

## Counting Down to the Mayan Apocalypse

Written by Mary Manjikian

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MARY MANJIKIAN, DEC 6 2012

As we count down to the end of the world as predicted by the Mayan calendar, it is logical to ask what, if anything, social scientists can learn from society's current obsession with all things apocalyptic. A quick google search for the topic "apocalypse" turns up over 106 million results. Amazon.com currently has over 35,000 apocalypse-related items for sale. (The offerings include movies, both nonfiction and fiction books, and various items of interests to today's "preppers" and survival enthusiasts.)

An immediate facile answer to the question "Why, exactly, are people so enamored with apocalypse?" is that it stems from a sense of unease or a fear about the future. It is thus perhaps a legitimate response to concerns about human security, global warming, ever more dangerous natural disasters, global overpopulation and the rise of new and dangerous viruses and germs. One might thus argue that the risk of either accidental apocalypse (through an event like a virus escaping from a lab or an accidental nuclear weapon launch) or planned apocalypse (as the result of a terrorist action like an EMP attack or a takedown of the internet) has greatly increased in recent years. That is, we are interested in apocalypse now because the world has become more dangerous.

However, this explanation ignores a couple of vital facts: First, the production of apocalyptic literature is not evenly distributed across the international system. Rather, it is largely a product of Western wealth and privilege to even imagine that the destruction of your city (Tokyo, New York, London or Washington) or your nation somehow represents the end of 'civilization as we know it.' In order to see the end of industrial productivity, the end of the internet or even of electricity as a threat, you must first acknowledge that in your nation at this time the continued existence and availability of this technology is taken as a given. In contrast, one can point to last summer's blackout in India which left over 360 million people (or the population of the United States) without power for over a week. What's interesting is that what might be termed an 'apocalypse' if it occurred in the US provoked nary a murmur in India. Why? Because most people there do not assume the daily existence of electricity, nor are their lives as dependent on it.

Thus, not surprisingly, we can find apocalyptic literature written at the height of the British Empire, at the pinnacle of Soviet power, and in the United States. Apocalyptic literature allows wealthy modern readers the luxury of asking counterfactual questions about their own society. What if, we may ask, someday in the distant future, we are able to look back upon the end of American hegemony? What might we learn from such an exercise?

The question of apocalypse makes much less sense when asked from the perspective of a small nation (like Belgium), a poor nation (like Chad) or a violent nation (like The Congo). The ability to entertain ourselves with a vision of our nation transformed into a future failed state, complete with brutal dictators, an absence of daily goods needed for sustenance and the possibility that our children might not live to adulthood is a luxury of Western excess. (Recently I pondered the offerings found on Pinterest, the suburban housewife scrapbooking site, under the heading of 'apocalypse'. I found myself calculating what percent of the one percent of the world's population actually had enough disposable income to contemplate purchasing a year's worth of food or five years' worth of food, to be put away "just in case" or to build a shelter to be used "just in case." To the average person in the developing world, the idea that a prepper might buy food or construct housing for reasons of hypothetical future security rather than survival probably sounds ludicrous.)

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There is also a tendency for every generation to assume that they alone have somehow discovered apocalypse and the production of apocalyptic popular culture. However, as Frank Kermode argues, so-called “eschatological anxiety” is a literary theme which occurs at regular intervals in all rapidly advancing societies. Often it accompanies the advent of some new and dangerous technology – like chemical weapons during World War One or the nuclear weapons of World War Two. Each new scientific-technical advance reminds us again of the possibility that we have the means to destroy ourselves, and apocalyptic literature might thus represent a sort of public psychological exercise in which we work out the implications of that advance. Today’s apocalyptic offerings thus represent a grappling with new advances in genetic engineering (or the possibility that we could somehow create a new species capable of destroying us – as occurs in *The Passage*); our vulnerability and dependence on technology (or the possibility that ‘the lights will go out’ as is suggested in the American television show *Revolution*); or the ways in which globalization and interdependence have rendered us dependent on our neighbors in new in surprising ways (Here we can consider the riff on insulin which William Forstchen provides in his EMP novel, *One Second After*. He describes the death of a beloved child after international trade ceases, and reminds us that currently to make insulin you need eleven different components from eight different nations across the world. An end to international trade thus has the ability to affect all of us.)

Apocalyptic thinking is thus not unique to the US nor to our particular time period. However, that is not to say that it is insignificant or irrelevant to social science scholars. Rather, apocalyptic literature is a type of speculative fiction which is of great interest to military and intelligence planners in particular. In the past, speculative fiction created in the early 1900’s (in particular the novel “The Battle of Dorking” about a hypothetical German invasion of Great Britain) led to calls for greater defensive fortifications of Britain’s harbors which proved valuable at the advent of World War Two. Similarly, popular cultural products which help us to envision security vulnerabilities in our electrical grids and our cyber infrastructure can help in defensive planning, as well as helping to establish a public consensus that these threats are real and it is worth spending money to fix them. And it is even possible that a good apocalyptic novel can help American social scientists in particular to move beyond situatedness in their own research. If we can imagine ourselves as members of a society in which our state has failed, our leaders are dangerous and violent and our children’s survival is not to be taken for granted, perhaps we can better empathize with and understand the position of citizens and leaders in the developing world as well. We can thus view the international system not from above but rather from below, from the vantage point of the dispossessed – if only through the power of our imaginations.

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