Fear of the Future in the Modern World
A Russian Case*

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ABSTRACT

The specific objectives of this article were to research what factors the intensity of fears, in particular, fears of catastrophes spread in post-communist countries; and what the impact of fear is on political, social, and economic life, in post-communist society.

This article is based on the theoretical analysis of fear, as a social construction, influenced by the "hard facts" of society, i.e., the economic developments, the political and social processes, as well as the "soft facts" of society, i.e., ideological trends, the character of information available to ordinary people, and the acts of various political actors to use fear as a propaganda tool to obtain their desires. The article relies on sociological traditions which have been discovered in recent studies of the rational and irrational elements in the individual. These studies have also uncovered a trend in the relative role of fears on the degree of justification extrapolated from the subjects "objective reality," i.e., from well substantiated fears (for instance, the fear of catastrophes like Chernobyl), to fully absurd fears (for instance, fears based on various conspiracy theories).

* This is the first publication directly related to the project "Catastrophism in the contemporary world" carried out by the Michigan State University and the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Science. The project director and author of the project is Vladimir Shlapentokh; Vladimir Shubkin is the head of the Russian part of the project; Vladimir Yadov is a member of the advisory board of the project; and Igor Zadorin is the director of CITRON, the Moscow firm for public opinion studies. This project, to my best knowledge the first of its kind totally dedicated to the public fears, was conducted in Russia in 1996. The survey was carried out in three stages. Initially, 15 regions were chosen for the study. In view of limited resources, it was carried out in three sub-samples of 500 respondents each. Each sub-sample was consecutively administered within three to five months in order to get information about the reliability of the data on the changing Russian political situation.

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Introduction

THE SUBJECT OF THIS PAPER is fear of negative events and processes of social significance, and fear of catastrophes—specific events which threaten almost all people in a given area, a city, a region, a country or the world, with extremely negative consequences, fear of the highest magnitude.

Fear and Catastrophism in Social Science

While fear in general, and fear of catastrophes in particular, has played an important role in religion and philosophy, it has not attracted significant attention from social science. Meanwhile, conventional wisdom assumes that the mood and the behavior of individuals, groups and the nation as a whole depends very much on feelings about the future, be they optimistic or pessimistic. Thus it is surprising that, since their emergence in the 1970's, studies on quality of life have mostly ignored the role of fear in human life and its impact on the quality of life (see Campbell, 1971; Campbell, Converse and Rogers, 1976; Andrews, 1986; Allard, 1972). It is especially surprising because these studies were oriented to find out, among other things, what people felt about various elements of their lives.

In addition, the number of sociologists whose studies are devoted to catastrophe is very limited. Most of them are concerned with post-catastrophic situations, such as how societies, organizations and communities respond to technological or ecological disasters (see Kreps, 1978; 1985; Perry, 1985; Rose, 1982; Quarantelli, 1978; 1980) or how individuals and the public adapt to disasters (see Green, 1985; Kurian, 1991; Quarantelli, 1985; Slottje, 1991; Walker and Rosser, 1993). As far as I know, few publications are concerned with the sociology of catastrophe in general, except for the outstanding work of Enrico Quarantelli (see Kreps, 1985; 1978; Prince, 1920; Quarantelli, 1954, 1981). Fewer still are concerned with catastrophic mentality as a social issue (see, for example, Wolfenstein, 1957). Even literature that deals with collective behavior and social movements only occasionally raises the issue, and it is never really considered an important social phenomenon. Only in the studies of crowd behavior, including panic, does fear as a significant social problem emerge as a main issue. However, recent studies in this area pertain only to specific cases and not to the catastrophic mentality of people in "normal" times (see King, 1990; McClelland, 1989; McPhail, 1991; Rachman and Maser, 1988, Wittchen, 1986). Even Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda's seminal book Moral Panics (1994), the recent publication closest to the subject of this paper, deals only with single cases concerning fears which emerge as a result of moral crusades (against alcoholism, sexual assault, homosexuality, and child molestation) organized mainly by "moral entrepreneurs." Generally speaking, then, Samuel Prince's statement of