Apocalypse Now!

Fear and Doomsday Pleasures

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> If we do nothing, the consequences for every person on this earth will be severe and unprecedented—with vast numbers of environmental refugees, social instability and decimated economies: far worse than anything which we are seeing today… We have 100 months left to act. (Prince Charles, March 2009; see also New Economics Foundation [http://www.neweconomics.org/content/one-hundred-months]).

A few months after the outbreak of the deepest and longest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression, Prince Charles, heir to the throne in the U.K., uttered the above prophetic words, announcing the coming climatic Armageddon. We are now four years later and nothing substantial of the sort that Charles had in mind has been done to stem climate change. The "Passage to the Act" was nonetheless the intention of Charles's intervention. His statement was indeed a call to arms, driven by a deep-seated belief that something serious can and should be done. His apocalyptic framing of the environmental pickle we are in is not an unusual discursive tactic. Warnings of "dangerous climate change" and pending disaster are repeated *ad nauseam* by many scientists, activists, business leaders, and politicians. It serves primarily to nudge behavioral change and urge action. Such narratives in fact combine an unbridled optimism in the species capacities of humans to act if urgency requires it and in the scientific, technological, and organizational inventiveness of some to come up with the right mix of measures to deflect the arrow of time such that civilization as we know it can continue a while longer.

Until 2007-2008, climate change and related environmental concerns were indeed fairly high on the social and political agenda. Media reports, spurred on by a flood of scientific research galvanized by popular interest and concern, kept the environment high on the political agenda. Climate conferences attracted global attention only comparable to other mega-events like the Olympics, and prominent politicians biked to work or visited the Antarctic to bear witness to the facts and effects of climate change. CO_2 and other greenhouse gases nonetheless continued their seemingly unstoppable climb. However, an allegedly much greater catastrophe for civilization had begun to unfold when the financial crisis exploded in the fall of 2007 and pulled the core capitalist countries into the longest and deepest recession since the Great Depression. While, unsurprisingly, the output of climate gasses did fall the subsequent year as Western economies contracted (but have again begun their inexorable climb), no effort has been spared to salvage the financialized economy from its home-grown wreckage and to mobilize unprecedented public means to put the profit-train back on the rails, albeit without much success so far. Apocalyptic imaginaries of potential social and economic disintegration saturated the landscape, urging people into not only putting their trust unreservedly in the hands of the various national and global elites, but also supporting the elites' clunky and desperate attempts to save their way of life.

Despite significant differences, both catastrophic narratives share an uncanny similarity, particularly if viewed from the place of enunciation. While the ecological Armageddon points at a universal, potentially species-wide destruction, the economic catastrophe is a particular one related solely to the threatened reproduction of, basically, capitalist relations. Yet, the discursive mobilization of catastrophe follows broadly similar lines. Imaginaries of a dystopian future are nurtured, not in the least by various political and

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economic elites, to invoke the specter of the inevitable if NOTHING is done so that SOMETHING WILL be done. Their performative gesture is, of course, to turn the revealed (ecological or political-economic) ENDGAME into a manageable CRISIS. While catastrophe denotes the irreversible radical transformation of the existing into a spiralling abyssal decline, crisis is a conjunctural condition that requires particular techno-managerial attention by those entitled or assigned to do so. The notion of crisis also promises the possibility to contain the crisis such that the dystopian revelation is postponed or deflected. Thus, the embrace of catastrophic language serves primarily to turn nightmare into crisis management, to assure that the situation is serious but not catastrophic. Unless you are from the cynical Left—"don't panic now, we told you that crisis would come"—or from the doomsday preachers who revel in the perverse pleasures offered by the announcement of the end, the nurturing of fear, which is invariably followed by a set of techno-managerial fixes, serves precisely to de-politicize. Nurturing fear also serves to leave the action to those who promise salvation, to insist that the Big Other does exist, and to follow the leader who admits that the situation is grave, but insists that homeland security (ecological, economic, or otherwise) is in good hands (Swyngedouw 2010a). We can safely continue shopping!

What we are witnessing is a strange reversal whereby the specter of economic and/or ecological catastrophe is mobilized primarily by the elites from the global North. Neither Prince Charles nor Al Gore can be accused of revolutionary zeal. For them, the ecological condition is—correctly of course—understood as potentially threatening to civilization as we know it. At the same time, their image of a dystopian future functions as a fantasy that sustains a practice of adjusting things today such that civilization as we know it (neoliberal capitalism) can continue for a bit longer, spurred on by the conviction that radical change can be achieved without changing radically the contours of capitalist eco-development. The imaginary of crisis and potential collapse produces an ecology of fear, danger, and uncertainty while reassuring "the people" (or, rather, the population) that the techno-scientific and socio-economic elites have the necessary tool-kit to readjust the machine such that things can stay basically as they are.

What is of course radically disavowed in their pronouncements is the fact that many people in many places of the world already live in the socio-ecological catastrophe. The ecological Armageddon is already a reality. While the elites nurture an apocalyptic dystopia that can nonetheless be avoided (for them), the majority of the world already lives "within the collapse of civilization" (The Invisible Committee 2009). The Apocalypse is indeed a combined and uneven one, both in time and across space (see Calder Williams 2011).

A flood of literature on the relationship between apocalyptic imaginaries, popular culture, and politics has excavated the uses and abuses of revelatory visions (Skrimshire 2010; Calder Williams 2011). Despite the important differences between the transcendental biblical use of the apocalypse and the thoroughly material and socio-physical ecological catastrophes-to-come, the latter, too, de-politicize matters. As Alain Badiou contends:

> [T]he rise of the "rights of Nature" is a contemporary form of the opium for the people. It is an only slightly camouflaged religion: the millenarian terror, concern for everything save the properly political destiny of peoples, new instruments for control of everyday life, the obsession with hygiene, the fear of death and catastrophes… It is a gigantic operation in the depoliticization of subjects. (Badiou 2008, 139)

Environmental problems are indeed commonly staged as universally threatening to the survival of humankind, announcing the premature termination of civilization as we know it and sustained by what Mike Davis (1999) aptly called "ecologies of fear." Much of the discursive matrix through which the presentation of the environmental condition we are in is

quilted systematically by the continuous invocation of fear and danger, the specter of ecological annihilation, or at least seriously distressed socio-ecological conditions for many people in the near future. The nurturing of fear, in turn, is sustained in part by a particular set of phantasmagorical imaginations that serve to reinforce the seriousness of the situation (Katz 1995). The apocalyptic imaginary of a world without water or at least with endemic water shortages; ravaged by hurricanes whose intensity is amplified by climate change; pictures of scorched land as global warming shifts the geo-pluvial regime and the spatial variability of droughts and floods; icebergs that disintegrate; alarming reductions in biodiversity as species disappear or are threatened by extinction; post-apocalyptic images of nuclear wastelands; the threat of peak-oil; the devastations raked by wildfires, tsunamis, spreading diseases like SARS, Avian Flu, Ebola, or HIV—all these imaginaries of a Nature out of synch, destabilized, threatening, and out of control are paralleled by equally disturbing images of a society that continues piling up waste, pumping CO_2 into the atmosphere, recombining DNA, deforesting the earth, etc… In sum, our ecological predicament is sutured by millennialism fears sustained by an apocalyptic rhetoric and representational tactics, and by a series of performative gestures signalling an overwhelming, mind-boggling danger—one that threatens to undermine the very coordinates of our everyday lives and routines and may shake up the foundations of all we took and take for granted.

Of course, apocalyptic imaginaries have been around for a long time as an integral part of Western thought, first of Christianity and later emerging as the underbelly of fast-forwarding technological modernization and its associated doomsday thinkers. However, present day millennialism preaches an apocalypse without the promise of redemption. Saint John's biblical apocalypse, for example, found its redemption in God's infinite love, while relegating the outcasts to an afterlife of permanent suffering. The proliferation of modern apocalyptic imaginaries also held up the promise of redemption: the horsemen of the apocalypse, whether riding under the name of the proletarian, technology, or capitalism, could be tamed with appropriate political and social revolutions. The environmental apocalypse, in contrast, takes different forms. It is not immediate and total (but slow and painful), not revelatory (it does not announce the dawn of a new rose-tinted era); no redemption is promised (for the righteous ones), and there are no outcasts. Indeed, if the boat goes done, the first-class passengers will also drown.

As Martin Jay argued, while traditional apocalyptic versions still held out the hope for redemption, for a "second coming," for the promise of a "new dawn," environmental apocalyptic imaginaries are "leaving behind any hope of rebirth or renewal … in favor of an unquenchable fascination with being on the verge of an end that never comes" (Jay 1994, 33). The emergence of new forms of millennialism around the environmental nexus is indeed of a particular kind that promises neither redemption nor realization. As Klaus Scherpe insists, this is not simply apocalypse now, but apocalypse forever. It is a vision that does not suggest, prefigure, or expect the necessity of an event that will alter the course of history (Scherpe 1987). Derrida (referring to the nuclear threat in the 1980s) sums this up most succinctly: "here, precisely, is announced—as promise or as threat—an apocalypse without apocalypse, an apocalypse without vision, without truth, without revelation …. without message and without destination, without sender and without decidable addressee … an apocalypse beyond good and evil" (Derrida 1982). The environmentally apocalyptic future, forever postponed, neither promises redemption nor does it possess a name, a positive designation.

The attractions of such an apocalyptic imaginary are related to a series of characteristics. In contrast to standard left arguments about the apocalyptic dynamics of unbridled capitalism, I would argue that sustaining and nurturing apocalyptic imageries are

an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism for which the management of fear is a central leitmotiv (Badiou 2007) and provides part of the cultural support for a process of post-politicization (Swyngedouw 2010a). At the symbolic level, apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or displacing social conflict and antagonisms. Apocalyptic imaginations are decidedly populist and foreclose a proper political framing. Or in other words, the presentation of climate change as a global humanitarian cause produces a thoroughly depoliticized imaginary, one that does not revolve around choosing one trajectory rather than another, or identifies clear adversaries in a political process; it is one that is not articulated with specific political programs or socio-ecological projects or transformations. It insists that we have to make sure that radical techno-managerial and socio-cultural transformations, organized within the horizons of a capitalist order that is beyond dispute, are initiated that retrofit the climate (Swyngedouw 2007). In other words, we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation—"the partition of the sensible" in Rancière's (1998) words, so that nothing really has to change.

The negative desire for an apocalypse that few believe will really happen (if we were to belief that the earth is really in the dismal state we are told it is in, we would not be sitting around writing and reading arcane academic journal articles) finds its positive injunction around a fetishist invocation of CO_2 as the "thing" around which our environmental dreams, aspirations, contestations, as well as policies crystallize. The "*point de capiton,*" the quilting point through which the signifying chain that weaves a discursive matrix of meaning and content for the climate change problematic, is CO_2—the *objet petit a* that simultaneously expresses our deepest fears and is the thing around which the desire for change, for a better socio-climatic world, is expressed (see Swyngedouw 2010b).

The fetishist disavowal of the multiple and complex relations through which environmental changes unfold finds its completion in the double reductionism to this singular socio-chemical component (CO_2). The reification of complex processes to a thing-like object-cause in the form of a socio-chemical compound around which our environmental desires crystallize is furthermore inscribed with a particular social meaning and function through its enrolment as commodity in the processes of capital circulation and market exchange (Bumpus and Liverman 2008; Liverman 2009). The commodification of CO_2—primarily via the Kyoto protocol and various offsetting schemes—in turn, has triggered a rapidly growing derivatives market of futures and options. On the European Climate Exchange, for example, trade in CO_2 futures and options grew from zero in 2005 to 463 million tons in June 2009, with prices fluctuating from over €30 to less than €10 per ton over this time period (see www.ecx.eu, accessed July 30, 2009). There is indeed an uncanny articulation between the financialization of everything under neoliberal capitalism and the managerial or institutional architecture of carbon-trading schemes.

The proposed transformations often take a distinct dystopian turn when the Malthusian specter of overpopulation is fused with concerns with the climate, whereby, perversely, newborns are indentified as the main culprits of galloping climate change and resource depletion, a view supported by luminaries like Sir David Attenborough (OM CH CVO CBE), Dr. Jane Goodall (DBE), Dr. James Lovelock (CBE), and Sir Crispin Tickell (GCMG KCVO), among others (see www.optimumpopulation.org, accessed August 2, 2010). Eco-warrior and Gaia-theorist, James Lovelock (2010, 94-95), put it even more chillingly:

> …[w]hat if at some time in the next few years we realize, as we did in the 1940s, that democracy had temporarily to be suspended and we had to accept a disciplined regime that saw the U.K. as a legitimate but limited safe haven for civilization… Orderly survival

Of course, the economy is "greening," "sustainable" policies and practices are now part of the standard toolkit of any private or public actor, carbon is traded, trees are planted, activists act, energy efficiency increases, and technologies are retrofitted. Nonetheless, greenhouse gasses keep on rising, and old and new fossil energy sources continue to be exploited (coal, fracking, and tar sands in particular). "Greening" the economy does not seem to deflect the process of disastrous socio-environmental transformation. In the meantime, climate change scientists continue to crunch their numbers and calibrate their models. There is growing consensus now that the Kyoto objective to keep global warming below 2° Celsius cannot any longer be achieved, regardless of measures taken. Even a global temperature rise of 4° Celsius seems inevitable now, while some fear, if things continue as they are, that even greater temperature increases are very likely (New et al. 2011). A four degree rise will have profound effects and, in all likelihood, push climate behavior over the tipping point whereby catastrophic change is inevitable, unleashing very fast and unpredictable geographical transformations in climate patterns. It is a bleak picture, one that will undoubtedly dwarf the already doomsday-laden imaginary that Prince Charles painted.

In light of the above, what is the proper leftist response? I discern broadly three perspectives. The first one centers on nudging behavioral change in a more sustainable direction. Under the mantra of "it is better to do something (like recycling, growing organic food, and the like) rather than nothing," many liberal environmentalists mobilize the apocalyptic imaginary in an effort to encourage individuals to modify attitudes and behavior, and to impress on politicians and business leaders the need to heed the environmental clarion call. Sustainability hinges here on individual preference and consumer sovereignty. They also insist that that catastrophe can still be averted if proper action is taken, action that does not necessarily overhaul social relations but does postpone the environmental catastrophe so that life as we know it can continue for a while longer.

The second strand fully endorses the environmental cataclysm and revels in the certainty that this had already been predicted a long time ago. The standard response here is, "you see, we told you so." This is strictly parallel to forms of Marxist analysis of the current financial crisis in capitalism: "Don't complain now, we did tell you so."

Against this cynical stand, the third, and for me proper leftist response, to the apocalyptic imaginary is twofold and cuts through the deadlock embodied by the first two responses. To begin with, the revelatory promise of the apocalyptic narrative has to be fully rejected. In the face of the cataclysmic imaginaries mobilized to assure that the apocalypse will NOT happen (if the right techno-managerial actions are taken), the only reasonable response is "Don't worry (Al Gore, Prince Charles, many environmental activists….), you are really right, the environmental apocalypse WILL not only happen, it has already happened, IT IS ALREADY HERE." Many are already living in the post-apocalyptic interstices of life, whereby the fusion of environmental transformation and social conditions, render life "bare." The fact that the socio-environmental imbroglio has already passed the point of no return has to be fully asserted. The socio-environmental Armageddon is already here for many; it is not some distant dystopian promise mobilized to trigger response today. Water conflicts, struggles for food, environmental refugees, etc. testify to the socio-ecological predicament that choreographs everyday life for the majority of the world's population. Things are already too late; they have always already been too late. There is no Arcadian place, time, or environment to return to, no benign socio-ecological past that needs to be maintained or stabilized. Many already live in the interstices of the apocalypse, albeit a

combined and uneven one. It is only within the realization of the apocalyptic reality of the now that a new politics might emerge.

The second gesture of a proper leftist response is to reverse the order between the universal and the particular that today dominates the catastrophic political imaginary. This order maintains that salvaging the particular historical-geographical configuration we are in depends on re-thinking and re-framing the human-environment articulation in a universal sense. We have to change our relationship with nature, so that capitalism can continue somehow. Not only does this argument to preserve capitalism guarantee the prolongation of the combined and uneven apocalypse of the present, it forecloses considering fundamental change to the actually existing unequal forms of organizing the society-environment relations. Indeed, the apocalyptic imaginary is one that generally still holds on to a dualistic view of nature and culture. The argument is built on the view that humans have perturbed the ecological dynamic balance in ways inimical to human (and possibly non-human) long-term survival, and the solution consists broadly in bringing humans (in a universal sense) back in line with the possibilities and constraints imposed by ecological limits and dynamics. A universal transformation is required in order to maintain the present. And this can and should be done through managing the present particular configuration. This is the message of Al Gore or Prince Charles and many other environmental pundits. A left socio-environmental perspective has to insist that we need to transform this universal message into a particular one. The historically and geographically specific dynamics of capitalism have banned an external nature radically to a sphere beyond earth. On earth, there is no external nature left. It is from this particular historical-geographical configuration that a radical politics of transformation has been thought and practiced. Only through the transformation of the particular socio-ecological relations of capitalism can a generic egalitarian, free, and common re-ordering of the human/non-human imbroglios be forged.

Those who already recognized the irreversible dynamics of the socio-environmental imbroglio that has been forged over the past few centuries coined a new term to classify the epoch we are in. "Welcome to the Anthropocene" became a popular catch-phrase to inform us that we are now in a new geological era, one in which humans are co-producers of the deep geological time that hitherto had slowly grinded away irrespective of humans' dabbling with the surface layers of earth, oceans, and atmosphere. Noble prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen introduced "the Anthropocene," coined about a decade ago as the successor name of the Holocene, the relatively benign geo-climatic period that allegedly permitted agriculture to flourish, cities to be formed, and humans to thrive (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). Since the beginning of industrialization, so the Anthropocenic argument goes, humans' increasing interactions with their physical conditions of existence have resulted in a qualitative shift in geo-climatic acting of the earth system. The Anthropocene is nothing else than the geological name for capitalism WITH nature. Acidification of oceans, biodiversity transformations, gene displacements and recombinations, climate change, big infrastructures effecting the earth's geodetic dynamics, among others, resulted in knotting together "natural" and "social" processes such that humans have become active agents in co-shaping earth's deep geological time. Now that the era has been named as the Anthropocene, we can argue at length over its meaning, content, existence, and modes of engagement. Nonetheless, it affirms that humans and nature are co-produced and that the particular historical epoch that goes under the name of capitalism forged this mutual determination.

The Anthropocene is just another name for insisting on Nature's death. This cannot be unmade, however hard we try. The past is forever closed and the future—including nature's future—is radically open, up for grabs. Indeed, the affirmation of the historical-geographical co-production of society WITH nature radically politicizes nature, makes

nature enter into the domain of contested socio-physical relations and assemblages. We cannot escape "producing nature"; rather, it forces us to make choices about what socio-natural worlds we wish to inhabit. It is from this particular position, therefore, that the environmental conundrum ought to be approached so that a qualitative transformation of BOTH society AND nature has to be envisaged.

This perspective moves the gaze from thinking through a "politics of the environment" to "politicizing the environment" (Swyngedouw 2011; 2012). The human world is now an active agent in shaping the non-human world. This extends the terrain of the political to domains hitherto left to the mechanics of nature. The non-human world becomes "enrolled" in a process of politicization. And that is precisely what needs to be fully endorsed. The Anthropocene opens up a terrain whereby different natures can be contemplated and actually co-produced. And the struggle over these trajectories and, from a leftist perspective, the process of the egalitarian socio-ecological production of the commons of life is precisely what our politics are all about. Yes, the apocalypse is already here, but do not despair, let us fully endorse the emancipatory possibilities of apocalyptic life.

Perhaps we should modify the now over-worked statement of the Italian Marxist Amadeo Borigio that "if the ship goes down, the first-class passengers drown too." Amadeo was plainly wrong. Remember the movie *Titanic* (as well as the real catastrophe). A large number of the first-class passengers found a lifeboat; the others were trapped in the belly of the beast. Indeed the social and ecological catastrophe we are already in is not shared equally. While the elites fear both economic and ecological collapse, the consequences and implications are highly uneven. The elite's fears are indeed only matched by the actually existing socio-ecological and economic catastrophes many already live in. The apocalypse is combined and uneven. And it is within this reality that political choices have to be made and sides taken.

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