

Reviews

Robert Wuthnow, *Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation and Other Threats*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 294 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-973087-2
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The nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 suggested to many that the days of the human species might be numbered. The March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and the following nuclear crisis were a reminder not only to Japan but also to the rest of the world of the fragility of civilization. Within minutes, whole towns were obliterated. After a few days it appeared as if an entire region of Japan might become a Chernobyl-style time capsule, abandoned due to radiation contamination for generations to come. These events highlight the vulnerability of biological human life and complex social organization to dangers originating in nature, technology, or both. How does society respond to the looming threat of mass disaster? In *Be Very Afraid*, the noted sociologist Robert Wuthnow offers an answer.

The book offers a tour through various catastrophic risks of global scale that have hovered over us for the past 60 years. Wuthnow moves from nuclear annihilation to the dangers of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the hands of terrorists and rogue states. He considers viral pandemics and the challenge of climate change. His treatment of each of these has something of the feel of narrative cultural history. Wuthnow reminds us of the chronology of key events. He traces the paths through which dangers came to be identified and taken seriously, quotes from sources of the time to capture some mood, and reminds us about key outcomes.

Several key findings emerge from this sweeping investigation. Wuthnow shows convincingly that a discourse of impending disaster is a recurrent and surprisingly central feature of social life. We live in an era where there is an intense awareness that human life on earth or complex forms of social organization might suddenly come to an end. There is a continual discussion of apocalyptic scenarios in science fiction and an intense sensitivity to potential global dangers in our news pages. For example, a few deaths from avian influenza are sufficient to gain headlines half way around the world. Meanwhile governmental bureaucracies and think tanks have proliferated in order to manage each threat as it emerges.

Wuthnow takes a broadly positive and optimistic view of this activity. In effect scaling up the symbolic interactionist reading of human action (e.g. as found in Herbert Blumer's various theoretical tracts) he reads the response to lurking dangers as evidence of human cultural and organizational creativity: 'Our ability to think, interpret, question, frame, ponder, reflect, and organize – to make and appreciate art and culture – is what makes us human. Other species

react instinctively' (p. 9). More specifically, he sees this activity as 'problem solving'. The category includes getting on with the routines everyday life (p. 21), trusting government experts and institutions (p. 22), getting organized (p. 20), and coming up with stories (p. 17). The process can involve aggregating risks or breaking them down into manageable pieces, handing over authority to experts or dispersing it to the wider population, or even self-help solutions, such as the backyard nuclear shelter. In fact, 'problem solving' seems to involve anything except paralysis or panic.

Be Very Afraid has several merits. It is extremely useful as a survey of apocalyptic threats. Researchers thinking of entering the field can use the book to get up to speed on some basic issues of fact and representation. The book also establishes the comparative sociology of global catastrophe as a field for legitimate investigation. Wuthnow's narrative treatments of the various individual threats reward close reading with subtle points of insight. The book is also jargon-free and is written in a clear and accessible way.

All this said, the study is also in many ways very frustrating for the academic sociologist such as this reader. Perhaps because it is intended for a general audience, there is no serious engagement with the substantial, theoretically informed academic debates on risk, culture, nature, technology, and society that have generated an increasingly dense literature in our leading journals. How does Wuthnow feel about the work of Mary Douglas, Ulrich Beck, or Sheldon Ungar? I have no idea. Indeed, of the three major authors just mentioned only Beck appears in Wuthnow's selected bibliography. Wuthnow sets out a stall without challenging any major statements in the field. This is disappointing precisely because Robert Wuthnow's finest books have been marked by bold claims and theoretical innovation. They have been provocations that irritate but also stimulate. Here he avoids a fight with the unobjectionable claim that society is active and creative in thinking about and dealing with dangers and that problem solving can take many forms. Who can disagree with any of this?

In fact, many will. Those holding strong constructivist and/or critical sociology perspectives are likely to find Wuthnow's account too influenced by American pragmatism, too deferential to common sense, and too unwilling to point a finger to be a truly compelling analysis. Wuthnow makes some gestures towards framing theory, but never really unpacks the deep, autonomous grammars of culture that might constrain or fatally distort the process of representation. He seems too quick to accept the officially endorsed 'reality' of the threats he describes, rather than seeing these threats as the hyped-up product of aggressive (or excessively risk averse) claim-making by stakeholder institutions supported by a largely uncritical and sensationalist mass media. Duds like the Y2K virus and the repeated failures of avian and swine flu to kill more than a handful of people could lead sociology to a different kind of investigation. Words like 'panic' and 'disproportionate' might be found in those writings. Likewise, Wuthnow generally applauds the work of experts, organizations, and institutions in managing or preparing for risk. Most sociologists are far more critical of expert systems than Wuthnow. They would see these as potential carrier groups, touting risks, claiming monopolies, feathering their own nests, and bolstering their own authority.

Fence-sitting and claiming that all social and cultural responses are 'problem solving' is especially questionable from the perspective of engaged critical sociology. This has long claimed that many 'solutions' coming from authority are complicit in the problem. For example, at some point we have to decide whether to 'Protect and Survive' or 'Protest and Survive'. The former was the British Government's advice to householders during the Cold War. In essence: in the event of a nuclear attack stay at home, get under the kitchen table, and listen to the radio (this was a lie about

survivability so as to stop panic and keep roads clear for the military). The latter was the motto of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as it organized marches and civil disobedience. It is far from clear what Wuthnow's approach illuminates here. Glossing over such divergent strategies as evidence of the human spirit, as creative 'solutions', or as affirmations of humanity in the face of doom seems strangely unsatisfying or incomplete as an analytic or ethical strategy.

Even if it will not please all readers, *Be Very Afraid* remains an important and very useful accomplishment. It stands out as a comprehensive, widely accessible, and informed review of the social response to diverse catastrophic dangers. It is a study that is long overdue. We can only hope that this book does not become even more timely.

Philip Smith

Walter F. Hatch, *Asia's Flying Geese: How Regionalization Shapes Japan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010, 292 pp., \$24.95, pbk
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Japan's inability to turn its economy around for the last two 'lost' decades continues to baffle us. With this book, Hatch provides insights into the surprising inertia in Japan's political economy that has resisted changes in the face of massive globalization challenges. In succinct terms, he argues 'that Japanese bureaucratic and business elites avoided, or more precisely forestalled, change in the domestic political economy by regionalizing Japan's core networks of political and economic exchange' (p. 4) by utilizing Japan's strong manufacturing position, particularly *vis-à-vis* Southeast Asia, in the 1990s. Hatch starts with the concept of 'selective relationalism', borrowed from economic sociology, to explain how Japan's economic elite actors from bureaucrats, business executives, management, and labor of large firms (p. 43) collectively guarded the post-war economic structure with 'a desire to maintain the positional power they have come to enjoy' (p. 250). As selective relationalism lived beyond its usefulness and prevented new innovation and changes from taking place by the 1980s, it was Japan's economic regionalization that prolonged the life of this system. By invoking the perspective of 'the second image reversed', which emphasizes how external factors influence the domestic environment, Hatch vividly traces how expanding regionalization of manufacturing industries into Southeast Asia perpetuated Japan's *ancien régime*.

With his refined and witty prose, Hatch weaves through developments of Japan's political economy on both domestic and regional stages. As Japan went through the economic catch-up, relationalism linked the state with industries through informal guidance and created networks among businesses through horizontal and vertical keiretsu (Chapters 2 and 4). Within the large firms, lifetime employment, seniority pay, and enterprise unions have become the foundation of social contract between management and labor (Chapter 4). These policy and business networks provided stability and predictability for Japan's economic growth and economic security during its post-war high growth era, but they then began to impair changes as the Japanese economy matured. How did the arrangement outlive its usefulness in the 1990s? Hatch employs a novel concept of 'elite regionalization'. He explains that overseas production facilities established