Future Crises, Future Agendas
An Assessment of International Crisis Research

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Crisis: A Watershed
From Local, Specific Turbulences,
to Global, Inconceivable Crises in Unstable and Torn Environments
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1. Emerging challenges in the crisis arena

Crisis intelligence (management and research) has been developed these last decades using common definitions such as the one suggested by Uriel Rosenthal: "A serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a social system, which –!under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances –!necessitates making critical decisions" [1]. The focus was the dynamics triggered by the event, and the complex interactions between that event –!its production, its development, its management –!and a specific social context. Some cases have been the stars of these studies: Seveso, Three Mile Island, Tylenol, Bhopal, etc. Among the key problems that have been studied: magnitude, uncertainty, number of stakeholders, communication, coordination, decision-making. In various disciplines, scholars have worked to try to understand some facets of the crisis dynamics, beyond the event itself. And managers have developed new tools and organisations to meet these challenges.

Since a few years, the star-events seem to leave the room to star- global crisis prone conditions, triggering numerous, continuous, and extremely serious lines of crises. Climate change, public health, hyper-complexity of our technological world-wide systems, world-wide media systems, destabilized social systems, terrorism, etc. have given birth to many specific crises, but more decisively to **a global crisis-prone context**.

The turbulent dynamics stemming from a specific event –!which occurred in a relatively stable context –!seem to evolve into something else. Extremely disturbing characteristics now signal these contexts and the type of crises we are witnessing increasingly: Global interdependencies and global tight coupling, real time, discontinuity and volatility, ignorance, loss of sense, and, last but not least, the impossibility to pay for emerging large-scale events. The basics, the references, the norms and values, appear to witness severe upheavals. Crises are more and more described as "outside of the box": too much, too fast, too strange, too costly. And each specific crisis trigger large-scale turbulences, with "unthinkable" difficulties.

Hence a triple dynamics: disarray, in the management; distrust and fear, on the citizen side; a threat of decoupling, between those in charge and those who thought they were protected.

Naturally, some answers have prevailed these last ten years: more crisis centres, more tools and check-lists, more "crisis communication", more hotlines, more "victims support interventions". But the limits of these responses appear clearly. When a minister of Health

[1] U. Rosenthal, "Crisis Decision Making in The Netherlands!», Netherlands' Journal of Sociology, 22 (1986), pp. 103-129, quoted in U. Rosenthal, Michael T. Charles and Paul 'T Hart, *Coping with Crises –!The Management of Disasters, Riots and Terrorism*, 1989, Charles Thomas Publishers, Springfield, USA, p. 10.

states on television, in the middle of a national crisis, that everything have been done to count the dead since the beginning of the event, and that a hotline has been set up, the global response appears radically inadequate.

More than ever, crisis intelligence requires a constant question: aren't we a war behind? In many respects, it appears we are. Even if the lessons learnt in the 80s are now fully understood by the most advanced circles. The urgency is to address the emerging crisis conditions. These conditions are changing very fast (and terrorism is not the only risk to consider).

However, very few are willing, prepared to acknowledge the challenge itself. Leaders, teams accept to do more of the same —when it would be crucial to forge new visions, new skills and new tools. When the strategy does not meet the challenge, more tactics cannot fill the gap.

And, as far as academic circles are concerned, the innovative, collective, international capabilities that would be required are not there.

The risk is that everyone chooses to hide in his bunker, trying to find responses in old visions and frameworks. Some will pretend they are "optimistic" and refuse facts and action. Some will repeat and repeat: "Nothing's new under the Sun". All will suffer so great a fear that innovation and cooperation will appear the last strategy to choose.

But failure is not an option. That means a lot of work, innovation, networking and initiative.

2. The Challenges for Crisis Research

Several new frontiers are to be considered:

1°) Intellectual challenge
We do not have the grammars, tools, mindsets to seize the new conditions of crises: discontinuity, singularity, instability, inconceivability, real time, global high speed domino effect, ignorance, etc. The words, concepts, models, frameworks, mindsets, tools will have to be revisited and probably largely reinvented if we want to understand the new dynamics of risks and crises.

2°) Managerial and governance challenge
Present managerial responses, including those related to "crisis management" as it has developed these last decades, will increasingly appear inadequate. Too much, too rapidly, too fuzzy, too much ignorance, too far from clear-cut rules, too costly, etc. Using the ancient models, even stretched to the limits, will not be appropriate. We will have to invent new approaches to management, responsibility, leadership.

3°) Networking challenge
We need a fresh academic, social, business, public environment to be able to seize the new intellectual challenges, to have access to "outside of the box" situations and data, with many and new stakeholders. The traditional partition between the academic world and managerial world will have to evolve considerably. That will suppose huge changes on both sides.

4°) Cultural and Psychological challenge
For years, in-depth resistance has been central to the study of crises, which has contributed to explain the poor development of the field.

> *Rosenthal and all.*: "Scientists do not feel at ease with those events and developments which seem to be at odds with the neat and tidy theories they have based on "normal" circumstances and environments. Crises seem to be in perfect contrast with the very assets of modern social science. Disasters appear to be

unpredictable and thus prove to be poor subjects for the development of scientific laws. Consequently, at first glance, crises are poor candidates for social science analysis." [2]

Weinberg: "Science deals with regularities in our experience. Art deals with singularities." [3]

Stacey: "At least 90% of textbooks on strategic management are devoted to that part of the management task which is relatively easy: the running of the organizational machine in as surprise-free a way as possible. On the contrary, the real management task is that of handling the exceptions,the task has to do with instability, irregularity, difference and disorder." [4]

Even *Sigmund Freud* should be considered to understand the in-depth uneasiness concerning the reality and the notion of crisis: "I will show you how the whole trend of your previous education and all your habits of thought are inevitably bound to make you into opponents of psycho-analysis [crisis-analysis], and how much you have to overcome in yourselves in order to get the better of this instinctive opposition!» (p. 18) You have grown accustomed to regarding psychological modes [crisis] with suspicion, to denying it the attribute of being scientific, and to handing it over to laymen, poets, natural philosophers and mystics [journalists, victims, and even terrorists]. (p. 23)

These lines could sound strange, provocative and irrelevant, but years in the arena invite to conclude that the constant reactions against the subject itself cannot be purely "rational". [5]

Now, with the new horizons of crises, these deep-rooted resistances will be reinforced. The "don't even think that there could be anything new under the sun"—attitude has to be profoundly transformed.

3. Initiatives for the Research Community

The difficulties are so wide and multi-layered that one strategic line is necessary: to proceed, whatever the idea, through specific, limited, concrete initiatives. This line of action will focus the attention, produce results, make people work together, reduce the fear-dimension, and prevent from pure speculation (so tempting to avoid the difficulty of the in-depth questions).

1°) Academic initiatives for crisis intelligence
Researchers from a large spectrum of disciplines, and countries, have to unit their efforts around specific projects to launch the bases of a new scientific field. A promising focal point question would be the notion of discontinuity. Some cross-examination would be stimulating between very different fields of interest (terrorism, out-of-scale natural and health disasters, network collapses), but with one common problem –!discontinuity.

A complementary line of effort should be devoted to the emotional problems linked with discontinuity: fear, fear management, fear overcome, etc. This is essential to prevent avoidance, refusal, or the worst crisis-management strategies. "Groupthink", "stress" were studied to understand reactions in limited crises; that kind of research is now necessary with our large-scale loss of references.

2°) Academic initiatives for crisis knowledge
As it has been the case in the last decades, academics should develop systematic field studies of emerging crises. But, this should be done internationally, and more systematically. International teams have to be set up to do so, and prepared go and study real cases, in real situations.

Two complementary lines of research have to be developed: a better understanding of how the complex social fabric produce and develop crises ; a better understanding of specific

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[2] Rosenthal and all, 1989, op. cit. p. 5.

[3] A. Weinberg, Science and its Limits: The Regulators Dilemma. *Issues in Science and Technology* 2 (1): 59-72.

[4] Ralph Stacey, *Strategic Management & Organizational Dynamics*, Pitman, London, 1996 (p. XIX-XX).

[5] Sigmund Freud!: Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, The Standard Edition, Liveright, Norton, New York, London, 1989.

dynamics that prevail when discontinuity brings in new logics.

This experience and research advancement should permit the development of training and courses for future leaders. If they are not prepared to that world of discontinuity, they will be at loss in their job, they will refuse debriefings, refuse simulations, etc. The crisis field has to enter the closed world of the universities. The best would be to go directly to international courses.

3°) Academic initiatives for crisis management
Academics have a role to play as a dynamic interface between many stakeholders. This can lead to very stimulating debriefings. It was done after the Anthrax crises[6], it should have been launched after the Sars episode. It would be appropriate to choose international cases enabling trans-national cooperation.

Another line of action could be to conduct a study to detect and study the best initiatives taken by stakeholders to promote new way to anticipate, detect, manage, mitigate, heal, unthinkable crises.

A focal point could be common in the various field to cover: the new concepts, new visions, new rules to invent to be able to prevent, mitigate, lead, empower, heal, pay, restore etc. when situations clearly are outside of the box. Academics can take initiatives to promote these "neutral interfaces" and "nexus" suggested by Erwann Michel-Kerjan.

4°) Academic involvements in strategic Think-Tanks
Those academics who would not refrain from a close contact with real situations should help the building of strategic think-tanks: groups of specialists and leaders whose function would be to open questions during severe crises and be ready to work to help stakeholders in charge. With Arjen Boin, we have the firm intention to promote such a line of action. It should be launched at the European level, and rapidly at an international level.

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[6] « Anthrax and Beyond », special issue, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, Volume 11 Number 3, 2003.