

# From 'Normalcy' to Extreme Context: the Contribution of Elias Canetti to the Understanding of Risk Dynamics\*

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## Abstract

The article presents the case of Piazza San Carlo, Torino, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2017. That evening, in the main square of Torino, large screens were showing the last act of the Champions League. Thousands of Juventus fans - about 30,000 in fact - were gathered there to attend the Juventus-Real Madrid match. The unhappy outcome of that cheery evening left 1,527 people injured and in need of rescue and two women who died later. It proposes a reading that mobilize the categories of crowd behavior, as set out by Elias Canetti, in order to discuss the occurrence of an epistemic incident that transforms a normal situation into an extreme context. In this example, we can see how the fear of terrorism causes real material effects and shapes the 'phantom power' of virtual terrorism. The case is first read as the effect of an epistemic accident in which a disruption happened and the status of common knowledge, collapsed. In the second place it is read through the concept of the transmission of affect which makes visible the embodiment of a crowd. The spreading of emotions depends upon their being given expressions by the deployment of all the senses.

*As a writing practice, exemplification activates detail.  
The success of the example hinges on the details.  
Every little one matters.  
(Massumi, 2002: 18)*

## 1. Introduction

Usually, when we think of a high-risk system, we have in mind a nuclear or a chemical plant or similar organizations where risk is 'objective' and embedded in the production process. Conversely a crowd of people assembled in the main square of an Italian Northern town on a pleasant evening to watch live football on a large screen, would merely be considered a common occurrence. Such a meet-up in a main square for a concert or other cultural occasion, especially in Italy and in Summer, was just a habitual part of normal life before the pandemic.

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People would not associate such a form of sociability with the label 'high-risk', or even any form of risk. Even for those in charge of crowd safety this would be seen as 'a normal situation', where a routine task has to be performed in the same, reliable way they have done many times before. Only a few, extremely risk adverse members of the public might wonder how those employees framed the situation before setting out to accomplish their shift work that evening and wonder how risky such a common occurrence would seem in their eyes (Colville *et al.*, 2012). My aim in this article is to discuss how a normal situation can transform into an extreme one and consider how much more easily that might occur in the highly interconnected contemporary society.

If we make a reference to Barry Turner's (1978) and Turner and Pidgeon (1997) model of Man-Made-Disaster we find that the sequence of events associated with the development of a disaster starts from the stage of 'normalcy', i.e. from notionally normal starting points, when initial cultural beliefs about the world and its hazards are accepted and associated precautionary norms are set out in laws and occupational codes of practice. When a normal situation is disrupted by an unforeseen event we can inquire into the dynamics of risk as an unfolding process, assuming therefore a cultural approach to disasters (Gherardi, 1998; Pidgeon, 1991). There is growing interest in how social processes of organizing, and wider socio-cultural considerations, may contribute to the appreciation of the 'lived experience' of security and safety in society and in organizations (Gould and Macrae, 2021; Turner and Gray, 2009). The recognition that while the risk of physical harm is inevitable in social situations, there is also an organizational orientation to account 'as far as is reasonably practical' (Turner and Tennant, 2009) for the management of risk, safety and accidents in similar situations.

In the development of the article, and I shall focus on what may happen within a crowd, rather than its effects on the interorganizational network activated to face the disruption. I shall use an exemplification from a real fact to propose a reading that will mobilize the categories of crowd behavior, as set out by Elias Canetti, in order to reflect on how easily an epistemic incident may transform a normal situation into an extreme one.

## 2. Piazza San Carlo, Torino, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2017

That evening, in the main square of Torino, large screens were showing the last act of the Champions League<sup>1</sup>. Thousands of Juventus fans - about 30,000 in fact - were gathered there to attend the Juventus-Real Madrid match. The unhappy outcome of that cheery evening left 1,527 people injured and in need of rescue and two women who died of the injuries later.

As organizational scholars we can easily imagine the emergency situation that, like a wave, expanded and touched the surrounding hospitals, the emergency wards and the rescue organizations. A whole interorganizational field was suddenly flung into motion without any clear idea of what was going on or what had caused the happening.

So, what, in fact, did happen? The trial ended in January 2021 and six defendants, including the mayor of Turin and other administrators, were sentenced to one year and six months. As reconstructed by the investigators, some robbers had sprayed pepper spray in the crowd causing a general stampede.

In what follows I shall focus on the first interpretations that appeared in the newspaper three days after the fact. My aim is not a fair truth interpretation of official narratives, but only a

reflection on what might have upset the state of normalcy, and how an ‘organizational presence’ (Cooren *et al.*, 2008) is coproduced through ongoing processes of communication.

The day after the accident the newspapers reported the following:

- Perhaps it was the collapse of the railing on a stairway to the underground car park at San Carlo Square that triggered panic among people shouting and exulting right after the third Real Madrid goal.
- One witness said, “A boy launched a firefight saying it was a bomb.” But no explosion was heard so it is more likely that it was someone who started screaming after the car park railing collapsed.
- As to what *really* happened all versions were still confused: someone speaks of an explosion that would have caused panic, some other of a car that approached the square.

I wish to stress the role of media in looking for ‘possible causes’, after concerns about a possible terrorist act were allayed. In those months’ of 2017 terrorism was highly present in the news after the attacks in Westminster on March 22, Manchester on May 22 and in Borough market in London on June 3. Moreover, less than one year before, on the evening of 14 July 2016, a cargo truck was deliberately driven into people celebrating Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, resulting in the deaths of 86 people and the injury of 458 others. Thus, as in Torino, when people heard a violent sound, saw a ‘suspect’ car and heard people crying and running everywhere, a highly likely interpretation of what was going on was that an act of terrorism was underway. The affective atmosphere was full of tension.

In newspapers in the days following that event, a witch hunt to find someone guilty was put in motion: Had the square no exits? Where is the suspect boy who appears in a photograph?

Pictures 1 and 2 were shown in newspapers as evidence of possible interpretations: The place was not suitable to receive and contain such a number of people and any isolated individual carrying a backpack on his shoulders who stops in the middle of a running crowd immediately seems suspicious.



Pictures 1



Pictures 2

As to the sufficiency of the number of exits from the square, readers can form their own opinion. Then when reports that the suspected guy had presented himself to the police and had been discharged appeared the next day, the moral obligation on the press to put matters to rights was fulfilled

While the legal system was working to find out eventual responsibilities and give an authoritative account of the facts, interpretations of the happening and its causes continued to multiply. The one thing that appears clear, however, is that a sudden transformation within the crowd made it the main actor in this drama. Moreover, the historical and cultural atmosphere in which a crowd gathers, creates a context in which the fear of terrorism in itself can evoke real consequences. In this example, we can see how terrorism, either actual or virtual, configures a crowd as an extreme context in itself rather than solely an extreme event.

### 3. From high risk to extreme contexts

There is a surging interest in extreme contexts, heightened by the awareness of today's political, economic, and ecological uncertainties. The field of studies that is currently referred to under the label 'extreme contexts' is rather fragmented and overlaps with previous widely used categorizations. Nevertheless, it offers a promising contribution to an organizational approach to safety.

A couple of examples may help to shed light on the beginning of the use of this category and the interests that were expressed by it. When we refer to the definition of extreme context in Hannah et al. (2009: 898) we find the following image:

an environment in which one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization's capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to organization members.

The authors' interest was focused on leadership and a team or organization's ability to devise an adaptive leadership response. A similar interest also guides Dixon et al. (2017: 297) who prefer the expression in *extremis* to define a situation

in which leaders or their followers are *personally* faced with highly dynamic and unpredictable situations and where the outcomes of leadership may result in severe physical or psychological injury (or death) to unit members.

The military acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) acknowledges the equivocality of the *in-extremis* context. Bouty *et al.* (2012: 476) draw a line of continuity across risk and extreme contexts that they define 'as management situations that are at the same time (1) evolving, (2) uncertain, and (3) highly risky'. Evolving refers to time's speed. Uncertain refers to the probability of occurrence of events as well as their actual moment and consequent practical details. The risk can be vital (e.g. fatal injuries in the course of action) and/or symbolic (e.g. loss of leadership).

To better understand and cover the empirical cases that configure an extreme context there is a need to overcome the initial and pioneering literature since its main focus on leadership, coordination mechanisms and the breakdown of learning in teams (Kayes, 2004) presumes situations in which either leadership, learning or coordination are present or possible. But, an extreme context may appear suddenly and in a 'normal situation' where an extreme event

changes the normalcy and, as I suggested in the case of Piazza San Carlo, the unforeseen takes the stage. Once more, the key lesson of this case is that there are genuine limits to management practices in extreme context (Tempest *et al.*, 2007) that are not adequately captured by existing managerial theories.

A couple of recent reviews (Bundy, *et al.* 2017; Williams, *et al.*, 2017) on crisis management and resilience suggest that we are only at the beginning of the configuration of a field in need of theoretical and empirical rigor. The boundaries of such a reconfigured field have been drawn by Hällgren *et al.* (2018), who conducted a highly rigorous review of 138 articles, mapping an emergent community of scholars.

Despite the fragmentation of the collected articles, the authors discern three general, empirically distinct categories that are distinguishable along contextual lines. Under the general category of extreme contexts, the authors parse the relevant empirical works into those that draw from risk, emergency and disrupted contexts. They give very telling examples:

research on US Special Forces operations in Iraq might be considered to epitomize a risky context, whereas fieldwork with the emergency department of a South Chicago hospital would constitute an emergency context, and a study of the Boston Marathon bombing would be a disrupted one (Hällgren *et al.*, 2018: 112).

The authors moreover disclose in their review a clear distinction between extreme event and extreme context, referring to Hannah, *et al.* (2009)'s distinction that I outlined previously.

Extreme events are defined in terms of three necessary conditions: i) the potential to cause massive consequences, ii) the unbearable consequences for organization members, and iii) the organization's inability to prevent those extreme events from actually taking place. Given this conceptualization of events, extreme contexts become environments

where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization's capacity to prevent it and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to - or in close physical or psychosocial proximity to - organization members (Hannah *et al.*, 2009: 898)

and, I would add, to citizens at large. These definitions had guided Hällgren *et al.*'s (2018: 115) taxonomy allowing a distinction between events that are likely to occur and those that actually have. Given this, a context can be characterized as extreme when organizational routines are specifically implemented in daily operations or in plans and modalities. These activities are undertaken in order to prevent or prepare for events that are likely to occur. Events that would definitely have significant consequences for the normal life of an organization and affect all members, the groups and communities related to it. Another distinction is made between extreme contexts as a result of "disruptions", contexts that are designed around "emergencies", and contexts that are inherently 'risky'.

Piazza San Carlo is an example of a disrupted context. The literature around extreme contexts has as a common point of interest in temporal trajectories, even if it is not always explicitly stated. Temporality and the need to model dynamic representations of risk are my concern in this article. The example that I refer to can be considered as a context in which a disruption

took place and the risk developed along a situated temporality. Nevertheless, I shall not analyze the situation from the point of view of the organizations who were involved in the disruption, rather my focus is on the crowd and on how a crowd can move from a situation of normalcy to a situation of panic thus disrupting the whole of an organizing setting. To keep this focus, I shall refer to Elias Canetti's typology in 'Crowds and Power', but not contextualize his work in relation to the sociological (or psychological) classics on crowds or crowd management. The topic has a long tradition in social sciences (Le Bon, 1895; Trotter, 1916; McDougall, 1920), and it looks like the long fascination with it is flourishing again (Borsch, 2012; Brighenti, 2010; Reicher, 2008). I also recognize that the topic of crowd management is present in managerial studies and has been studied in relation to public order and the use of urban spaces for large events, giving rise to expert knowledge and the professionalization of safety practitioners (Dryry *et al.*, 2013; Tarlow, 2002; Wijermans *et al.*, 2016).

#### 4. Canetti's typology of crowds and their formation/dissolution

In the following paragraph, I try to make extensive use of Canetti's words, in the hope of bringing to my readers the beauty of his prose and the effective descriptions of the crowd's dynamic that he offers.

His essay on crowds start from an anthropological consideration: the fear of being touched. In his words:

There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. The repugnance to being touched remains with us when we go about among people; the way we move in a busy street, in restaurants, trains or buses, is governed by it. It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite. The crowd he needs is the dense crowd, in which body is pressed to body; a crowd, too, whose psychical constitution is also dense, or compact, so that he no longer notices who it is that presses against him (Canetti, 1978:15).

The crowd is like a sole body:

As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. The man pressed against him is the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body. This is perhaps one of the reasons why a crowd seeks to close in on itself: it wants to rid each individual as completely as possible of the fear of being touched. The more fiercely people press together, the more certain they feel that they do not fear each other (Canetti, 1978:16).

Canetti operates a distinction between the open and the closed crowd:

The natural crowd is the *open* crowd; there are no limits whatever to its growth [...] The openness which enables it to grow is, at the same time, its danger. The *closed* crowd, renounces growth and puts the stress on permanence. [...] It creates a space for itself which it will fill. The entrances to this space are limited in number, and only these entrances can be used; the boundary is respected whether it consists of stone, of solid wall, or of some

special act of acceptance, or entrance fee. The boundary prevents disorderly increase, but it also makes it more difficult for the crowd to disperse and so postpones its dissolution (Canetti, 1978:17).

In Canetti's typology of crowds, according to their prevailing emotion, we find the following classification: the baiting crowd, the flight crowd, the prohibition crowd, the reversal crowd and the feast one. I shall describe each briefly, referring the reader to Table 1 for further details:

- the baiting crowd can be the hunting pack, collective killing, public execution. It forms with reference to a quickly attainable goal, and, once a baiting crowd has attained its victim's demise, it disintegrates rapidly.
- The flight crowd could be represented by the exodus, or by Napoleon's *Grande Armee* in its retreat from Moscow. It is created by a threat. Everyone flees; everyone is drawn along. The natural end of the flight crowd is the attainment of its goal; once this secure, it dissolves.
- The prohibition crowd, as with a strike, or sympathetic strikes is created by *refusal*. A large number of people together refuse to continue to do what, till then, they had done singly. They obey a prohibition, and this prohibition is sudden and self-imposed. This crowd dissolves when the moment has come to lift the prohibition to which the crowd owes its existence.
- The reversal crowd, as in revolutions, the Day of the Bastille; revolts of slaves against their masters, of soldiers against their officers, of colored people against whites. Revolutions are times of upheaval; those who have been defenseless for so long suddenly find teeth. Reversal presupposes a stratified society. The reversal is a process which takes hold of the whole of a society and, even if attended with success from the start, it comes to an end only slowly and with difficulty.
- The feast crowd. A feast *is* the goal and people are assembled there for it. Through common enjoyment of this one feast people prepare the way for many future feasts.

| Types of crowd   | Formation   | Disintegration   |
|--|---|--|
| The baiting crowd<br>(the hunting pack; collective killing; public execution)          | It forms with reference to a quickly attainable goal. The goal is known and clearly marked, and is also near. This crowd is out for killing and it knows whom it wants to kill.   | Once a baiting crowd has attained its victim it disintegrates rapidly. Disgust at collective killing is of very recent date and should not be over-estimated. Today everyone takes part in public executions through the newspapers.   |
| The flight crowd<br>(exode; Napoleon's <i>Grande Armee</i> in its retreat from Moscow; | It is created by a threat. Everyone flees; everyone is drawn along. The impetus of the flight continues to multiply so long as everyone recognizes that there are others fleeing with him. The moment he starts to think only of himself, the character of the mass flight changes and it becomes a panic, a struggle of each against all who stand in his way. | The natural end of the flight crowd is the attainment of the goal; once this is in safety it dissolves. There is also another possibility, which may be called the flight in sand. The goal is too far off, the surroundings are hostile and the people starve and grow exhausted. |
| The prohibition crowd<br>(a strike; sympathetic strikes)                               | It is created by a <i>refusal</i> : a large number of people together refuse to continue to do what, till then, they had done singly. They obey a prohibition, and this prohibition is sudden and self-imposed.   | It dissolves when the moment has come to lift the prohibition to which the crowd owes its existence. If it corresponds to the feeling of the crowd it will, by withdrawing the   |

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|  | <p>From the moment of its birth this crowd is transfused with the negativeness of prohibition, and this remains its essential characteristic as long as it exists. Thus one could also speak of a negative crowd. It is formed by resistance; the prohibition is a frontier nothing can cross</p>  | <p>prohibition, decree its own dissolution.</p>  |
| <p>The reversal crowd (revolutions, the Day of the Bastille; revolts of slaves against their masters, of soldiers against their officers, of coloured people against the whites)</p> | <p>Revolutions are times of reversal; those who have been defenceless for so long suddenly find teeth. Reversal presupposes a stratified society. A clear separation of classes, one enjoying more rights than the other, must have lasted for some time, and made itself felt in men's daily life before the need for reversal arises.</p> <p>Every command leaves behind a painful <i>sting</i> in the person who is forced to carry it out.</p> | <p>The reversal is a process which takes hold of the whole of a society and, even if attended with success from the start, it comes to an end only slowly and with difficulty. The successive baiting crowds run their brief course on the surface while the waves of reversal rise slowly from the depths.</p>                                |
| <p>The feast crowd</p>   | <p>There is abundance in a limited space, and everyone near can partake of it. Nothing and no-one threatens and there is nothing to flee from; many prohibitions and distinctions are waived, there is no common identical goal which people have to attain together. The <i>feast</i> is the goal and they are there.</p>   | <p>By common enjoyment at this one feast people prepare the way for many future feasts. Earlier occasions of the same kind are recalled in ritual dances and dramatic performances; the tradition of them is contained in the actuality of the present feast. In any case they feel assured of the future repetition of similar occasions.</p> |

Table 1. Elias Canetti's classification of crowds according to their prevailing emotion.

In Piazza San Carlo a feast crowd is assembled, and it is a closed crowd like those who gather in a theatre and are deeply absorbed by the performance. Canetti employs the example of the theatre to describe what happens in a crowd when a fire develops and generates panic. He writes:

The more people were bound together by the performance and the more closed the form of the theatre which contained them, the more violent the disintegration. Thus, the crowd, a moment ago at its apex, must disintegrate violently, and the transmutation shows itself in violent individual action: everyone shoves, hits and kicks in all directions (Canetti, 1978: 26).

The sudden command to flee which the panic gives is immediately countered by the impossibility of any common movement

Neither women, children nor old people are spared: they are not distinguished from men. Whilst the individual no longer feels himself as "crowd", he is still completely surrounded by it'. Panic is a disintegration of the crowd *within* the crowd. (Canetti, 1978: 27).

While in this typology of crowds the processes of formation and disintegration of a crowd are in a sense external to the crowd itself, in the case of a fire in a theatre the disintegration dynamics come from the inside and the force of destruction that it brings illustrates the intimate risk that a crowd *always* hides in itself. Canetti had a fascination with fire, as his book *Auto-da-fé* witnesses. Fire is itself a nonhuman crowd, and Canetti acknowledges its anthropological meaning: 'Fire, as a symbol for the crowd, has entered the whole economy of man's feelings and become an immutable part of it' (Canetti, 1978: 27). His description of the disintegration of a crowd in analogy to the burst of a fire is highly evocative:

The manner in which fire spreads and gradually works its way round a person until he is entirely surrounded by it is very similar to the crowd threatening him on all sides. The incalculable movements within it, the thrusting forth of an arm, a fist or a leg, are like the flames of a fire which may suddenly spring up on any side. Fire in the form of a conflagration of forest or steppe actually *is* a hostile crowd and fear of it can be awakened in any human being (Canetti, 1978: 27).

Terrorism may take the place of fire in the whole economy of feelings and become an immutable part of a daily life atmosphere. The example of Piazza San Carlo is rather frightening when one considers that it is enough just to name 'terrorism' for its effects to become real. Moreover, when we acknowledge that a crowd – a feast crowd – can easily have its context transformed to extreme and see that the risks evolving from this transformation are not coming from outside but from within, we may wonder what consequences this would have on the rational management of security and safety.

Security practices vary greatly between countries which have been exposed to terrorism and those which have not. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is that a feast crowd is an integral reality of social life and can never be 'safely' sealed from the risk of its internal disintegration. Given this, my question is: what happened in Piazza San Carlo that may potentially happen in similar situations, and how can a 'normal situation' transform itself into an extreme context in such a few minutes? Is there anything new that this case may contribute to the literature on extreme contexts as disruption?

I wish to discuss two phenomena – epistemic accident and transmission of affect within a crowd - to help us better place the transformation of a crowd as a sudden, dynamic and *unforeseen extreme event*, in a 'normal' context.

## 5. Epistemic accident and transmission of affect

The sudden and unforeseen transformation of a feast crowd into an extreme context may provoke an *epistemic accident* for which both the known lessons about 'leadership' and 'coordination mechanism' are inadequate. As a disruption in the way that organizations and people use to frame the context in which they dwell, the tight model of rationality and control that risk situations and emergency situations are able to cope collapses and opens itself to the unknown and thus the *transmission of affect* within a crowd (Borch, 2012).

'Epistemic Accidents' can be defined as those accidents that occur because a technological assumption proves to be erroneous, even though there were reasonable and logical reasons to hold that assumption before (if not after) the event (Downer, 2010: 18).

Downer by revisiting in more depth the fateful 1988 fuselage failure of *Aloha 243*, suggests a new perspective on the sociology of technological failure. He challenges the implicit 'rational-philosophical model' of engineering knowledge, which assumes that engineering facts are, in principle, objectively 'knowable', and that 'failures' are theoretically foreseeable. From this he suggests a new category of disaster: the 'Epistemic Accident'. His work reconciles the sociology of disaster with the sociology of knowledge by arguing that some accidents are caused by engineering beliefs that prove to be erroneous, even though those beliefs are logical and well-founded.

While the category of epistemic accident was developed in relation to technological failures and engineering knowledge, I argue that it may be extended also to extreme disruptive contexts, where, for instance the following elements collapsed: the status of common knowledge, the way that actors and organizations had previously framed the situation, the way they understand their place in it and what should be done by whom.

In fact, if we accept the premise that some accidents result from erroneous beliefs, and we further accept the argument that even the most 'perfect' knowledge-claims necessarily contain uncertainties, then Epistemic Accidents can occur anywhere and at any time. Any unforeseen event is probable as it is probable any epistemic accident that disrupts common knowledge.

Downer recognizes that Epistemic Accidents potentially reach far beyond technology, since:

The argument that error might not be ontologically distinct or epistemologically identifiable has implications for the social analysis of all kinds of system failures, whether technological, medical or financial. Sociological accounts of everything from medical mishaps to market collapses, invariably construe them as 'deviances' from some ideal, that need explaining. The idea that, epistemologically speaking, there need not always have been a 'knowably correct' choice, offers an important counter-perspective (Downer, 2010: 22).

The literature on disrupted contexts often deals with natural disasters and it emphasizes the degree to which extreme events can foster collective action and promote temporary collective actions that support permanent organizations. On the other hand, the literature also shows society's inability to avoid atrocities being inflicted on entire populations, as in the case of such extreme contexts as genocide, holocaust and similar. The example of Piazza San Carlo does not fit perfectly into either of the two models. On one side the newspapers reported how people living around the square run downstairs to open the front doors for those who were looking for an escape. On the other hand, these solidarity reactions were accompanied by local shoppers that did the opposite. And in any case any temporary organizing designed to cope with the disruption had, in this case, a limited life. Though the disruption caused by these two dissonant attempts was severe it was not because a whole society went awry, as the Holocaust. San Carlo reminds us of similar events related to sport events like the Heysel disaster in 1985 (Kech, 2015) to name one and, at the same time, it is a telling example of a disruption endogenously created by the dissolution of a crowd, and by the epistemic accident that ripped the social and emotional fabric.

Under what conditions can a crowd threatened with self-destruction prevent panic?

Canetti describes such a situation in the following words:

Disintegration through panic can only be averted by prolonging the original state of united crowd fear. In a threatened church there is a way of achieving this: people pray in common fear to a common God in whose hand it lies to extinguish the fire by a miracle (Canetti, 1978: 27).

What can we learn from Canetti that make us recognize similar situations where such knowledge may be transferred? What comes to my mind is the role of communication in situations in which an epistemic accident maybe underway. For example, terrorism and sporting events have been studied (Klauser, 2008; Pavoni, 2017; Richards *et al.*, 2011) and they illuminate the emergence of order in urban space. Those who have studied coordination centers or large railway stations or airports (Joseph *et al.*, 1995; Heath and Luff, 1992; Potthast, 2011), in which perturbed situations happen both regularly and at extraordinary intervals, have concluded that the risk of disruption comes from leaving spaces of flows de-coupled from spaces of communication. In preventing situations of crisis, the horizontal mode of coordination between various actors is more effective that hierarchy and anticipation. Nevertheless, communication in the case of an epistemic accident should be carefully delivered and the technological infrastructure to sustain it should be in-place beforehand. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

One more consideration comes into play when we realize that an epistemic accident is not only a disruption in the knowledge embedded in the situation of normalcy and the routines, that assume a situation as manageable. But rather, it is also a disruption of the affective state of the social fabric. The principle of sympathetic induction (McDougall, 1920), suggestibility, telepathic influence, and the principle of direct induction of emotion by way of the primitive sympathetic response, have been the explaining concepts in the work of the classics.

More recently the so-called 'turn to affect' (Clough and Haley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010) has taken into consideration how affect is located in the interplay of affect/being affected (Massumi, 2002) and it is embodied in the way that our senses participate in the dynamics of affecting and being affected. In particular Brennan (2004:52) uses the term entrainment as 'a name for the process whereby human affective responses are linked and repeated'. Research on entrainment by olfactory and other sensory means accounts for situations where people act as of one mind in the production of group violence. The spreading and the intensification of emotions depend upon their being given expressions that involve the deployment of all the senses. Smell is significant here, but hormones, especially testosterone, can also be visually stimulated. The emphasis on sight as the principal mechanism in the communication of affect goes unchallenged in the literature on groups (Brennan, 2004: 57). There is also stress on hearing, and the communication of affect takes place between individuals whose affects are self-contained. One individual body may resonate with an affection, whereas other individuals see it, or hear it and then drum it up within themselves, being affected and thus this affect, apparently, spreads. Moreover, the *rhythmic aspects* of behavior at a gathering

are critical in both establishing and enhancing a sense of collective purpose and a common understanding. [...] words and images are matters of vibration, [...] sights and sounds are

physical matters in themselves, carriers of social matters, social in origin but physical in their effects (Brennan, 2004: 71).

We may say then that affect is transmitted by the senses (sight, smell, touch) and by kinesthesia (gestures, vibrations, rhythms) and by entrainment (pheromones).

Moreover, we may distinguish between spontaneous affective atmospheres and the techniques that aim to control, change or create them and are called atmotechnics, used by British police since 1983 and designed to affect the crowded atmospheres of protest or other disorders (Wall, 2019). Studying the training manuals of the police Wall identifies a shift from a linear understanding of atmotechnics as a prelude to 'the use of force', to an affective feedback loop where specialised officers are deployed to 'sense' mood changes among crowds, reporting back to senior strategic and tactical decisions to take account of atmospheric conditions.

In summing up, my interpretation of Piazza San Carlo as a disrupted extreme context focuses not only on an epistemic accident as the trigger of the dissolution of the crowd within the crowd, but also on the embodied and sensorial knowledge that co-produces collective behaviours that are dominated both by affectivity, communication, and cognition. The fear of terrorism produces material effects and can be seen as a form of de-materialization of any threat. The often-invisible material forces between people, places, and economic/political systems, call for more capacious and relevant knowledge for doing research on extreme contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

This article is not based on a case study in the strict meaning of the organizational analysis of an accident or a disaster, rather it uses the logic of 'an exemplary case' for proposing a line of interpretation and for mobilizing the theoretical concept that could be applied in case of a subsequent analysis. I like to define this method as 'grounded theorizing', since the anthropological theoretical insights by Canetti in relation to the dynamics of crowds' formations and dissolutions are translated and ground into the interpretation of a situated occurrence. The metamorphosis of a crowd parallels the sudden and unforeseen transformation of a 'normal' situation, where risk and its copying modalities are under control, into an extreme context in which the taken-for-granted framing of the situation is disrupted. Thus, the theorization based on this example proposes two explanatory concepts.

In the first place the example is read as the effect of an epistemic accident in which a disruption happened and the status of common knowledge and the way that actors and organizations had previously framed the situation, their place in it and what should be done by whom, collapsed. The fear of terrorism causes real material effects and shapes the 'phantom power' of virtual terrorism.

In the second place the example is read through the concept of the transmission of affect which makes visible the embodiment of a crowd: its transcorporeality (Alaimo, 2012). The spreading and the intensification of emotions depend upon their being given expressions by the deployment of all the senses. Affect is generated and transmitted by the senses (sight, smell, touch) and by kinesthesia (gestures, vibrations, rhythms) and by entrainment

(pheromones). In this way the materiality of the body has its place in the sociomaterial interpretation of extreme contexts.

More generally, the exemplary case that I offer for reflection contributes to a larger framing of risk. Not in objectivist terms but rather as an emergent property of social situations (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002) that may change status in a very brief moment. When risk can emerge, and disrupt the social fabric, the conditions for coordination of an inter-organizational network are also challenged. Instead of aiming at achieving a coherent and unified set of actions, Wolbers *et al.* (2018) suggest a fragmentation perspective to show that dealing with ambiguity and discontinuity is not only inevitable for these organizations, but it is a key characteristic of coordinating them. As a result, 'the coordination process is characterized by ad-hoc adaptations, separate pockets of control, and a multiplicity of interpretations (Wolbers *et al.*, 2018: 1523)'.

Making sense of the disruption and working for the coordination of the responses is a typical sociomaterial problem (Orlikowski, 2007) in which the social and the technical responses are entangled. Moreover, when the general mind set of the organizations is shaped by the feast situation, the shift towards 'emergency' has to struggle against what Berthod and Müller-Seitz (2018: 52) call 'mindful indifference'. With this term the authors denote 'the capacity for experienced operators to distinguish problems that could turn into critical ones from problems that can be tolerated on account of the overall system reliability'. A serious disruption in what constitutes 'the normalcy' produces strong emotional reactions in the operators at the interplay of knowing, practicing, and the discursive practices that are used for sustaining coercive violence (Dick, 2005). Mindful indifference is in fact embodied and embedded in their working practices and yet it allows them to switch to a mindful level of attention in the case of an unforeseen event that requires them to establish new sociomaterial relationships.

In conclusion, I argue that a dynamic model of representation of risk is needed for considering both sensemaking and framing (Gherardi, 2006; Purdy *et al.*, 2017) for understanding and acting. I see these not as cognitive structures that provide resources for operators to shape what they see as possible, but as interaction processes unfolding along with the situation at hand. The organizational and collective activity of framing should consider the interplay of knowing embedded in the everyday activities (the state of normalcy) and agency of individuals, materials, and discourses that reshape the setting after a sociomaterial disruption. Canetti's descriptions of how crowds form and dissolve contributes ways to frame risk in subjective, dynamic and situated terms and see how a crowd may constitute an extreme and unavoidable context when a rumor of terrorism is spread out.

### Keywords

Affect; Canetti; crowd; epistemic accident; extreme context; football-related disaster; virtual terrorism.

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<sup>i</sup> The description of the event is taken from the newspaper la Repubblica in the week 3-7 June 2017.