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## REVIEW

# Review: Harper, Earl T. and Doug Specht (2021): *Imagining Apocalyptic Politics in the Anthropocene*. London and New York: Routledge

Suvi Alt

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*Imagining Apocalyptic Politics in the Anthropocene* speaks to a widespread contemporary perception of crisis which is constituted, among others, by rapidly deteriorating environmental conditions, the rise of nationalist politics, and the spread of infectious disease. The book's chapters offer a wide range of compelling engagements with the predicaments of existence in the era that is called the Anthropocene, with subjects ranging from the climate emergency to geotrauma to urbicide, and from indigenous cosmologies to ageism to selfies.

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Earl T. Harper and Doug Specht's edited book *Imagining Apocalyptic Politics in the Anthropocene* speaks to a widespread perception of crisis that is constituted by, among others, rapidly deteriorating environmental conditions, the rise of nationalist politics, and the spread of infectious disease. Harper and Specht's introductory discussion of apocalyptic politics starts from the observation of the 'incredible rate at which apocalyptic events have emerged during the time of writing' (2019–2021) (2). This short timespan notwithstanding, the editors offer an impressive list of apocalyptic events: the increasing prominence of climate protest, the rise of fascist politics in the US, Hindu Nationalism in India, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests, the possibility of another Gulf War, fires in the Amazon rainforests, in Australia, and in California, as well as protests in Hong Kong, Algeria, Sudan, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, Bolivia, India, Nicaragua, and Russia. At first glance, these events seem to be too different in kind and too disjunct to be subsumed to the same category of *apocalypse*. Yet the editors make it possible to read them through the lens of apocalypse by setting very wide parameters for what can be considered *apocalyptic*. These parameters are the destruction of the old and the subsequent emergence of a new normality (4).

Abstaining from a very tightly fixed conceptualisation of *apocalypse* at the beginning of the book, Harper and Specht provide the conceptual space for the book's authors to reconstruct its meaning and operation through their examinations of specific phenomena. Mariana Reyes-Carranza's 'The end of worlding: Indigenous cosmologies in the Anthropocene' offers a particularly illuminating

reconstruction of the ways in which 'the end of the world' is understood in two specific cultural and political contexts, that of the Museum of Tomorrow in Rio de Janeiro and the Yanomami people inhabiting the Amazon rainforest on the border between Brazil and Venezuela. Reyes-Carranza shows that in Yanomami eschatology, the end of the world is understood as the obliteration of the forest, which, in turn, is conceived of as a complex set of connections that enable the making of worlds. Such an end of 'worlding' is juxtaposed to the universalising, planetary depiction of the end of the world at the Museum of Tomorrow. In doing so, Reyes-Carranza's text complicates the simplistic discussions of 'environmental apocalypse' that take a specific version of Christian apocalyptic thought as a given.

The conceptual latitude that the volume offers to each author, however, comes at a cost. Missing from the editors' conceptualisation of apocalypse is any sustained engagement with the concept's religious roots. Although contemporary renditions of *apocalypse* are largely secular, the structures of different forms of apocalyptic thought are embedded in various religious traditions. An analysis of the role of eschatology in today's crises would profit from systematically engaging with the question how these traditions and processes enable and constrain the operation of apocalyptic politics. By reducing apocalypse to an antagonism between the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new, however, Harper and Specht abstract from these traditions and from the processes through which the apocalypse has been secularised in modern political thought.

Many of the following chapters reproduce the editors' broad conceptualisation of apocalyptic politics and utilise the apocalypse as a generic frame for discussing a variety of contemporary phenomena. Key themes of apocalyptic thought such as time, judgement, and salvation receive

only limited engagement in some of the chapters, and in some chapters none at all. While many of the contributions make brief reference to the Greek meaning of apocalypse as *unveiling* or *revealing*, there is no sustained discussion of the meaning of such revelation. Some chapters provide only a brief reference to *apocalypse*, which is meant to qualify the politics that are being discussed as *apocalyptic*. It seems that generally insightful chapters such as Doug Specht and Cat Snyder's 'The self(ie) in the Anthropocene' and Philip Jones' 'A world without bodies: Geotrauma and the work of mourning in Jorie Graham's *Fast*' could have been written without any reference to *apocalypse* at all. That is, the apocalypse seems to function as a sidenote to a discussion that is actually about something else.

On the upside, this loose usage of *apocalypse* as a conceptual umbrella rather than as an object of much discussion in its own right enables a wide range of compelling arguments about the predicaments of existence in the era that is called the Anthropocene. Stephanie Wakefield's 'Urbicide in the Anthropocene: Imagining Miami Futures', for example, is a fascinating examination of three visions for the future of Miami, one of which begins to look beyond the prevalent paradigms of resilience and puts forward the purposeful destruction of existing urban space in order to design a completely new geographical form. María Soledad Castro Vargas and Diana Barquero Pérez's 'Triggering the apparitions: Spectres of chemical seascapes' explores the ways in which synthetic chemicals become part of seascapes. Following such 'contaminants of emerging concern' (CECs) allows for imagining the chemical geographies of the Anthropocene where that which is conceived of as necessary for the health and productivity of life in capitalist societies is simultaneously that which poses novel hazards to both human and non-human existence. With such chapters, the book has much to say about life in the Anthropocene and about contemporary environmental and climate crises, but often somewhat less, at least explicitly, about the apocalypse or apocalyptic politics.

A notable exception to this is Tristan Sturm and Nicholas Ferris Lustig's concluding chapter 'Variegated environmental apocalypses: Post-politics, the contestatory, and an eco-preariat manifesto for a radical apocalypitics'. On the one hand, Sturm and Ferris Lustig's chapter captures

one of the book's key merits. In emphasising that 'This is an age of variegated and competing apocalypses' (213), they succinctly point out that the book's editors and authors do not suggest that the apocalypse should be understood as a singular thing. On the other hand, Sturm and Ferris Lustig's formulation of principles for a 'new' radical apocalyptic politics takes the varied theological roots of the concept of *apocalypse* seriously. Their manifesto is a fitting end to the book which highlights its full potential. But instead of being deferred to the conclusion, the kind of unpacking of the relationship between politics and apocalypse that their chapter contains would have been helpful at the outset of the book.

According to the editors, the aim of the volume is to answer the question: 'does the apocalypse (in whatever form it may take) give rise to new politics or entrench old forms?' (6). This question explicates a basic tension within the book: Because of the wide parameters set for the concept in the introduction and because of the often-implicit engagements with it in many of the chapters, the answer seems to necessarily be that 'it depends on the apocalypse'. This constitutes the book's most notable strength: It can accommodate for various (notions of) apocalypses rather than imposing conceptual stricture. Yet, and especially in light of this, the volume would have benefited from more explicit and systematic reflection on how various conceptualisations of apocalypse have different political implications. Such reflection could further clarify the political implications of including all kinds of phenomena from Brexit to Hindu Nationalism to forest fires under the same concept of *apocalypse*. As it stands, the volume does not provide means with which to differentiate between them on the conceptual terrain of *apocalypse*. Without an ability to conceptually distinguish such vastly different phenomena, the concepts of apocalypse and apocalyptic politics risk concealing more than they reveal.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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