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Is Crisis Management (Only) a Management of Exceptions?

Christophe Roux-Dufort

EM Lyon, 23 avenue Guy de Collongue, 69130 Ecully, France. E-mail: roux-dufort@em-lyon.com

This paper revisits the concept of crisis within the field of crisis management and puts forward a series of avenues for building a theory of crisis that is in closer relation with the mainstream of organization theory. We suggest that if crisis management still limits itself to the analysis of exceptional situations, it might never go beyond the sphere of exception management and will for a long time remain an isolated discipline with little room for innovation and progress. As an alternative we analyze crises as a process of incubation that starts long before the triggering event. This proposition implies revisiting other related notions that have seldom been discussed by authors: first the status and place of the triggering event that should be viewed both as a fault line and a hinge between a degenerative organizational past evolution and a future of change; second, the temporality of a crisis so as to extract it from the urgency it is traditionally associated with; third and contrary to authors who see in the crisis a collapse of meaning and of sensemaking, we analyze it as a surge of meaning that fosters organizational change and transformations.

Introduction

Crisis, often reduced to major events such as natural disasters (Hurricane Katrina), the collapse of financial empires (Enron, Worldcom or Parmalat), major terrorist attacks (9/11), unprecedented diseases (Asian influenza), etc., are traditionally perceived as exceptional situations. As such, research studies in crisis management often derive part of their legitimacy from the power of the event they investigate. The more critical the event, the more it appears to legitimize scientific examination, as if in itself, the incomprehension it arouses justifies a crucial need for knowledge. Although the credibility of this stream of research cannot be questioned, we believe, however, that the exceptionality of the situations that crisis management examines contributes to isolating this discipline from organization theory and damages its legitimacy within this area. As Scott (1994) put it: 'One of the puzzling aspects of the growing literature on organizations prone to accidents [crises] . . . is the lack of connection to mainstream organization theory. Why does not the stream of work connect more directly with the large body of theory and research on organizational effec-

tiveness, or with the growing body of work on organizational learning? Perhaps these organizations are too special, too exotic, too "far out" to be compared with the prosaic world of everyday organizations.' (Scott, 1994: 25, *our emphasis*).

What's more, some authors have recently substituted the concept of crisis for a number of notions which, according to them, prefigure a new generation of events entirely beyond the control and understanding of traditional organizations and thus making almost obsolete the traditional crisis management concepts, methods and tools. The notion of *rupture* is thus favoured over crisis (Lagadec, 1999), and *inconceivability* replaces uncertainty (Rosenthal, 2003). Although these analyses are relevant, this semantic escalation contributes to widening the distance between crisis management and the preoccupations of managers and organization theorists.

The concept of crisis has never made it into organization theory whereas it has for a long time found a strong theoretical legitimacy in other fields of human and social sciences such as economics, political sciences or sociology, where it stands as a structuring notion. Crisis management is perceived as the management of exceptional or out-of-the-ordinary situations, but it

does very little to help theorize the functioning of organizations. One of the reasons why organization theorists have shown little interest in theorizing the concept of crisis is that this concept fosters paradoxical attitudes. The intensity, suddenness and dramatic dimension of crises fascinate researchers. At the same time, its abnormal absurd and sometimes destructive nature can repel a number of them (Roux-Dufort, 2007). Focusing on the event and its intensity prevents researchers or managers from closely examining and questioning the functioning of the organization, and instead, induces them to study the different ways of dealing with the surprise, the urgency and the disturbance. Crises are then often defined as abnormal events that disrupt the developmental trajectory of an organization at a specific time and in a specific place (Pearson and Clair, 1998), and as such the priority should mostly be to rectify the imbalance as quickly as possible before other imbalances further deteriorate the situation. Although we do not question the idea that the exceptional nature of an event is a central element of a crisis theory, we would like to extend the background of analysis for developing a crisis theory in the field of organization science. After examining the factors which, we believe, confine crisis management to a theoretical enclave, we will present several arguments that have seldom been discussed in the literature. Our argument is based on an initial criticism of the so-called event-centred approach to crisis management. We are convinced that if the analysis of crisis limits itself to helping managers to handle exceptional events, it will never go beyond the sphere of exception management and will for a long time remain an isolated discipline with little room for innovation and progress. We therefore suggest analyzing the crisis as a process of incubation that starts long before the triggering event (Groeneweg, 1992). This proposition requires that we revisit other related notions that have seldom been discussed. First of all it implies that we discuss the status and place of the triggering event in crisis theory. The triggering event does not, in our opinion, lose its role as a catalyst, but imposes itself both as a fault line and a hinge between a degenerative organizational past evolution and a future of change. Second, in our attempt to show that a crisis spans from before to after the triggering event, we discuss the temporality of the crisis so as to extract it from the urgency it is traditionally associated with. Finally, and contrary to some authors who see in the crisis a collapse of meaning and of sensemaking, we shall analyze it as a surge of meaning.

Crisis Management: The Reasons for Its Isolation

Four main reasons can be put forward to explain the isolation of crisis management in the field of organiza-

tion theory. First, crisis management is a scattered and non-cumulative field of research characterized by little theorization. This first reason leads to the second: the vagueness of definitions. Without a solid conceptual and defining framework, research loses legitimacy and runs the risk of misidentifying the phenomena it aims to describe. Third, crisis management suffers from a methodological monolithism. The main results it produces are drawn from case studies of major industrial disasters that still today serve as immovable references. Finally, a crisis is perceived above all as an event. This position gives it a singularity and a contingency that distance it from more structuring models and that make replication and generalization of research results difficult.

Crisis is an alibi

In organization theory, crisis essentially serves as an amplification chamber for research on other concepts. In fact, it has been used as an alibi rather than as an object of research. Crises present the advantage of exposing organizations to extreme situations and consequently of bringing to light organizational phenomena that are more difficult to identify in normal situations (Starbuck and Farjoun, 2005). Thus, the crisis is used as a catalyst but is seldom the subject of theorization that would shed light on its nature and place in the theory of organizations. The analysis we made of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* disaster, for example (Roux-Dufort, 1999), was a first step towards a theorization of crisis. It showed that approaching the crisis exclusively from the angle of the accident did not make it possible to draw conclusions concerning the organizational mechanisms that caused the wreck. Neither the scientific investigation of the main causes of the shipwreck nor the analysis of the consequences have contributed much to understanding the organizational forces that led to the disaster. According to us, an in-depth analysis of several organizational preconditions is necessary to better understand the reasons for and the processes of production of such a disaster. This is the type of key questions that a theory of crisis should raise: how do organizations produce their own crisis? Understanding that crises are generated by the organizations themselves enables the researcher to approach the crisis from a wider angle. It helps him step back from the exceptional nature of the event and leads him to identify the processes that put organizations in a vulnerable situation on a regular basis (Groeneweg, 1992). Twenty years ago, Perrow (1984) provided an answer to this question in the theory of normal accidents (TNA). He showed that industrial accidents were inherent properties of complex technological systems. In his opinion, the complexity and tight

coupling of high risk industrial systems suffice to predict the occurrence of accidents. The TNA has provided a fruitful source of inspiration for researchers. In fact, it is referred to in most studies in crisis management (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992; Pearson and Clair, 1998). Only recently Wolf (2005) has consolidated part of this theory through quantitative research in the particular context of the petrol refineries industry, thus filling a gap in a literature that desperately lacks a quantitative basis (Helsloot, 2006). Even though Wolf (2005) has succeeded in relating the field of industrial accidents with concepts of organizational theory, such as performance and resource allocation, his investigation remains centred on an industry which again can be viewed as atypical in regard to non-technological companies. Perrow himself explains that this theory has never inspired organization theorists because the organizations he focused on differed too much from those which the theory of organizations usually examines (Perrow, 2004). His studies have dealt with systems that are too exceptional or even too 'exotic' (Scott, 1994) and consequently cannot be applied to the analysis of organizations in general. Thus, the theory of normal accidents, which provided researchers in crisis management with a solid conceptual framework, has also done them a disservice in that it drew its results from unconventional fields.

Crisis is poorly defined

The under-theorization of the concept has led to another difficulty: that of its definition. The exceptional nature of some crises gives the impression of an abrupt shift from a normal situation to a crisis situation. Crisis is thus defined as sudden, unexpected, surprising and unpredictable. They take the form of acute and painful manifestations (Morin, 1976). All these characteristics lead to definitions of crisis based essentially on the nature of its consequences and implications (Forgues and Roux-Dufort, 1998). Here again, the researcher is confronted with a theoretical insufficiency due to the weakness of definitions. Little interest has been shown so far in the description of intermediate states between normality and crisis that would allow us to approach a crisis as a process of accumulation of deficiencies and weaknesses rather than as a sudden and extraordinary irruption. Obviously distinctions have already been made between incidents, accidents, conflicts, rupture and crises (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992), but here again these terms refer to specific and punctual events that do not always make it possible to identify the stages of evolution of a situation. Another typology has been proposed. It distinguishes different stages in the evolution of crises ranging from anomalies degenerating into vulnerabilities, disruptions and crises (Roux-Dufort,

2007). These propositions are theoretical in nature and still need to be validated empirically. To this difficulty of distinction is added a growing confusion between crisis and urgency.

In the general state of urgency that characterizes modern societies and organizations (Aubert and Roux-Dufort, 2003), risks, events, breakdowns or incidents rapidly take a dramatic turn. It is as if the state of urgency rises by several notches when an incident occurs. In reality, the unexpected, sudden, unpredictable event contributes to feeding the already existing sense of urgency. In such a context any unexpected event systematically induces a lack-of-time syndrome. Depending on the organization's perception of how much time is necessary to manage the risk, it will be confronted with varying degrees of urgency. The crisis is the paroxysmal phase of the urgency in which the importance of what is at stake, the incomprehensibility of the events, the sudden compression of the time for reaction and the necessity to act immediately combine together dynamically. Yet practitioners frequently confuse urgency and crisis. There is no doubt that a crisis always has an element of urgency, but the two notions are in no way juxtaposable. In a situation of urgency, the actors do not have much time to react but the solutions to the situation are known. In a situation of crisis, not only is time scarce but the solutions are still unknown. Because of this confusion, crisis management as a field of research and practice is hindered by a dire lack of clarity concerning the phenomena it observes and compares. These conceptual difficulties are partly due to a methodological monolithism that causes researchers to privilege the accidental and dramatic event to understand and explain the crisis.

Crisis is an accident

The weakness of theoretical constructions related to crisis is also due to an often-monolithic methodological approach characterized by the frequent use of case studies of major industrial disasters which now serve as root references for the discipline. The preference for major accidents has two effects: on the one hand studies in crisis management are often much more descriptive than theoretical (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 1999); on the other hand this literature generates much more knowledge about accidents than organizations, which is another obstacle to a rapprochement with the theory of organizations. Historically, the study of crises gained momentum following the high media coverage of often incomprehensible events that occurred between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1980s: Torrey Canyon, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl. These disasters have inspired many studies: Bhopal (Shrivastava, 1992), Chernobyl

(Beck, 1992), Challenger (Starbuck and Miliken, 1988; Vaughan, 1996), Exxon Valdez (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992), the contaminated blood crisis (Setbon, 1993), Columbia (Starbuck and Farjoun, 2005), the Enron financial scandals or the September 11 terrorist attacks (Rosenthal, 2003). Though these cases have been the subject of fruitful analyses, they have left the impression that the term 'crisis' only applies to major 'accidents'. The methodology of single case studies was obviously justified because little was known about the phenomenon of crisis. As such it helped put some order in a complex and fallow area. These studies have had a major impact but they have somehow tied researchers to an approach centred mainly on accidents. It is surprising to find that these works have then been exploited at will to theorize crisis. The problem does not so much lie in these references as in the hypothesis according to which the results drawn from these works are applicable to crises, the sources of which are not industrial accidents. In European research, reference studies look beyond these cases but only in order to focus their attention on other similar major events: the Erika oil spill, the AZF explosion, mad cow disease or the heat wave of August 2003 (Lagadec, 2004). These events make for an original and attractive field of research but one that often eludes fundamental theoretical questions on the contribution of crises to understanding organizations.

A science of the exceptional

One last reason that summarizes the above arguments therefore seems to impose itself: crisis management does not so much deal with crises as with accidental events. A major event exerts a strong power of attraction but also acts as a black hole. Its intensity absorbs the attention of practitioners and researchers, who as a result, forget about its source and roots. Seeing the crisis as an event has disadvantaged the discipline of crisis management because it leads to the belief that the event prevails over everything else.

From the theory of organizations' standpoint, it has been suspicious of a discipline that is interested only in unique events – which, what's more, are ill defined – and whose methodologies of investigation do not guarantee the replication of the results. For science the event is an exception and is not always characterized by recurrence or frequency, which would have made it much more attractive and popular from a scientific point of view. Crises never occur in exactly the same way as previous ones, which makes observations difficult to conduct. If crisis management as a discipline only sees crises as punctual events, it then runs the risk of being perceived as a science of the exceptional. There is no denying that crises, such as they manifest themselves during critical events, are not

easily comparable. Their accidental and random nature gives organization leaders an excuse not to pay attention to them, or at least to consider this event as the starting point of a surprising and incomprehensible dynamic process they had never experienced before. True as this may be, crisis management is largely based on an event-centred approach that considers the crisis as the result of an event defined in time and space the so-called *triggering event* (Shrivastava, 1992). It is the triggering event that makes the crisis visible. It crystallizes multiple dimensions and initiates a dynamic process that is often out of control. This revealing power of the event has led many authors and managers to mistake the event for the crisis itself. The confusion is at its highest in what is frequently called typologies of crises which several authors have developed (Lagadec, 1991; Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992; Pearson and Clair, 1998; Roux-Dufort, 2003; Gundel, 2005). Although these typologies are useful, they prove ineffective once we become aware that it is not crises that we classify but generic events that can take multiple and incomparable forms making it impossible to engage in serious scientific investigation. The term proposed by Turner (1976), *precipitating event*, gives, we believe, a better idea of the crisis dynamic. The fact that it '*precipitates*' the crisis, implies that the latter germinated before this event triggered it. By seeing the crisis as an event, crisis management seals its own fate and reduces itself to being a management of exceptions since the events it examines are exceptional in nature. Thus, there is no doubt that by approaching the event as the first remarkable expression of a crisis, crisis management has half-closed the door to alternative investigation pathways that could have revealed a wider temporal horizon extending from the past toward the future. Crisis management should therefore also consist in exploring the enigmatic origin of the event and the possible post-event futures. Only then will we be able to talk not only about accidents but also about organizations.

Crisis Management: From Event to Process

We propose analyzing crises as a process of organizational weakening that degenerates until the point of disruption we shall call the precipitating event. This perspective is complementary to the event-centred approach. In this section, we analyze what this perspective implies. We believe that the processual approach makes it possible to integrate elements that have until now been examined in isolation from one another. It also enables us to articulate more rigorously the role and place of the triggering event in crisis management theory.

The processual approach of crisis

In a processual approach, crisis is perceived as a long incubation process that suddenly manifests itself under the influence of a 'precipitating' event. Supporters of this approach defend the idea that crises develop in phases: warning signals, acute stage, amplification and resolution (Turner 1976; Fink 1986; Mitroff and Pearson 1993; Gatot and Jacques, 1999). The acute phase is only the peak of an accumulation of organizational dysfunctions that have existed for a long time but that have been overlooked. The processual approach thus suggests the existence of a genealogy of crises as some researchers have already suggested (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992; Shrivastava, 1992). More recently, Rosenthal (2003) suggested that the first objective of researchers should be to grasp the full context in which the crisis occurs from the pre-existing conditions to the consequences. In a processual approach, the implications of a crisis are not only negative or threatening. A crisis can also reveal and uncover factors the organization would most probably have remained unaware of if it had not occurred (Morin, 1976; Shrivastava, 1992). This is where the status of the triggering event should be detailed. Building a theory of crisis requires that we show the complementarity between the accidental nature and the revealing property of the event or, to put it differently, that we combine an event-centred approach in which the triggering event is seen as the starting point and the processual approach in which the event is considered as the point of arrival of a destabilizing process which has been ignored until now. This requirement can only be met by engaging in a reflection on the temporality of the crisis, a reflection that few authors have so far undertaken. This reflection leads us to reconcile the two approaches.

The status of the triggering event

The event has a particular status in the western conception of time. As the French philosopher Jullien (2001) underlines: '... the notion of event is intrinsically related to the idea of time ... we would have no consciousness of "time" without the "events" that punctuate it' (pp. 86–87). And as we have highlighted several times, crisis management is a privileged field for the magnification of events. However, according to Jullien (2001), the event has two characteristics. First, it is, in principle, what could not occur all the time or frequently. From this point of view, it is exceptional and is in keeping with the assumptions of the event-centred approach of crisis management. Second, it is the fault line between the past and the future. From this point of view, it articulates two periods and therefore lies on a temporal horizon that is wider than the present event.

These two sides of the event lead us to conceptualize the crisis both as an exceptional situation and an evolutionary process.

First, the event is what could not occur all the time or even frequently. This is definitely how authors in crisis management often conceptualize crisis. In this respect, the event is singular, extraordinary and accidental in nature. Nothing can be the same after the event. It marks a disruption and in some ways a suspension of time. After major disasters such as the terrorist attacks of September 11 or the AZF explosion, the expression 'time stopped' easily comes to our confounded minds. It means that the normal course of events is suddenly interrupted and can never be 'as it was before'. The event instantly imposes a before and an after. Other expressions such as 'nothing will ever be the same again' or the more polemical 'never again' mark the final nature of the event. The event is a point of no return. It is in this sense that it is exceptional and decisive. This property of the event explains why crisis management underlies a particular conception of time. The ability to act in real time and to react immediately as well as flexibly are central to crisis management. In a situation of crisis, there is a sense of urgency because the scenarios that are unfolding are irreversible and a sense of control over events can only be restored by prompt decision-making and action. This extreme time pressure generated by the event should impose extraordinary conditions of performance which exceptional tools (crisis units, emergency plans, crisis communication plans, etc.) alone can help facilitate. The confusion between crisis and urgency highlighted above with respect to definitions is total here. Yet, one has to recognize that the event does not just challenge organizations to be reactive, indeed it acts as a disruption in the normal course of time.

The event as the fault line between the past and the future

The event is also a fault line between the past and the future. It spans beyond the present and reconfigures the field of possibilities. Because time is suspended, the emergence of meaning is made possible as if the agitation caused by the current state of urgency within organizations and the irreversible unfolding of events deafened and blinded managers and ordinary citizens. Because the triggering event suspends time, it reveals the impossible, the unthinkable and sometimes the inconceivable. The event opens a window of understanding of the past and of the future. It reveals meaning precisely because it stops the irreparable and deafening passage of time. The event confronts us with the limits of our comprehension and with our inability to understand its origins and future. Just as the initial Big Bang

event is a concentrate of potential meaning and questions us on its underlying dimensions. The precipitating event therefore becomes crucial to our understanding of crisis because it encompasses both the errors of the past, the drama of the present and the possibilities of the future. It puts leaders in a position to give new meaning to their actions, a position they had never been in before. It sheds light, through retrospective sense-making, on the process of incubation of the crisis and might, as a result, show that a change for the better is possible.

The event establishes a temporal disjunction and calls for a transition. Management authors are reluctant to talk about organizational transition – a term mostly reserved for use by economists to describe the passage from one economic system to another – and prefer to use the term change, which suggests a smoother passage from one period to another. To some extent the event symbolizes the difficulty for the western mindset in general, and for organization theory in particular, to conceptualize transition. Being in transition means being simultaneously in the before and in the after, while the event inserts itself between the two periods. It should be both the point of arrival of a period and the starting point of another, but since the western mindset does not consider this as a possibility, it is literally nowhere (Jullien, 2001) and escapes comprehension. As such, crises are most of the time perceived as incomprehensible. And yet the event is precisely the junction point between the before period – when decision-makers were often ignorant of what was brewing – and the after period when decision-makers are overwhelmed by their discovery. If the event implies the transition from the before to the after, it bears the obsolescences of the past as well as the seeds of renewal. A theory of crisis should therefore be able to integrate a wider time perspective and should lead individuals to ask themselves questions about the meaning and origins of crisis. That, we believe, is what a theory of crisis implies, as indeed the event also contains a part that cannot be assimilated and that transcends causal interpretations. It suddenly gives rise to the enigma of its origin, and according to Jullien (2001) leads to the question of sense. It is from this perspective that the crisis is also a surge of meaning, which researchers and practitioners must commit to uncover.

Crisis Management: A Surge of Meaning

Crisis bring forth changes and transformations. These revealing and transformational properties are triggered by a sudden collapse of organizational basic assumptions that bluntly prove to be inefficient (Pauchant and Mitroff 1992). Weick (1993) refers to it as a collapse of

sensemaking practices or, rephrasing him, as a cosmological episode: 'A cosmological episode occur when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together' (Weick, 1993: 633). To the notion of cosmological episode proposed by Weick (1993) to account for crises, we could associate the notion of cosmogonic episode. Literally the term cosmogony means a mythological account about the origin of the universe and its components. The Bible's Genesis is a cosmogony. Beyond its literal meaning, cosmogony is also a scientific theory that explains the creation of the universe. From this point of view, the theory of the Big Bang is a cosmogony. The event seen as a cosmogonic episode therefore implies that it sheds light on its consequences and its origins. Yet, most authors describe the process of crisis as a collapse of sensemaking. Weick (1993), for example, compares it to a cosmological episode, while Lagadec (1991) sees it as a disintegration of the frames of reference. Crises are anyhow frequently compared to referential upheavals during which organizations lose the ability, at least temporarily, of making sense of events. This collapse of meaning stems from a temporary disruption of boundaries that leads to indifferentiation (Girard, 1982). In times of crisis, indifferentiation, which is due to the disintegration of boundaries that normally enable individuals to differentiate things and therefore to make sense of them, suddenly leaves the actors with an unbearable sense of confusion. From this point of view, the crisis is more the result of an experience than that of an event. In short, the crisis has no existence by itself, it exists through the way in which it is experienced by the individuals concerned. Consequently, a theory of crisis is above all a theory of experience and meaning.

The question of sensemaking in crises has already been illustrated by Weick (1993), particularly in his analysis of the Mann Gulch Disaster. When researchers and practitioners describe crises as a collapse of sensemaking, they also refer to the inability of the actors to understand and integrate the events that are unfolding before their eyes. The Mann Gulch fire-fighters, described by Weick (1993), lost their ability to make sense of the situation the moment the officer in charge ordered them to protect themselves by lighting a backfire and to drop their tools so as to be lighter. This unexpected order, provoked by a fire that was beyond the intervention capacity of the fire-fighters, shattered what to them had made sense until then. And Weick even adds that a fire-fighter who not only has to abandon his tools but light a fire instead of putting it out is no longer a fire-fighter. Thus, if the identity of these men is no longer founded, then nothing around them can make sense. This is the famous cosmological episode.

Crisis: a surge of meaning and opportunity

As highlighted by Jullien (2001), crises offer a unique concentrate of experience. Weick's view of crises as cosmological episodes can be complemented with another perspective: crises can also be seen as an overflow of meaning. In a situation of crisis, it is not so much the loss of meaning that overwhelms the leaders, but rather the wave of meaning that cannot be processed through the traditional frameworks of interpretation. Crises most of the time reflect the meaning of individual, organizational and societal imbalances and weaknesses. As an illustration we can approach the Mann Gulch disaster from a different angle and suggest that the fire-fighters realized suddenly that they could not be anything other than fire-fighters. The order they received by the officer had the effect of reducing them to simple men prepared to do anything to save their own lives. But the fire-fighters realized that they were incapable of changing from one to another, of not functioning like fire-fighters so dependent were they on an organization, a training and a few accessories. Within a few seconds, the order given by the officer crystallizes the meaning of their dependence, which they are incapable of transcending even in a life-and-death situation. In a first version of this episode, the fire-fighters lose the sense of who they are, and therefore of what they do. In the other version, they are confronted with their obvious inability to surpass themselves because of who they have been for a long time. The fire-fighters of Mann Gulch suddenly became aware of their inability to be anything other than fire-fighters and that is precisely what caused the problem. It is a form of truth about their dependence that overwhelms them. The psychologist Rollo May describes a crisis as follows: 'A crisis is exactly what is required to shock people out of unaware dependence upon external dogma and to force them to unravel layers of pretence to reveal naked truth about themselves' (May, 1958: 17).

Should the crisis be a wave of meaning, the question is raised of the ability of organizations and their leaders to decode this meaning and use it. Here, the well-established but seldom discussed idea that crises are opportunities should be revisited. The process approach to crisis recognizes the existence of a pre-event phase and a post-event phase, where the event serves to reveal the crisis. This amounts to seeing the crisis as an effector (Morin, 1976) or, in other words, as having the power to cause profound changes and transformations within organizations. From an empirical point of view, the researchers who examine this hypothesis show that there exist normalization processes through which organizations use familiar and acceptable cognitive norms that help them cope with crises but which also restrict the learning potential provided by the crisis

(Roux-Dufort, 2000). After the crisis there are, of course, systematic tensions between the temptation to restore the status quo and the need to see the crisis as an opportunity for organizational change. Even if learning is restricted, crises do provide opportunities for organizations to give new meaning to their action. It is as if the crisis gave rise to an overflow of meaning which organizations found difficult to absorb. They channel and translate this meaning through cognitive, emotional and socio-political filters so that it can be understood and decoded by all. These filters act as normalization processes in that they contribute to bringing back the event and its meaning into categories that are familiar and acceptable to the organization's stakeholders.

Crises imply an examination of past actions in order to learn or unlearn elements of the current context. According to Turner (1976), there is definitely a pre-crisis phase that takes the form of an incubation period that is difficult to interpret and during which ill-defined problems are difficult to see. Yet for Turner: 'The precipitating incident also makes it inevitable that the general perception of all the events in the incubation period will be transformed, by offering criteria that identify the incubating period of events so that the process of transforming the ill-structured problem into a well-structured problem may begin' (Turner, 1976: 382).

Jullien's (2001) conception of the event as a reconfiguration of the possible takes all its significance with Turner's approach (1976). When an unknown meaning emerges, a form of learning is possible. In other words, what the event-centred approach considers as the crisis, the processual approach only considers as the accelerator of a situation that is already in progress. At this stage, the triggering event is only the most visible part of a destabilization process that started long before and that suddenly races out of control under the effect of a specific event.

Crisis: from victims to culprits

The processual approach focuses on the underground part of the crisis or on what we might call its ante-chamber. Focusing on the 'before' of a crisis implies the recognition of a certain part of responsibility in the emergence of the crisis. The event-centred approach, by suggesting that the events are beyond our control, tends to go hand in hand with an attitude of fatalism or victimization. An example we have recently examined related to the death of a SME's leader. It provides a good illustration of this tension between fatality and responsibility. The death of the boss of a medium-sized firm can obviously result in a severe crisis. At the beginning this crisis was seen as a fatality – the death of the leader – and the employees, who saw their workplace going bankrupt for lack of a credible heir or buyer,

felt they were the primary victims of this unfortunate event. By adopting a processual approach it quickly became clear that the owner's death only speeded up a dynamic that existed before. An in-depth diagnosis revealed that the company was very centralized and completely dependent on this leader. The omnipresence of the boss – a common phenomenon in SMEs – possibly explained how he, by accumulating tasks, had put not only his health at risk but also that of his company. The centralization certainly enabled the company to survive and develop thanks to the boss's skills and complete dedication, but it also generated several dysfunctions and vulnerabilities such as blockages, slowness, excess of authority, departures of valued employees, conflicts and above all prevented the diffusion of skills and know-how.

These elements, which existed before the crisis, explain how the leader's death triggered the collapse of the firm. In this context, the death of the boss was not the crisis. It suddenly confronted the company with its imbalances and its excessive dependence on one man. There was something in this state of dependency that suited everyone, and which everyone contributed to maintain. It is definitely this self-maintained dependence system that constituted the ground for crisis. It is for this reason that the leader's death had dramatic consequences. In this context, should the difficulties that followed be attributed to the death of the boss or to the situation of dependence? In the first case, the explanation provides no solution because the boss's death cannot be reversed. In the second case, there are more levers of action. If it is not too late, they will consist in reducing the excessive state of dependency of the firm.

The event-centred approach is conducive to a process of victimization. It leads the actors to look for scapegoats or to blame the responsibility for the crisis on various actors. As long as the individuals concerned maintain an attitude of fatalism and position themselves as victims, they cannot recognize their own responsibility and therefore have little means of acting. In the example of the SME, nothing would be worse for the firm than finding a new leader who would rescue the firm and put himself in a central position again. In this case, based on what the triggering event suggests as a solution (finding a new boss), a short-term solution to the crisis would be found but the conditions that led to the main imbalances in the first place would be kept, or worse, reproduced.

In this example, there are two on-going joint processes. The first is that of an accumulation of dysfunctions and weaknesses that establish themselves to the point of creating a form of dependency that somehow suits everyone. This is the potential ground for crisis. The second is the creation of an increasingly thick veil of ignorance on this state of weakness. The actors grow

increasingly blind to the existence of a symptom of self-maintained dependence which keeps them in denial and causes them to blame the crisis of the SME on fate (the death of the leader). The processual approach therefore makes it possible to reorient crisis management towards encouraging all involved to recognize their responsibility and therefore towards giving them more control over events. It gives the leaders the opportunity to see how the crisis and what precedes it can give precious indications on the state of their organization, and better still to see the potential crisis areas emerge.

Conclusions

In this article we have proposed an extended conceptual background that could help free crisis management from the realm of the exceptional. We believe that the regeneration of research in crisis management will necessitate a conceptualization of crisis that recognizes not only the properties of exceptional events but also the intrinsically processual nature of crises and therefore the possible existence of pre-crisis stages. On this basis, many research directions can be explored. Research could focus on the identification and characterization of crisis-fostering environments and on the processes of weakening of organizations. This will probably call for a study of two complementary phenomena: that of what can be called organizational imperfections and that of managerial ignorance. Both these concepts are essential to the construction of a theory of crisis. The notion of organizational imperfection serves to describe a cumulative crisis-conducive process. Organizations are generators of imperfections because any development, progress or growth generates its own weaknesses. In this regard, crisis is inherent to any evolution process. A crisis is never exceptional but it reveals a stage of development beyond which the organization can no longer operate on the same basis as before. It is therefore necessary to explore a complementary concept: managerial ignorance.

This concept of ignorance points to useful directions concerning the processes of attention developed by managers. According to the upper echelons theory (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), top managers structure decision situations to fit their view of the world. They therefore simplify the world in order to understand it and make decisions. We see ignorance as the result of a difference between the complexity of situations and what managers retain of those situations. The question remains of why and how they define what is important and what is not, and of how they focus their attention on certain elements rather than others. In terms of crisis, the question is to know why and how executives concentrate on certain vulnerabilities rather than

others. And organizational imperfections potentially endanger the stability and regularity of the organization. More specifically, and considering the demands made on executives in terms of efficiency and performance stability, their self-esteem might be affected when anomalies or weaknesses concern areas for which they are responsible. This self-esteem is regulated narcissistically by activating defence mechanisms that psychoanalysis identified and described long ago and which the theory of organizations has also explored by showing how organizations serve as means of reinforcing individual defence mechanisms. Argyris (1982) offers a very good definition of a defence mechanism as an addition or subtraction from concrete reality that inhibits detection and correction of errors as well as detection of the unawareness that the actions are defensive. We are here at the core of what we call managerial ignorance. It is only when management allows ignorance about the evolution of weaknesses and imbalances into crises to exist that crisis-conducive environments can grow and intensify. The more established the dysfunctions and weaknesses the thicker the veil of ignorance. The vulnerability of an organization does not so much reside in its actual weaknesses as in the ignorance of these weaknesses, an ignorance that is activated by defence mechanisms that regulate the managers' threatened self-esteem and leads them unconsciously to favour laissez-faire over correction. The more entrenched the imperfection, the more likely it is to lead to a disruption and the more prohibitive the psychological and sometimes economic cost of a correction. We believe that it is at this intersection that lie some promising research leads for crisis management.

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