

Nihilism, Fundamentalism, or Activism:


Three Responses to Fears of the Apocalypse

By Richard Eckersley

A few years ago, my son and I were watching world news on television. An item began about the humanitarian tragedy in Darfur, Sudan (which is still with us). "Can we turn this off, Dad?" my son said. I asked why. "It's depressing," he replied. "I don't need reminding what a horrible place the world is."

The images we hold of the world affect how we think, feel, and act, and they are increasingly shaped by global or distant threat and disaster: earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, bushfires, disease pandemics, war, terrorist attacks, and famine. While these hazards are, for the most part, not new, previous fears were never so sustained and varied, nor so powerfully reinforced by the frequency, immediacy, and vividness of today's media images. This effect seems certain to intensify as climate change and other threats begin to impact more deeply on our lives. The boundaries between the personal and the global are breaking down.

Most attempts to address these threats focus on economics and technology, but how we react psychologically to apocalyptic fears will be just as important. This response involves subtle and complex interactions between the external world and that existing in our minds. These have implications for both personal well-



Widespread fears of an apocalyptic future elicit equally dangerous responses: nihilistic thoughts and decadent lifestyles that accelerate environmental destruction, or fundamentalist intolerance that exacerbates social-political conflict. The only safe approach to suspicions of the apocalypse is adaptation through activism.

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being and social cohesion and action.

Psychological research suggests that adaptability, being able to set goals and make progress toward them, having goals that do not conflict, and viewing the world as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful are all associated with well-being. Biomedical research has shown that people become more stressed and more vulnerable to stress-related illness if they feel they have little control over the causes of stress, don't know how long the source of stress will last or how intense it will be, interpret the stress as evidence that circumstances are worsening, and lack social support for the duress that stress causes.

Negative expectations of the future of the world are likely to impact on several of these states, most obviously by encouraging perceptions that the world is hostile and dangerous and that circumstances are deteriorating. These psychological impacts will, in turn, shape our social responses.

We are being drawn in at least three directions by suspicions of an impending apocalypse (in either a literal, religious sense or figuratively speaking). The "business as usual" denial that has been the dominant response until recently is giving way to nihilism, fundamentalism, and activism. There are several reasons for framing our responses in this way:

- The possibility of global calamities is mainstream thinking among scientists and futurists. For example, the 2005 health synthesis report of the United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment project warns that the growing and unsustainable exploitation of ecosystems is increasing the risk of nonlinear changes in ecosystems, including accelerating, abrupt, and potentially irreversible changes, which could have "a catastrophic effect on human health."

- People, individually and collectively, can respond very differently to the same perceptions of threat and hazard. There is no guarantee the right response will prevail, although each has its psychological attraction. Despite the recent political action on global warming, for example, the response remains inadequate; the gap between what we are doing and

what we now know we need to do continues to widen.

- This construct gives dramatic expression to what are, in reality, fuzzy response categories, thus drawing attention to their differences. Think of the responses (nihilism, fundamentalism, or activism) as tendencies or deviations from the norm, with subtle to extreme manifestations, and which can overlap, coexist, and change over time in individuals and groups.

- It acknowledges the "mythic" aspect of our situation, and the importance of stories to how we understand and respond to it. Futurists have noted both the human susceptibility to apocalyptic ideas, especially at times of rapid change, and our mythic need for utopian ideals, both of which are embodied in stories. Narrative studies have demonstrated the power of stories to transport ideas across time and space, construct meaning and identity, shape communities, enrich social life, de-

fine social issues, and even put together shattered lives.

Let's look more closely at each "apocalyptic" response.

Nihilism: Decadence Rules

Nihilism is the abandonment of belief in a social or moral order. At the extreme are today's youthful killers. As Theo Padnos, a young prison literature teacher, told American writer Ron Powers: "In a world stripped of meaning and self-identity, adolescents can understand violence itself as a morally grounded gesture, a kind of purifying attempt to intervene against the nothingness."

What united his pupils were not their backgrounds, Padnos said, but their apocalyptic suspicions. "They think and act as though it's an extremely late hour in the day, and nothing much matters anymore." The adolescents were drawn to the mythic violence of movies and television, to stories of "post-apocalyptic

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Nihilism: Abandoning order



heroes just like they want to be—violent, suicidal, the sort of people who are preparing themselves for what happens after everything ends.”

Others respond in less dramatic ways to this sense of helplessness and futility. They become even more determined to succeed, to be a winner at all costs, or lose themselves in the quest for pleasure or excitement. These lifestyles have their own hazards, including various forms of addiction. Nihilistic inclinations are evident at a more mundane level in a growing political disengagement: a focus on home and hearth, on “tending our own patch.”

This strategy has its appeal. The happiest participants in his studies, Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay has said, were “those whose horizons were most limited, and whose concerns were unremittingly local, immediate, and personal.” There is a cost, however. The sense of the world as threatening and hostile, and that ultimately we are all on our own, produces a fraying of citizenship and democracy, as well as a vulnerability to the politics of self-interest and fear.



Fundamentalism: Taking control with rigid certainty

Fundamentalism: Dogma Rules

Fundamentalism refers to the retreat to the certainty of dogmatic beliefs, whether secular or religious. In an extreme form, this is “end time” thinking—rife among fundamentalist Christians in the United States—in which global war and warming are embraced as harbingers of the Rapture and Christ’s return to Earth. Other fundamentalists may reject environmental concerns as a liberal or socialist plot.

Commentators are unsure how influential “end time” philosophy is within the Bush administration. In his book *The President of Good & Evil*, philosopher Peter Singer says that George W. Bush’s religious outlook is best represented by the Manichean idea of a force of evil in the world, with an apocalyptic Second Coming imminent. America is viewed as the nation divinely appointed to destroy the forces of Satan. This response, like that of Islamic fundamentalist groups, could intensify as calamity deepens, possibly including a resort

to the use of biochemical or nuclear weapons.

The growth in fundamentalist thought extends beyond religion. Neoliberal economics, which underpins current political strategies, also represents a form of fundamentalism in its rigid adherence to an economic doctrine in the face of the growing evidence of its failure to deliver promised benefits. Some recent scientific attacks on religion smack of another secular fundamentalism in the form of a rejection of any but a scientific view of the world.

Like nihilism, fundamentalism has its appeal. It produces a comforting certainty about life and a call to united action against threats, both moral and physical. Research shows that people on religious and political extremes are happier, presumably because of the conviction they are right. One political commentator has noted that Bush’s description of the September 11 terrorist attacks as “evil” and his framing of America’s response as a war between good and

evil were crucial to helping Americans rally after the attacks. It helped people cut through all the confusion, uncertainty, and complexity and come to terms with what had happened. But fundamentalism also breeds intolerance and generates simplistic solutions to complex problems.

Activism: Hope Rules

The activist approach to the apocalypse involves the transformation of belief. In this approach, hope rules. Activism reflects the desire to create a new conceptual framework or worldview (stories, values, beliefs) that will make a sustainable, equitable future possible. The counter-trend that this activism represents is evident in surveys across the Western world showing that many people are making a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values, and way of life. Rejecting contemporary lifestyles

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Actions to Avert Apocalypse

The purpose of progress is to improve quality of life. Quality of life can be defined as the degree to which societies provide living conditions conducive to health and well-being (physical, mental, social, and spiritual). Quality of life is both subjective and objective, as much a matter of how people feel about their lives as about the physical conditions in which they live.

The currently dominant model of progress—material progress—regards economic growth as paramount because it creates the wealth necessary to improve quality of life: increasing personal freedoms and opportunities and meeting community needs and national goals.

But material progress is increasingly being challenged by an alternative model—sustainable development—which does not accord overriding priority to economic growth. Instead, sustainable development seeks a better balance and integration of social, environmen-

tal, and economic goals and objectives to produce an equitable, optimal, and lasting quality of life for all people.

Focusing on quality of life draws attention to the social dimension of sustainability, which has been relatively neglected in a debate that has emphasized the economy and the environment. More specifically, this perspective provides a new approach to the issue that dominates political debate about the competing models: reconciling the requirements of the economy—growth—with the requirements of the environment—conservation and sustainable resource use. Our growing understanding of the social basis of quality of life provides a means of integrating different priorities by allowing them to be measured against a common goal or benchmark: improving well-being.

Shifting from material progress to sustainable development

changes how we look at everything, especially public policy. In essence, the policy task is to reduce the proportion of GDP derived from consumption undertaken for short-term personal gratification and to increase that involving investment directed toward broader and longer-term national and societal goals: building natural, economic, social, and human capital (for example, environmental protection and sustainable resource use, physical infrastructure, health, education and training, and research and innovation).

An economic transition from conspicuous consumption to social investment would help to create a higher, fairer, and more enduring quality of life. But before governments make the shift, we, the people, will have to show them more clearly this is what we want. The public needs to show more leadership.

—Richard Eckersley

**Transforming
apocalyptic visions
into sustainable
futures**





Activism: Adapting and transforming

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and priorities, they place more emphasis in their lives on relationships, communities, spirituality, nature and the environment, and ecological sustainability.

Activism's appeal lies in its sense of empowerment and possibility and in the collective identity, unity, and mutual support it provides. I discussed some of its social aspects, notably the research on "cultural creatives" and downshifters, in an earlier article ("A New World View Struggles to Emerge," *THE FUTURIST*, September-October 2004). Activism's political cutting edge is the global development of what American social activist and entrepreneur Paul Hawken describes in a new book, *Blessed Unrest*, as the largest social movement in history.

The movement is not hierarchical; there is no manifesto or doctrine. It is not so much trying to save the world as trying to remake it. Metaphorically speaking, it is humanity's immune response to political corruption, economic disease, and ecological degradation. "The movement is not merely a network; it is a complex and self-organizing system," Hawken says, noting that it is made up of more than a million organizations with roots in the environmental, social justice, and indige-

nous movements: research institutes, community development agencies, village- and citizen-based organizations, corporations, networks, faith-based groups, trusts, and foundations.

"It arises spontaneously from different economic sectors, cultures, regions, and cohorts, resulting in a global, classless, diverse, and embedded movement, spreading worldwide," Hawken writes. "In a world grown too complex for constrictive ideologies, the very word 'movement' may be too small, for it is the largest coming together of citizens in history."

Avoiding the Apocalypse

All three "apocalyptic" responses are growing in social intensity in a head-to-head contest that, sooner or later, will shatter the status quo. Nihilism and fundamentalism represent maladaptive responses to threat, whatever their short-term or personal appeal. Because they do not address the root causes of the problem (i.e., the perception of a coming apocalypse), they risk amplifying the costs to human well-being. As Jared Diamond argues in *Collapse* (Viking, 2005), such strategies have led in the past to the collapse of societies confronting environmental strains. Activism is an adaptive response,

closely associated with the drive for sustainability [see sidebar, "Actions to Avert Apocalypse," page 38].

There is a real and increasing possibility that global warming, resource depletion, increasing world population, disease pandemics, technological anarchy, and the geopolitical tensions, economic instability, and social upheaval they generate will create a nightmare future for humanity in this century.

Avoiding this fate will depend critically on the stories we create to make sense of what is happening and to frame our response. A key task is to ensure that these stories reflect neither the decadence and degeneracy of nihilism nor the dogma and rigidity of fundamentalism, but the hope and creative energy of activism. □



About the Author

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