

Review for THES
By John Adams
Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago
By Eric Klinenberg
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What kills you matters. In the first half of October this year two people per day were killed in Washington and its suburbs. There was no discernible pattern in their age, sex or ethnicity. They were killed suddenly and without warning by a stranger they had never met. Their families and friends grieved, but otherwise their fates attracted virtually no media attention. They were victims of road accidents. Over the same period someone was killed every other day by the Washington Sniper. Again there was no discernible pattern amongst the victims chosen by the anonymous killer. Their fates attracted massive media coverage all around the world and led, far beyond the vicinity of their occurrence, to extraordinary changes in behaviour – ranging from a massive policing operation to people jogging to their cars in zigzag patterns with their groceries in supermarket car parks.

In *Heat Wave* Eric Klinenberg confronts a similar phenomenon. He puts the death toll of the Chicago heat wave of 1995 at 700 and compares it with other much better known disasters - twice as many as in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, twenty times the number of those struck by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, four times more than in the Oklahoma City bomb in 1995, more than three times the number killed by TWA Flight 800 in 1996. Why, he asks, should government, the media and public opinion attach so much more importance to the lives lost in these other disasters?

An obvious part of the answer is that Klinenberg has not chosen fair comparators. The 700 deaths that he attributes to the heat wave were overwhelmingly of people who were old and frail. In such populations any environmental stressor such as a pollution episode or extreme heat (or cold) will advance the date of some deaths, sometimes only by a matter of days. In most societies the very old are cheered to the finishing line and their ultimate, inevitable, demise is not mourned in the same way as that of someone cut down in their prime – as are most of the targets of snipers, terrorists and the victims of the other disasters he cites. But that complaint aside, Klinenberg has produced a damning indictment of the “malign neglect” with which the old and frail *and poor and isolated* are treated in Chicago.

Although the Mayor, the Chicago City Government and the media come in for heavy criticism for the way they responded to the heat wave, Klinenberg’s main target is *Society*. The Mayor and his Government sit atop a set of problems that they can only pretend to govern – which is why, when things go wrong – they spin furiously; “deny, deflect and defend” is Klinenberg’s description of the City’s relationship with the media. He speaks of “the political will to tolerate deprivation”, but such is the dire shortage of social capital in the Chicago he describes one almost feels sorry for the Mayor, confronted by problems far beyond his powers to solve.

Klinenberg quotes one observer: “Time was, that neighbours took care of each other. They kept an eye on the lady who lives upstairs. ... not anymore ... community activists

didn't ask how they could have worked to prevent some of these deaths. They asked why the city hadn't done more ... it seems neighbourliness is a skill we will have to relearn." His reaction to this perspective is ambivalent. He seems to accept it as a fair description of the problem while at the same time rejecting it as an attempt to "let the city government off the hook". His argument is further confused by his description of the thing he would impale on the hook: "the organizational complexity of a decentralized city government coupled with the bureaucratic slipperiness of overlapping city, county, state and federal jurisdictions make it difficult to pinpoint the lines of political accountability."

The causes of death that a society tolerates tell us much about its values. Through the years of terror in Northern Ireland twice as many were killed in road accidents as by acts of terrorism. In Australia the annual road death toll is close to twenty times that attributed to the Bali bombs. The remarkable equanimity with which affluent, motorised, America accepts over 40,000 road accident deaths a year suggests a Faustian social contract by which this annual sacrifice is exchanged for the perceived individual freedom and control provided by the car. But any *externally imposed* threat to either the control that governments perceive that they (should) have over events, or the control that individuals feel they (should) have over their own lives, creates alarm and panic. Klinenberg contrasts the fates of the socially connected well-to-do with those of the isolated poor. The poverty and social exclusion suffered by most of those who died in the Chicago heat wave appear to have generated a biblical fatalism - ye have the poor always with you - amongst both rich and poor.

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