

individuals, but I wondered about the feasibility of such alliances across Europe in a broader context of anti-blackness. For example, police violence against Black populations across Europe is a growing problem, but it is not always evident to mobilize around this issue, especially given Europe's denial of race and racism.

This book is not especially

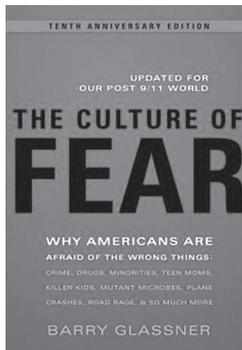
optimistic—nor does it need to be—Small does not predict any significant improvement in the condition of BE. What is inspiring is the persistence of BE despite slavery, colonialism and imperialism, and racism and discrimination against its existence for the past few centuries. As Small quotes Bob Marley, “we refuse to be what you want us to be!”

he (and Marley) remind us all—Black and non-Black—of the importance of resistance, whether it be within academia, the discipline of sociology or elsewhere.

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twenty years in a culture of fear

by daniel m. harrison



The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things

by Barry Glassner

Basic Books

384 pages

It has been 20 years since Barry Glassner first published *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. I first became aware of Glassner's work while watching Michael Moore's powerful documentary, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). At that time Glassner was already something of a minor celebrity sociologist with a solid presence in print and TV media. He was often featured as the culture expert for stories in *USA Today* or on segments on *CNN* or *CBS This Morning*. In October 2001, Glassner penned an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* discussing the terrorist attacks on the country the month before. He grimly

noted how “the counterfeit horrors” that had “almost completely disappeared from public discourse” following 9/11 were slowly making a comeback. While “Americans have new and real dangers to worry about,” Glassner argued, “only some overblown risks have been deflated.”

Michael Moore clearly appreciated Glassner's account of the American culture of fear. In the documentary, he cites approvingly of Glassner's comments about our senseless worries about dangerous Halloween candy (p. 29) and our irrational fear of black men (pp. 109-127). A notable highlight of *Bowling for Columbine*, emphasizing the disconnection of these fears from reality, is when Glassner and Moore are seen casually strolling through South Central Los Angeles, unbothered by anyone, musing about the misguided paranoia of the American public. The success of *Bowling for Columbine*—the film grossed \$58 million globally and won the 2002 Academy Award for Best Documentary—meant that Barry Glassner became a sociological superstar. *The Culture of Fear* was so successful that in 2009 the book underwent a 10th Anniversary edition that was “Updated for Our Post 9/11 World.” More recently, in 2018, Glassner has published a third edition of *Culture of Fear* “Updated for the Trump Era.”

Glassner is a voracious consumer

of the mass media. He knows how the media works to manipulate audience sensibilities. In *The Culture of Fear*, he interrogates the representations of social and cultural fears in the news and on television. Relying on probabilistic logic, he argues that overall, life for most people is actually much safer and considerably less scary than the media makes it out to be. However, Glassner claims that powerful social actors such as politicians, businesses, and media organizations profit by keeping us afraid. Glassner argues that we are unreasonably afraid of social phenomena such as road rage, pedophiles, teenagers, mothers, black men, immigrants, drugs, and air travel. Instead of fretting over such pseudo worries, Glassner would have us focus our attention on more structural concerns such as food insecurity, crumbling infrastructure, and growing inequality.

The first edition of *The Culture of Fear* in 1999 packed quite a wallop. Glassner researched thousands of news stories and played them off each other. He tested accounts by putting them up against solid social science research. The book was refreshing. It served as a sort of antidote to fear in society. Glassner urged readers to be critical consumers of the news. His underlying thesis—which Glassner articulated most clearly in an

article in *Qualitative Sociology* that same year—that “unfounded fears that receive star billing in the news media...allow people to ignore, avoid, or pretend away, other fears that are uncomfortably close at hand,” (p. 302) seemed to explain a lot about social life.

However, over time the book has not aged so well. Part of the problem concerns the news stories the book focuses on. Like many books on social problems, content can quickly become outdated. The news stories that Glassner discussed in the original *The Culture of Fear* were (obviously) historically contingent productions. These narratives differ from the dominant stories in our culture today, which will also be different from the ones tomorrow. This makes the book disappointing at times, especially as a teaching text, because so many of the examples Glassner uses are now well over twenty years old. Despite claims made to the contrary, the bulk of the material in *The Culture of Fear* has never been updated, neither in 2009, nor in 2018. A reader coming across Glassner for the first time today, thinking the book had been genuinely “Updated for the Trump Era,” might be rightly confused.

So why all the references to the 1980s and 1990s? These parts of the book offer a fascinating historical account of *fin-de-siècle* America, but they suggest a missed opportunity on Glassner’s part to reengage with his text, in which he might have offered a more nuanced understanding of how cultural fears change over time. Retrospectively interrogating his own thesis and the evidence Glassner used to make his claims would have been a valuable exercise for readers. For example, it would have been helpful to see updated statistics on teen suicide, a concern Glassner claims is blown out of proportion to the attention the media gives it (p. 54). Yet, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention notes that teen suicide rates have been increasing since 2010 and now stand at 1.4 per 10,000 people, much higher than the 1 per 10,000 rate Glassner reports. Other

useful updates would be welcomed for Glassner’s sections on cyber-smut (p. 31), missing children (p. 62), and silicone implants (p. 164). These social problems (pseudo or not) all continue to exist, of course, and Glassner misses an opportunity to provide more information on how they have changed in recent years.

Because the majority of *The Culture of Fear* relies on out of date events reported in the media, the important debunking function that it originally provided is largely missing. Instead, the new edition has become hyper-politicized. Gone is so much of the emphasis on how we “fear the wrong things,” though Glassner does take issue with what he calls the “mindless technophobia,” (p. 255) found in “e-fears” (e.g. too much screen time for children). Today, Glassner’s argument is mainly that we should fear one thing: President Donald J. Trump (p. 248).

Glassner catalogs the ways Trump seeded fear and discord across society

An exercise in media criticism more than sociological explanation, *The Culture of Fear* remains an undertheorized work.

and fomented hatred against immigrants and LGBT people (p. 259). While most sociologists would likely agree with these sentiments, some might take offense at the anti-Trump turn. Glassner is in a difficult position. It is clear that he holds Trump at least somewhat responsible for many of the fears currently pervading US society, but his own work shows that the culture of fear existed well before Trump. Our current era is a new stage of this culture of fear built on a historical foundation of fearmongering, not a separate and unrelated era altogether. This makes Glassner’s critique of Trump seem shrill at times, and in our increasingly politicized society might be viewed as hysterical by pundits disagreeing with his views. It certainly dilutes the strength of the book’s core argument.

Glassner ends the new edition of *The Culture of Fear* by anointing

Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, Barack and Michelle Obama, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting survivor Emma Gonzalez as the new sort of “leaders” he thinks are needed in today’s society (pp. 261-262). While concerns about guns appeared in the earlier editions of *The Culture of Fear*, they were just one problem among many. In the latest edition, gun reform is presented as the most pressing social problem of our time. “IT’S THE GUN’S, STUPID” (p. 260) Glassner reminds readers in the book’s closing pages, before repeating a call to implement a litany of gun reforms which he hopes will lead to fewer gun deaths (p. 261). Glassner concludes the book by urging readers to “call BS to enablers of gun violence for decades to come” (p. 262).

An exercise in media criticism more than sociological explanation, *The Culture of Fear* remains an undertheorized work. For example, Glassner does not

discuss specific mechanisms involved in “personal, political and corporate” fear-mongering in any detail. He describes different tricks used by the powerful to induce a culture of fear in a population such as “repetition, misdirection, and treating isolated incidents as trends,” but he does not explain how these techniques work so well. Glassner also does not situate his book in the context of larger arguments about risk, fear, or disaster in society. In my view, the book would have been improved had Glassner addressed arguments such as Kathleen Tierney’s *The Social Roots of Risks: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience*, Lee Clark’s *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in Popular Imagination*, and Ulrich Beck’s classic *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, among other recent works.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Culture of Fear* remains an important work

books

for sociology today. The book reminds us that part of a sociologist's job is to be a conscience and witness to society. At times Glassner successfully illustrates Peter Berger's maxim that things are not always what they seem. For example, his writing on the irrational fear of black males seems quite prescient, in retrospect, given the power of Black Lives Matter. "A black man is about eighteen times more likely to be murdered than is a white woman," Glassner reports (p. 112). "And for black men between the ages of fifteen and thirty, violence is the single leading cause of death" (p. 112).

Glassner's description of what he calls "monster moms" also continues to be illustrative of our cultural landscape today. Particularly in tabloids and on rightward slanting news programs, one still finds many "gruesome tales of sadistic moms" (p. 98). Glassner reminds us of the ideological functions served by such reports of

bad mothering, which ultimately serve the interests of male power. His argument that we have nothing to fear from single moms and teen mothers provides an interesting foil for researchers in feminist criminology and the sociology of deviance.

Finally, Glassner's chapter "Smack is Back" (pp. 131-150) in which he tackles the sensationalism and absurdity of the War on Drugs, also seems particularly relevant today. Reading this chapter, one wonders about Glassner's views of the apparent opioid crisis in society today and whether he thinks this is just another false fear exaggerated by the media. Readers interested in drug reform policies would especially benefit from Glassner's perspective on these subjects.

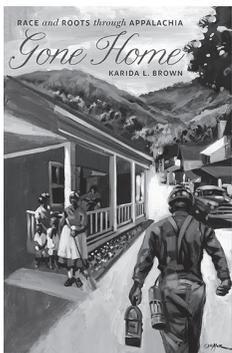
Overall, the new edition of *The Culture of Fear* still offers valuable insight into the nature of contemporary society. Twenty years on, it remains a useful artifact for social analysis and research.

Glassner's book reminds us that today, Americans still spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about irrational fears. As a society, Glassner says we need to reset our priorities and start addressing the problems that really matter. While the lack of current political will to enact the policy recommendations Glassner suggests may be disheartening, his work nonetheless poses an important challenge to social scientists and activists to keep the ideal of an enlightened, rational, and democratic society alive.

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race in appalachia

by saida grundy



Gone Home

by Karida Brown

University of North Carolina Press

264 pages

There is a luscious rolling prose to *Gone Home* that mimics the verdant hills and valleys of Appalachia. It is writing far more beautiful than sociology perhaps deserves, with a rich narrative that invoked all the sensory memories of a

place I know well. I am a bit of an expert, you see, on being Black and from the Bluegrass. Karida Brown's convention-busting oral history on Black migrants to eastern Kentucky's coal mining towns (for which she won the 2017 ASA Best Dissertation Award) provides an authentic take of families often rendered invisible by the presumed uniform poverty and whiteness of the region. Her elaborate descriptions seem similar to the way that one from the old country might taste and approve of an authentically cooked dish. This is a book about my folk.

I recognized the names of several interviewees throughout its eight chapters, and aside from my biographical attachment, this book is one of the few sociology texts I would have read even if I were not a sociologist. The importance of Brown's work to the community is made evident in how far this book has spread

across communities in those hills and valleys. My parents read *Gone Home* and mailed copies to their childhood friends. It is, for perhaps an entire generation of Black people from a small and often forgotten place, a way of finding each other again that social media and emails will never capture. For those African Americans whose lives map a migratory pattern that social scientists would otherwise reduce to a footnote, *Gone Home* must feel like redemption. For the children and grandchildren of Black coal miners, who left Harlan County behind or struggled through decades of late capitalism to stay put, *Gone Home* tells the story of a time and place to which they can return only in their memories. Brown seasons this reunion with a wealth of historical photos. My Aunt Sandy came across a picture of her hometown's Colored Public School circa 1950 and physically hugged