Riot Pandemic in France:
Unconventional Crises and « Out of the box » Initiatives

France is currently in the grip of a " social Katrina ". Exactly as in the United States, the first response 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. When faced with a major haemorrhage, the priority is to save the patient, and to a certain extent this has been done. 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 are outside our mental maps and outside established codes of governance. Obviously there are some well known ingredients : Crowded suburb estates with run-down tower blocks, poverty, unemployment and desperation. However, a double threshhold has been crossed, that of the unacceptable – rejected 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 their identifying values. Starting with the loss of authority - a fundamental founding principle of democratic society. Every crisis is a moment of truth and we are clearly faced here 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 literally erupting and pulverising existing schemes of interpretation. We are confronting : firstly events which occur within a worldwide context of gross uncertainty and major, even brutal changes, secondly the " unimaginable " transposition of the traditional north/south faultline straight into the very heart of our nations, and thirdly the construction of a personal identity based on violence and death. These issues are by no means restricted to the middle east ; in utter disbelief the world watched as the destitute and deprived people of New Orleans fired at the rescue helicopters, 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 coagulations 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, now inappropriate response could also include sanitised speeches, limp consultation or the rubber stamping of groups determined to impose the worst. Other people suggest " sending in the army ". Totally irrelevent. The semantics of war are no solution for what is essentially a problem of civil law and (dis)order.

Other pitfalls ? First of all the intellectual trap, it is important not to confuse the current events with those of May 1968, a period of student protest, rioting and unrest in France. This situation is very different, characterised by *asymmetry*. 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 to be camera ready and manipulation can be literally 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 very wrong to send back the message that our world economy does not need the "disinherited", "the unprofitable" citizens. Finally, the cultural trap. Faced with a critical need to be inventive, the major risk is that we fall back on the most archaic models. Diversity can and must be converted to riches, it is not and must not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle.

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

Which actors should be involved ? So called « cyclonic » type 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 » type crisis, *the ordinary citizen must be placed at the heart* of crisis management. Above all, the ordinary people must not be made to feel abandoned, must not feel that the only focus of attention are the troublemakers, must not feel that they have no voice in the management of the event.

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, and it could be that a number of the foreign readings of these events may prove to have been somewhat dismissive. It might be advisable for French local (or national) elected officials to invite a number of foreign mayors (from either Europe or the Americas) to exchange experiences and pool operational creativity. This would generate a very welcome, necessary and desirable opening both in terms of understanding the situations and would reseed much needed confidence.

Finally, beyond this immediate crisis period, French society will have to be mobilised. A problem of this severity is not resolved without a genuine redistribution of the playing hand from both an economic and cultural point of view. Pragmatic solutions must be searched for and found, they will not simply fall as the gentle rain from the sky.

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