

## Lehman's Serpent throughout the World

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Mass media in Time of Global Economic Crisis

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Knowledge, information and sociology of crisis have been challenged many time in history, e.g. Pompej, Lisbon, New Orleans, the recent Tsumanis, Burma's cyclone, the big Chinese earthquake, accidents generated by nature and environment. Such catastrophes evoke manifold responses. Despite the enormous progress and density of modern media technologies the dynamics of public consciousness in face of catastrophes are readable in historical documents. So Jeremias Gotthelf, famous Swiss writer, described the flooding of the wild river Emme 1837<sup>1</sup>. It destroyed lives, houses, grassland and woods. The writer shows how these events produced a series of chaotic perceptions, experiences and emotional states of people. To such extreme insecurities and fears narrations and myths responded offering metaphysical patterns: the myth of "Emmen-Schlange (-serpent)", the flooding as sign of gods or ghosts. Thereby strong feelings of belonging together followed, of being selected to survive, of new responses to the uncertainties. A third kind of coping with chaos is readable: people are looking deeper into dark or hidden zones; old or forgotten stories are recovered, the collective memory of past becomes activated by catastrophes. Finally the matrix zone is evident in Gotthelf's document, the efforts to rationalise the catastrophe's aftermaths by calculating them in financial terms and to provide models of justice compensating the damages. The case of Emme illustrates that natural catastrophes can play the role of *creative* destructions, which are able to re-integrate a society shaping a communitarian mind. They can be described as efforts to drive public models and images in four zones of consciousness: chaos, panorama, dark and matrix zone<sup>2</sup>.

Mankind looks back to human made *disruptive* catastrophes like, besides the wars, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, and *silent* ones, for instance impacts of warming climate, pollution space or latent pandemic potentials like bird flu, SARS or currently swine flu around the world. The continuous flow of such events and dangers is observed by World Observatory providing a monitor of global risks but including the whole range of events and trends daily provided by media by six clusters and scenarios (see appendix, figure 1).

Since September 2008 the Lehman-serpent, evidently a man made catastrophe, swings between horrible chaos and terrible order. The financial breakdowns shocked at the beginning by data and figures followed later on by suicides, falls of prominent leaders, tragedies of people illustrating the crisis. A first chaotic cycle of events was restricted to the US. But evidently the

financial affairs contaminated in very short time a series of banking institutions linked to the US money markets and of global North. These first cycles of chaotic events needed immediately strong efforts for ordering. Important persons tried to pacify the disorders and associated fears. But it was not possible to contain the insecurities within the financial (and economic) sectors. A series of local, national and international conferences followed. However the crisis expanded and new waves of events reached transcontinental and worldwide extensions. They absorbed the ordering gestures and measures gained in the US and linked national actors relevant for financial affairs. Responses offered by experts, data collections and research remained ambiguous, were rejected or evoked further doubts. The wave of chaos reached the international communities in the North, the emerging countries (BRIC: Brazil, Russia, India, China) and the South.

A catastrophe in a world region leads to waves of chaos evoking unexpected events. They can be hardly flattened through convincing images that a new order can be established. The initial events in the restricted area (US) transmitted the waves of chaos to international global level where they changed its incidence on societies as well as its character.

The observation of daily events reveals these trends and paths of global development (figure 2). During September 08 the negative events in scenario one world (Smith) reached an extraordinary peak. In October 08 nearly all scenarios of global developments have been affected; mainly “Cassandra” notifying the financial as catastrophe-like event increased. But also a clear shift to negotiate the impacts of crisis was evident (Rousseau).

Much more, the chaotic events in scenario *one world* (Smith)<sup>3</sup> migrated to that of *civil society* (Kant): questioning established norms in financial affairs and to that of *negotiating* (Rousseau): trying to find agreements by interactions and conferences. But as the crisis expanded worldwide the *domesticating* efforts (Hobbes) have been affected. US as centre of the critical events falls down as agent for order. US as hegemonic leader faces enormous risks and efforts to overcome the insecurities. The election of American President Obama and its intense engagement for a state oriented pacification of the crisis is a response to the extreme deviation of world wide chaos from the normal line, in fact, the events could mark historical change.

Let's make a comparison to Chernobyl as an earlier catastrophe: There is some evidence that the breakdown of the Soviet Union in the early 90-ties was one of the aftermath of the catastrophe and, connected with it, the erosion of the old trusty image of the overall control power competently concentrated in Moscow. It was dramatically illustrated by the waves of chaos produced through the Chernobyl accident also starting in a local arena but diffusing regional and trans national borders. Empirical research 20 years after the disaster confirms long

termed impacts on perceptions, attitudes and conduct of different generations in Chernobyl regions. Thereby, for instance, the communitarian effects and local attachment strengthened by the catastrophe are visible until now.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis of daily events reveals a substantial change of its contents *within* the Smith cluster (scenario). The events and its resonance in media progress from level I to II and increasingly including aspects of level III:

- I: Events contain chaotic and mostly negative impacts on firms, economy, society and outlook.
- II: Events include intentions for new models, measures and ordering by public and state-intervention.
- III: Events articulate interests to hold, regain or to change global leadership (hegemony) in financial as well as economic issues.

How has the Lehman serpent impacted people in different parts of World society? On the basis of two national comparative surveys<sup>5</sup> three trends can be summarised as follows:

In *global South* the financial crisis generates strong personal concerns, much higher than in the other parts of global society. The financial crisis works as catalyser of a trans national class-consciousness and awareness of poverty (Figure 3). These attitudes dispose people for a *anti-status-quo* position, i.e. a state oriented change of economy (level II). The national economy as well as the international economic order (level III) should be radically changed in the sense of new order (Figure 4/5). Countries of this part of global South included into the survey are: Kenya, Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, Central America, Philippines, Mexico, Chile, Turkey. They are members of the “existential periphery”; measured as highly concerned by increasing food prices, i.e. an indicator for deprivation in regard to basic needs (see figure 7).

In *emerging countries*, in BRIC embracing Brazil, Russia, India, China, a very interesting trend is evident. Despite the fact that people partially are also suffering low basic need conditions (for instance Brazil) they are less concerned personally by the crisis and they are systematically less interested in strong reforms for the national and international economic order than the other parts of global society. It seems that the financial crisis in this region does not impact a trans national class-consciousness of anti-status-quo but rather *pro-status-quo*; here the optimistic outlooks to participate in world economy seems not to be touched by the crisis. New orders are less stressed and the group of emerging players expect more than the others that the economic situation will improve already in the next six months (see figure 6).

The *Northern part of world society* is less concerned by increasing food prices and direct impacts on personal situation. But they are more pessimistic in regard to the time horizon for improvement. Mainly the European South supports new national and trans national models of economy more than the populations in BRIC. Thereby the hegemonic player and the source of crisis, US, is taking middle positions between the South and the BRIC, the emerging players.

Looking to members of *European Union* data analysis confirm the observations on global level (figure 8). The group of peripheral newcomer states, mainly Hungary, Greece, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Cyprus, show the strongest personal concern while in the group of insiders, affluent and smaller states, mainly in Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland) people is much less concerned. The group of other insiders and newcomers, of bigger or core nations vary between these two groups. The assessment of the current personal concern by financial crisis is strongly correlated with the expectation of future outlooks.

It seems that the personal concern by financial crisis is explained by a peripheral versus affluent position of a EU member state and/or by (ii) its status as newcomer, insider or core nation of European Union.

Concluding remark: It is evident that events do not articulate themselves but need information, symbols, media in order to gain significance and influence. But it seems that catastrophic events themselves produce strong symbolic power. Thereby media function rather as *vehicles* of them than as its *creators*. Evidently the media evoked by the financial crisis have worked as vehicles for hard events. Otherwise one could hardly understand the systematic trends of attitudes among the different positions of global and European society. The series of events due to financial crisis produced a kind of class-consciousness polarising between different positions of nations within the international system of inequalities and stratification in a very short time.

Surely media have been also challenged to take the role as creators of images about what, where, and how something happened in worldwide and national financial affairs. Among the emerging geopolitical players the creation of optimistic images impacted significantly on attitudes in populations. The role of media could probably confirm such impacts.

But one practical conclusion is the most relevant: the crisis made visible a hidden sphere of economic life, a dark hole became visible as a field of failures, dilettantes, tacit corruption and of creators using a complex language of expertise far and isolated from people's and public understanding. At least in this respect the crisis is indeed "creative".

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jeremias Gotthelf, Die Wassernot im Emmental am 13. August 1837, Erzählung (Erstdruck 1852).

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Peter Meier-Dallach (2009), Cataclysms and Change of World Society: The financial crisis as paradigm, World\_Drives association. See [http://www.culturprospectiv.ch/de/world\\_observatory](http://www.culturprospectiv.ch/de/world_observatory)

<sup>3</sup> The empirical analysis of events bases on World\_Observatory where the six clusters and scenarios are used as a monitoring of global trends: [http://www.culturprospectiv.ch/de/world\\_observatory](http://www.culturprospectiv.ch/de/world_observatory)

<sup>4</sup> See results of comparative studies of project: The Chernobyl Generations after 20 years: A comparative investigation in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine: Internet publication in Russian, English (2) and German (3): <http://www.chernobyl.info/index.php?userhash=18181673&navID=155&IID=3>

<sup>5</sup> The source for the *global* interpretation is the BBC World Service Survey of 29,000 people from 24 countries (ahead of G20 summit 2009). The source for the *European* data is the current Euro-Barometer 2009.

FIGURES (see appendix)