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Book review:
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Book review

Davis R. GIBSON (2012).
Talk at the Brink. Deliberation and Decision during
the Cuban Missile Crisis.
Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Readers should not expect revelations from Gibson's short book; the Cuban missile crisis has been examined and re-examined from every angle, almost since its inception. This does not mean that *Talk at the Brink* has nothing to offer. By using the concept of talk to examine the Cuban missile crisis from a new angle, it provides a very original look at how decisions were made by the American administration — one which adds another narrative perspective to the many ways in which this story has been told in the past. To put it in more scholarly language, Gibson constructs a new theoretical framework and reaches an intriguing conclusion: even when people in a group are free to discuss an issue widely, they do so in a restricted way; even more strangely, this restricted talk has positive outcomes.
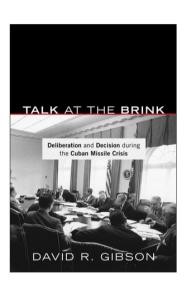
Gibson clearly states his aim in the introduction: he wants to demonstrate how the mechanisms and dynamics of talk affect decision-making processes. As talk is subject to the rules and constraints of conversation, dependent on its resources and affected by its 'vagaries', these details can alter decision outcomes. The book aims to advance studies of "microcontingency", stating that "the course of history may sometimes hinge on small, localized events" such as how groups' interactions unfold (p.1). To develop his argument, the author revisits the Cuban missile crisis through the detailed analysis of discussions between John F. Kennedy and his advisers, most of them secretly taped by the U.S. President. Gibson considers how these conversations contributed to shaping Kennedy's perceptions of events, his understanding of the different options, and the risks associated with each of them.

These historical events have already been the subject of well-known contributions to organization studies, especially those of Allison (Allison, 1969, 1971; Allison & Zelikow, 1999), Janis (1972, 1982) and Anderson (1983). Yet because they were based on retrospective accounts such as memoirs and interviews, the first two authors' studies never assessed what was said during the Cuban missile crisis meetings. Anderson, meanwhile, merely read the detailed notes, unavoidably colored by individual perspectives, taken by participants at four meetings. Gibson, on the other hand, has taken advantage of more than twenty hours of Kennedy's recently declassified taped discussions. These newly accessible data have enabled him to develop another account of

the crisis, based on a detailed analysis of the dynamics of talk.

It would be virtually impossible to offer a detailed analysis of over twenty hours of soundtrack; greater focus was necessary. A preliminary major challenge for Gibson was therefore to develop a relevant strategy aiming at successive acts of analytical reduction: this was done through first focusing on talk around the three major decisions that Kennedy made with his advisers' input, and consequently "spotting trends in talk about these particular decisions' premises" (p.20). In this way, Gibson whittled down twenty hours to five. This analytical strategy also entailed a new transcription of the soundtracks, in line with the methodological principles of Conversation Analysis (CA).

Gibson sets out his theoretical framework in Chapter 2, introducing the concept of "foretalk", i.e. talk about the future. He aims to utilize, on the one hand, ideas from pragmatism and phenomenology about imagination and choice, specifically drawing on Dewey, Bergson and Schutz. On the other hand, he draws from research on how people talk, particularly in group settings, relying notably on the founding fathers of CA such as Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, Lerner and Heritage, among others. Like the phenomenologists, Gibson believes that thinking about the future means imagining competing futures. The decision-maker then "cycles through" these imagined stories, revisiting them one after the other and finding them different each time as he changes through the process, until one account stands out and appears to offer the obvious way forward.

How is this cycle of thought performed by a talking group, however? First of all, because talk relies upon language and speech — so word choice, syntax and phonetics — "codification may take on a life of its own" and assist in shaping thought (p.28). Adopting a CA perspective, Gibson underlines that conversations of this type will be a highly structured performance; they will be sequentially organized, and will involve specific rules and procedures such as the turn-taking principle, transition-relevance places, and expectations that talk be relevant to the conversation, among others. Additionally, this group talk would entail social features such as the chance of misunderstandings or disagreements, mediation or majority ruling, status and power differences, face concerns and facework, etc. These features respond to additional conversational rules — for example, designating who will speak next. However, they also respond to new flexibilities — in the choice of who is addressed or in participants' alliances, for instance — and raise new possibilities such as conversation schisms.

Interestingly, Gibson endeavors to specify the features of foretalk (narratives about the future) compared with afttalk (narratives about the past). He highlights three defining characteristics here. First of all, no one can claim an "epistemic authority" on the future, as no one can allege to have been there. Consequently, all attempts to narrate the future are epistemologically equivalent. Secondly, since it is lacking in historical records, the consistency of a future narrative is uniquely based on its internal plausibility, i.e. each sequence has to be linked convincingly to the following one. As such, "the trajectory of a future narrative is especially sensitive to the events that get included in it along the way, making such narratives highly path dependent, or contingent" (p.33). Thirdly, the link between two "constituent parts" — or claims of the story — are not necessarily linear (the narrative is not simply "unilinear" as a matter of course). An addition to the story is relevant inasmuch as it combines something new with something that has just been said. This could be either a new consequence or a new

cause of the considered step, provided through different possible moves: the suggestion of a new simple consequence, an additional co-consequence, or an alternative consequence; a proposal of a new simple cause, an additional co-cause, or an alternative cause; or perhaps the elaboration of a negative cause. In this way, an alternative story can allow the narrator to end up with opposite results to those previously considered. Hence, multiple claims appear relevant at each point, and result from structural as well as substantive possibilities. Gibson underlines the consequentiality of narrative relevance for foretalk development as it "casts a 'cone of light' on the region of narrative space that can be developed or contested at any given instant" (p.45).

In this second chapter, Gibson thus builds a well-developed repertoire of possible sequences of claims (see p. 38). Although promising, however, this theoretical framework goes on to be used only infrequently later in the book, except in identifying cases of "suppression", when group members avoid or fail in mentioning a known element pertinent to the present situation and to the narrated story. Gibson makes an important point here. Beyond the obvious case of one member hiding information from the others, suppression can be collectively constructed. Its impact on decision-making also stems from the fact that what we do not talk about may appear less likely; after all, deliberative decisions are often justified against what was said during the deliberations.

In this way, Gibson attempts to synthesize phenomenology, which tends to be very theoretical, with the sum and substance of empirical CA. As such, although studying the details of talk, he moves away from CA orthodoxy by taking context into account, focusing less on understanding how a practice is conversationally accomplished and more on how interactional strategies are linked to conversational outcomes.

Chapter 3 sets the stage of empirical analysis by introducing the group under study: the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). First, the author recalls the group's historical origin: created to avoid reproducing the disaster scenario of the Bay of Pigs, it aimed to improve the decision-making processes by steering clear of an uncritical reliance on experts, conformity to the President's opinion, and letting domestic political calculations obscure judgment. The body was purely advisory and Kennedy had no obligation to follow its recommendations. Gibson then combines qualitative and quantitative analyses to highlight some key features of the exchanges, such as the link between what was discussed within the meetings and President Kennedy's public moves, and the central role of Kennedy as chair, decision-maker, and primary addressee—he remained the person "who would ultimately make the crucial decisions, and who would principally be held accountable for them" (p.72). Other features of the meetings included the qualified place of expertise, as no member disposed of solid "epistemic authority" to talk about the future, and the different members' interactional tendencies, which revealed significant inequalities in participation even though competition to speak was apparently not particularly intense.

In Chapters 4 to 6, Gibson investigates talk around three major decisions made by the ExComm team.

Chapter 4 focuses on the first dilemma: how to respond to the discovery of Soviet missiles en route to Cuba. The considered lines of action were to do nothing, launch an immediate military attack or give advance warning to Khrushchev, thus providing him with a chance to step back. All of these options looked

inadequate; it was hard at first to imagine how they could secure the missiles' withdrawal without putting the world at risk of a nuclear war. However, in the end, one of these "bad" options (the advance warning in the form of a naval blockade of Cuba) was accepted. Gibson explores how the group, through talk, came to accept this initially "unacceptable option" (p.75). He reveals a pattern of interactional dynamics resulting in "decision-making by suppression", i.e. the suppression of a relevant narrative option "through a variety of conversational mechanisms including self-censorship, interruption, selective uptake following conversational overlap, ambiguation, and simple omission" (p.164): ultimately, the acceptability of the blockade rested on the ExComm's ability to find another plausible story to tell, one that reached an acceptable conclusion (and did not result in the death of millions of Americans in a nuclear conflict). This was made possible because the ExComm's foretalk adopted an iterative progression, the group "consider[ing] each option over and over again", telling each story "as if for the first time" (p.76). More specifically, Gibson underlines how ExComm, lacking an easily acceptable solution, seemed to have "shifted from finding a solution to the problem of the missiles to finding a solution to the problem of seeming to find a solution" (p. 102-103).

This first decision paved the way for the second conundrum the ExComm had to deal with: as Cuba's blockade had been announced, which ships were to be intercepted? For the group, the difficulty resided in the fact that the blockade was actually disconnected from ultimate goal of eliminating missiles. As a result, it was hard to build a narrative starting with the blockade and ending with the missiles' withdrawal, and thus to reach an agreement about the immediate objective of the blockade and how it should be implemented in practice. Consistent with this difficulty, Gibson notes a lack of narrative depth in the group's talk; ExComm members focused on justifications of inaction, without considering the possible consequences of not intercepting ships with missiles on board. It is not clear who exactly these justifications were meant for. Seemingly conceived for a sympathetic audience, they were certainly not for the benefit of the Soviets. Eventually, the U.S. team was subjected to "environmental impatience" as ships arrived at the blockade line. If delaying the decision meant not intercepting, not intercepting was to be interpreted by other actors, and especially the Soviets, as a decision. So this deliberative process "was cut short by events in the world" (p.133). For Gibson, it was a case of "decision-making by indecision".

As some boats were allowed to continue their route and another was approaching, Khrushchev sent two offers: one transmitted to Kennedy's office, offering to withdraw the missiles if the U.S. pledged not to invade Cuba, and another, made public in the press, suggesting that Soviet missiles would be removed from Cuba if U.S. Jupiter missiles were withdrawn from Turkey. For the ExComm members, Khrushchev's inscrutable behavior constituted a third conundrum, investigated in Chapter 6: which offer was valid? Did the second offer negate the first? On this point Kennedy and his advisers were divided, unable to reach agreement on how Khrushchev would respond if the United States accepted the first offer, while ignoring the second, public one. Even so, the group had few moments of overt conflict. At the end, it seemed that their convergent stories were allowed to coexist, aided by different conversational practices such as narrative segregation (they sequentially "interdigitated" the two accounts without reconciling them), non-confrontation, (mis)perception of

agreements, and circumvention (not arguing directly). This happened again and again in circular talk patterns, with repeated stories articulated as if for the first time. Kennedy was ultimately convinced by his advisers' opinions and officially accepted Khrushchev's first offer. However, unsure of the results, he unofficially let Khrushchev know he was ready to negotiate the removal of the Jupiter missiles from Turkey. Gibson describes this last process as a case of "decision-making by division".

In the concluding chapter, Gibson streamlines his argument, defining its scope — it fits situations where no solutions appear obvious or are enforced by powerful actors — and identifying other consequential conditions such as environmental forces and individual interests. He emphasizes the impact of the "machinery of conversation", orienting or limiting those who could or would talk, what could or should be said and what would or could be neglected. In Gibson's words, this book's main claim is thus that "insofar as a decision arises out of talk, and there is no 'right' answer simply waiting to be discovered or decreed, that decision emerges from the intersection of individual's perspectives and interests; conversational rules, procedures and vicissitudes; and external events that may impinge on the decision-making process before it has run its course" (p. 159).

While it was not in Gibson's stated objective to test Janis, Allison or Anderson's accounts of the Cuban crisis, his new study offers a somewhat different view of the ExComm conversations to theirs. Allison's work (1969, 1971, Allison & Zelikow, 1999) argued that what happened could be made sense of according to three distinct theoretical models: the rational actor model, highlighting how the U.S. and Soviet rulers sought to advance (or defend) their national interests; the organization-theoretic model, emphasizing the consequentiality of organizational routines in the decision-making process and outcomes; and the bureaucratic politics model, in which advisers were supposed to advocate for positions which tallied with their own perspectives and the interests of their affiliated bureaucratic departments. For his part, Janis (1972, 1982) concluded that the US advisers' group successfully avoided the "groupthink" trap: they managed to stay open to dissenting opinions, examined systematically the different options and their consequences in an unbiased fashion, and suspended the influence of status and protocol. Anderson (1983) argued, however, that the decision-making process within the ExComm did not follow the conventional rational decision-making model, in that the participants proceeded through a succession of yes-no choices with binary options. He called this "decision-making by objection".

Gibson's analysis deviates from these previous accounts: although he agrees that the group's discussions were a real attempt to have an open conversation where status was "gummed out", he highlights the previously unacknowledged details that ExComm's information was incomplete and that no systematical or exhaustive calculative analysis of every option was carried out, although some options were considered in parallel at some points in the discussion. Gibson's study also reveals that when Kennedy let several ships through the blockade unintercepted, this was due to indecision overtaken by environmental impatience rather than being a consciously accepted and well-articulated position aimed at avoiding the escalation of the crisis. Moreover, bureaucratic interests become less visible when discussions are examined more closely; it appears that individual ExComm members were quite flexible in their opinions.

This is especially evident with regard to the traditional view of the group's talk as structured by the "hawk-dove divide" — the first side clamoring for a military response, the second advocating diplomacy — which retrospectively appears to be a reification of more fluid and nuanced individual positions.

The main contribution of this book is probably its attempt to further hone previous theoretical contributions on foretalk and continue the empirical illustration of its most noteworthy characteristics, "the repetitive, circular, and in some ways amnesic nature of deliberative talk that allowed the ExComm to revisit each option again and again, perhaps in the hope that the 'shoals or rocks or troublesome gales' encountered last time around would suddenly disappear on the next visit" (p.166). In that, aside from its contribution to decision-making or deliberation studies, Talk at the Brink could also be of interest to scholars aiming at further understanding "prospective sensemaking" (Gioia and Mehra, 1996; Gioia et al., 2002; Gioia, 2006; MacKay, 2009; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012; Kaplan and Orlikowski, forthcoming), also named "future-oriented" sensemaking (Gephart et al., 2010). The Cuban crisis case highlights in particular the practical difficulties of "present perfect thinking" (Weick, 1995), particularly when combined with other forms of thinking—ones which are sometimes more prospective or counterfactual, and which sometimes do not even fall within the narrative genre. It also reminds us that "prospective" sensemaking needs to be thought of not only as an activity displayed by groups of people in isolation from the pressures of the action (as we could imagine a group of top managers thinking about long-term strategy), but also as something which is intermeshed with actions.

Gibson, however, although offering a critical perspective on the classical view of decision-making, does not follow the deconstruction of the concept through, and reads his empirical material with the decision-making framework even when no decision is visibly being made (cf. the "decision-making by indecision" ending the second conundrum). The author contends that decisions are made through interactive talk, and that interactive talk is plagued with a good deal of amnesia. Ideas are repeated rather than developed, so conversations are largely circular. Drawing a parallel with Janis's concept of groupthink, he proposes the concept of grouptalk: "converging on the same story while preventing its discontents from raising an effective objection" (p. 164).

The key process is more about suppressing than about building stories (or parts of stories). Repetition in conversation reflects less an insistence on a given idea than an avoidance of other ideas. In all three studied cases, the elephant in the room was simply talked away; the aim was to silence the most difficult questions because nobody had any good answers.. The blockade was not an appropriate response to the threat of the missiles, yet others were no better. As ExComm was unsure what the blockade was really about, confusion set in when it came to deciding what to do about it. As for the third case, the response to Khrushchev's double message, the elephant in the room had a face: that of the President. As most ExComm members favored the option of answering the first (private) letter while Kennedy intended to reply to the second (public) one, the conversation was really about avoiding a challenge to the President's authority. In the end, talk is mostly used for not talking about key aspects of the decision at stake.

While Janis praises the open, deliberative mode of the ExComm for protecting the decision-making process from the dangers of groupthink, Gibson suggests

that this very mode gave room for what he calls grouptalk. But whereas groupthink is supposed to reduce the quality of choices, he suggests that the outcome of grouptalk was ultimately positive; he even offers a generalization in this regard: "A possible implication is that in the most trying times, what is called forth, and indeed what might be indispensable, is behavior that, under normal circumstances, we would associate with cognitive slippage" (p. 166). From a Weickian perspective, the deliberative mode of the ExComm can be seen as generating too much thought, too many alternatives and too much analysis. No story was strong enough to resist such an analytical process. Through grouptalk and the suppression of some stories, the group was able to select and retain stories plausible enough to provisionally make sense of the situation and preserve some capacity for action. It has to be noted, though, that the plausibility of the retained stories was built by throwing a veil on their weaknesses rather than by highlighting their positive features. Similarly, avoiding challenging the President's authority by more or less ignoring what he said helped maintain the group role structure. In short, grouptalk supported the sensemaking process that helped the USA out of the crisis.

Talk at the Brink is certainly an important book. It opens up many avenues for research, some of them only briefly explored by the author. Scholars in the field of organization studies will find inspiration for researching issues in the fields of decision making, sensemaking and change, and will be able to fashion interesting tools and ideas for studying these processes through the lens of language and discourse.

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