

Central Minds of Government Under Acute Adversity

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“Acute Adversity,” in the sense of long-lasting situations of harsh difficulties of various types, faces an increasing number of countries. Therefore, its impacts on actual policymaking need investigation, which in turn requires broad historic-comparative studies. On the basis of such a study, a number of typical response patterns of Central Minds of Governments to acute adversity have been identified, including: different forms of reality denial; maze-policy-behavior, up to panic decision-making; escape into dogmas and policy orthodoxies; utopism and fanaticism; extreme pragmatism; legislative nominalism; administrative reform cycles; policy fashions; enemy seeking and surrogate alibis; lalms demanding; ideological-symbolic transformation, such as “ennoblement”; routinization; and, relatively seldom, adequate policy invention. Most of these actual response patterns are counter-productive, posing the need for improved policymaking in the face of acute adversity. Reliable recommendations on better policymaking under acute adversity require deeper understanding of actual policy behavior of Central Minds of Governments under strong pressures and its causes. Therefore, this subject deserves more attention, both from scientific and applied perspectives.

Preface

Adversity is increasingly a feature conditioning policymaking and requiring fargoing adjustments in policymaking systems and in governance as a whole.¹⁾ But conditions of what I call “acute adversity” are unequally distributed, posing particularly harsh challenges to many Third World countries. Tendencies to design and evaluate governance in Third World countries in accordance to regime types and government patterns as they evolved in western societies without adequate adjustment to the special needs of high-aspiration development countries, further reinforce the need to study the particular conditions and requirements of Third World countries as a step towards designing governance structures better fitting their necessities. This paper is part of such an endeavour.

I first discussed the concept of “acute adversity.” Then some typical response patterns of

* A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 1986 Annual Meeting of The American Political Science Association, The Washington Hilton, August 28~31, 1986.

1) The subject as a whole is treated in Yehezkel Dror, *Policymaking Under Adversity*(New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986).

Central Minds of Government (CMG) to acute adversity are explored, followed with some theoretical considerations. The paper concludes by setting the stage for further studies needed to develop redesign ideas for upgrading the capacity of CMG to better cope with acute adversity.

“Acute Adversity” and its Variations

Leaving aside attempts at formal definitions of fuzzy concepts, for the limited purposes of this paper the idea of “acute adversity” is best presented as one of “crisis”, but without intense time pressure which characterize “crisis” in the narrower sense of the term. A subjective sense of threatening events and of being on a declining curve, facing of serious problems for which no satisfactory solution seems to exist, disappointment from policy-orthodoxies which formerly performed well and were deeply believed in, political disintegration, subjection of a society and its political system to repeated traumatization—these convey some of the manifestations of “acute adversity”.

A brief look at some widespread forms of contemporary acute adversity serves further to clarify its essence and to indicate its prevalence. But, first, let me note that my treatment focus on acute adversity from the perspectives of CMG. Situations may look quite different from the perspectives of other institutions and strata and within CMG too pluralistic and contradictory assessments of situations may prevail. The perspective of CMG provides a unitary frame-of-reference for the concepts as used in this paper, while being of crucial importance for explaining the behavior of governments and for efforts to improve capacities to govern and to engage in accelerated development.

Some CMG face predicaments which seem hopeless and very intimidating, up to the situation of *aporia*, in the Greek sense of the term of “being cornered” with no way out, which constitutes a prime form of acute adversity. A striking illustration is the situation facing the CMG of the Republic of South Africa. The CMG of the poorer countries of Africa face quite different but still very threatening forms of *aporia*. Hong Kong, living with a fixed transition date to a very different political regime shrouded in much uncertainty, illustrates another and rather unique form of acute adversity, which probably will become more and more acute when the time of moving under the control of the Peoples Republic of China approaches.

Oil-rich Third World countries are in a different type of acute adversity, caused by the

decline in oil-revenues combined with large debts accumulated during the period of high oil prices. This situation illustrated the acute adversity which often follows windfall-profits, when CMG must face declining incomes after they and their polity as a whole got used to large inflows of free resources. The New Industrial Nations in South-East Asia may move into a less extreme, but related, version of acute adversity when a period of rapid growth gives way to non-growth or slow growth at best.

Very interesting a form of acute adversity are pandemic phenomena, with periodic outbursts of calamities. An area with a high frequency of serious earthquakes illustrates such a situation. Historically, the Black Death in Europe in the 13th and 14th century is a well-studied case of such acute "pandemic" adversity.

History provides many illustrations of additional forms of acute adversity, as illustrated by a sense of historic decline, as experienced by the Late Roman Republic and, again, during the decline of the Roman Empire. Extreme turbulence, such as during the Religious Wars in Europe, the so-called General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century²⁾ and during extensive periods in China,³⁾ for instance, constitute another form of acute adversity which may become important in some unstable areas, such as the Middle East.

Additional forms of acute adversity should be added, such as facing a more powerful hostile neighbour. But the illustrations provided above suffice to circumscribe the variety of situations which I call "acute adversity" and to clarify the scope and essence of that concept.

The above discussion also serves to demonstrate the actual importance of examination and improvement of the performance of governments under acute adversity. Acute adversity is widespread, especially in the Third World. And acute adversity is not a passing short-lived phenomenon, but a chronic situation accompanying many CMG during extended periods and to be expected to persist in the foreseeable futures in many countries, with periodic ups and downs and variations in forms and intensities.

Three methodological conclusions follow from the above observation:

First, without a very broad comparative-historic perspective, there is no hope for deep

2) See, for instance, T.K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Geoffrey Parker and Lesley M. Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

3) An introduction to Chinese history, which well brings out the cyclic movement between periods of political disintegration and acute adversity and periods of stability and integration, is Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982; originally published in French in 1972).

analysis of fundamental political processes, such as coping with acute adversity. The narrow perspectives of most of contemporary political science, with some distinguished exceptions, cannot but result in surface analysis which fails in providing deep knowledge and cannot reach real understanding of contemporary phenomena.⁴⁾ Not only are most of modern political science and much of contemporary social sciences focusing on too narrow a slice of time, but they are in the main ignorant of the history of non-Western political systems and fail to take their lessons into account when building up theories.⁵⁾

Related is the second methodological lesson on the limited, though important, domain of applicability of strict empiric methods and of positivism in general in a "proper" political science. For studying main patterns of political behavior, such as the subject of this paper, within a broad comparative-historic perspective, a revised Popperian approach is preferable,⁶⁾ with utilization of multiple types and disciplines of "knowledge",⁷⁾ together with much interweaving between general theories and comparative-historic material.⁸⁾

Third, evaluation and improvement of public policy and of the capacity to govern in general must be related to different historic conditions facing policymaking in various countries. Thus, conditions of acute adversity may require quite different policymaking systems and policymaking modes than conditions of prosperity and widespread satisfaction. To provide just one illustration: while incremental policymaking may be preferable under conditions of prosperity and satisfaction with policy outputs, conditions of acute adversity may require option-innovation, up to search for break-through policies which can mutate negative trends and break out of *aporia* situations.

Therefore, recognition of the special issues posed by acute adversity is very important for public policy studies, dealing with problems of actual importance in many countries, including especially but not in the Third World countries. Furthermore, "acute adversity"

4) Relevant is Theda Skocpol, ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

5) To return to the illustration of China, any serious treatment of nation building and of upgrading the capacity to govern in the face of acute adversity should, inter alia, take into account the Manchu experience, as well presented in Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, two volumes (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

6) E.g., see Peter Munz, *Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge: Popper or Wittgenstein?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

7) E.g., see Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), which urgently needs application to political science, as well as to public policy studies.

8) As illustrated, though with too narrow a scope of comparative and historic material, by Robert R. Alford and Roger Friedland, *Power and Theory: Capitalism, the State, and Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

also serves as a "pure type" construct permitting advancement of public policy knowledge, including both novel theories and development of policymaking-redesign ideas going beyond conventional thinking.

Typical Response Patterns of CMG to Acute Adversity

Comprehensive description, classification and explanation⁹⁾ of actual responses of CMG to acute adversity require reprocessing of much historic and comparative material, far beyond whatever is available in literature at present. On the basis of a preliminary exploration of historic material and some broad comparative surveys, I have identified a number of main typical response patterns of CMG to acute adversity, which can be summed up as follows, as "conjectures" in line with the methodological recommendations presented above:

Different forms of reality denial.

Going beyond the inability of any generation to "exit itself" and understand the upheavals it undergoes, as shown time and again throughout history, CMG often engage in clear denial of realities and "self-deception", in respect to situations which cannot but be perceived as acute adversity on the objective level of available "information".

Maze-policy behavior.

The metaphor of a mouse running around in a maze after receiving an electric shock well brings out striking features of much policy-behavior in the face of acute adversity, with contradictory on-off responses and erratic decisions following one another.

An extreme but not scarce form of maze-policy behavior are policy-convulsions, with extreme shifts in behavior, up to "panic decisionmaking".

Escape into dogmas and policy orthodoxies.

A main form of response to acute adversity is clinging to simple dogmas and policy orthodoxies, often with much nostalgia for utopian visions of the past. Entrenchment in some single-dimensional political-economic doctrine well illustrates this response pattern in a main contemporary forms.

Utopism and fanaticism.

Another important response pattern to acute adversity is utopism and fanaticism. This response more frequently characterizes movements and groups that established CMG, but can lead to takeover of CMG by "true believers", as illustrated by Nazi Germany and by

9) See *Policymaking Under Adversity*, op. cit., esp. chapter 3.

Iran nowadays. In this connection, another type of "acute adversity" should be mentioned, namely a kind of "spiritual" and "ideological-cultural" distress, which has a strong propensity to lead to radical ideological responses, which can be shared by CMG or take them over.¹⁰⁾

Extreme pragmatism.

Quite different a widespread pattern of trying, or mistrying, to cope with acute adversity by CMG is extreme pragmatism, with separate ad hoc handling of manifest pressing problems on their face-value, without any in-depth reading or coherent handling of the situation.

Legislative nominalism.

Related, is a tendency to try and handle visible manifestations of adversity by legislation, even though the resulting enactments are often not intended for implementation, usually cannot be implemented, and often would not have any impact on the adversity if indeed implemented. Legislative nominalism is widespread nowadays in many countries, mainly because legislation costs no money and creates the delusion that the adversity is being coped with. Negative results include not only substantive non-coping with the adversity, but also overloads of the Legislature and of the Executive alike.

Administrative reform cycles.

Administrative reforms, usually nominal, formalistic and on the surface, are another quite widespread response by CMG to acute adversity, moving like fashion from country to country.

Policy fashions.

The observation above leads to the broader category of unselective response-fashions, with policy ideas which seem to have worked in one country being uncritically adopted by CMG in other countries, even when conditions are very different. Efforts by quite a number of CMG to copy industrial policies which worked in some of the New Industrial Countries even when their situation is quite different, well illustrate this response pattern in operation nowadays.

Enemy seeking and surrogate alibis.

Historically widespread is the search for enemies, external as well as internal, to blame

10) Relevant is, for instance, Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1985); a very insightful socio-political novel on a Brazilian episode is Mario Vargas Llosa, *The War of the End of the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

for acute adversities. Nowadays, a number of surrogates serve as a substitute alibi. Thus, the World Bank and the I.M.F. are blamed in a number of Latin American countries for their acute adversities, as sometimes are multi-nation companies, some of the New Industrial Countries, and the rich countries in general.

Historically, "decadence" of the population and supernatural intervention often serves as alibis for CMG-incapacity to handle adversities, and perhaps also caused in part the latter by providing CMG with a misleading attribution-theory for diagnosing the situation. Nowadays, in most countries accepted cosmologies and attribution theories accepted by political cultures inhibit such alibis. But the widespread concept of "ungovernability", which puts the blame so to say on societies, serves as a weak surrogate alibi which is widely accepted today, in political practice as well as political science¹¹⁾.

Alms demanding.

An interesting modern response pattern to acute adversity, often converging with alibi seeking and blaming of others, is alms-demanding, with rich countries being regarded as obliged to help poorer countries. This alms demanding is justified not only or mainly in terms of human values, but as a "demand" often put forth as a justified "compensation", with the rich countries being blamed for the state of the world and for the acute adversity faced by poorer countries in particular.

Ideological-symbolic transformation, such as "ennoblement".

A quite different very interesting response to acute adversity is "ennoblement", with efforts to transform perception of the "adversity" so that it is regarded as an asset and a positive "challenge", a "builder of national character" etc. Widespread in the past, many contemporary cultures have less of a capacity to engage in such symbolic alchemy, because of dominant materialistic orientations. Still, ideological-symbolic transformation of acute adversity into a "challenge" constitutes an important response possibility, which may well become more important when other responses fail and which may be quite successful in coping with the adversity itself, if it succeeds to mobilize national energy.

Routinization.

A special type of cultural response to acute adversity, related to ideological-symbolic trans-

11) Therefore, I recommend substitution of the term "incapacity to govern" for "ungovernability." The term "incapacity to govern" puts the onus on the necessity to adjust governmental performance to changing conditions, including societal features which make the tasks of government harder to perform successfully. It thus poses clearly and explicitly a main mission of public policy studies.

formation but different, is routinization. Often, the de facto response of CMG to acute adversity is a process of routinization, thanks to which what initially was regarded as acute adversity becomes with time an accepted state of affairs. This response reduces the "acute adversity" nature of the situation by adjusting levels of aspiration and cognitive maps to actual reality. Adjustment of some countries to terrorism by coming to regard it as a part of the natural order, often deliberately adopted as a policy by CMG but also as a spontaneous learning and dissonance-reducing process, illustrates routinization as an important response pattern to what at first is regarded as "acute adversity". In some cases this is quite functional a response pattern, but in others it may reduce efforts to confront the adversity and thus have negative longer-range consequences.

Policy invention.

Finally, sometimes acute adversity stimulates invention of new policies which cope successfully with the situation, overcoming the acute adversity and achieve national aspirations in the face of harsh conditions.

Some Theoretic Considerations

Identification of main patterns of CMG-behavior in the face of acute adversity is an essential step towards building a theory of CMG-behavior, which is neglected in contemporary public policy studies. But the advancement of public policy studies and related disciplines requires more than empiric survey and classification of main response patterns to acute adversity. Required is a theory which explains such responses and which can serve as a basis for design of CMG-improvements so as to upgrade the quality of coping with acute adversity.

Present social science knowledge in general and public policy studies in particular do not provide an adequate basis for building such an urgently needed theory of CMG-behavior. Indeed, most of the necessary spade-work, such as reprocessing of historic-comparative material as already mentioned, has hardly begun, including study of actual CMG response patterns to acute adversity. Nevertheless, to stimulate research and thinking on the subject, let me proffer some preliminary theoretic considerations, based on my studies and limited in their validity to the level of guesstimating and preliminary conjectures:

A first question is, *whether the behavior of CMG is different under various conditions*, such as acute adversity as compared with prosperity and widespread satisfaction,

My conjecture, which in this case I regard as rather strong and well based on historic-comparative material as well as available theories, is that CMG behave quite differently under various conditions, with response patterns as discussed above being typical for acute adversity and quite others characterizing CMG under conditions of prosperity and widespread satisfaction. For instance, to return to an illustration used above prescriptively, as a matter of empiric impressions it seems that incrementalism is more typical a feature of CMG policymaking under conditions of prosperity and widespread satisfaction than under acute adversity, when after some time it is often abandoned in favour of other policymaking-modes (though usually not the required policy-innovation pattern, but rather jumpy or doctrinaire policymaking, as discussed above).

A second question is, *what is the distribution of the various response patterns*, given acute adversity?

At present, no data basis for answering this question is available, the question itself hardly having been posed and taxonomies of response patterns to acute adversity, such as presented above, being novel. On the basis of contemporary impressions and preliminary readings, I tend to the hypothesis that "policy innovation" is much more scarce than the other response patterns, but this at present is very provisional a conjecture.

A third question, leading towards a theory of CMG-behavior, is *what variables cause different mixes of response patterns?*

A number of variables can be identified on the basis of theoretic analysis and comparative studies. Thus, alibis depend on accepted cosmologies. Historism, in the sense of particular historic circumstances of specific countries, is very important, with some countries tending more to particular response patterns, such as searching for enemies, than others. Probably, some mixture between "necessity and chance" shapes in part response patterns, so that a probabilistic approach is appropriate. More cannot be said on the basis of present material and the question whether in principle a theory explaining and predicting response patterns under particular conditions, at least probabilistically, is at all possible cannot be answered within the present state-of-the-art of social change non-understanding¹²⁾.

Especially pertinent for public policy studies is the question, *whether it is possible in any meaningful way to "evaluate" main response patterns and consider their consequences?*

12) Relevant are Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: MacMillan, 1979); and Raymond Boudon, "Why Theories of Social Change Fail: Some Methodological Thoughts." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 47 (1983) pp. 143-60.

Evaluation of policies is a very difficult endeavour, fundamental problems of ascertainment and appraisal of policy-consequences not having been solved¹³, with difficulties being compounded by the nature of policies as “fuzzy gambles” and the role of “chance” in shaping policy-results¹⁴. Still, in some cases response patterns can be assessed in terms of their impacts on the CMG and on the involved society; and, in principle, CMG-behavior can be evaluated in terms of its fit with suitable models of policy ultra-rationality on one hand¹⁵; and, easier to do and very revealing, by examining obvious errors in policymaking, on the other hand. Thus, to return to an already used illustration, incremental policymaking when a polity is on a sinking curve can be evaluated with good reasons as negative a response to acute adversity.

When such evaluation frames are applied to the above presented response patterns of CMG to acute adversity, most of them must be evaluated as inadequate and in-error. But care must be taken to hedge this conclusion because of philosophic inadequacies of the evaluation criteria and complexities of social-historical processes, such as “ironies of history”, “self-fulfilling prophecy” effect etc.

When longer stretches of history are taken into account, “acute adversities” and their “mismanagement” seem to constitute milestones on the arduous road to human learning. It is tempting to speculatively apply recent ideas in evolutionary epistemology¹⁶, including the speculation that in terms of the evolution of *homo sapiens* as a specie and its culture, incapacity of CMG to respond effectively to acute adversity has not been dysfunctional, but rather irrelevant and perhaps also learning-encouraging in some senses.

This does not imply that one should be sanguine about the prevalence of doubtful response patterns by CMG to adversity. Acute adversities are sure to continue, characterizing the present epoch of rapid change. Therefore, if the welfare of human beings as individuals and of nations as social entities is regarded as important, as distinct from a speculative long-range evolutionary view of humanity, then upgrading of CMG-responses to acute adversity is a main mission for public policy studies.

13) See Yehezkel Dror, *Public Policymaking Reexamined*, supplemented editions (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983), part II.

14) See *Policymaking Under Adversity*, op. cit., esp. pp.167-76.

15) Care must be taken not to apply simple notions of “rationality” to policymaking because of their serious inadequacies. Instead, public policy studies must be based on more advanced ideas of what I propose to call “ultra-rationality.” See Yehezkel Dror, “Steps Towards a Philosophy of Policy-Reasoning”, forthcoming.

16) E.g., see Franz M. Wuketits, ed., *Concepts and Approaches in Evolutionary Epistemology: Towards an Evolutionary Theory of Knowledge* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1984)).

This conclusion is also reached from a future-oriented, rather than past-based, evolutionary perspective concerned with humanity as a whole. A main difference between the past on one hand and the present and future on the other hand is the growing potency of policy instruments and, therefore, the growing impact of policies on the future. Inadequate coping with acute adversity may therefore cause long-range damage, up to the spectre of impairing the collective future of humanity as a specie. Therefore, upgrading of capacities of CMG to handle acute adversity constitutes an imperative also within an universal human evolutionary perspective.

Towards Explanation and Improvement

As fits public policy studies, examination of empiric behavior and theoretic considerations above lead to identification of improvement needs. A main challenge posed to public policy studies is to upgrade the capacity of CMG to cope with acute adversity. But, to do so, it is necessary to open-up CMG, which up till now have been handled in this paper as “black boxes”, to examine the causes of their inadequate responses to acute adversity and to suggest suitable redesigns and retrofittings of CMG.

These are tasks for another paper. Just to demonstrate the difficulties of these tasks, let me add the troublesome conjecture that the very nature of acute adversity inhibits correct responses, posing a “catch” and vicious spiral, with acute adversity requiring outstanding qualities of CMG-behavior, while acute adversity as a matter of fact depresses CMG-capacities.

The processes producing this self-defying effects are well illustrated by the concept of “motivated irrationality”¹⁷⁾, with strong emotions resulting in “hot” decisionmaking, which inherently is very error-prone¹⁸⁾. To overcome this defect, “island of cold policy-reasoning” must be established within the core of CMG, which in turn contradict many characteristics of widespread policymaking institutions and cultures, leading to additional vicious circles and “catches” the handling of which requires further redesigns.

The above difficulties are only a few out of quite a range of congenital incapacities of CMG to perform well in the face of acute adversity, indicating the possible need to rede-

17) See David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

18) For instance, see Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment*(New York: Free Press, 1977).

sign important parts of CMG so as to permit better performance in the face of harsh conditions¹⁹). This is a task for another paper, which may be very hard to write before more research is done and adequate theories are developed on actual responses of CMG to acute adversity, understanding of reality being a precondition for its improvement.

19) Even the quite farguing proposals in *Policymaking Under Adversity*, esp. chs. 8 and 10, may be inadequate for meeting the strenuous test of acute adversity, more farguing innovations being perhaps essential, See also Yehezkel Dror, "Adjusting the Central Mind of Governments to Adversity." *International Political Science Review* Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 1986) pp.11-25.