

Risks, Crises, Ruptures: A Whole New Ball Game

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September 11, 2001: the global rules of the game are torn apart. This is the most dramatic, but not the only facet of the risk arena. One jet-propelled Sars contamination, and public health paradigms have to be revisited all over the world. One technical incident in a critical network, and a quarter of North America is plunged into the dark – “a 9-10 second event”; the same in Italy a few weeks later. One mad cow, and the US meat market teeters, in 24 hours. Not a week goes by without a totally unforeseeable crisis hitting the headlines. Terrible shock: we were so sure and proud of our risk analysis models and crisis management tools.

The models we used to settle international crises, and to successfully avoid a nuclear holocaust – “in our lost XXth Century. As Coral Bell warned as early as in 1978: “It has been rather misleading and unfortunate that the academic study of crisis management was initiated chiefly by the Cuba missile crisis in 1962 [...] It appeared to approximate to the form of a ‘two-person game’. [...] The episode really did look rather like a diplomatic chess game [...]. If there is a ‘game’ model for crisis, it [is] certainly not chess, but poker for five or six hands in the traditional Wild West saloon, with the participants all wearing guns, and quickness on the draw rather than the fall of the diplomatic cards tending to determine who eventually acquire the jackpot”. The warning takes its full meaning just now.

The tools we forged to handle managerial crises. Especially after the TMI incident (1979), efficient rules, handbooks, and checklists had been developed. Some cases are well known as the Tylenol tampering episode handled by Johnson and Johnson in the 80’s. But that game is over: “Here lie the [conventional] crises”. We have now numerous answers to *previous* crisis configurations; but the *Questions* have changed, radically. The new web of challenges is now made of: “unconventional” events, reflecting more than mere specific incidents, rather global turbulences; real-time risks and out-of-scale domino effects, in the new interdependent critical infrastructures worldwide context; scientific ignorance; potential losses exceeding the capacities of insurance frameworks. And last but not least, “Crisis Communication” is plunging into “communication *in* crisis”, when instant media coverage, dramatized emotions and the lack of substance fuel the crisis itself.

In a nutshell, **rupture becomes the name of the game**. And time is running out. A dangerous dynamics tends to be reinforced after each event: disarray of people in charge (experts, managers, governments), on the one hand; distrust among the public, on the other hand. Which increases confidence on the side of the perpetrators, when they happen to be human beings.

There is an urgent need to reconsider paradigms and strategic intelligence. Discontinuity and surprise, ambiguity and ignorance, are still outside of most managerial models. They have to come to the center. We have to stop pretending “there is nothing new under the sun”

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(Ecclesiastes 1:8-10). We were used to have technical answers – technical answers will no longer do on their own. We have to switch to question searching and collective sharing process, systematically. Refusing questions and withholding information make problems intractable. The critical step is to have the courage to acknowledge and to address emerging challenges. Let us remember the core lesson of the official report of Enquiry after the BSE fiasco in the UK: “A vast majority of those who were involved in the country’s response to BSE believed, subjectively, that it was not a threat to human health. *In their heart of hearts they felt it was impossible*”.

And the same need to launch determined *initiatives*: senior executives’ training to global surprise, citizen empowerment are the keys for advanced field work. One illustration: after the 2001 anthrax attacks in the US and innumerable hoaxes in Europe and elsewhere, I suggested to the postal operators to launch an international debriefing process. Representatives from 30 public postal operators, among which the USPS, came to Paris in November 2002 to share their experiences, and to establish common operational capabilities in case of severe crises. It was done one month later, successfully². A similar initiative concerning the Sars episode, which involved much more stakeholders worldwide than the WHO and Chinese authorities, should be launched to also include Airlines, Airports, Insurers, Municipalities, around the world. With a growing globalization of social and economic activities that leads to increasing interdependencies, we’re not playing chess anymore. Collective answers have to be reactive and sized to the new game.

Nevertheless, mobilization is on its way. A *European Crisis Management Academy* was created in April 2000 in Stockholm. The movement was enlarged last summer with a EU/US Crisis Management Conference at Minnowbroock Conference Center, thanks to the impulse of Syracuse University (NY).

The Guns of August (Barbara Tuchman) crushed Europe in 1914. *The Planes of September*, and other waves of emerging ruptures are setting the scene today. I have been working for the past thirty years on the strategic management of these issues: the stakes are today of historical importance. The vision is clear: “fiasco is not an option” — our collective responsibility is to transform emerging global ruptures into emerging global opportunities. The roadmap is clear: unconceivable challenges call for previously unconceivable responses. The immediate imperative is clear: time to get to work.

² «Anthrax and Beyond», *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, Volume 11 Number 3, 2003