The Crisis and the Complexity of Knowing

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ABSTRACT

The crisis our society finds itself in is very much a crisis of knowledge; that is, a lack of knowledge about the complex world. Humanity 'simply' do not know what they do not know. This is true for the complexity of a nonlinear complex reality. Complexity is still taken for granted. Ignorance on complexity is still dominating our worldview. Complex organizations are trying to face the complexity of the world, but show at the same time their ignorance on the very complexity of complexity. Harnessing complexity is a hardy perennial for these complex organizations. They do not seem able to explore the very potential of complexity for their own organizations, in terms of fostering creativity and innovation. The only remedy for this is first to recognize their ignorance on the topic of complexity. To confront complexity you first need to become (more) knowledgeable about the very dynamics of complexity.

Keywords: Complex Organization, Complexity, Crisis, Ignorance, Knowledge Society, Learning, Network, Thinking

INTRODUCTION

“We have to deal with what we do not understand, and that demands new ways of thinking.” (Paul Cilliers, 1998, p. 2, emphasis added)

In this contribution we want to go deeper into the crisis of our time and its consequences for organizations and companies, operating in our society commonly conceived as a kind of ‘information society’ or ‘knowledge society.’ According to the French thinker Edgar Morin, we may speak about a so-called ‘poly-crisis’ (Hessel, 2011, p. 43). We argue that the crisis can be taken as being both a financial, economical, political and moral crisis. The crisis is very much the crisis of Western Culture. According to Sandywell (1996), we may speak about a crisis of Western reason. We ‘simply’ lack an adequate understanding of the crisis we are in. To understand the very crisis we are in, and its effects on Complex Organizations (CO’s) and their management, we need to become more reflective on the nature of this crisis. We argue here that the deep nature of the crisis is still very much hidden. After reading the papers, journals and more specialist literatures, we are of opinion that nobody seems to have a kind of bird eyes view of the crisis. Consequently, nobody seems to know what is underlying the very crisis we are still in. Even worse, we seem not able to view the system with new eyes.

We want to argue here that the crisis is very much the crisis of our common way of knowing. The crisis we are in is very much the
crisis of a learned incapacity to make the link between the known known and the field of the unknown unknown (Table 1).

The crisis is very much about our learned ignorance: the ignorance about the unknown unknown. The crisis is a crisis of a learned incapacity to make the link between the known known and the field of the (un)known unknown. It is the crisis of complex phenomena within our reality as we took it for granted. We took not only complexity for granted but also the notion of reality. We have ‘simply’ underestimated the very complex nature of reality. The map we have of reality is not about the territory anymore. This turns the crisis into a crisis of innovation. We urgently need a new map about what is real. Solving the crisis demands for a real shift of mind: of new ways of thinking and knowing about [what is] the real. It is therefore no surprise that there is no such thing as an easy ‘solution’ for this crisis. This description of the state of art may explain why nobody seems able to find the path of ‘solving’ the very crisis we are in. For this reason we may speak not only about the tragedy of the crisis as unforeseen. We may as well speak about the tragedy of misunderstanding the crisis. The crisis is very much the crisis of the unexpected and misunderstood phenomena, being more complex than ever thought before. The unexpected in this is very much about the unknown. Experts, whom we trusted, were not very expert and knowledgeable about the unknown. They didn’t know very well what should be done about the very crisis. Their lack of knowledge became clear to everyone. Consequently, reputations got lost very quickly and the struggle to survive became very prominent.

The demonstrated lack of knowledge about the unknown is not only about the known unknown but also, and even more so, about the unknown unknown. This, we argue, might be viewed as the key for a new opening in our thinking about the world as a more complex world. This opening might be viewed as opening a new window on the world. We argue here that new thinking might open a new world: a complex world. This hitherto unknown complex world may show up to be a “world of the possible” (Kauffman, 1993). Within this new world we may open up new vistas of possibility, with new spaces of possibility, hitherto unknown. Opening of this new world of the possible asks for a shift of mind about what is the real in this complex world. We need to open up the black box of this unknown world, to see what is in it and how complexity may be ‘at work’ in the real. We should not only be ready to embrace complexity. We also need to learn to live with complexity by confronting the complexity of our world. Doing so, we may better understand the power of complexity operating in this world. It is the power of complexity as self-potentiating (Rescher, 1998). Once we better understand how complexity can be ‘at work’ in this complex world, we might benefit from a deeper understanding of the power of complexity. This is the very promise of complexity.

“In order to arrive at what we do not know. You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.”
(T. S. Eliot, in “East Coker”)

### THE TRAGEDY OF THE CRISIS

The tragedy of the crisis of today may be viewed as the tragedy of modernism, showing its fundamental incapability to function as an adequate source for mastering the causes of the

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