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Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

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Constructing Crisis: Leaders, Crises and Claims of Urgency
Bert Spector
Cambridge University Press, 2019

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Constructing Crisis: Leaders, Crises and Claims of Urgency by Bert Spector (2019; Cambridge University Press) provides a decidedly critical perspective on processes of organizing that leaders use to impetuously concentrate power. I purposely use the term critical here to underscore the rhetorical ethic Spector engages in the book. It follows two veins: First, in the way that Constructing Crisis unfolds especially how Spector lays out his case for problematizing (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) the contextual constructionism of problems and crises in organizations. It appears that he picks up on familiar themes that build critical theory (e.g., research as a vehicle for critique, see Hayes, Hopkinson, & Taylor, 2016) even if he does not directly make this assertion himself. Second, in a delicate plot to challenge the normative landscape of leadership studies in mainstream management research, Spector bypasses the anticipated pragmatics of empiricism – attempting a theoretical construct of 'crisis' (Jaques, 2007), lacking field-level definition (Perry, 2018), and reliability issues of comparative longitudinal research on crises (Roux-Dufort, 2016) – that plague the literature, favouring to cut straight to the crux of his proposition: leaders use underlying organizational processes to weld power during moments of crisis.

What exactly is it about a crisis that elicits the worst in leaders especially those with capitalist motives? In *Constructing Crisis* Spector wades into this debate that has seemingly failed to command a prominent following much to the dismay of mainstream management and organization theorists (Roux-Dufort & Lalonde, 2013). He does so by taking an unconventional approach to studying the construction of a crisis. Rather than limiting himself to a single-sided understanding, Spector performs a high-stakes balancing act that lives up to normative expectations – orienting a crisis as a process of organizational weakening (Roux-Dufort, 2007) – while simultaneously problematizing the taken-for-granted narratives of extant theory that posit crises as unexpected or unanticipated 'events' as shock to the status quo (Pearson & Clair, 1998). He does this brilliantly; careful not to wed his conceptualization to some wholesale transformation that upends and dismisses the work of so many in management and organization studies focusing on allied interests (e.g., stakeholder and issue analysis, see Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017). In doing this, we are greeted with the idea that

> [T]here is no such thing as a crisis… [they are] constructions made by leaders, claims that insist that their social unit faces an urgent situation… [whose] claims of urgency are not neutral, scientifically objective readings of the external environment [r]ather they are exercises in power and assertions of interests on behalf of the claims makers. (pp. ix-xi)

Provocative in his interpretive effort, Spector reels in his readers by focusing not so much on the fractious character of crisis and crisis management streams of research demoralized by a lacking consensus around how it may be understood (see James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011, for a detailed accounting of the evolving definitions) but challenging how crises may actually be used to supplant collectivism in organizing with tropes of managerialist ideology. He would not be the first to raise this concern. In a recent article in the *Academy of Management Annals*, Williams, Gruber, Sutcliffe, Shepherd, and Zhao (2017) found, in their systematic approach to the literature, that how an organization responds to negative externalities is partly an outcome of traditional control mechanisms within an organization, chief among them being the actions by leaders to exploit (or ignore) vulnerabilities that ultimately result in major disruptions of what is deemed normal. People crave status quo and managers know this. Leaders in Corporate America[1] and public service know this too. After all, it was Rahm Emanuel (2020), then-chief of staff to President Barack Obama throughout the first two years of his presidency, who let slip: "Never allow a good crisis go to waste. It's an opportunity to do the things you once thought were impossible" (para. 1). The argument Spector forwards is that crises present leaders with an indelible opportunity to seize control.
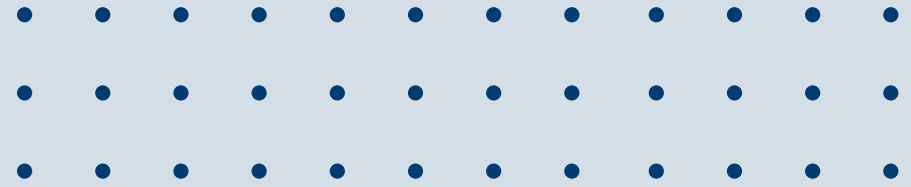
The context of crisis is an incredibly timely one that Spector points out at the forefront of the book. He lets readers know that as he sat down to began writing in 2016, "a wave of migration convulsed Europe... In June, citizens of the United Kingdom voted to exit the European Union... In the United States, competing claims of crisis dominated the presidential campaign" (Spector, 2019, p. ix). We know with the benefit of hindsight that that was just the tip of the metaphoric iceberg. In terms of an organizational perspective, adversity has been common-place for as long as humans, being the social creatures that we are, have sought association one with another. Be it early primal instincts of 'fight or flight' or more present-day threats of information systems malfunction, for example, moments of uncertainty have presented the social world with an existential angst. There is, arguably, no better example of crisis (or crises) than the multiple troubles that besiege us now. Take stock of the critical moment we face: a novel virus that has infected tens of millions; a global economy teetering on the brink of yet another collapse, and; political tribalism spurred on by rising populism of all partisan persuasions threatening to pull apart the social fabric of a new world order. These are just a few conflicts that rise to the claim of 'crisis.'

Considering the calamities that seemingly appear with each new week, we assume a certain familiarity with the idea of crisis, but have we callously reified crises as 'things' as opposed to rethinking them in terms of leaders and their claims of urgency? Spector attempts to answer this question throughout the entire book by taking readers down a path of reinterpreting the idea of crisis. *Constructing Crisis* is organized around ten chapters whose contents each take on the idea of de/reconstructing facets of crises. For example, readers are asked in the first chapter to consider the incorrectly applied use of the crisis concept, most notably in the crisis-as-event model (Hermann, 1963; James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011) that supposes crises as surprising and disruptive events (e.g., incident, accident, disaster) often studied as a unit of analysis. Spector then shifts from pointing out the fault of event-based research to offering an alternative model that shifts analysis away from the event and toward the claim of urgency itself. Each subsequent chapter takes this crisis-as-claim model to explore what we get wrong about thinking them (crises) as things: reification of urgency (chapter 2); intricacies and shortcomings of the crisis-as-event model (chapter 3); the anatomy of a crisis and its socially constructed

character (chapter 4); common narratives from the crisis-as-event model (chapter 5); a belief formation process underpinning the acceptance of urgency narratives (chapter 6); the mechanics of building convincing narratives of crisis (chapter 7); dynamics of crisis leaders in theory and practice (chapter 8); a reinterpretation of leader behaviours as crisis-claim-makers (chapter 9), and; final thoughts that form an ensemble calling leaders, followers, and those who study them to think differently about crises as power (chapter 10).

What stuck with me after reading the book was just how much undoing is needed in our rethinking of leaders and their inclination to exploit a crisis. Now, students of leadership theory know that it is a mature field – arguably among the most published area in all social science to-date (Hunt & Dodge, 2000). Why is that? Jeffrey Pfeffer (2015, p. 8), the preeminent leadership guru of Stanford Graduate School of Business, offered an interesting explanation; suggesting "many people, both scholars and practitioners, view leadership as a construct important if not fundamental to explaining business and organizational per-formance." If I could summarize Pfeffer's view, it is that leadership is 'important' because the rise and fall of an organization ultimately depends on, among other things, leading people toward some common goal. Most often that 'goal' is profit. What has resulted is an industry large in its magnitude and far in reach. Spector similarly points out that "a robust crisis management industry exists offering just that kind of practical, step-by-step advice" (2019, p. 37). What brings these two literatures together, at least in *Constructing Crisis*, is how Spector demon-strates how an insatiable appetite for a romanticized version of heroic leadership acts as an accelerant to competing intraorganizational interests. This is best exampled by how the characterization of an event can impact decision making. Spector uses familiar examples in business like Nissan's Carlos Ghosn – the disgraced former chief operating officer who, in his implementation of a restruc-turing program that resulted in the furlough of over 20,000 employees, gain notoriety for his hypocrisy by misrepresenting his own generous compensation – to reiterate how powerful leaders' decisions are in constructing a crisis and exploiting it for gain.

Enthusiasm for *Constructing Crisis*, especially for its ability to get readers thinking about the 'who' and 'what' of urgent claims, also doubles as what I feel is a missed opportunity. If its possible to epitomize the last century the most
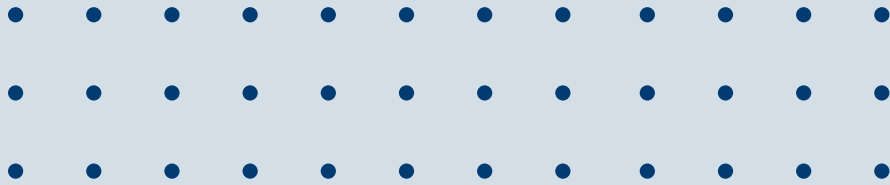
important juncture relating to how we 'do' business would be the rise of neo-liberalism as a hegemonic discourse. Neoliberalism – a reworking of ideology to be defined by capitalist imperatives – has creped into the way we think and talk about business and society. Most research conducted in the mainstream of management and organization studies support logic of the market. Among the outcomes of this ideology has been an alarming reality that businesses have failed as an ethical system (Miller, 2019). Through dozens of examples, Spector lets his audience know that crises of moral and ethical proportions in capitalism have damaged the reputation of business overall. However, little, if any, dialogue is produced about how corporations (and leaders) who extend their responsibilities to society (Wood & Logsdon, 2019) beyond profitability might also fare in the face of crisis. After all, some of the most renown brands have been touted as examples of responsible businesses (e.g., PepsiCo's commitment to tackling global water scarcity by enhancing production processes to increase water efficiency). Likewise, some of the more common consequences of strategizing corporate social responsibility include remedies to 'crises' in the big picture (Janssen, Sen, & Bhattacharya, 2015): carbon footprint, fair-trade, and volunteerism, to name a few.

The publication of *Constructing Crisis* is in keeping with a movement in management scholarship that is shedding light on the interwoven nature between business and society vis-à-vis themes of ethics, leadership, and corporate social responsibility (Andriof, Waddock, Husted, & Rahman, 2017; Hsieh, 2017; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019) . Its clear to anyone attuned to the political nature of leading organizations that this book provides a compelling rethink of a powerful tool in the arsenal of management: crisis. There are so many claims that demand our attention to 'fear this' or 'focus on that.' Spector advocates that it takes "a critical response to all such claims" (2019, p. 221) to understand the fidelity of a crisis and determine how these may actually be construed to mobilize others to act in some manner favourable to some interest. Drawing out how we may understand these strategies is one way to equip ourselves as we emerge from calamity to a 'new normal.'

Notes

[1] Phraseology referring to the cabal of corporate and business executives; not necessarily a context of American socio-economic politics.

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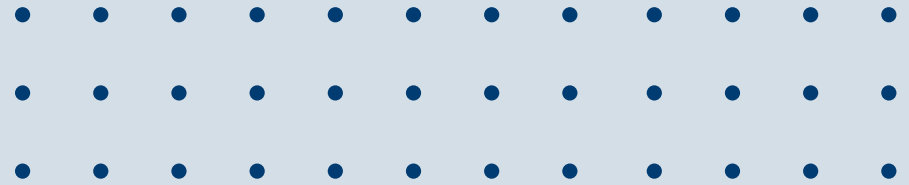
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