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Recommended Book

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Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination, Lee Clarke (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006)

In the conclusion to *Worst Cases*, Lee Clarke presents a speculation that poignantly proves his case that imagining the worst is a necessary public exercise. Arguing that the risk of large-scale disasters has increased in recent years, Clarke writes, "New Orleans, right at the mouth of the Mississippi, is so far below sea level that a storm surge from a large hurricane could submerge a large proportion of the city under twenty feet or more of water" (162). As we all know now, Clarke's worst case scenario came true as his book was in press, with Hurricane Katrina tearing through the levees, resulting in 1,720 recorded deaths, 202 missing persons, and 711,000 refugees.

The woeful lack of planning that led to the disaster, the high number of people affected, and the mostly shameful response from the many government officials, journalists, and people on the street who blamed the victims made Hurricane Katrina the worst disaster in American history, according to many sources. As Clarke points out, worst cases are those that people identify as worst cases, usually based on their seeming inconceivability, their resistance to any planning or control, and their resonance with the experience of observers. The strength of Clarke's book is that we can immediately identify an event like Hurricane Katrina with his central argument—that we must learn to reasonably imagine the worst so that we can better plan for large-scale disasters.

Worst Cases extends Clarke's discussion of disaster planning, begun with *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster* (1999). In his previous work, Clarke took on disaster planning in corporations and government agencies, pointing out that their scenarios are often unrealistic and inefficient, often making matters worse. Clarke's own mission is to promote a more realistic and efficient worst case thinking, not only in organizations that engage in risky activities, but in public culture. His message in *Worst Cases* is directed at citizens living in what

sociologist Ulrich Beck called "risk societies," in which institutions normalize accidents and disasters, many of them generated by tools, machines, and technological systems associated with social progress. Beck's classic formulation is that modern institutions create risks and then justify exercises of power over citizens in the name of controlling risks. Like Beck, Clarke is highly critical of organizations engaged in risk assessment. Clarke argues that in disaster planning, such organizations are innately conservative and self-protective, and therefore have a paucity of the imagination necessary for truly facing the worst. Instead, Clarke puts his faith in ordinary citizens who, unlike government officials and corporate managers, have little vested interest in preserving the power of the organizations that could be held accountable for negligence.

In its attention to popular culture from a sociological perspective, Clarke's book makes a further contribution to disaster studies, a growing field with many notable contributions in the past decade, such as Eric Klinenberg *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*; Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*; Steven Biel's *American Disasters*; and Ted Steinberg's *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*. With an overall aim to mitigate the effects of catastrophe, many scholars in a variety of fields have become interested in the social construction of disasters and the ways that people make sense of them. In order to effectively prepare for and cope with disasters, the reasoning goes, we must be brave enough to face them without straying into paranoid or apocalyptic imaginings that often exacerbate their violent effects. The role of the popular imagination is considered of key importance, since it determines what counts as a disaster, and for whom. The various cultural meanings of disaster are negotiated within this realm, including the reorganization of communities and identities, debates over accountability, and the formation of collective memory.

In his account, Clarke posits that ordinary people are, for the most part, rational actors who are best capable of imagining worst case scenarios. He dismisses the widely held notion, often traced to Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, that people are irrational when it comes to risk perception, often inflating dangers such as environmental pollution because of deeply held taboos. In risk communication, corporations often falsely present themselves as rational entities besieged by an irrational public that erratically assigns blame without evidence.

Clarke makes a helpful distinction between probabilistic thinking and worst case thinking. In probabilistic thinking, risks are assessed according to how likely they are to occur. In much popular writing about risk, citizens are seen as having irrational fears that do not match risk probabilities. They may, for example, fear a terrorist attack more than they fear

the much riskier activity of driving. Clarke argues that probabilistic thinking—figuring out the odds—is a useful exercise in making decisions, but that imagining the worst is also appropriate, especially in situations where a large-scale catastrophe, such as a nuclear meltdown, is possible. Furthermore, organizations use probabilistic thinking because it is more permissive and allows them to produce what others may feel is an unacceptable degree of risk. As Clarke rightly notes, the discourse on risk plays out along lines that protect the powerful and dismiss the powerless. Contrary to much official opinion, however, "bottom-up citizen-based responses" are the best and most resilient approach to disaster.

By writing an accessible book, without dense academic jargon, Clarke hopes to better inform citizens to imagine and prepare for disaster. *Worst Cases* proceeds by intriguing anecdote: story after story of the worst things that have ever happened to individuals and societies, from a hunter accidentally shooting through a wall to kill a woman standing in her bathroom, to the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, which killed 35,000 people. He does not spend much time with any one event, although the September 11 attacks are treated throughout the book as a seminal event that sharpened public awareness of disaster planning and its perceived failures. The effect of Clarke's anecdotal method is to illustrate his point that disasters are "as normal as love, joy, triumph, and misery" (6) and that they reveal much about societies and their imaginings. Thus, Clarke broadens sociologist Charles Perrow's insight that accidents are normal in complex technological systems to argue that disasters are normal in all aspects of modern life and that the danger is increasing. This does not mean, however, that we need to neurotically dwell on disasters or accept them without intervention. Rather, Clarke proposes that we engage in identifying past worst case scenarios and reasonably imagining future ones as a public duty, from Hollywood studios to local communities. The more we can imagine, the more prepared and resilient we can be.

Clarke frequently models worst case thinking, often extrapolating from events that have already occurred. Based on the effects of the Chernobyl disaster, what if terrorists tampered with ten reactors? What if a trembler on the scale of the San Francisco earthquake hit today's Manhattan? What if the *Challenger* had been carrying plutonium? Clarke argues that it is easier to produce scenarios from what we already know, but that we should use fantasy to think outside the box and urge our institutions and public officials to do likewise. While positive thinking is a mantra in a Dale Carnegie–inspired American consumerist society, negative thinking may prevent disasters and preserve us from many harmful effects.

While Clarke's argument comes from his understanding of American society and its organizations, he foresees a rise in large-scale global disasters, from bioterrorist attacks to chemical accidents. These disasters

will have greater impact because of our increased global interdependence and a growth in population, especially in concentrated urban areas. The radioactive cloud from Chernobyl circled the planet, and traces of radiation were found in Antarctica. Viruses are spread globally through transportation systems. Environmental disasters, such as over-grazing, create refugee populations. News of disaster spreads rapidly, effecting global perceptions of the power and vulnerability of nations. Therefore, it is becoming less possible to think of large-scale disasters in isolationist terms. Clarke's discussion of what he calls "globally relevant disasters" is not fully developed, but by implication, the imagination of disaster must include global effects and cross-cultural understanding.

In its challenge to widely accepted assumptions about who should properly engage in disaster planning and how they should go about it, *Worst Cases* makes a valuable contribution to disaster studies. It would be interesting to see how Clarke would address the familiar argument that millenarianism and the apocalyptic imagination of the Endtime are already deeply embedded in popular culture and have created distorted perceptions, such as the belief that certain populations deserve their fate. His view of citizens as rational actors may be somewhat optimistic, given the complex, historical patterns of belief that thread through American life. His project to inform and educate citizens to create reasonable worst-case scenarios, however, is an excellent one, and we would do well to heed his advice.

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