

Symbols, Rituals and Power: The Lost Dimensions of Crisis Management

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There is a systematic deflation in governmental rhetoric of the developments that call attention to the unequal distribution of goods and services and a systematic inflation of the forms of threat that legitimize and expand authority. The latter are defined as crises, the former as problems. As crises recur and problems persist, so does a governmental dramaturgy of coping. (Edelman, 1977: 49)

This article proposes a more power-critical approach to the analysis of crisis management and, in this respect, explores the possible contribution of research on political and organizational symbolism. Viewed in terms of symbolic action, attention is drawn to the opportunity spaces that crises entail for policy makers and other crisis actors. To exploit these, it is important for decision elites to influence collective definitions of the situation in such a way as to highlight preferred courses of action and to selectively obscure alternative interpretations. Three types of symbolic 'crisis handling devices' (framing, ritualization and masking) are presented and illustrated. In conclusion, the need for a broader perspective on the nature of the politics of crisis management is emphasised.

Introduction

When, in July 1992, the Italian anti-Mafia Judge Borsellino was assassinated only one month after his friend and colleague Falcone had suffered the same cruel fate, his family refused to accept an official state funeral because they felt 'the state' was guilty of his death as a result of the lack of vigour in curbing and prosecuting the Mafia. This emotional denunciation of government policy added to the swelling chorus of criticism already directed not only at the incumbent government which, at the time of the assassination, had been in office for less than a month but, more importantly, at Italy's entire political class. It was a symbolic act of anger, despair and defiance. To some politicians, it was a painful reminder of a similar event fourteen years earlier when the widow of Aldo Moro, the former Prime Minister and Chairman of the Italian Christian-Democratic Party and slain victim of a protracted kidnap drama staged by the left-wing Red Brigades, similarly refused to allow a state funeral.

Then, the main reason was that throughout the traumatic period of Moro's kidnapping, his former colleagues had all distanced themselves from him and refused to negotiate his release even at times when such a negotiated release

was virtually handed to them on a 'silver platter' by the kidnapers. At the same time, the official response to the crisis — one of the largest manhunts in history — had produced no results at all, thus demonstrating the vulnerability of the established order against these kinds of attacks.

On both occasions, the family's refusal caused politicians major embarrassment and frustration because, to them, the ritual of a state funeral provides a prominent dramaturgic opportunity to reach out to the mass public at a time of crisis; to display the required combination of grief and brisk determination; and to emphasise the resilience of the body politic as a whole. Politicians have more insidious motives for wanting to stage a dramatic public display. As Kertzer (1988: 140) observes in his discussion of the Moro example, 'what the politicians were so eager to bury that day were not the remains of Aldo Moro but the political disaster his kidnapping and death had produced'.

The examples of the Red Brigades and Mafia crises in Italy illustrate the vital role that images, symbols and rituals can play in the dynamics of crises. It is a central presumption of this argument that despite the importance of these political crises, they do not seem to be very well understood in recent crisis research. Current literature on crises and

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emergencies stands out with its strong orientation to managerial issues of organization, planning and response.

Furthermore, this managerialist orientation tends to be interpreted rather exclusively in functionalist-technocratic terms; analysis being for policy and organizational practices. This takes the form of detailed discussion of issues of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery and within each of these emergency 'phases', a critical examination of problems of command, control, communication and intelligence (to borrow the language frequently employed by crisis analysts) in various types of crises (Petak, 1985; Drabek, 1986; Charles and Kim, 1988; Comfort, 1988; Gow and Kay, 1988; Rosenthal, Charles and 't Hart, 1989; Gow and Otway, 1990; Lagadec, 1990; Sylves and Waugh, 1990; Rosenthal and Pijnenburg, 1990; George, 1991; Parker and Handmer, 1992).

In a more prescriptive mode, there has been a recent *hausse* in practitioner-oriented handbooks specifying detailed guidelines on the 'how-tos' of crisis management (Fink, 1986; Raphael, 1986; Nudell and Anthokol, 1988; Regester, 1989; Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991; Lagadec, 1991; Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992). This reflects an attention bias existing among practitioners. In an examination of mainly North-American companies' attitudes and activities with respect to crisis management, Mitroff, Pauchant and Shrivastava (1988) found that the so-called 'technical family' of crisis management concerns (technology, infrastructure) was 200 times more developed than the 'psychological and cultural family', relating to issues of stress, anxiety and cultural attitudes towards risk and vulnerability.

Crisis analysts need to be aware of the fact that this instrumentalist orientation dominating their field is not altogether unproblematic. It rests upon certain philosophical, epistemological and, indeed, normative assumptions which can be summarized in terms of a functionalist paradigm emphasizing *control* (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Kouzmin, 1983). The control paradigm constrains the scope of large portions of current crisis management analysis in many as yet under-explored ways.

The present essay is designed to communicate a two-fold message. First, crises and crisis management are both inherently complex and politically controversial phenomena; ones which can only be analysed to the full extent if the managerial, functionalist decision making approach is complemented by, and contrasted with, a more power-critical perspective. Secondly, one useful set of tools lending themselves to a power-critical analysis of the

dynamics of crises and of prevalent crisis management practices can be found in theory and research on the symbolic dimensions of politics and administration. In contrast to the positivism and functionalism in the great majority of current crisis management studies, the literature on symbolic action departs from a more constructivist perspective in which the nature of social reality cannot be objectively observed and assessed but, instead, is highly contingent upon the different subjective constructions made of it by different actors (Berger and Luckman, 1966).

In addition, the symbolic action literature has, by tradition, developed into a very effective instrument for a power-critical analysis of official actions and policies. It does so by looking behind the technicalities and official rhetoric espoused by political and government actors and by exposing the ways in which official actors use powerful language and other symbolic tools to shape interpretations of events and achieve their ends. This more general perspective on politics and administration can be profitably applied to the domain of crises and crisis analysis (Hedberg, Nystrom and Starbuck, 1976; Selbst, 1978; Weick, 1988; Saussois and Laroche, 1991).

A cursory survey of key characteristics and components of a symbolic action perspective on politics and government will be outlined and it will be shown how the application of such a perspective to the study of crises and crisis management affects conceptualizations of crises and, consequently, opens up new domains for research into crisis management. In particular, the extent to which three core features of symbolic action — framing, rituals and masking — can be found in processes of crisis management can be explored. In line with the primary objective of providing for a more power-critical analysis of crisis management, emphasis is placed upon the use of symbolic strategies and tactics by 'official' crisis managers. In particular, analysis will indicate how symbolic instruments of crisis management serve crucial political functions for power holders.

One important caveat needs to be identified at this point. It should be noted that such a reconceptualization of crisis management does not, in itself, accord any special place to incumbent authorities or bureaucratic organizations formally responsible for defining and defending the established order. Crises are constructed and manipulated by a variety of stakeholders within, but also outside, governmental circles (Rosenthal, 't Hart and Kouzmin, 1991). This is not to deny the crucial position, power advantages and special burdens of responsibility that lie with public

officials and agencies. However, adopting a symbolic perspective should not amount to a one-sided critique of what political-administrative elites say, do, or refrain from saying or doing.

The same analytical apparatus can be applied to studying and scrutinizing the role of other groups, including non-power holders and special interest groups. They too engage in symbolic manipulation to achieve political ends. They too espouse particular knowledge and authority claims. They too engage in miscalculation, miscommunication and norm violations. In reviewing the work of some prominent analysts in the symbolic tradition, one cannot help but feel that this essential fact is often overlooked or conveniently played down (Foucault, 1977; Edelman, 1988).

Symbolism and the nature of crises

One way to analyse politics is to see it as institutionalized drama (Rosenau, 1973; Combs, 1980). Such drama provides a way of expressing and channeling the heterogeneity of values, perceptions and interests that inevitably exist in society. The structure of political institutions and the way they operate reflect elaborate sets of interaction rules enabling, yet also selectively impairing, the articulation of demands, the settlement of conflict and the formulation and implementation of public policies. A key aspect of such a system is communication; especially among and between elites, social groups and mass publics necessary to keep the political process going.

As the substance of the issues under discussion can be too complex to be widely understood or too sensitive or offensive to some stakeholders to be explicitly expressed, they tend to become subsumed into symbols that lend themselves to more parsimonious and flexible communication (Edelman, 1964). Hence, intricate and often highly technical macro-economic and fiscal discussions (for example about appropriate levels and forms of taxation) are symbolically reframed in terms of 'tax battles' between 'free-market liberals' and 'welfare-state interventionists'.

Put in this form, policies lend themselves to dramatic representation in the mass media, in parliament, if need be in the courts and certainly in direct encounters between those who govern and those who do not but are affected by policy outcomes. Although particular cultures may evolve typical or preferred symbolic systems, these are not fixed entities:

Our symbol system, then, is not a cage which locks us into a single view of the political worlds, but a melange of symbolic understandings by which we struggle, through a continuous series of negotiations, to assign meaning to events (Kertzer, 1988: 175).

Dramatic political gestures can take many forms. One example is the launching of major 'policy initiatives', appropriately labelled for instant symbolic evocation and recollection, and to gather widespread support (for example the 'War on Drugs' or the 'War on Poverty'; the 'Anti-Abortion Crusade' or the 'Combat Inflation Now' (CIN) programme of president Ford — note the apparent popularity of military metaphors). Similar dramatization is also pursued by groups that seek to influence policymakers to adopt a certain set of measures such as various action groups calling for a 'battle against AIDS'.

Equally frequent are personified dramatic acts; many of which are in the form of rituals governed by meticulous, often unwritten, rules concerning time, place, presentation and with clearly defined standards of appropriate conduct. Such dramatic moments can be found in the inauguration or demotion of office-holders; State of the Union messages by the head of state; question time debates between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition; weekly meet-the-press encounters with leading politicians and an elite group of journalists; official state visits to and from foreign powers and major international conferences.

All of these symbols and dramatic acts structure political life and convey important, most fundamentally reassuring, messages to those who do not participate. In doing so, they fulfill important functions in the maintenance of political order and stability. In a more critical spirit, Edelman (1971, 1977, 1988) argues that the use of political dramaturgy, language and symbolism serves, intendedly but also unintendedly, to obtain the 'consent of the governed', even in the face of great disparities in wealth, status and power.

The field of symbolic action evolves around central themes of political processes as constructed realities; the role of symbols, myths and rituals as instruments of such social construction and, consequently, the crucial manipulative functions of language, imagery and communication. Behind these broad catchwords lies a diverse mixture of ideas, perspectives and empirical research which once were quite prominent in sociology and political science but appear to have fallen from grace since, with perhaps the notable exception of the growing literature on organizational symbolism (Pondy, Frost,

Morgan and Dandridge, 1983; Turner, 1991). In the emergent age of 'postmodernist' social theorizing, such subjectivistic perspectives on politics and society may find renewed prominence. However, even a cursory look at the current content of key academic journals shows that social science is still very much in an era overwhelmingly dominated by positivist empirical approaches.

There is no single integrated statement of the symbolic perspective on politics and administration. Rather, elements of the framework can be found in different 'cores' within political science, sociology/anthropology and organization theory (Elder and Cobb, 1983; Kertzer, 1988; Turner, 1991). In addition, there are many related sub-fields and themes, including communication theory, cultural analysis (Hofstede, 1980; Geertz, 1983) and discourse analysis (Edelman, 1977, 1988; Nimmo and Sanders, 1981; Jablin, Putnam and Porter, 1987; Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, 1990).

Crises are linked to social, economic and political conditions and tensions. As many early students of crisis phenomena have emphasised, a full understanding of these factors is essential to understanding crisis management (Prince, 1920; Sorokin, 1942; Coser, 1956; Halper, 1971; Almond, Flanagan and Mundt, 1973). This basic premise tends to get lost in current crisis definitions which focus on crises as unpleasant events challenging decision makers to respond under conditions of threat, urgency and uncertainty (Rosenthal, 't Hart and Charles, 1989: 3-33). To put the focus exclusively on the decision making function might easily lead analysts to turn a blind eye to the broader significance of crises. From a more sociological perspective, a working notion of crisis might start with the idea that it highlights discontinuities and disruptions of dominant conceptions of social and political order — be it in different ways and to different extents (Rosenthal, 1978).

The current crisis literature's emphasis on the technology of crisis response (issues of organizational forms, the structuring of information processes, media management, stress-coping procedures) appears to turn these socio-political dimensions into a black box of 'contextual factors'. In as far as politics and conflict are all acknowledged as key elements in crisis management, they are often treated as 'problems' that stand in the way of an 'effective' crisis response (Rosenthal, 't Hart and Kouzmin, 1991).

A symbolic perspective on the nature and dynamics of crises can be useful in redressing this imbalance and bringing the full extent of the political dimensions of crisis management

back to the centre stage. Starting with the very conceptualization of crisis, the symbolic perspective re-focuses the analytical debate. From this perspective, then, a crisis can be defined as a *breakdown of familiar symbolic frameworks legitimating the pre-existing socio-political order*. Crises come to the fore when the everyday dramas of public life are disrupted, either by an exogenous event, by cumulative and hitherto insufficiently recognized unintended consequences of processes of organization and governance (Sieber, 1981) or by the deliberate activities of particular groups bent on achieving such a perceptual breakthrough. This alternative conceptualization harbours a number of consequences:

1. Crises are a *perceptual category*: for a crisis to come into being, a sufficient number of influential individuals and groups must become aware of important changes in their environment (Schorr, 1987: 125-127).
2. Crises, whatever their origins, therefore always contain *multiple levels of conflict*. This cognitive conflict occurs at the intra-individual level, where affected individuals are faced with conflicting cognitions: on the one side, familiar beliefs sustaining the existing order and personal stakes in it, and, on the other hand, significant, repeated and undeniable disconfirming information that some things are seriously wrong. At the societal level, this cognitive conflict is emulated in the activities of multiple groups and organizations espousing different definitions of the situation and offering different claims about causes, impact and further development and advocating alternative and often conflicting strategies as to how to deal with the situation. Examples of the collusion of intra-individual and societal conflicts can be found in psycho-social research into the experience of creeping and man-made disasters such as Love Canal, Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl (Edelstein, 1988; Fowlkes and Miller, 1988; Brommeth, 1989).
3. Crises are an *affective category*: the dramatic challenges to previously-held world views that crises bring about, compounded by first-hand or indirect experience of material damage, human suffering or gross injustice, generate a significant amount of anxiety. Barton (1969) aptly defines disasters as situations of collective stress. More specifically, crises highlight and amplify personal insecurities and feelings of vulnerability and may serve to decrease the perceived self-competence and self-esteem of those affected (Wolfenstein, 1957).
4. Crises contain an *element of de-legitimation*:

the perceived changes are interpreted in such a way as to call into question the past, present and perhaps future functioning of particular aspects of society and, in many cases, government. In doing so, they challenge the knowledge, status and authority claims of those individuals and groups seen to be responsible. Precisely because crises challenge the primal political symbol of 'security' (Edelman, 1977: 4-5), they also challenge the competence of the institutionalized (and self-proclaimed) guardians of security, the state and its political-administrative leadership. Crises, then, should be viewed as dynamic forces in ongoing, dynamic processes of legitimization, de-legitimization and re-legitimization. De-legitimization at the macro-level is prominent during socio-economic and political regime crises. A rough scenario of crisis-induced de-legitimation reads as follows: shortfalls in socio-economic performance by existing regimes — increased political opposition — greater difficulties in sustaining governmental performance — further increases in opposition, including anti-regime and anti-system opposition (instead of merely anti certain policies or anti incumbent elites) — aggravation of crisis and possible regime breakdown (Habermas, 1975; Linz and Stepan, 1978). At the micro-level, the de-legitimation process can be witnessed in the disenchantment that disaster or terrorist victims and bereaved often experience in their contacts with corporate and governmental bodies in seeking explanations for what is happening and in pursuing post-crisis damage compensation and safety improvements.

5. Given this context of fundamental ambiguity, conflicting cognitions, collective stress and latent or manifest de-legitimation, *crises provide opportunities* for mass mobilization and institutional self-dramatization. Conventional crisis definitions tend to ignore the basic *multi-valence* of crises. Whilst decision makers may indeed experience threat, urgency and uncertainty, other officials, groups and organizations will harbour the exact opposite interpretation (Bryson, 1981). For one thing, to mass media agencies such as CNN, a major international crisis is nothing short of life-blood. In fact, CNN's coverage of the Gulf War provided the vehicle of that cable network's definitive international breakthrough. Similarly, whilst the serious riots surrounding the inauguration of Dutch Queen Beatrix demanded a heavy toll from the Amsterdam and other police forces,

central-government public-order bureaucrats welcomed them as a rare opportunity to re-affirm their pleas for a stronger, better equipped and trained anti-riot police capability in the Netherlands. Edelman (1977: 47) puts it quite succinctly: 'Any regime that prides itself on crisis management is sure to find crises to manage, and crisis management is always available as a way to mobilize public support'.

In many cases, decision makers themselves may be ambivalent in their interpretation of events. This makes the on-going battle between different groups for dominant definitions of the situation all the more interesting. Authorities themselves need not automatically be defenders of the status quo. They may, in fact, acknowledge the threats a crisis poses, while at the same time they too may conceive of possibilities of using the crisis to further some of their aims. The fact that certain aspects of the old order are de-legitimized opens up opportunities for rallying people behind visions of a new order, or at least to solicit mass support for measures that can be depicted as 'lessons' for the 'improvement' of the old order.

Sometimes the cathartic effect of a major crisis is a pre-requisite for change-oriented policy-makers being able to propose a temporary abandonment of 'muddling through' patterns of politics in favour of centralized styles of governance and far-reaching decisional powers ordinarily considered unthinkable. This too is the logic behind various constitutional provisions concerning 'crisis government' in various countries ('t Hart, Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1993). In Belgium, for example, the widely shared sense of budgetary crisis in the mid-1980s contributed to parliament agreeing to drastically reducing its influence on government policymaking for sustained periods of time.

In the latter example, the crux lies, of course, with the question as to whether the perception of crisis that formed the basis of this self-initiated abdication of democratic authenticity in favor of executive rule accurately reflected the state of the Belgian economy and the government's budget. An alternative interpretation would be that this image of crisis was more or less deliberately constructed and amplified by groups of stake-holders exploiting the opportunity structure that seemed to present itself at the time. In other words it is useful to ask: was it a 'real' or a 'pseudo' crisis?¹ This takes one from the question of the symbolic conceptualization of crisis to the issue of crisis management strategies.

Crisis management as symbolic action

The symbolic re-interpretation of the crisis concept yields five inter-related analytical dimensions to crisis *management*:

- *Perceptual control*: the 'management' of cognitive images about events;
- *conflict reduction*: re-aligning different and mutually contradictory definitions of the situation;
- *affective control*: the 'management' of individual and collective emotions generated by the breakdown of routine symbolic order;
- *de- and re-legitimation*: ultimately, some new equilibrium of more or less predictable and commonly supported patterns of social and political interaction needs to be re-established; and
- *opportunity recognition and exploitation*: both from a short-term and a longer-term perspective, every crisis presents opportunities for certain stakeholders that 'good' crisis management can bring to the fore.

These five dimensions are closely related. It is argued that the most basic ones are re-legitimation and opportunity exploitation. These constitute the most basic aims to be achieved irrespective of an actor's particular position. The other three dimensions should be regarded as instrumental in achieving these two meta-goals. Below, some of the specific symbolic strategies that are pursued by crisis actors seeking to manipulate the conduct of crisis on these five dimensions will be explored. Some strategies will be predominantly cognitive, while others are more explicitly aimed at the manipulation of emotional stress or the reduction of socio-political conflict. Three broad classes of symbolic strategies: framing, rituals and masking need discussion in greater detail.

Framing

The most important instrument of crisis management is language. Those who are able to define what the crisis is all about also hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for resolution. Conversely, for those who seek to instigate change, it is of vital importance to be able to aggravate the sense of societal crisis so as to foster a psychological and political climate receptive to non-incremental change. Much of the conflict inherent in crises centres around the various stakeholders' attempts to impose their definition of the situation on others. They do so by employing different languages, selectively exploiting data and arguments and forming 'discourse coalitions'

with like-minded groups (Hajer, 1989). Indeed, one way of looking at the communication dimensions of crises is in terms of the continuum between controlled and uncontrolled formats of communication (Combs, 1980: 119–121).

The very occurrence of a disaster or an acute crisis event implies that, at least momentarily, authorities lose control over the dramaturgy of political communication. They are literally overtaken by events, as well as by the fact that in most cases the mass media's initial responses are much quicker and more powerful in terms of generating images of the situation for mass consumption (as was painfully evident, for example, during the *Zeebrugge* ferry disaster and the 1987 Stock Market crash). Authorities try to use every means at their disposal to resort to more controlled formats as well as rhythms. As one crisis manager defined the problem: 'under normal circumstances an administrator "controls" time; during crises, time "controls" the administrator' (Docters van Leeuwen, 1990).

This loss of control over format and pace of communication means a loss of control over the definition of the situation which, arguably, is among the greatest threats to effective governance. Hence the strong emphasis on the re-establishment of such control, up to the point of policymakers seeking to fully direct images and mass media activities (a hyper-effective form of 'rumor control'). One way to do this is to severely restrict public access to sites, people and information relevant to the conduct of a crisis, as was practised with disturbing efficiency during most of the Falklands and Gulf wars.

Opposed to these official efforts may be other groups' attempts to exert a certain degree of counter-control over image formation. Groups may try to circumvent or contradict these super-imposed cognitive images: for example, by seeking to penetrate the armoury of 'the official story' or by attempting to expose previously hidden or controversial practices by self-created spectacles. Greenpeace's spectacular actions against nuclear testing or waste dumping at sea are cases in point.

Whichever party is doing the framing, apart from the necessary organization and technology, language is the main vehicle for all these activities. Edelman (1964) distinguishes four institutional language styles: rhetorical, judicial, administrative and bargaining language. Rhetorical and judicial languages are used in the open arenas of politics to solicit mass approval, while the administrative and bargaining languages form the vehicles for

behind-the-scenes striving for advantage and deal-making. Likewise, in the context of crises, rhetorical and judicial languages will be used to define the nature of crises, to identify their causes and to allocate blame.

At the rhetorical level, strongly evocative language is used to generate or reflect popular and elite anxieties — the very act of labelling a particular set of social conditions a 'crisis' is in itself a major rhetorical act. Edelman (1977) talks about a 'semantically created crisis'. It makes quite a difference whether one labels events such as Bhopal an 'incident', an 'accident', a 'tragedy' or a 'scandal'. These terms convey different assessments of the situations in terms of seriousness and the eventual allocation of responsibility for the crisis situation.

Issues of causation and responsibility for crisis occurrence are a key feature of the judicial language employed in official investigations and court proceedings. Such language is used as well to justify extraordinary legal and constitutional measures such as enabling a reallocation, mostly a drastic centralization, of formal powers of decision. From the perspective of power-holders, an important function of judicial language is to de-politicize the crisis events and to counteract the attendant de-legitimation processes by employing a 'non-partisan' channel for defining the situation and assessing success and failure.

This strategy proved to be quite effective in Great Britain throughout the 1980s when the country experienced a series of inner-city riots (Jacobs, 1989) (notably in Southall, Brixton, Toxteth, Liverpool, Handsworth and Bristol), a major prison revolt in Manchester, as well as a disturbingly high frequency of large-scale man-made accidents involving mass publics (a plane crash; a ferry disaster; an oil-platform explosion; a boat collision on the Thames; several major railway crashes; an underground station fire and a stadium crowd disaster). In each case, official inquiries were called for by the government and performed by judges, who, whilst being tenacious and objective in their pursuit of the immediate causes and implications of these events, by the very nature of their position and terms of reference steered clear of any of the underlying political issues.²

Once a problem is framed and politically adopted in terms of 'crisis' and 'avoid-avoid' choices, the details of probabilities attached to various alternatives become less salient in influencing what is subsequently done. This was exemplified by the Swine Flu crisis, during the Ford administration, when the decision was made to embark on a massive

innoculation programme designed to reach every American citizen and sure to kill a few people because of side effects:

It mattered little that the experts could not tell whether the chance of pandemic influenza was 30 per cent, or 3 per cent, or even less than 1 per cent. What the Assistant Secretary for Health, the Secretary of HEW, the President, and Congress heard was that there was *some* chance of pandemic flu and this was enough. No responsible politician wished to put himself in the position of opposing the program, thus running the risk that pandemic illness and death might prove him a villain (Silverstein, 1981: 135; Jervis, 1992: 191).

The framing of issues as crises thus generates a sort of self-binding dynamic. This might lead to highly ineffective and costly politics, but, if carefully staged, may also be put to astute political manipulation. In many instances, it makes good political sense to first dramatize the seriousness of the situation; for example, by personifying threats and constructing diabolical enemy images before going on to propose bold, even extreme, courses of action that under normal conditions would never stand a chance of being accepted (Edelman, 1977: 14; White, 1986; Edelman, 1989: 66–89). In doing so, stakeholders may appeal to deep-rooted 'threat biases' in how people perceive their environment (Jackson and Dutton, 1988: 384–385).

The logic here is familiar as it underlies the tendency to externalize internal conflicts to generate social homogeneity and gain support (Coser, 1956). A much-cited example in this respect is the Reagan administration's usage of the KAL 007 crisis:

If a widely publicized event can be interpreted as confirmation that a conspicuous enemy is dangerous, a political coalition can usually be broadened. When Russia shot down a Korean airliner carrying 267 passengers in 1983, the officials of the Reagan administration who spoke in public of their anger and revulsion at the action also benefited from the occurrence of an event that could be used to mobilize public support for defeating a nuclear freeze resolution in Congress, building the MX missile and increasing the arms budget (Edelman, 1988: 70).

Rituals

Another dimension of crisis management highlighted by the symbolic perspective is the extent to which responses to crises are pervaded by rituals; defined as symbolic behavior that is socially standardised and repetitive (Kertzer, 1988: 9). Rituals follow highly structured, more or less standardised, sequences and are often enacted at certain places and times that are themselves endowed

with special symbolic meaning. For example, in Holland, whenever a disaster occurs (mainly industrial accidents), there will be an automatic reflex on the part of authorities to set up, and publicise prominently, an official evacuation centre or public shelter to accommodate inhabitants of affected areas.

Oddly enough, the evidence of numerous disasters seems to indicate that time and again, people do not use these facilities and go to relatives and friends instead. However, when government agencies fail to follow the ritual of setting up such a centre, there is public criticism. Apparently, the very fact that official centres are made available, symbolizes the fact that the government cares and is prepared to take measures to help those affected by the disaster.

Similarly, the laying of wreaths at the site of an accident, an attack or another symbolic location is a well-known crisis ritual. Such rituals of mourning can be spontaneous or directed. An example of a spontaneous, yet highly structured and symbolic, mourning ritual occurred following the Hillsborough Stadium crowd crush that killed more than ninety Liverpool fans. Starting hours after the disaster had taken place in Sheffield, the Spionkop side of Liverpool's Anfield Road stadium was turned into a kind of shrine by thousands of people coming to pay their respects (Jacobs, 1991). More organized mourning rituals followed later, in the form of public masses in both Sheffield and Liverpool and one-minute pauses at the start of soccer matches throughout Britain. Official state funerals for deceased or slain political leaders are among the most powerful and politically significant forms of crisis-related ritual, as discussed earlier in the context of the Moro and Borsellino cases, and as evidenced by the analyses of the funerals, for example, of Mahatma Gandhi, John F. Kennedy and Indira Gandhi (Shils, 1968; Combs, 1980: 41-47; Kertzer, 1988: 140-144).

Crisis-related rituals can take many forms and fulfill many functions (Klapp, 1969). Some of these are:

Rituals of solidarity: One important ritualistic task for prominent officials is to go and visit the site and the victims of disaster or collective violence. The symbolic importance of such a public display of compassion with those suffering hardship can hardly be under-estimated. Failure to abide by it in favour of a 'business-like' attitude amounts to a serious under-estimation of the affective dimension that such disasters generate. It is sure to bring officials instant and intense public-relations problems and, occasionally, political embarrassment.

One example of this would be the fate of the Belgian Minister of the Interior, Nothomb, whose failure to show emotion and come to the site of the Heysel stadium tragedy caused much of the immediate post-crisis debate to focus on his personal role — even to the point of a marathon debate in parliament with opposition parties staging a nearly successful attempt to force his departure from cabinet. Here, the opposition appeared to exploit the minister's failure to grasp the symbolic dimensions of his role in these kinds of crisis circumstances; a failure never made in England where prime-ministerial and royal visits to the site of major disasters and terrorist attacks have indeed assumed highly ritualized proportions ('t Hart and Pijenburg, 1988).

Rituals of reassurance and purification: Confronted with a widespread social perception of crisis, policymakers need to get several reassuring messages across to the public and to other actors. First, they need to be seen to be in overall control of the situation. This is quite a challenge because, if they really were in control, there would presumably be no crisis. Secondly, policymakers or decision elites will want to avoid massive, unforeseen and uncontrollable public reactions. In part this is achieved by labelling such behavior as 'panic' and, in doing so, stigmatizing it as a means of deterrence.³

Thirdly, they will want to reassure the public that every conceivable effort is made to get at the root of the problem, which, in most cases, becomes personified in a search for human perpetrators or scapegoats. These might be found in the form of pre-existing enemies. Low-level operators (in cases of disasters), previous governments (in case of policy fiascos), or — as a means of last resort — pathologies resulting from the activities of large, anonymous bureaucratic agencies are also frequently singled out as 'causes'. Critics outside government or corporate circles stress lethargy, corruption or lack of will and action on the part of incumbent officials as important factors in bringing about the current crisis. An additional function of this mode of public search for causes is to re-instate the belief in rational procedures of government by emphasizing evocative terms such as 'full-scale inquiry', 'objective' and 'evaluation'.

Fourthly, incumbent officials seek to publicly reassure that a crisis situation will not be abused for partisan political purposes; in many cases followed by statements or actions which do just that. This attempt to reinstate the rationality myth in the face of turbulence and crisis is further amplified by employing a language of 'learning' to provide reassurance

that 'lessons' of the present crisis will be used to prevent similar events from recurring notwithstanding that research on governmental learning is, at least, sceptical about such crisis-induced learning capacities (Etheredge, 1985; Neustadt and May, 1986; Staw and Ross, 1987; Wildavsky, 1988; van Duin, 1992).⁴

Rituals of animosity: A classic example of mutually antagonistic psycho-dramas being enacted against the backdrop of an international crisis is presented by the seizure of American embassy personnel in Teheran from November 1979 till February 1981.

The crisis itself was not directly thrust on the American people, but rather created through a rich symbolic production which identified a variety of acts thousands of miles away with large symbols of national identity, as well as with abstract principles such as democracy and terrorism. The hostages were symbolically transformed into the American state itself and their captors with a variety of stigmatic symbols. It was a war of ritual, with the Iranians parading their symbols through the nearby streets of Teheran, creating a larger symbol out of the embassy itself, while in the United States the general public was swept into this international struggle through its own series of rites, which ranged from protest marches, the lowering of flags to half-mast, to the preparation of petitions addressed to the captors (Kertzer, 1988: 135).

Generally, psycho-drama is a distinguishing feature of terrorism, especially hostage-takings, but it can be found in other forms of conflict crises as well (Schmid and de Graaf, 1982). The burning of enemies' portraits and flags are standard practices in international conflicts. With anti-police demonstrations, identifying police as 'pigs' or 'Nazis' are among the standard animosity rituals practised by radical protest groups following public disturbances and police violence directed against them, with a classic example being the Chicago 1968 Democratic Convention riots (Farber, 1988).

Similarly, the often intense mutual antagonism displayed by opposing bands of soccer fans and hooligans has strong ritual, even tribal, connotations (Marsh, Roser and Harré, 1978). Many of these animosity rituals fulfill psychological and political functions as 'safety valves'. Writing against the backdrop of the massive street protests and riots of the late 1960s in the US, Edelman (1971) argues that such rituals — including judicial rituals resulting in the punishment of enemies — help reduce anxiety levels and give the impression that people can exert a certain degree of control over their lives, even though their actual

influence is negligible (Elder and Cobb, 1983: 116).

Masking

If crises expose deep-rooted conflicts and vulnerabilities of the established social order, it follows that one important dimension of crisis management by status-quo-oriented officials and agencies is to counter-act this exposition or to dampen its impact. They engage in a specific form of impression management called masking. To be sure, there exists a fine line between masking and denial or distortion of threat perceptions. Masking refers to the external communication strategies of crisis stakeholders, whilst denial refers to their own personal and internal-organizational beliefs and perceptions. The latter may be severely distorted as a consequence of defective patterns of individual, group and organizational reality-testing (Turner, 1978; Janis, 1989; Mitroff and Pauchant, 1990). This will decrease their resilience capabilities to respond effectively to emergent contingencies. Such culturally and organizationally-rooted denial and perceptual distortion are, indeed, important precursors to man-made crises.

Masking can be a parallel mechanism to denial and distortion: individuals and organizations that themselves are unable to engage in systematic and realistic self-appreciation are highly unlikely to communicate effectively to their social environments. However, masking may also be used more deliberately by policy makers who do not suffer from threat-induced perceptual rigidities. Masking, in fact, constitutes an important instrument in actually manipulating situations to stop short of the crisis point, or to selectively define dominant recollections of what transpired during a crisis. Some prototypes of masking strategies involve:

- Communicating a 'business as usual' image. Downplaying the critical nature of particular risks, emerging adversities and performance failures is almost routine behaviour in many organizations. In part it is an inevitable consequence of the operation of hierarchies, where each official has strong formal and cultural incentives to withhold 'bad news' from superiors. In part it may be an imperative given the web of interdependencies in which an organization is embedded. For major corporations, to admit any hint of non-routine problems and threats might trigger momentous consequences in the increasingly volatile arena of contemporary stock markets. As far as government agencies are concerned,

allowing such signals to multiply is interpreted as an invitation to the much-detested loss of autonomy. Publicly admitted signs of trouble either leads to direct intervention from political executives or to increasingly alert and critical scrutiny by media and parliament.

This type of masking effort may succeed and buy the official or agency time to put its affairs in order, thereby preventing an emergent crisis from materializing. Yet short-term success is not all that counts. If successful masking is *not* followed by additional symbolic or substantive remedial actions, it will only generate more severe backlashes when, in the longer run, the 'real' problems come to the surface (the My-Lai and Watergate cover-ups come to mind, as do many corporate downfalls).

Secondly, masking may be practised too little or too late and hence lack communicative power. If masking does not help to alleviate short-term concerns about performance or emerging threats, its very failure to convince people tends to aggravate the situation: it acutely exposes 'credibility gaps' and raises questions about managerial incompetence, as well as distrust. A prototype of this kind of masking failure occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Three Mile Island nuclear incident.

The initial persistence of denial and innuendo and subsequent uncoordinated admission of serious problems on the part of most notably the Metropolitan Edison Company that operated the plant, outraged both state and national politicians, contributed to serious collective stress among local inhabitants, infuriated the media and precipitated a confusing parade of radiation experts claiming different things (Stephens, 1980; Ford, 1986). As a sideline, the coincidental fact that at the time of the accident, a major film was being screened around the nation, called the *China Syndrome*, powerfully depicting a highly plausible worst-case type of nuclear incident, certainly did not help any kind of masking effort undertaken.

- Displacing crisis perceptions onto other objects or domains. Edelman (1977: 47) talks about semantically created, versus semantically masked, crises. The latter refer to:

problems that impoverish or ruin millions of lives (which) are not perceived as crises because we attach labels and 'explanations' to them that portray them as natural and inevitable, or as caused by the people who suffer from them rather than by outside, unexpected threats. We see poverty, crime,

sickness, emotional disturbance, carnage on the highways, and similar disasters as chronic 'social problems' rather than as crises, though they hurt people more severely than any of the crises do.

Here the selective labelling amounts to a masking of the critical nature of problems deemed unmanageable or politically sensitive while, at the same time, emphasizing other problems that do lend themselves to successful dramaturgy, mobilization and crisis management. Instruments of such masking are the language of causation and the language of innuendo about impact.

The vivid quality of dramatic events such as riots, terrorist actions, international conflicts and disasters, combined with the availability of external causes and enemies, makes these episodes self-evident candidates for displacement of crisis perceptions. Vividness is a powerful cognitive-affective factor: belying all safety statistics, people are more concerned about aviation safety than about road safety, the simple reason being that the rare but highly vivid event of a plane crash sticks in human memory, whereas the highly frequent and routinized occurrence of road accidents does not produce this evocation. Similarly, most people are emotionally moved by vivid pictures of war- and drought-stricken Saharan populations in a food crisis, yet accept widespread but highly dispersed and causally reconstructed evidence of poverty and homelessness in their midst.

- Obscuring details of crisis management operations. This takes one to the well-known and perennially controversial domain of 'OpSec' (Operational Security), as it is known in (para)military circles. Under the protective belt of OpSec (or legal doctrines of executive secrecy), government actors are able to hide from the public and parliamentary eye unpleasant details about pre-crisis negligence or incompetence, as well as about failed, excessively costly or ethically controversial decisions and actions taken throughout the crisis. The claim to OpSec works especially well in situations of potentially violent domestic or international conflict and terrorism, where organized state violence (or 'force' to use a typical form of masking semantics) is employed. Public attention is rarely drawn to the observation that governments use 'force' whilst enemies use 'violence'.

These situations, in particular, tend to evoke severe feelings of threat and vulnerability among mass publics and foster acceptance of whatever means are used to pursue the ends of terminating the

perceived threat. That is, if a particular conflict can be constructed as a severe threat to (national) security, this almost automatically implies a certain degree of abstention on the part of press, mass publics and representative bodies: they are considered the domain of professional administrators of force, operating discretely and autonomously and not bothered with sensitive questions that might expose their practices to current and future enemies. Interestingly, whenever such masking of operational actions breaks down, the sudden exposure to rough details may generate public over-reactions of sudden outrage.

An example of this constitutes the Belgrano affair several years after the Falklands conflict, when a whistleblower in the UK Ministry of Defence leaked sensitive details about a deliberate political-military decision to sink an Argentinian ship steaming outside the combat zone and not taking part in the hostilities (Bovens, 1990: 188). This triggered outrage about the ethics of such an act, as well as about an alleged 'cover up' and constituted almost the only major break in an otherwise perfectly dramatized and selectively masked British war effort.

Counter-symbolism: Sometimes the very staging of the crisis itself by opposition groups reveals the perpetrator's great insight in the symbolic dimensions of collective stress. The example of the student demonstrations in Bangkok, in 1973, is a case in point. When students carefully identified their actions with deeply-held symbols legitimating Thai governments over past decades, such as the constitution, the monarchy and Buddhist religion, this put the incumbent government into difficulty whereby its repression of the students' movement could be publicly construed as a violation of super-ordinate values. The revolt was successful and the government was toppled (Kertzer, 1988: 123).

Terrorists tend to look for dramatic sites and targets that not only publicise their cause but symbolically show the vulnerability of the system they seek to challenge. This is why despite the elaborate security measures taken, the IRA continues to try and strike near the centre of British politics (Whitehall) even though they could bomb other targets with far less risk of being caught. It is also why most 'professional' hostage-takers and kidnappers enact more or less fixed scripts designed to maximize pressure on the authorities via the communication of dramatic pictures or messages through the mass media.

Authorities are aware of the power of

counter-symbolism and fear it. This is why Chancellor Kohl and his German government showed great anxiety over the announcement by Jewish organizations that they would protest against President Reagan's visit to the Bitburg SS cemetery by wearing their concentration camp uniforms. The sheer evocation of the mental picture of a US President symbolically forgiving German war atrocities by laying a wreath for SS officers while, at the same time, German uniformed police were being seen forcibly keeping away victims of the Third Reich must have been enough to produce nightmares for both Kohl's and Reagan's staff. Yet, by announcing the visit, Kohl in particular had manoeuvred himself into a position from which no retreat was possible. The visit went ahead and elaborate police precautions were taken to keep the protestors far removed from the scene of the visit and outside the range of television cameras (Hartman, 1986; Regan, 1988: 257-264).

Whilst counter-symbolism can be a powerful instrument of questioning the dramaturgy of elite definitions of the situation, it too can backfire and unintendedly enhance acceptance of, and support for, elites. For example, during a protracted conflict between Amsterdam city authorities and militant squatters protesting against housing shortages and speculative practices, a ritual of court-ordered evictions of squatted premises developed in which massive police forces called in to effect the eviction were subsequently engaged in pitched street battles with radical demonstrators. After some time, the severe, repeated and purely ritual character of this street violence overcame the housing issue in the public debate about squatting. As a consequence, the squatters lost the broad popular support they had initially enjoyed and were effectively marginalized and stigmatized by the authorities who had, simultaneously, initiated massive building and renovation programmes. The strategy of violent confrontation became self-defeating: the movement became internally divided and crumbled (Graham and Gurr, 1969: 783-795; Rosenthal and 't Hart, 1990).

Conclusion

Crises are the domain of multiple realities and conflicting cognitions. By whom, how, and why an event is perceived as a crisis is a key empirical issue for crisis analysts. To answer it, analysts will need to examine the role of language, symbols and communication in the process of the formation of collective perceptions.

Likewise, analysts will have to take into

ible plurality of cultures (Wildavsky, 1990), their values in value systems (Hood, 1990), and the various risks (Douglas and Douglas, 1990) and perceptual anchors used to evaluate events that occur at any point in time. They mine the politics and framing; in other words, they frame the dominant definition of crisis. Only if one is to have a very definition of crisis as to the ways in which it changes over time and ultimately adequately begin to understand the process of crisis management by various stakeholders. As to crisis management, it is symbolic crisis politics is more a social and transient phenomenon, the symbolics of crisis are used so effectively through the use of emotion and affection control, to reduce conflict, that social and political issues are left untouched. On the other hand, the contrast between the two should not be

as Jackson (1976: 224) notes, 'The political outputs to crises are not dispensed, but rarely produced hastily produced such as emergency laws and decrees' in the governmental arena and controlling social consequences that last way in of any particular crisis. The plateau theory of welfare- each 'war' or social crisis and additional provisions frequently maintained that this is because *ad-hoc* translated into bureaucratic (Lorenz, 1980: 15). The renewed attention for the crisis management is, then, currently dominant constitutes crisis politics. Content-based concerns with reassurance-group- or bureaucratic issue of crisis management concerns; namely to the fundamental and political order, (Rosenthal, 1978: 57-60). One of the crucial functional perspective is to look at the issues and rationales and to the issues of authority, power that are inextricably way in which crises are

defined and handled and to what their medium- and long-term consequences are for existing structural and cultural arrangements.

Notes

- 1 The terms 'real' and 'pseudo' are put in inverted commas because to establish the 'realness' of a crisis pre-supposes that one has some objectively or inter-subjectively validated standard of making such a judgement. According to deconstructionist accounts of social epistemology, such a presumption is problematic to say the least. As Edelman (1988: 10) puts it:

Accounts of political issues, problems, crises, threats and leaders now become devices for creating disparate assumptions and beliefs about the social and political world rather than factual statements. The very concept of 'fact' becomes irrelevant because every meaningful political object and person is an interpretation that reflects and perpetuates an ideology.

- 2 In contrast, from the perspective of change-oriented groups, judicial discourse and procedures are often resorted to in order to gain entrance to the policy arena and to acquire a more or less 'official' stamp of approval as legitimate stake-holders. Examples of these would include anti-nuclear activists who have fought major court battles in Germany and Holland over the proposed Kalkar nuclear breeding reactor. Similarly, organizations such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International have developed considerable research and judicial expertise, including the staging of symbolic tribunals, whilst, at the same time, developing much broader lobbying activities to expose corporate or governmental misconduct, negligence and mismanagement. The same goes for the *ad-hoc* organizations involving victims and the bereaved fighting political and court battles over, for example, Bhopal, Herald of Free Enterprise and Exxon Valdez litigation.
- 3 In actual fact, detailed studies of human behaviour in acute stress situations (such as burning buildings) show that people hardly ever 'panic' in the sense of irrationally acting out stress-induced behavioural impulses. As long as people are well-informed of their situation and are aware of behavioural alternatives that will shield them from danger, they will display calculated reactions. Only if such information and behavioural alternatives are completely lacking, will they be overcome by hyper-vigilant impulses (Drabek, 1986).
- 4 One multi-functional means of conveying these various reassuring messages is to launch 'sweeping inquiries', 'extensive policy reviews' and 'thorough re-examinations' (Combs, 1980: 60). At the same time, whether such inquiries live up to their publicly espoused claims is highly contingent upon political processes that determine the composition, terms of reference, time schedule, information access and staffing of these inquiries (Lipsky and Olson, 1977).

Furthermore, even if the inquiries produce solid and detailed evidence and suggestions for improvement, it is political processes that determine whether the committees' definitions of the situation receive enough public attention, agenda status and persistent political-administrative support to prevail during the 'muddling through' of implementation (van Duin, 1992). Yet, whether policy improvements actually are effected as a result of crisis-induced inquiries is often far less important than their ritual functions in defusing a highly-charged socio-political atmosphere.

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