REVIEW ESSAY

Worst Cases and Dark Times

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Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination
By Lee Clarke
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006
213 pp. $22.50 (cloth)

The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times
By Jeffrey C. Goldfarb
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006
162 pp. $29.00 (cloth); $18.00 (paper)

Good books help us understand anomalies, such as an Associated Press report about an opinion poll (January 2007) of what events people expected to happen: 61 percent felt that the United States would be hit with a terrorist attack; 40 percent thought the United States would go to war with Iran; 50 percent predicted that bird flu (avian influenza) would arrive in the United States; and 25 percent anticipated the Second Coming of Christ! Such beliefs can be partly explained by a sociology of knowledge aided by a good dose of symbolic interaction.

The sociology of knowledge, symbolic interaction, and the politics of everyday life are enlivened in the two books under review, and their authors seem to approach the nature and consequences of symbolic interaction from different starting points. Lee Clarke wants to understand the sense that things are getting worse and worse—and the worst is just ahead, while Jeffrey Goldfarb illuminates how everyday interaction and social routines are often discounted as important—and consequential—for major social changes. Too often, theoretical narratives that focus on institutional truths about "big politics," including totalitarianism, eclipse everyday life. I do not know if these fine thinkers have ever met, but I use their work here to engage some common issues of the power of defining the situation and the role of the mass media and media logic in shaping these definitions.

Clarke focuses on misperceptions about catastrophes, beginning with the assertion that worst cases can teach us about society, "for to reflect upon worst cases is to reflect upon the imagination" (2006:5). The chapter titles in his book show how

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much of this doomsday thinking is informed by fear and negatively imagined futures: "Worst Cases: Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid"; "The Sky Could Be Falling"; "What's the Worst That Can Happen"; "Power, Politics, and Panic in Worst Cases"; "Silver Linings: The Good from the Worst"; "Living and Dying in Worst Case Worlds." Clarke calls attention to how we bargain our interpreted past with a very uncertain future.

The deal is that worst cases happen all the time, and until we come to grips with what might be termed the "politics of imagination"—and dare to delineate its features—we are stuck with overwhelming rhetoric about fear and doom. Clark adds numerous examples to show that "catastrophes are common and that failures are a normal part of life" (2006:18), but until we realize that the social construction of futures is quite problematic and highly contextual, cheap doomsday thinking about the "end is near" and a variety of fear-inducing scenarios will prevail. While modern risk analysis is based on "probabilistic thinking" (what's likely to happen), "possibilistic thinking" is oriented to what could be termed "how bad can it get"? The key, Clarke instructs, is to avoid possibilistic thinking borne of "risk analysis" in favor of "consequential thinking," or what is likely to happen if, say, a piece of foam falls from a space shuttle. Rather than see it as a sign of danger, the engineers framed it as "acceptable," and we had the *Columbia* tragedy.

Consequential thinking can also help us plan better. (Note that this seems to fly in the face of "modernism.") Three attributes of worst cases seem to guide us: inconceivability, uncontrollability, and social identification, suggesting that it is not so much the event itself but how people define the event, what they think about it, and what social meaning emerges. The 9/11 attacks are a good example: Were they the worst possible thing that could happen to the United States, the worst thing that has ever happened, or, worse still, the result of cunning conspirators who outwitted U.S. foreign policy, U.S. intelligence communities, and a superior U.S. culture? Was 9/11 so wretched that a defining stand, a united outcry against this assault on humanity, must answer it through war and a global assault on terrorism and all those who hate U.S. influence? Or, what if it was something else?

The mass media, Clarke suggests, make a big difference when it comes to which social definitions and meanings get floated and gain a foothold. "Newspaper editors . . . decide whether they'll cover some catastrophe and how prominently and extensively, partly on the basis of whether they can imagine themselves or their readers in the situation" (2006:16). And what might come of the disaster, especially if leaders are mistrusted to the point that "social liquification" occurs—"when trust or confidence in institutions and leaders fall apart" (2006:59). The problem, then, turns out to be more about what we think about the future and how our "official futures" of gloom and doom or "happy days are here again" get sorted out. Not surprisingly, officials gravitate to the official futures and seldom develop credible worst-case scenarios, just as they dropped the ball on "warning signs" about the 9/11 attacks. But what about the future?

Goldfarb challenges the notion that what might be called "big politics" is far removed from everyday life, especially the social definitions and meanings that guide people in their daily routines. He tells the story in eight chapters covering his work in 1968 Prague art communities (chaps. 1–4), changing definitions over the Internet (chap. 5), the importance of religion and politics (chap. 6) as they confront institutional resistance (chap. 7), and the presentation of self in an electronic age (chap. 8). Big politics often looks dismal, especially in the context of Eastern Europe, which provides many of Goldfarb's examples of social resistance—including a few people meeting in a coffee shop just to discuss a play or art. Goldfarb proposes that people become free (or freer) by engaging in interaction that does not include ideology, at least in its most blatant form. His project is to draw on the insights of Erving Goffman and Hannah Arendt to show how defining the situation can provide social space for innovation and personal freedom, which can be shared, and soon routinized, and therefore potentially consequential if it rubs against official doctrine, for example, no meeting, no political discussions. Arendt, we are reminded, urged that we (1) distinguish between truth and politics; (2) base a sound politics on factual truth; and (3) distinguish political opinion from truth.

How is the politics of small things to occur? It is bound up with media logic and the presentation of self. The answer is mainly a process of interaction and engagement and discussion, which is explicitly nonideological, perhaps nonhierarchical (although that can also be ideological). It involves treating people equally, as Goldfarb did in a seminar, or when it comes to political discourse, presenting oneself in such a way to guide students to act in common. This requires speaking to the people, no small task if one "does not have the power of televisual presentation of self" (2006:124). He cites Martin Luther King, Jr., as an archetype of the politician of small things, whereby action inspires others to act similarly, civilly, and usually effectively, even in small ways that can cascade and flow to change. Goldfarb's book was partly inspired by the death of a friend in the attacks on the World Trade Center. It is a small but elegant statement about friendship, good faith, human kindness, and courage at various societal levels, but great institutional and global potential. This book should be read by anyone who believes that symbolic interactionism is conservative, narrowly focused, and unable to address the nature, process, and impact of social change.