

COMMENTS ON REVIEW BY MARTIN H. SMITH IN *MASS EMERGENCIES*, VOL. 1, NO. 1, OCTOBER 1975

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The issue of October, 1975, carries a review of my book, *Disaster and the Millennium*. I have no quarrel with most of the notice, since the reviewer, Martin H. Smith, has given it over to a lengthy and relatively accurate synopsis. However, Professor Smith has managed to compress three major criticisms into the final paragraph, and it is with his funereal coda that I wish to deal.

Professor Smith chastises me on three grounds: (1) that my utilization of *millenarian movement* deviates from current usage; (2) that my utilization of *disaster* similarly deviates to the point of becoming “a vague, meaningless concept” and (3) that I have bootlegged in precisely the sort of Le Bonist crowd behavior argument I attack.

I have erred in Professor Smith’s eyes by placing the millenarian label not only upon “classical” movements (his term) but on “secular, more rational forms of political protest,” i.e., messianic nationalism and totalitarian movements. The twentieth century has been a harsh teacher, and if it has taught anything, it is that secularizing a movement does not necessarily make it “more rational”. The point has been made so often – by writers as varied as Norman Cohn, David Apter, and Crane Brinton – that I would have thought it beyond serious contention. If we reserve “millenarian” only for direct descendants of late medieval chiliasm, we find that such movements

cease to be politically significant in the West after about 1850. The reason is that from roughly that date millenarian visions, such as Marx’s, are expressed in a secular idiom. Ironically, those most eager to show the political demise of “classical” (I would prefer “traditional”) millenarianism are such Marxist writers as E.J. Hobsbawm and Peter Worsley. Their developmental schemes depend upon stigmatizing millenarianism as “irrational” and “pre-political”, epithets that may possess some incantatory value but do little to illuminate the subject.

Professor Smith’s second objection is more consequential, and I see behind it a conceptual gap that cannot be easily bridged. He takes me to task for straining the meaning of disaster beyond the current literature. While I would reject the implications of “strain,” he is indeed correct in the suggestion that I find that literature conceptually inadequate. The reason lies in its failure to appreciate how culture and history structure the perception of what constitutes a disaster. Since so much disaster research has been conducted in post-World War II America, it is scarcely surprising that disaster should be defined in terms of those stress levels that modern Americans find excessive. Nor is it surprising, given the funding patterns and policy implications, that the conceptualization should be geared to the needs of rescue and rehabilitation agencies.

To a considerable extent, however, “disaster” is in the eye of the beholder, and as the perceiving eye changes, so too does the consciousness of what disaster is. Thus, in England between 1650 and 1850 natural hazards lost much of their threatening aspect and were supplanted by man-made disasters associated with industrial technology. That kind of cognitive-evaluative shift is only partially encompassed within definitions that lay overwhelming stress upon physical damage. Much more is involved; the sense of vulnerability, loss of control, and the availability of acceptable explanations of misfortune. I might add in this respect that geographers of natural hazards have proved far subtler and more resourceful than their colleagues in other disciplines.

Professor Smith obviously believes that the extension of “disaster” to certain culture contact situations, to war, and to economic dislocation is an unacceptable metaphoric extension. Yet if we look at the historic experience of catastrophe — a project to which William Langer unsuccessfully exhorted his fellow historians in 1958 — we find that two significant changes have occurred: First, natural hazards have come increasingly under human foresight and control; where they have not, the shock of their occurrence has been mitigated by the belief that they are in principle controllable. Counter to the decline of natural hazards, has come the rise of man-made disasters, of which the current literature on ecological and nuclear “doomsdays” is but the most conspicuous reminder. Second, the shift from natural to man-made disasters has been accompanied by a shift in the scale of possible catastrophe. Natural disasters reflected the rhythms of nature and occurred within recognizable spatial and temporal limits. Man-made disaster, by contrast, is far less likely to be in a form for which communal memory provides precedents, and is far less likely to observe spatial and temporal limits. Disaster research that fails to recognize these processes will, in my view, operate upon a steadily shrinking terrain.

Finally, I must confront that perennial bugbear, the charge of “psychologizing.” In the

first place, I thought I had made abundantly clear my distaste for crowd-mind models. The work of Kerckhoff and Back and of Trevor-Roper, to which I give considerable weight, is to my mind clearly distinguishable from the Le Bon school. Second, even a casual reader in the millenarian literature will be struck by the frequency with which examples of ecstatic behavior abound. The choice is between evading and confronting the problem of its occurrence; in choosing to confront it, I was necessarily drawn to an examination of individual factors. Third, the book deals with two major questions: What societal conditions give rise to millenarian movements? and, How do individuals behave once they have joined such movements? The former poses problems at a different level than the latter. Although he is less than crystal clear on the point, Professor Smith apparently supposes my discussion of disaster and my discussion of ecstatic behavior to be parallel, irreconcilable approaches to the single problem of millenarian emergence, when in fact they are separate answers to separate problems. Finally, Professor Smith has a way of tarring everyone with the Le Bonist brush: “Although he [Barkun] criticizes Le Bon and psychopathological explanations, his dependence on the disaster syndrome, ecstatic behavior, suggestibility, contagion, and leveling is somewhat contradictory.” My surmise is that talk of the disaster syndrome makes Professor Smith uneasy. A segment of disaster research has always sought to play down problems of individual functioning and accentuate the capacity for adaptive response. My own reading of the literature suggests that those who deny the significance of the disaster syndrome have not looked for it; that those who have, find it widespread and surprisingly durable; and that disasters differ in their capacity to produce it. In any case, word magic will not forever exorcise it.

These brief comments do not exhaust my disagreements with Professor Smith. If my conclusions strain the literature for him, I hope they extend it for others.