

Patrick LAGADEC - SOME SERIOUS QUESTIONS FOR FRANCE

After the colossal shocks of the last decade — the earthshaking events of September 11 (2001); the debacles of Katrina (2005), Lehman Brothers (2008), and Fukushima (2011); the surprising renewal of Sandy (2012, with remarkable advances in dealing with the crisis) — all countries, major corporations, communities, NGO's, the media and the citizens have the duty to perform a strategic audit. The question is simple and brutal: are we configured to navigate in the world of the 21st century, with its risks and crises — a world that is fundamentally unstable, volatile, chaotic and deeply unknown?

Certainly, we have complete libraries on risk management, crisis management, crisis communication, as well as early warning, weak signals or situation awareness ... but the challenges have exceeded the bounds of this known cartography. We are now essentially grappling with:

- mega shocks, which no longer concern very specific, localized situations, but entire continents and even the planet;
- systemic effects, the result of the nature of our totally interconnected and interdependent worlds, whose economic and financial viability is largely based on the loss of robustness and resilience;
- expert evaluations that are not only confronted with uncertainty, but also by the unknown, because of the speed, profundity and complexity of the tumultuous situations in question
- the fundamental weakening of our referential platforms and moorings, whether in regard to the natural, economic, technological, societal or geopolitical environment;
- “unimaginable” eruptions, such as were manifested during hurricane Sandy: the massive role of the social networks, the mapmaking done by the actors themselves made possible thanks to the power of Google, all of which upsets, the normal charting of roles for actors in a crisis as well as for all strategic leadership.

What of France in the confrontation with this universe upset by the crises of the 21st century? At the risk of a simplification, I would like to try to open at least a few lines of questioning and of warning, which are equally calls for action.

A State in great difficulty

All presentations of the French system of crisis management insist on the major asset of France: a strong state, centralization permitting powerful responses, an administration of high quality, the means for large scale action, and organizations whose convergence allows for great exploits in emergency response. Here one could also mention the corps of fire-fighters, the specialized army units made available to

the ministry of the interior for intervention in a catastrophe, the extremely advanced medical emergency intervention system, the ministerial and inter-ministerial crisis bodies, etc..

This picture is very powerful and the first question is concerned with durability. The current situation presents significant worries because of budget restrictions, which could in a few years create a particularly troubling landscape if the model cannot be maintained at its current level.

But the major strategic question is of a more qualitative nature: could this architecture with its original DNA give rise to traps in the face of rapidly emerging risks and crises? Already, the crises of the storm of 1999, the major explosion at the AZF factory in Toulouse in 2001, the heat wave of 2003 and the H1N1 flu crisis of 2009 have posed serious questions concerning the ability of the centralized, highly planned and broadly static system to deal with surprise, volatility and radical change.

The risk is that the fundamental design is essentially inappropriate to the challenges to be dealt with. That can lead to a rapid crash in a crisis situation outside of the norm, especially in terms of credibility – as was the case during the Chernobyl catastrophe, with the state hastening to communicate the fact that France was not affected by the radioactive cloud – which could indeed lead to a loss of legitimacy on the part of the state. The same loss of confidence developed during the episode of the heat wave of 2003, then the flu of 2009. In sum, a state that is powerful on paper, but rapidly viewed as inexistent or incompetent when engaged with reality on the ground.

Certainly, efforts are put in place to open and consolidate the competence of the state. Industries of vital significance are asked to support the action of the state, communities are urged to provide themselves with plans, and citizens are invited to participate in the effort. But this is done according to the same DNA: always under the firm and exclusive leadership of the public authorities – which is not in phase with the turmoil and new dynamics of a society of connectedness, where horizontality, speed and the dynamic of closeness become the primary dimensions of action, including and above all in situations of grave crisis.

Certainly, some exercises are well organized by the public authorities. But always with the routine of repeated predictable schemas, and only in a technocratic modality. It is rarely a question of confronting the unknown, invention in regard to leadership or of upsetting the habitual games of the actors. Media training is being consolidated, but the challenges of communication have mutated and no longer deal with pledging allegiance to the principle of transparency nor merely satisfying the cameras of the big networks.

And above all, the preparations and the training hardly involve the executives, most often absent during exercises that were not prepared according to their intentions, which ironically justifies their untimely absence. This is to be expected from the education of the elites, recruited for their excellent ability to apply their knowledge of calcified juridical structures, not for their inventiveness in dealing with murky situations whose reference points have been destroyed. Surely no culture should go

brutally against its DNA. But there can be historic circumstances where the divergences are too important to be sustainable, and the will to evolve too limited to reduce vital flaws.

The years 1990-2000 saw the launching of very interesting initiatives in the major groups in charge of essential networks, with the involvement of directors in the exercises, training, feedback, etc.. There currently exists no audit, but it seems very probable that one never moved on from this experience, already fragile because of the turnover of individuals and teams. The question even arises as to whether the involvement of management executive committees has become less frequent, with their will less firm (with the undoubted exception of media training and crisis communication, the personal utility of which is always very clear to the director).

My experience has led me to observe a truly deathly fear in regard to the questions that must be posed today and the initiatives that must be taken or at least considered. I have noticed frequent evasions with a leitmotiv: "We mustn't disturb the executives and top level decision makers", "we mustn't disturb the managers". How many universities, enterprises, training programs where it was finally decided to quickly give the participants a few basic notions, some quick manuals, while refraining from all questioning, from all confrontation with surprise, from the necessity of inventing, on a blank page, unexplored trajectories with unknown actors! How many seminars, exercises, and feedback sessions beginning with these words: "The executives will not come"?

As long as one is confronted only by crises well contained within the conventional hypotheses, the system can continue to delude itself about its robustness. Beware of the first outbreak of a major surprise. Because the crises of today are no longer only severe tests of means, logistics, coordination, and communication. They are above all tests of leadership, and the viability of systems. Whoever has not been prepared, swept along to leadership on a blank page, will be seized with a deathly fear when summoned by events where he will be obliged to use his inventiveness.

Other actors between uncertainty, caution and loss of confidence

Many actions have been undertaken to consolidate the culture of risk and the culture of crisis, especially at the local level. But it is clear that this remains difficult. The national culture appears again, very comfortable: "It is the business of the state!" Even if, more basically, such demands are coupled with growing distrust.

It is necessary to put all these agents in the position of being effective actors. For example, in an exercise, they should not be brought together to make them take part in a simulated evacuation exercise. But rather to ask them, much in advance, what they would do, how one can help them, how one could train with them, etc.. When Sandy occurred we saw groups of students mobilizing themselves to inform Google maps, for example, concerning service stations still able to effectively supply petrol. Such burgeoning will become the rule. But this presupposes, to be effective, that it may be engaged in a common dynamic, recognized and therefore tolerated and enriched by the actors controlling the most important levers. For now, the cultural transformation is far from having been accomplished. The state still comes to have

itself heard, to lay out its doctrines, its plans, its methods, not to lend an ear and act as facilitator of multiple emerging dynamics, without its monopolistic leadership role.

The United States has shown, with Sandy, what spectacular progress one could achieve between two major shocks. It remains for France to show the same dynamism. And that without necessarily signifying the abandonment of values and culture. There are certainly major collective advantages in the principle of preeminent responsibility of the state, which can help citizens who do not have the good fortune to be among the well connected layers of society perfectly at ease with the new technologies, and sufficiently rich to have access to this costly universe of modernity. Still it is necessary to confront the true challenges, to offer true answers, which are not mere incantation.

For now, one must recognize that the brakes and the refusals are significant. The simple fact of expressing a non-conventional idea is already a source of major difficulty for anyone who wishes to remain in the system. It will be necessary to enter a completely different dynamic. Because, the tests of the 21st century will not demonstrate any kind of delicacy.

It is not certain that other countries are much better prepared than France. An international audit would be urgent. It could be organized by international task forces, of expert insurers or ad hoc ratings agencies. It does not suffice to wait, under the cover of blind optimism, for a high quality report such as one knows how to produce after trials on a grand scale. For this as well, the crises of the 21st century will not wait.

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