

Dara Z. Strolovitch, **When Bad Things Happen to Privileged People: Race, Gender, and What Makes a Crisis in America**, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2023, 396 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover).

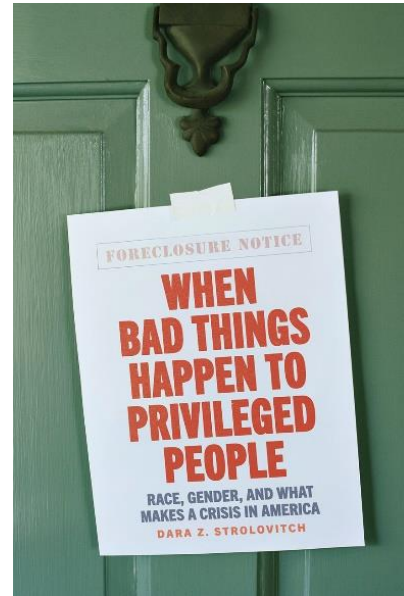
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Although the term “crisis” is seemingly ubiquitous in American politics today, what constitutes a crisis—a situation dire enough to require state intervention—is not universally accepted but framed by dominant political actors along with news outlets. American history is rife with calamitous events; however, not all bad events or situations were characterized as crises. Dominant political actors and news outlets did not begin to increasingly frame events as crises until after the Great Depression. The term appears more frequently in contemporary American culture, and it appears to be attached more frequently to events that affect the more privileged in society.

Dara Z. Strolovitch’s **When Bad Things Happen to Privileged People: Race, Gender, and What Makes a Crisis in America** examines a large corpus of material to track the frequency of “crisis” in major repositories of American policy, such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. To demonstrate the ways in which policy makers framed events, Strolovitch reviews presidential addresses, party platforms, and the *Congressional Record* to support her argument that “crisis politics is key to understanding the political landscape of the early twenty-first century” (p. 4). Strolovitch does not merely count the times “crisis” is used; instead, her analysis identifies how bad events get framed based on whom they affect. Even though marginalized groups feel the effects of financial, climate, and pandemic events, it is only after privileged groups are afflicted that a *crisis* occurs.

This interdisciplinary book is an excellent balance of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, accessible to social scientists and humanities scholars. Strolovitch’s well-crafted arguments are backed up by thorough empirical analysis. Readers wanting to understand the methodology, especially the *keyword approach*, have charts, extensive notes, and appendixes that explain the tools used to analyze the many repositories available to researchers. Scholars and students have more than a case study on rhetorically framing events as crises: Strolovitch offers a primer on effective language analysis. The book’s introduction overviews the approach and scope of the research and grounds readers in the claim that “crises [become] worthy of and remediable through state intervention and resources when they affect dominant or relatively privileged groups” (p. 19).

The book is separated into Part I—a historical look at how crises are framed and not framed in American history—and Part II, which culminates in an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the post-2007 housing crisis only became a *crisis* after foreclosures hit privileged families considered undeserving to be in



the situation. To support this conclusion, Strolovitch prepares readers to recognize the discursive relevance of "crisis" in Part I that includes the first three chapters. The first chapter examines President Obama's use of "crisis" in relation to gun violence in America. Strolovitch provides an astute rhetorical analysis of an op-ed Obama published, showing how Obama linked the "fight for gun safety" to women's suffrage, civil rights, and LGBTQ+ rights to remind his readers that the struggle will be long like those others that were won (p. 27). Throughout the chapter, Strolovitch identifies the (in)frequency of the term "crisis" in other time periods and justifies the keyword approach through a review of key language and cultural theorists, such as Nancy Fraser, Murray Edelman, and Raymond Williams. Because language and meaning are not solid, Strolovitch augments the definition of "crisis" by qualifying it with five categories she returns to throughout the book: summarized in one of her many useful tables readers learn "[a] seemingly self-evident shock" is a *clear-cut crisis*; "[a]n ongoing (domestic) issue . . . facing a critical juncture" is a *condition-as-crisis*; synonyms "tragedy" and "catastrophe" are *calamity-as-crisis*; an "[a]ttempt to draw attention to a problem and stimulate political and policy responses" is a *crisis-as-creation*; and *noncrises* are bad things but "not treated as crises by dominant political actors" (p. 36). The chapter offers more explanations and examples of the categories and reinforces labeling (or not labeling) situations as crises is a political maneuver.

The second chapter explores each of the five crisis categories and provides readers with the foundational section "A Prehistory of Crisis Politics in Dominant American Discourse: 1840s–1960s" (pp. 51–67). Strolovitch's commitment to careful methodology is apparent in the analysis of the discursive practices using "crisis." In addition to the clear, well-presented tables, the book's endnotes offer full descriptions of what was searched, why the particular corpus was used, and how others can replicate the methodology. The chapter starts by identifying the frequency of "the word *crisis* . . . in English-American books from the 1810s through the 2000s," noting a substantial increase in the 1950s (p. 51; emphasis in original). Readers learn "[t]hat until the 1960s, dominant political actors used the term *crisis* only rarely," and the use was mainly limited to "episodic and sudden events such as wars, economic depressions, and . . . to conflicts in other countries" (p. 69; emphasis in original). The section "The NAACP and *The Crisis Magazine*" (pp. 75–80) reinforces the book's overall theme of identifying how dominant political actors and news outlets rarely characterize marginalized groups as being in crises. Detailing the founding of *The Crisis*, Strolovitch recounts Mary White Ovington's story of how the magazine's name comes from James Russell Lowell's 1845 poem "The Crisis" (pp. 76–77). This is not simply an interesting historical anecdote but a recognition vital for the rest of the book: A political crisis must be constructed as "a moment of decision" where action is needed (p. 78). The fact that "crisis" was rarely used to indicate racial oppression that required action underscores Strolovitch's argument on the (eventual) Great Recession when marginalized groups' issues were framed differently from privileged groups.

The third chapter details the proliferation of dominant political actors' use of *crisis*, and how "such shifts in political language are rarely neutral" (p. 92). Strolovitch analyzes party platforms, State of the Union Addresses, and congressional hearings that did address concerns of marginalized groups, and she finds that "dominant political actors did not invoke crisis politics to justify state action and resources when such issues were addressed"; however, they did when the concern "was more typically the status quo rather than the status of marginalized groups" (p. 94). The use of "crisis" during the 1960s and 1970s did not focus on structural inequalities. For instance, during the War on Drugs, specifically in the context of Washington, DC, the crisis was that drug users had to resort to crime such as theft, which affected the

common citizen (p. 100). Even the focus on juveniles with drug offences did not concern “the conditions of the young people’s lives,” but “the alleged criminality of these young people” (p. 101). When dominant political actors did address crises related to marginalized groups, a change in policy occurred that foreshadowed neoliberal deregulation that eventually culminated in the housing crisis. Increasingly, private solutions were promoted to address the concerns of marginalized groups.

Part II of the book includes the fourth and fifth chapters and focuses on 1990–2010. The fourth chapter begins the analysis of the foreclosure crisis (and prior noncrises that affected marginalized groups pre-2007). The key to this chapter’s argument is understanding that after overt discrimination and redlining were illegal in housing, deregulation—championed by both Democrats and Republicans—led to lenders coming up with high-risk mortgage schemes that were directed to marginalized groups; additionally, many of these borrowers were not technically subprime and should have qualified for traditional loans that did not come with onerous elements, such as balloon clauses and adjustable-rate mortgages. When marginalized groups defaulted and had bank foreclosures on their homes, the governing assumption was that they took out more than they could afford. The fifth chapter explains that the mortgage meltdown was rarely labeled a crisis until 2007 (p. 162). Searching the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, Strolovitch shows the term “crisis” increases dramatically in news coverage starting in 2007. Upon closer examination of the articles on marginalized groups, the familiar pattern returns, and readers learn that few reports discussed the effects (or potential effects) of systemic oppression, specifically in housing. The deregulated financial institutions do not get blamed until 2007, when nonmarginalized groups started being affected. Then, policy makers attempted to intervene on behalf of homeowners, but news reports continued to reinforce racial and gender disparities as natural, inevitable factors. The chapter concludes by explaining that marginalized groups are often the first to feel the effects of a bad situation, portending what is to come for dominant groups.

The conclusion discusses COVID-19 and its disproportionate effect on marginalized groups, but Strolovitch does not attempt to reconcile the crisis discourse of the pandemic but further demonstrates how it reproduces the inequities of other (non-)crises, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The book prepares readers to understand how calls to marshal resources to combat social ills often require privileged groups to be affected.