The public and political furor over the police response at Sydney airport in late March, 2009 to the bashing death of an associate of the Hells Angels bikie gang highlighted once again our false faith in systems, institutions and structures, and our misguided belief that somebody else will step in to protect us in times of trouble.

On the day of the brawl at Sydney Airport, passengers assumed that security would stop the melee; private security staff assumed that the Australian Federal Police (AFP) would stop the melee; the AFP assumed that the public or airport security would alert them to the melee via the emergency triple 0 number; and everybody assumed that something everyone seemed to refer to as ‘increased airport security’ would come to the rescue. But in reality, no-one was able to take complete responsibility. This event highlights the weaknesses of seemingly rational management systems, and particularly, the danger that arises when we over-rely on these systems to manage our lives.

As well as being a useful and efficient means to manage resources, provide a degree of certainty, and solve broad organisational and societal problems, management systems also have the effect of removing creativity, community and autonomy from citizens in the interests of efficiency and responsibility for the greatest possible part of the structure.
Philosopher John Ralston-Saul describes the dominant power system in the West as being Platonist, "[a] system, which functions on highly developed levels of structure and law—[a] school of pure rationality and fear of the undefined and doubt'. These rational systems take on a form of homeostasis, in that they regulate their internal environment and attempt to maintain a stable and constant condition by restricting the influence of external forces. This internal focus also means that systems are unable to communicate with other systems because protecting the integrity of the system is a critical component of its efficiency. To some degree, the systems are so internally focused and structured that they are unable to adapt to variables that are not input into the system.

There are clear parallels to how the security system responded to the incident at Sydney Airport in the response to Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, the US government response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and even in the origins of the global financial crisis.

In many areas affected by the tragic Victorian bushfires, residents who wanted to create clearings around their homes were prevented from doing so by laws that had no flexibility for individual council representatives or owners of properties to believe that they could (or should) make autonomous decisions. Despite this, some residents did so in defiance of council laws and in spite of fines. Similarly, many residents assumed that they would be advised by the authorities whether they should stay or go, despite people from the Premier down telling them that they should make their own decision whether to leave early or stay and defend their properties. The result was that many people waited until it was too late to make up their own minds. Their response is understandable, in that it suggests that because the system had long ago removed any autonomy on the part of the local community, in effect, many had given over to the authorities to manage their affairs.

The 2006 US Government investigation into the government response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster, found that despite a National Response Plan (NRP), a National Incident Management System (NIMS), an Interim National Infrastructure Protection Plan (INIPP) and an Interim National Preparedness Goal (INPG)—all created after the September 11 attacks—a declaration of an Incident of National Significance (INS) was required before the federal bodies could respond. However, the report states that the, 'NRP lacked sufficient clarity
regarding when and how an event becomes an INS, and ultimately, when an INS was declared, it had become too late to save a large proportion of the population.

The report also argued that the creation of all of these systems made it difficult for authorities to be flexible in their response to the disaster and, among its 125 recommendations, recommended that local authorities be given more autonomy to initially declare events an INS (or something similar) and circumvent the convoluted bureaucratic process required to ask for assistance. It recommended that better communication needed to be established between each of the bodies responsible for these systems, arguing that an all-encompassing communication system should be developed—another system to manage the systems.

Many trace the collapse of the world economy to the US sub-prime crisis and a false belief that it would self-correct. In an article published in the Boston Globe on June 8 2007, for example, it was reported that according to regulators, 'it would be a mistake to overreact to a market that is already showing signs of self-correcting at a time when little evidence has emerged that the broader economy is at risk.' At a broader level, however, the current global financial crisis is a result of the laissez faire (literally, let do) system of allowing the market to be the only arbiter of global economic policy, based around a theoretical concept of the maximisation of economic utility.

Ultimately, the size of the collapse is simply because one system—neo-liberalism—became so powerful that it existed only for the sake of the system and, because of its perceived effectiveness, was able to remove all alternative perspectives from the discourse. The alternative stance posited by many, Australia's Prime Minister included, was that it was time for the market to be more thoroughly regulated, which would be just as dangerous. Of course, the sub-prime debacle's origins were in a range of US government regulation passed from the time of Reagan, Bush, Clinton and Bush; however, this is not the point. Any system, either regulated or unregulated, needs to have consciousness of its effect on the citizenry because, if it doesn't, it is simply a theory.

Each of these events illustrate that systems, and a belief in the rational operation of these systems, have the ability to lull us into a false sense of security. Perhaps the critical issue in these events is that, in each case, everybody assumed that the system would take care of itself and solve any problems. And it is this ideology of systems and rationality that has brought about this willingness among the broader citizenry to disconnect from the complexity of existence in contemporary society and allow the system to take care of them. The problem is that the system does not care about complexity, difference and compromise—it is a construct built around efficiency—and the system makes decisions that are best for the system, rather than the citizen.

But there are clear historical precedents. The Age of Enlightenment (or Age of Rationalism) came about as a rejection of the divine right of kings and a rebellion against the orthodoxy and dominance of religious authority as the controlling force in life. To some degree, it brought about a collapse (or reduced influence) in these traditional institutions and led to both the French and American revolutions and subsequent republics. At its core was a critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs and morals, largely because of their failure to protect ordinary citizens, and partly because ordinary citizens believed (false) that these institutions would protect them. At this time, the intellectual and philosophical developments aspired towards rational discourse, personal judgment, liberalism and the scientific method. And, to some degree, this was very much an enlightened perspective. What the rationalists were rejecting was simply another system—religion—which had, and still has, the potential to be just as circuitous, self-supporting and pernicious as any management or scientific system.

In effect, this shift morphed into a variety of 20th century movements and ideological beliefs. The faith in rationality, systems (including the pre-eminence of the market as a means of governing the flow of capital), government as protector and neo-liberalism, are all artefacts of the Age of Enlightenment.

However, the underlying foundations of the Age of Enlightenment have been debased by modern interpretations of rationalism and systems based around efficiency and short-term gain, rather than the acceptance of curiosity, creativity and scepticism as a means of furthering society.

The major issue here is that any system, whether it is a religious system, a monarchical system, an institution, or an ideological system works on a principle of what Gideon Haigh refers to as 'near-rightness—it works okay as long as nothing out of the ordinary occurs. Once we give over to that system, it is restricted by its structure and by a false belief in its self-correcting
ability. Sadly, a system doesn’t have the faculty of consciousness nor creativity, so when something goes wrong that doesn’t fit into the system, it is slow to respond—if, indeed, it can respond.

In a system, no individual can take responsibility because the structure of the system removes the ability of individuals to make judgments without forcing them to conform to a structure pre-determined by the system—it is a cyclical dilemma, a Catch-22.

What happened at Sydney airport, what happened in Victoria and what happened on Wall Street show that if we place too much faith in systems, we will never be able to respond appropriately to extraordinary events. This is because systems and contemporary interpretations of rationality are based upon a foundation of reductionism and efficiency. These events show that a system can only respond to something it has been programmed to respond to. In other words, a system can’t think for itself. The process of thinking requires feeling, and rationality aims to remove feeling from decision making.

In no way am I suggesting that we should not have rules, laws and regulations to control and maintain appropriate behaviour. Nor am I suggesting that we should not have boundaries, policies and processes in business and in society. Boundaries are just as important as freedoms when developing ideas. There is an issue of balance, however, and at present, the pendulum has swung too far towards managerial systems thinking, particularly in domains that are not purely about management, such as politics, the environment and social justice issues. This focus is understandable because it is a natural instinct to seek simple, silver bullet responses, and managerial systems have the appearance of providing simple, rational and clearly-defined answers to many issues.

In times of crisis, such as what we are seeing now in relation to both global climate changes and economics, many of these rational systems must be ignored, or temporarily put aside as a means to get things moving quickly. What we need to recognise is that any system, any institution, any structure has its weak points, and there is a compelling and immediate need to re-situate creativity, an openness to complexity, and individual autonomy and responsibility into these structures.

Epilogue

Having recently done a bit of flying, I came to realise that ‘near-rightness’ is simply not an option when it comes to piloting a commercial aeroplane. For a situation that throws up a great amount of opportunities for massive failure, the airline industry makes few mistakes, and when it does, it spends a large proportion of resources to discover how and why. What I did realise is that the piloting of a plane requires the correct mix of both rational systems and human involvement. As a model, the way in which air is managed and monitored is a good one. The amount of resources involved in doing this is traded off against managing the major risks involved in flying a big steel tube through the air.

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