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# Book Reviews

**The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure,** A. Boin, P. 't Hart, E. Stern and B. Sundelius. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2005.

The politics of crisis management strives to be a 'comprehensive analysis [in which] the authors examine how leaders deal with the strategic challenges they face, the political risk and opportunities they encounter, the errors they make, the pitfalls they need to avoid, and the paths away from crisis they may pursue'. The 150 pages which result from this endeavor are, to start with a conclusion, good reading especially for students, clearly to few to handle the subject at hand precisely and fully and probably too long and scientific to be read by the leaders themselves.

What this book does is bring together the major points of the existing literature on the subject of public leadership in times of crisis. Much of this literature has originally been written or discussed by the authors before so they clearly master the subject. A special feature of this book is the abundance of examples, which accounts in part for the high readability.

The authors describe five 'critical tasks for leaders': sense making, decision making, meaning making, terminating and learning. Each task is then awarded its own chapter in the book. The fact that these tasks are essentially woven for public leaders is reflected in the discussions in the different chapters, which often touch on the themes of the other chapters.

Sense making may be considered as the classical situation assessment step in decision making. This book especially focuses on the barriers to crisis recognition, which often hamper individuals and leaders.

Decision making is, as the authors promise, considered to be both the act of coming to a decision as the implementation of that decision. The book however focuses mainly on the act of making a decision itself. In practice the overwhelming problems of implementing that decision, at least in the acute phase of a crisis, are for the greater part left untreated.

Meaning making refers to crisis management as political communication. Indeed, as is well known, the authors explain that the quality of crisis decision making can be fully independent from the perception of that quality in the media and with the general public.

Terminating a crisis is according to the authors only possible if the public leader correctly handles the accountability question. In their treatment of this 'task' the authors seem a little naive or perhaps I am too cynical. Where the authors speak of possibilities – 'if a post-crisis evaluation identifies failures of prevention' – I myself believe that no crisis nowadays is fully terminated without having pointed at the culprit and public leaders having promised that they will remedy this. Just 'bad luck' is not accepted these days, which by the way is in flagrant contradiction with risk management strategies that by law are usually based on probability calculations. So where the authors point out that 'accountability is hollow when [it] becomes ritualized' I am afraid it already is for the greater part.

In the chapter on learning, the authors in fact take that same stance i.e. actual learning from a crisis is limited. Though as they note, a crisis often opens a window of opportunity for reform for better or for worse. Of course, this theme is home ground for the authors who have published several famous articles and books on this subject.

In their concluding chapter 'how to deal with crisis' the authors, rather than giving tips and tricks, sum up all possible barriers to adequate crisis management. Here, those that would try to improve their crisis management skills by just reversing the mentioned barrier often will face an essential non-accomplishable task. While it is true for example that 'crisis can become uncontrollable when leaders fail to develop a clear picture of the unfolding events' the very essence of a crisis is that this clear picture cannot be developed. The 'uncertainty' element in crisis asks for decision making on the basis of an unclear picture of the crisis at hand.

Let me conclude with just a few words on the impreciseness and incompleteness of the book. It may be just the former mathematician who is disturbed but when on page 2 a definition of crisis is given in terms of threat, urgency and uncertainty it is imprecise to write on the following page that 'crisis typically and understandably *induce* a sense of urgency'. At that same page 3, time compression is suddenly said to be 'a defining element for crises' where *that* of course should be considered as induced on human decision makers by the defining characteristics of crisis. As an example of the incompleteness, when on pages 29–30 the effect of stress

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on human decision making is discussed, apart from the first sentence, as having a negative but non-quantified effect on the decision making by leaders in general, there is no mention at all of the relevant body of knowledge known as naturalistic decision making which sheds a much more applicable light on this theme.

Overall I would say that while it cannot be said that this book is a comprehensive analysis, there however can be no doubt that this book is a good introduction to the theme of public leadership during times of crisis.

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**Extreme Emergencies. Humanitarian Assistance to Civilian Populations following Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and Explosive Incidents – A Sourcebook,** Anthea Sanyasi. Practical Action, Rugby, 2005, 208 pp.

The operational landscape of humanitarian assistance organisations has changed. It requires an adaptation of humanitarian practice(s) for field intervention. This book is a most welcome contribution to this seemingly unavoidable change.

Historically, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been major contributors to relief intervention following natural disasters, epidemics and famine. A long history of cases and emergencies depicts this usual profile of humanitarian assistance. However, these organisations are now increasingly involved *directly* in civil and military conflicts, as well as in industrial or technological accidents or emergencies. Meaning: players in humanitarian assistance can fall victims – or worse, be direct targets – of these new threats to human security.

As a matter of fact, the technical profile of these conflicts and emergencies has also changed, as new threats have appeared. Certainly, the end of the Cold War – that some found analytically useful to describe as a Manichean, bipolar confrontation – has left the world with an increasingly complex landscape of crises, conflicts, and socio-technical emergencies. In short, the risks posed to human security seem to have become less and less understandable – or better, *readable*.

New threats have appeared. In particular chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive incidents (CBRNE) – both accidental and intentional – now threaten humanitarian assistance organisations and staff. In addition, there should be considered the ongoing trend of revised patterns for terrorist action, including the use of non-conventional weapons or substances – such as biowarfare and radioactive "dirty" bombs. In other words, civil populations are now plagued with new threats that also jeopardize the safety of players involved in humanitarian assistance. Consequently, and as sources and forms of risks evolve, so should change as well the protocols, methods and tools of humanitarian activity. In that sense, this sourcebook comes at the right time.

This CBRNE sourcebook is for international NGOs providing humanitarian assistance in the middle- and low-income countries. The sourcebook provides a generic guide for mitigation and humanitarian response to CBRNE-affected populations. It also provides NGOs with knowledge and tools for reducing the exposure and vulnerability of their field staff to potential CBRNE threats. Reading this sourcebook, it becomes obvious that it has captured the rich experience of several resource people and organisations involved in humanitarian assistance – and with a knowledge of CBRNE issues. Such lessons learned in exercise should be praised.

New types of civil and militarity threats to human security, including terrorist acts, are not the only trends making this sourcebook extremely valuable to its reader. Indeed, as global warming and related climate change feature new patterns of hydro-meteorological hazards – in terms of intensity, frequency, and geographic distribution – the probability of natural-technological interactions (NATECHs) also increases. For instance, flooding of industrial facilities has been known for having a potential of hazardous material release – some of which are present in the CBRNE list of substances. In that sense, disseminating information on CBRNE events will certainly improve the preparedness of humanitarian organizations to managing NATECH incidents and emergencies.

Considering that an NGO's policy on involvement in life-threatening situations – possibly featuring CBRNE risks – will be influenced by its mandate, technical competence and priority objectives, this sourcebook addresses the various dimensions of NGO activity and field intervention. Part I, on Managing the Crisis, covers five chapters. These address the following issues: Strategic management; Tactical management; Field staff safety; Operational management; Psychosocial support. Part II provides systematic information on CBRNE hazards. Part III provides resources (indicators, characteristics, list of measures, etc.) for appropriate response to CBRNE events. This last part is usefully organised in the form of topical annexes, some with very technical contents.

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