a cry of help simply to be allowed to 'exist', it would be wrong to send back the message that our world economy does not need the disinherited, or unprofitable citizens.

Finally, the cultural trap – faced with a critical need to be inventive, the major risk is that we fall back on archaic models. Diversity can and must be converted into riches, it is not – and must not – be seen as an insurmountable obstacle.

Obviously, as is the rule in all extreme events, the risk of the situation escalating into deadly confrontation must not be neglected. There are always determined groups who operate with this type of objective. Both paranoia and naivety are equally dangerous. However it is essential to generate a dynamic that seeks positive approaches, involving many different actors.

So called 'cyclonic' crises – which seem to absorb external energy at ground level to build up internal energy – call for similarly designed responses. In other words, when dealing with this 'out of the box' crisis, the ordinary citizen must be

photo: empics

In civilised society, the State has the total monopoly on legitimate violence

Riots spread across France

- Some 300 towns and cities were affected at the height of the riots, which started in Clichy-sous-Bois and spread initially to other neighbourhoods in the poorer suburbs of Paris. Other cities affected included Nice, Marseilles, Nimes, Montpellier, Perpignan and Pau; Lille in the north; Bordeaux, Nantes and Rennes in the west; Clermont-Ferrand, Tours and Lyon in central France; Rouen and Le Havre in Normandy; and Strasbourg to the east;
- Around 11,500 police and gendarmes were mobilised throughout the country. Seven helicopters were deployed in the Ile-de-France region encompassing Paris;
- More than 115 residents, police and firefighters were injured. A firefighter sustained serious facial burns from a Molotov cocktail and a disabled woman was badly burnt when youths set fire to a bus. A pensioner died three days after being attacked near his apartment building north-east of Paris;
- Twenty-five out of 100 French departments have been given powers to impose curfews after the government declared a state of emergency;
- A handful of towns, including Belfort in eastern France and the Parisian suburb of Raincy, ordered curfews for under 16 year-olds;
- More than 8,000 vehicles have been torched and dozens of buses, schools, gymnasiums, nurseries, libraries, shops and businesses destroyed in arson attacks;
- Police have arrested more than 2,503 people, the youngest aged 10. Jail terms have been handed down on 364 adults. In addition 456 under 18 year-olds have appeared in youth courts, and 103 have been issued with detention orders; and
- The two week spree of car-burnings and arson is already set to cost the insurance industry some 200 million euros (235 million dollars), according to the French insurers' federation.

placed at the heart of crisis management. Above all, ordinary people must not feel abandoned, must not feel that the only focus of attention is on the troublemakers, or that they have no voice in the management of the event.

Citizenship

Clearly, the most lethal pitfall is the emergence of 'militia', the first step on the road to barbarity. In civilised society, the State has the total monopoly on legitimate violence.

It is necessary to mobilise local or regional populations with their elected representatives and associations of a solid ethical foundation in order to invent – or simply restore, the notion of involved citizenship. Not instead of the police force, but as a very necessary part of the chain which guarantees the safety of people and property and the revitalisation of communities.

What innovative and creative actions can be taken? This is the key to tackling inconceivable situations, knowing how to find leverage points on which to establish the rescue operation and subsequently work on the reconstruction and reinvention of a new social deal for these areas. This can only be achieved once the heat of the situation has been cooled, in full respect of the rule of law.

Three directions can be indicated. The first, on the ground, to be established neighbourhood by neighbourhood, town by town. A worrying situation does not warrant centralisation. On the contrary, the real points of support are to be found locally – mayors, their teams in the local municipality and their networks. The real source

of dynamism is to be found at local level and these teams must be given full support. And as in all major crises, the family, and mothers in particular, are absolutely essential fulcra to re-start and support all efforts at restoration and revitalisation.

The second is at international level. We must not delay to take initiatives. There is no guarantee that this epidemic will remain confined to French soil. It might be advisable for French local (or national) elected officials to invite a number of foreign mayors (from elsewhere in Europe or the Americas) to exchange experiences and pool operational creativity. This would generate a welcome, necessary and desirable opening in terms of understanding the situation.

Finally, beyond this immediate crisis period, French society will have to be mobilised. A problem of this severity cannot be not resolved without a genuine cultural and economic redistribution of all the cards. Pragmatic solutions must be searched for and found. **CRJ**

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