

another wide-ranging and all-inclusive theoretical framework. Bourdieu's concept seems more relevant to certain areas of communication studies, such as journalism research, than cultural studies. The public sphere is a concept that is abstract enough for academics to provide their own interpretation, which helped launch a cottage industry in the academic presses of the 1980s and 1990s. No such luck with Bourdieu who spends most of his time closing down 'erroneous' interpretations of his work. But the French sociologist is already making a significant impact in media studies and his approach, as illustrated in this volume, represents one of the most sophisticated sociological approaches to journalism research.

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*Clarke, Lee* **Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination**

University of Chicago Press 2006 213 pp.  
£14.50 (hardback)

Thanks in large part to recent events, catastrophe and disaster are no longer exotic outliers in sociological enquiry. A sure sign of the ascendance of this domain is that some sociologists have begun to pitch this work to a popular audience. Lee Clarke's book explores the making and imagining of 'worst cases' – by which he means large-scale disasters with far reaching societal impacts – and his book is aimed at just such a broad and populist readership. Clarke examines what worst cases are, how they are imagined and predicted, why some events come to be considered a worst case while others are not, and the social and political fallout from these catastrophes. His central argument is that, while worst cases may be spectacular, they are a normal and common feature of life that can starkly illuminate how societies are organized. This is an important, if no longer sociologically surprising, message. But Clarke's primary audience is not to be found within professional sociology. His book does not seek to advance the field so much as to raise

the profile and broaden recognition of the insights that sociological analysis offers in times of crisis, threat and fear.

Targeted at a popular audience, the book does well to introduce some of the more salient issues that animate debates in this domain, along with some of the better known North American literature. Clarke's commentary is broad and wide ranging, settling for brief moments on the limits of probabilistic thinking, the politics of risk communication, how cultures constrain imagination, inequities in risk bearing, processes of blaming and scapegoating, the societal preconditions of disaster, and the construction of heroes, to name just a few. For more academic readers, the rapid movement of the text, urgently moving from one issue to the next, is likely to offer too swift an analysis of some distinctly problematic and hotly contested fields. Equally, the relatively slim referencing and footnotes indicate the readership being targeted. For a popular audience, however, Clarke seems to have pitched it just right. The text is lively, engaging, avoids excessive detail, and carries a faint hint of polemic. Clarke illustrates his points with a litany of fascinating examples, both actual and hypothetical, and uses the terrorism of September 11, 2001 as a constant reference point. These descriptions add colour to the text, but at times can crowd out the points they are meant to illustrate, with innumerable new cases and scenarios introduced right up to the closing pages.

One of the key themes running throughout this book is that worst cases are, by their very nature, so far beyond the range of ordinary experience that they are unimaginable, inconceivable and therefore rarely predicted, particularly by political elites. The apparent paradox presented by this position in light of the book's core argument – that catastrophes are at once both mundane and outrageous – to my mind presents a set of tensions that are not fully resolved by *Worst Cases*. Equally, some important issues posed in the opening chapter could have been explored in greater depth – the nature, formation and consequences of 'the popular

imagination' of the title, for instance. None the less, with this book Clarke has done a good job of bringing sociological accounts of catastrophes and worst case scenarios to a wider audience. Current and future events are unlikely to let this domain drift back to the margins of social science.

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*Davie, G., Heelas, P., and Woodhead, L.*  
(eds) **Predicting Religion. Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures** Ashgate  
2003 253 pp. \$84.95 (hardback) \$29.95 (paperback).

The dominant paradigm of the sociology of religions – secularization – is inherently predictive, forecasting the future demise of religion as a structuring social force. With this paradigm increasingly challenged, the editors of this volume asked twenty experts on religion in the contemporary UK (and Sweden) to offer predictions for the future of specific religious institutions, traditions, and movements. The book begins with three essays on secularization theory by José Casanova, David Martin and Oliver Tschannen, which, as might be expected, argue for a more refined and prudent use of the concept, without discarding it entirely. The empirical contributions to the book, however, taken as a whole, suggest that, in the British case, future trends will continue to uphold the orthodox theory of secularization: Christian institutions will continue to decline to the point of near extinction; the religious yearning will continue to exist and even flourish, but increasingly in 'soft' forms of spirituality with authority centred on individual subjectivity and expressed in vague beliefs and commodified practices which will have no impact on the social structure. Secularization will thus be complete: from being central to the organization of society, to becoming an autonomous institution within a functionally differentiated society, religion will cease to exist as a socially relevant institution, to be

replaced by a diffused, pantheistic spirituality providing personal meaning and bodily solace in a rationalized capitalist economy of which it is an integral part. Extrapolating from long-term statistical trends, Steve Bruce (ch. 4) predicts the virtual demise of Christianity in Britain by 2020. Bryan Wilson (ch. 5) continues in the much the same vein, noting that the sizeable material assets of the institutional churches are increasingly becoming a 'hollow shell from which the formerly encapsulated life form has largely escaped' (p. 70). The following chapters on religion and social networks show that reconfigurations of the social structure have already killed the social base of Welsh Non-conformism (Chambers, ch. 6), and caused the disappearance of religious socialization among non church-goers (Hirst, ch. 7). If charismatic movements offered the promise of a revival of Christianity, their weak theology and organization have made them unsustainable in the long term (Percy, ch. 8). Government outsourcing of social programmes to religious groups, the commodification of spiritual services, and the privatization of social life have already seriously diverted energies away from traditional forms of engagement in church life, and threaten the very membership structure of the churches (Cameron, ch. 9). With the self becoming the primary locus of religious authority, as shown in the cases of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians (Yip, ch. 11) and cyberreligion (Pilgrim, ch. 12), the moral and spiritual influence of the churches is further undermined. Quakerism risks fracturing or dissolution as the majority of its adherents refuse any form of religious authority and share no common belief (Pilgrim, ch. 12). Wicca as an initiatory tradition risks being trivialized and diluted by the growing commodification of witchcraft and paganism (Pearson, ch. 14). The New Age movement risks petering out when its largest cohort of practitioners, the Baby boomers, age and eventually die off – a trend which is, however, offset by the increasing diffusion of New Age ideas and practices in mainstream society, and even within its health and