Organizational zemblanity

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ABSTRACT

We introduce the concept of zemblanity to organization studies to refer to the enactment of disaster when, *in systems designed to impede risk, key actors nonetheless construct their own misfortune*. The case of the Costa Concordia provides an opportunity to discuss organizational zemblanity. Active as well as passive behaviours by the Costa Concordia's Captain created a vicious circle of inappropriate decision-making with traumatic effects. These were complemented by structural elements to be found both in the individual behaviours of others (mainly, the vessel's first line of command) and the lack of other effective organizational controls, both in terms of structures and routines. As our discussion illuminates, there are two overarching elements in play: an excess of individual discretion and a lack of proper organizational controls. We go on to consider the significant implications for both theory and practice that flow from our analysis.

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1. Introduction

While the managerial literature is well accustomed to the concept of serendipity, in this paper we theorize the less well-known and little researched process of zemblanity (e.g. Nicholson, 2007). We do so in order to understand how organization actors sometimes create avoidable disasters in systems that have been designed to afford "high reliability". The extant literature on high-reliability organizations (Roberts & Bea, 2001) argues that in systems that are highly complex and interdependent, accidents will, nonetheless, be normal (Perrow, 1984). In these studies the focus is on organizational design. Much less discussed is the creative social construction of action intended to evade organizational designs for minimizing risk and making accidents abnormal. In the case of Costa Concordia (Italy, 2012) we see not so much an insufficiency of organization design (Heeks & Bhatnagar, 2001) creating an accident waiting to happen as a catastrophic outcome (organizational performance) resulting from an excess of self-confidence, an absence of generative doubt, the presence of (delusional) managerial control, and a vicious dynamic of

organizational legitimacy.

Using the concept of zemblanity we do not refer to accidents caused by sheer complexity (Perrow, 1984; Reason, 1997), defective (maladaptive) routines (Starbuck, 1983), or human neglect (Weick, 2010). Instead in this paper we analyse *how humans construct their own misfortune in systems designed to impede it.* By exploring this question, we aim to introduce to the field of organization studies the topic of organizational zemblanity as the *active* but unintentional construction of misfortune. We do so in the case of an event that displays how a lack of wisdom in interpretive frameworks can be combined with an absence of organizational controls to unleash disaster. In practice, events pose a particular problem for interpretive frameworks. As Deroy and Clegg (2011) write, drawing on Deleuze (1968) and Badiou (1993), a theory of events orients one to the significance of the contextual de-structuring/re-structuring of interpretive frameworks as more or less incomplete or contestable. As they put it, an event offers a potential space for action, including inflections of structural rules and design (Linstead & Thanem, 2007). The Costa Concordia event provides a case of organizational zemblanity in which both active and passive behaviours by the Captain created a vicious circle of bad decision outcomes (Masuch, 1985); these were complemented by structural elements to be found in the individual behaviours of others (mainly, the vessel's first line of command) and the lack of additional effective

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organizational controls, in terms of structures and routines.

Similarly to other tragic events (e.g. Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Weick, 1993, 2010), the sinking of the Costa Concordia has been seen primarily as an effect of the combined effects of human factors and organizational controls (Giustiniano, Cunha & Clegg, 2016; Schröder-Hinrichs, Hollnagel, & Baldauf, 2012). To this extent the Costa Concordia unveils another paradoxical case of a high-reliability organization gone bad (e.g. Milosevic, Bass, & Combs, 2015).

We begin by introducing the concept of zemblanity; next we present the case data derived from juridicial and investigative reports; the incident of the Costa Concordia can be easily substantiated by the reconstruction of events reported in the legal proceedings that occurred subsequent to the disaster. In order to grasp the details of the case, the timeline of events critical to the unfolding of zemblanity were analysed. As our discussion illuminates, there are two overarching elements in play: an excess of individual discretion and a lack of organizational controls. We go on to consider the significant implications for both theory and practice that flow from our analysis.

2. Introducing zemblanity

While serendipity has gathered growing attention from the scholarly literature (Bonney, Clark, Collins & Faerne, 2007; Bouncken, 2011; Brown, 2005; Cunha, Clegg, & Mendonça, 2010; Cunha, Rego, Clegg, & Lindsay, 2015; Liyanage, 2006) its lexical qualities, specifically the identity of an antonym, went unexplored for a long time, until William Boyd (1998) coined the term zemblanity. He conceived it as the antonym of serendipity by referring to an imaginary physical space, Zembla. Zembla is the opposite of Serendip.[2] Whilst Serendip was described as a "southern land of spice and warmth, lush greenery and hummingbirds, seawashed, sunbasted", Zembla was "far north, barren, icebound, cold a world of flint stones" (Boyd, 1998, p. 234). For Boyd (1998), "zemblanity, the opposite of serendipity, [is] the faculty of making unhappy, unlucky and expected discoveries by design" (p. 234). Serendipity and zemblanity are the "twin poles of the axis around which we revolve" (p. 235). Hence zemblanity is conceived as the polar opposite of serendipity.

Nicholson (2007) underlines that, at the individual level, "zemblanity counters the idea that we make our own good luck with the equal and opposite notion that we make our own misfortune" (p. 389). Behaviours take place in organizations under the rules and according to the roles expressed by the formal organizational structures and procedures, even when they operate at an extra-organizational level (Burton, 2013; Obel & Snow, 2012). The design side of zemblanity has never been explored. In order to fill this gap, our proposal of organizational zemblanity will consider both the individual and the intra- and extra-organizational features that might dialectically reinforce each other, eventually escalating to create disasters. While Boyd's specification "by design" can be seen as the semantic opposite of "by chance", we describe how structures and procedures ("organization design") can allow individual behaviours of a specific kind to trigger zemblanity. In doing so, we attend to the "migration" of the concept of zemblanity initiated by Nicholson (2007) from being a literary conceit to one that informs the managerial field.

While several fields of study have metaphorically exploited the concept of serendipity since Merton (1949) first introduced it into the sociology of science (see also Merton & Barber, 2004), the antonym of zemblanity has been quite neglected. A systematic literature review (e.g. Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) found significant exceptions only in the field of medical sciences (e.g. Altarescu & Elstein, 2005; Holubar, 2004; Pepys, 2007). Within this field, when science is defined as the practice of gathering knowledge and condensing it into testable laws and theories, serendipity "wonderfully enables and enriches good science" (Pepys, 2007, p. 565). Zemblanity, on the contrary, is associated with fraudulent or deceitful behaviour labelled as "bad science" (e.g. Park, 2000). So, in the medical field, a lack of rigour leads to progressively bad results, escalating from single cases to societal problems (Pepys, 2007). Within the same field, at a more micro-level, a solution/treatment/device that affords "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage … could be zemblaneous for clinical practice, but useful and beneficial for research" (Kontinen, 2013, p. 224). In the medical field serendipity and zemblanity have been constituted in terms of either epistemology and methodology (good/bad science and ways to produce it) or ontology (practice/research).

In management, when serendipity has been used, it is in reference to the accidental discovery of something that, *post hoc*, generates value (Brown, 2005; Cunha et al., 2010; Liyanage, 2006). Cunha et al. (2015) classify managerial serendipity as the state of being *prepared for* and *open to novelty*. Organizations can be open and responsive to serendipity, designed to embrace lucky events and transform them into value, via "structure and coordination mechanisms, and improvised various procedural, cognitive and normative variations" (Orlikowski, 1996, p. 63). The focal mechanism for managerial serendipity is *generative doubt* (Cunha et al., 2015), the motivated and conscious search for understanding stimulated by the experience of not knowing (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). Cunha et al. (2015) conclude that the cultivation of generative doubt plays a critical role in stimulating readiness for and responsiveness to serendipity. So, in distinction from the medical field, in management the emphasis, *ceteris paribus*, is placed on how organizations are designed and how the main organizational actors enact such design.

While serendipity can capture fortuitous discovery by design, zemblanity refers to unfortunate outcomes resulting from ill-conceived choices that the extant design allows. Within this framework, zemblanity can be pictured as the opposite of serendipity. The contemporary world offers many instances of zemblanity: pilots who return from the toilet to find themselves locked out of the cabin by a co-pilot inside the cabin, intent on mass murder and suicide, secure inside a security system that cannot be overridden from outside the cabin[3]; football fans who flee a fire in a grandstand and are trampled by the press of panic in front of turnstiles that do not reverse.[4] In this instance, the focus is on zemblanity in the context of the Costa Concordia tragedy.

3. Method

Retrospective narrative has guided the whole process of interpretation followed in defining the overarching dimensions of zemblanity. The narrative of the main protagonists has been

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[2] Serendip refers to the Persian and Urdu name of Sri Lanka, but the actual origins of the term serendipity are contested amongst scholars. In fact, it is still debated whether the book "The Three Princes of Serendip" has to be attributed to the Venetian Michele Tramezzino (1557) or to the English Horace Walpole (1754) (e.g. Boyd, 1998; Hodges, 1964; Remer, 1965).

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germanwings_Flight_9525 (accessed 16 September 2015).
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bradford_City_stadium_fire (accessed 16 September 2015).