The Apocalypse from Below: The Dangerous Idea of the End of the World, the Politics of the Oppressed, and Anti-Anti-Apocalypticism

JOE P. L. DAVIDSON   *University of Warwick, United Kingdom*

*T*he apocalypse is frequently deployed by political movements, especially contemporary climate activists, to advance their causes. This article develops a framework for defending such invocations of the end of the world. With many other political theorists, I suggest that the apocalypse is a dangerous concept, not least because of its association with authoritarian accounts of history. However, we should not reject the apocalypse. I argue for a form of anti-anti-apocalypticism, using the criticisms directed against the concept as a launchpad to rethink it in viable terms. While acknowledging the value of different ways of defending the apocalypse, I highlight the importance of the causes of apocalyptic movements. Simply put, apocalypses from below are defensible because they have the capacity to clarify the political position of the oppressed and open new political possibilities for the group. By contrast, apocalypses from above, because they fail to fulfill these functions, are not.

There has been a revival of apocalyptic thinking in recent years. This is especially evident in the realm of climate politics, with activists and politicians warning that the wild weather and scorching temperatures of the future could result in the collapse of society as we know it (Cassegård and Thörn 2022). Other events have also triggered apocalyptic visions. The COVID-19 pandemic produced images—empty supermarket shelves, deserted city streets, and panic at hospitals—that seemed to come from a postapocalyptic film (Pohl 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sparked fears about nuclear Armageddon. The war caused analysts to warn that the risk of nuclear destruction is at its highest level since the end of the Cold War (Global Challenges Foundation 2022). Moreover, alongside these secular accounts of the end are theological apocalyptic narratives, whether that be the millenarian desires of the Islamic State in the mid-2010s (Mohamedou 2018) or the persistent hold of apocalyptic beliefs among evangelical Christians (Sutton 2014).

Of course, there is nothing new about the apocalypse; people have long feared that the end is nigh. However, the increased prominence of apocalyptic threats in the last decade poses a question: what role *should* the end of the world play in politics? For many political theorists, the answer is simple: none. Apocalyptic politics is, by necessity, dangerous. For example, liberals in the mid-twentieth century associated the apocalypse with the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany (Löwith 1949; Voegelin 1952),

while green thinkers suggest that apocalyptic thinking produces authoritarian and discriminatory responses to the climate crisis (Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020; Rothe 2020; Swyngedouw 2010). However, in the last decade, some political theorists have sought to reclaim the apocalypse, defending it from its critics and affirming its value (Cross 2023; Jones 2022; Lynch 2019; McQueen 2018). Certainly, endorsing the apocalypse as a mode of politics is not novel. Indeed, in this article, I bring together a range of twentieth-century political theorists who defend the apocalypse—including C. L. R. James (2013), W. E. B. Du Bois (1920), Ernst Bloch (1924), and Catherine Keller (1996)—to advance my argument. Nevertheless, it is significant that recent books like Alison McQueen's *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (2018) and Ben Jones' *Apocalypse without God* (2022), in distinct but complementary ways, affirm the value of apocalyptic thinking. They assert that certain forms of apocalypticism play a desirable normative or practical role in contemporary political struggles. There is a new apocalypticism in both political practice and political thought, the two rebounding against one another to shape the horizons of the future.

In this article, I continue the dialogue between apocalyptic visions and political theory. I argue that the apocalypse is a concept that, for all its problems, remains valuable. To adapt Fredric Jameson's call for "anti-anti-Utopianism," I advance a form of anti-anti-apocalypticism, or a mode of apocalyptic thinking that is capable of answering and defusing the challenges directed against the concept (Jameson 2005, xvi). As a method, anti-anti-apocalypticism suggests that we need to take the criticisms of apocalyptic politics seriously. The apocalypse is a dangerous concept; we cannot affirm it without qualification. In particular, the apocalypse fosters an authoritarian reading of history. Apocalyptic visions define the future in terms of the end of the world, and as a consequence, political

Corresponding author: Joe P. L. Davidson [ID], Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Warwick, United Kingdom, joseph.davidson@warwick.ac.uk.

actions are confined by this unalterable directionality. However, acknowledging these criticisms does not mean rejecting the apocalypse. Instead, the task is to rethink it, saving what is valuable about the tradition of envisioning the end of the world and rejecting the rest. The apocalypse can be rethought such that it no longer implies an authoritarian account of history and, instead, discloses a range of new possibilities for the future.

Following the anti-anti-apocalyptic method, I reflect on three different ways of defending the apocalypse. Building on the work of other political theorists, I begin by considering defenses that focus on the desired *consequences* of the apocalyptic movement, its vision of society should it be successful, and the *conduct* of the apocalyptic movement, the manner in which the apocalypse is deployed (e.g., does the movement claim absolute certainty about the end of the world?). While both the end and conduct of the apocalypse are relevant, I focus on an underappreciated factor for defending the apocalypse: its causes. I suggest that the defense of apocalyptic movements depends not only on the particulars of the vision advanced and the way in which it is deployed but also on the social location of the people advancing it. Borrowing Jacob Taubes' terms, the apocalypse "from the bottom up," visions of the end articulated by those oppressed in the current political system, is defensible in a way that the apocalypse "from above," visions of the end articulated by the powerful in the current political system, is not (Taubes 2013, 13). This is because the apocalypse from below has the capacity to clarify the political situation of the oppressed and disclose new possibilities in the world and thus contests the association between visions of the end of the world and authoritarian accounts of history, in a way that the apocalypse from above does not.

The article thus makes two key contributions to the literature on the apocalypse in political theory: First, with the notion of anti-anti-apocalypticism, it advances a method for thinking about the value of apocalyptic politics, using the criticisms of the idea of the end of the world as a prompt for rethinking it in defensible terms; and second, and more significantly, it proposes a novel defense of apocalyptic thinking. It argues that the association between visions of the end of the world and the movements of the oppressed is an important means of defending apocalyptic politics from its critics.

To make this argument, I begin in the first section by considering the definition of the apocalypse as a political concept. The remaining sections are then structured according to my anti-anti-apocalyptic method. As such, the second section examines the criticisms directed against the idea of the apocalypse, focusing particularly on the claim that it fosters an authoritarian account of history. The third section considers different ways to defend the apocalypse. Drawing on debates in just war theory, I outline three distinct approaches: the cause-based approach, the conduct-based approach, and the consequence-based approach. The fourth section reflects on the strengths and limitations of conduct-based approaches to defending the apocalypse. The fifth section then advances my cause-based approach, arguing that the apocalypse from below is defensible in a way that the apocalypse from above is not. By way of conclusion, I emphasize the relevance of my approach for understanding contemporary forms of apocalyptic politics.

THE APOCALYPSE AS A POLITICAL CONCEPT

Before moving to my main argument, some comments should be made about the definition of the apocalypse. In this article, I consider both religious and secular visions of the end of the world, judging both to have important political consequences (for a similar approach, see McQueen 2018). As demonstrated by the continuing influence of texts like the Book of Revelation, there is a strong relationship between apocalyptic thinking and theological modes of knowledge. However, accounts of the end of the world have undergone a process of secularization in recent centuries, such that there are now visions of catastrophe—most prominently, the climate crisis and nuclear Armageddon—that do not explicitly rely on an appeal to the supernatural (Berger 1999; Vox 2017). There are important differences between theological and secular expressions of apocalyptic thinking, with the former dependent on faith about other-worldly matters and the latter on knowledge about this-worldly matters (Vox 2017). Nevertheless, as Jürgen Moltmann (quoting Carl Schmitt's famous comment on political theology) notes, theological conceptions of the end, despite their other-worldly focus, are not apolitical: "All modern political concepts are 'secularized theological concepts', just as, conversely, all theological concepts of historical eschatology are political concepts that have been lent a theological colouring" (Moltmann 1996, 133). Religious and secular forms of apocalyptic thinking express dissatisfaction with the world as it exists and articulate political demands, hence my decision to include both modes of thinking in this article.[1]

Furthermore, as discussed further below, some visions of the apocalypse contain a utopian moment, with the destruction of the old order resulting in its reconstitution in a new and better way. However, utopia is not a necessary element. All apocalyptic visions share the negative moment of the end of the current order, and some complement this with an account of subsequent liberation. In basic terms, then, the apocalypse is a vision of the future in which a catastrophe, or a series of catastrophes, destroys the familiar institutions and practices of the present. So, whether secular or theological, negative or positive, the apocalypse is political for one simple reason: it is difficult to imagine the end of the world without also

---

[1] While I take the public role of theological discourses as given throughout this article, there is much more that could be said about the relationship between religion, secularism, and politics (for an overview focused on apocalyptic thinking, see Phillips 2015).

imagining the end of the prevailing political institutions of the world.[2]

ANTI-APOCALYPTICISM: A DANGEROUS CONCEPT

With this definition in hand, we can turn to the first moment of my method: anti-apocalypticism, or the challenges posed to apocalyptic thinking by political theorists. As noted in the introduction, political theorists have voiced suspicion about the end of the world. The first critique is that the apocalypse imposes a teleological narrative, involving a necessary movement from destruction to rebirth. For instance, mid-twentieth-century liberals argued that the apocalypse plays a role in the "origins of totalitarianism" (Landes 2005, 22; see also Cohn 1957; Tuveson 1964). Similarly, postcolonial thinkers highlight that the apocalypse posits a progressive narrative that legitimizes violence in the colonial world (Villagrana 2022; Westhelle 2012). In both of these cases, the apocalypse imposes a fixed future on history, closing debate about, and dissension from, an already determined movement. Invocations of the end of the world involve a dangerous appeal to the transcendental, something given without question, that has no place in democratic societies (Voegelin 1952). The apocalypse imparts a certainty that a totally liberated society will result from the destruction of the old order. The idea that utopia is the flipside of disaster can encourage rulers to *hasten* the apocalypse. Totalitarian states and colonial regimes believed that the violent end of the world, involving huge suffering, was necessary for the realization of a world of harmony, with their accounts of the future mimicking the certainty of theological modes of millenarianism (Landes 2005).

By contrast, other critics have emphasized that the apocalypse induces conservatism. This line of critique is especially prominent in work by green thinkers on the climate apocalypse (Katz 1995; Malm 2021; Rothe 2020; Swyngedouw 2010). The prediction that the wild weather of the future will result in the breakdown of contemporary society unless something is done creates a state of fear. Apocalyptic politics, rather than presenting the future as something that can be negotiated and reformed, suggests that the world is set on a trajectory toward catastrophe. It thus radically reduces people's options: either the apocalypse will happen, and destruction will be our fate, or it will be prevented. The climate apocalypse is "a thoroughly depoliticized imaginary, one that does not revolve around choosing one trajectory rather than another" (Swyngedouw 2010, 219). Apocalyptic politics produces a "totalizing narrative to end all totalizing narratives," and for this reason, it is "politically disabling" (Katz 1995, 277).

If the apocalypse is taken as inevitable, it produces fatalism and passivity, fostering the dubious feeling of "we're doomed—fall in peace" (Malm 2021, 152). Alternatively, if the apocalypse is understood as preventable, it may justify otherwise unpalatable actions (from increased surveillance to military interventions) to protect populations from the threat identified (Ophir 2007). Moreover, the totalizing nature of the climate apocalypse involves a false universalism; it masks the parochialism of the fears expressed (Alt 2023; Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020; Whyte 2018). For instance, in the case of the climate crisis, the end of the world often expresses the particular fears of prosperous populations in the Global North and sidelines the contributions of environmentalists in the Global South (Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020).

These critiques take aim at different dimensions of apocalyptic politics. The first critique focuses on the positive dimension of the end of the world, the fact that it involves not only the end of the current world but also the beginning of a better one. By contrast, the second critique focuses on the negative moment, or what Günther Anders calls an "apocalypse without kingdom" where the end "consists in mere downfall and does not represent a prelude to a new […] state" (Anders 1981, 207).[3] However, despite these differences, both critiques are centrally concerned with the association between the apocalypse and an authoritarian reading of history. The common worry is that apocalyptic politics, in declaring that history is set on a particular path, undercuts pluralism, debate, and dissent. There is one path of history, whether toward an ideal state or a catastrophic end, that all political actors must, in one way or another, accommodate themselves with; the future is dominated by visions of either liberation or disaster.

ANTI-ANTI-APOCALYPTICISM

The apocalypse is a dangerous political concept. For many of the scholars discussed above, the problems of the apocalypse are enough to dismiss the end of the world as a viable notion in political thought. However, the method of anti-anti-apocalypticism suggests another way of approaching these critiques. The challenges highlighted offer a set of guidelines for developing a defensible mode of apocalypticism. The primary criterion for a viable political conceptualization of the apocalypse is that it should address and mitigate the authoritarian tendencies associated with the end of the world. Given this, some questions emerge: Is it possible to enlist the apocalypse as a force that opens rather than closes possibilities? Or does the declaration of the end of the world necessarily involve restricting political options? These are the concerns that will guide the remainder of the article.

---

[2] Difficult does not mean impossible. As Fredric Jameson famously quipped, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 2003, 76). Some imaginaries of post-apocalyptic worlds reproduce features of the social world as it currently exists; the apocalypse occasionally fails to disturb essential features of the political order.

[3] All translations from texts cited in German in the references are my own.

An analogy is useful in terms of clarifying what is at stake in the defense of the apocalypse. Political theorists of the apocalypse find themselves in a similar position to just war theorists. War, given its strong association with death and destruction, cannot be affirmed without qualification. It is an ineradicably dangerous act in the sense that objections to war cannot, even in principle, be entirely rebutted. However, war is sometimes necessary. Given the conflicts in the current world, pacifism is unlikely to be viable in every instance. The "*tragic* character" of war resides in this tension between the destructiveness of conflict and the impossibility of peace (Evans 2005, 10, emphasis in original). For just war theory, a consequence of this tragedy is that we require normative regulations for deciding when wars should be fought and what kinds of wars should be prosecuted (for overviews, see Frowe 2022; Lee 2012).

Apocalyptic politics has a similarly tragic character. It is not only the case that the apocalypse can have dangerous consequences, but it is also the case that these dangers are bound up with the core components of the apocalypse as a concept. Imagining the total destruction of the present political order fosters precisely the authoritarian tendencies described above. The apocalypse has a strong affinity with an uncompromising, all-or-nothing mode of politics in which everything is staked on either hope for the end (as in the apocalypse with kingdom) or fear of the end (as in the apocalypse without kingdom). At the same time, it is difficult to imagine apocalyptic rhetoric disappearing in the near term. There will be political movements, because of the situation in which they find themselves, compelled to imagine the end of the world. Certainly, some apocalyptic movements regard this as a contingent situation. For those who believe catastrophe is followed by liberation, it is possible to achieve a state of peace and harmony where nobody would desire the end of the world. However, at least in the pre-apocalyptic world of the present, the apocalypse, like war, has a tragic character and guidelines on its uses are required to minimize its dangers.

The analogy with war is useful because it offers an indication of *the variety of strategies* by which to defend the apocalypse. Just war theorists propose that there are different principles that govern the justness of war (Evans 2005; Frowe 2022; Lee 2012). To make a judgment about a war, we must study its causes (for instance, is it the last resort?), conduct (for instance, are noncombatants directly targeted?), and consequences (for instance, are the terms of the peace fair to all parties?). My contention is that a similar typology of principles applies to the task of defending the apocalypse. Cause pertains to the particular political context in which the apocalypse is deployed, conduct pertains to the modality of the apocalyptic rhetoric deployed by actors, and consequence pertains to the desired ends of the apocalyptic movement. As an analytic device, the distinction between cause, conduct, and consequence discerns separate ways to affirm the dangerous idea of the apocalypse. In the subsequent sections of the article, I consider how both cause and conduct can be used to defend the apocalypse.

However, the analogy between just war theory and anti-anti-apocalypticism is not perfect. The differences between the two are also instructive. In particular, it should be stressed that the task of considering the consequences of war and the apocalypse is quite different. As Mark Evans comments, "the goal of a just war is a just peace," such that a war can be considered just insofar that it ends violent conflict (Evans 2005, 9). In negative terms, a similar statement can be made about the apocalypse. The goal of apocalyptic movements is a world where the apocalypse is no longer required, either because the threat feared (such as nuclear war) has been reduced to a minimum or because a fully liberated world (such as Revelation's New Jerusalem) has been established. However, in contrast to war, it is difficult to make this statement in positive terms. The apocalypse is a means to a variety of different ends, with movements proposing radically different visions of what the postapocalyptic world will look like. To take a few examples already mentioned, environmentalists, antinuclear activists, colonialists, and fascists all employ apocalyptic rhetoric but with different purposes in mind.

The desired consequences of an apocalyptic movement are relevant to considering whether it is defensible. In fact, if the content of the apocalypse cannot be affirmed, then other factors, including its cause and conduct, need not be considered. Obvious cases here are Nazi millenarianism, which imagined a state of Aryan supremacy in which other people had been eliminated or subjugated (Redles 2005), and the eschatological visions of European colonizers, which posited the genocide of Indigenous people as necessary for the realization of a new world (Villagrana 2022). Even if the causes and conduct of Nazi and colonial millenarianism are defensible in the terms described below, they would continue to be indefensible because of their desired consequences. By contrast, a case can be made for affirming the desired consequences of other apocalyptic movements—for example, stopping climate change or preventing nuclear war—and thus, cause and conduct become relevant.

However, given the diversity of apocalyptic movements, it is difficult to draw any general lessons about the apocalypse by considering its desired consequences. Indeed, if the goal of a political movement is indefensible, then it is irrelevant whether it deploys the apocalypse or some other concept for imagining the desired change. More specifically, it is not clear how refining the consequences of an apocalyptic movement addresses the anti-apocalyptic concerns discussed above. That is, apocalyptic movements with the *same end* may either foster or resist an authoritarian understanding of history. By contrast, as we shall see, cause and conduct are closely attuned to the *specific* problems that face apocalyptic movements.

CONDUCT: APOCALYPTIC REDIRECTION AND UTOPIAN HOPE

As noted in the introduction, there have been several recent attempts by political theorists to defend the apocalypse from its critics. These theorists have implicitly used the anti-anti-apocalyptic method; they have employed the criticisms directed against the apocalypse to rethink it in viable terms. However, as I demonstrate in this section, they have primarily focused on one strategy for defending the apocalypse, emphasizing the *conduct* of the apocalypse and deemphasizing its *causes.* It should be noted here that the conduct of the apocalypse is different from the consequences of the apocalypse. The latter refers to the *content* of the world desired by the apocalyptic movement, while the former refers to different *modes* of apocalyptic thinking. To consider the strengths and weaknesses of the conduct-based approach, I focus on two attempts to rethink the modality of the apocalypse: Alison McQueen's *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (2018) and Ben Jones' *Apocalypse without God* (2022).[4]

For McQueen, the most defensible form of apocalyptic thinking is that which accentuates the negative. Commenting on Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau, she proposes a form of apocalyptic *redirection*: "They redeploy apocalyptic images and rhetoric to get their audiences to imagine the end of the world in order to prevent it" (McQueen 2018, 195). If the apocalypse is not a vehicle for the realization of a better world but merely a means of avoiding the worst tendencies in the current world, then political movements cannot use it to validate authoritarian actions in the name of achieving perfection. Moreover, McQueen recognizes that, even in the case of apocalyptic redirection, there is a need to guard "against the risk of perverse apocalyptic politics" (McQueen 2018, 205). To this end, she stresses that the negative apocalypse is attuned to the "imaginative challenges" of confronting events like nuclear war, with images of future catastrophe questioning and reforming the "cognitive biases and motivated reasoning" that cause people to "underestimate […] global risk" (McQueen 2018, 203). This implies that the negative apocalypse is self-limiting, highlighting previously repressed issues but leaving open exactly how these matters of concern should be addressed. McQueen's negative apocalypse raises salient risks for discussion, but it does not propose a single solution to the crisis in question.

Jones' *Apocalypse without God* offers an alternative conduct-based approach to defending the apocalypse. In contrast to McQueen, Jones is concerned with the positive moment of the apocalypse. He argues that the apocalypse helps augment ideal visions of just worlds by offering a means of charting "a path from the imperfect present to the seemingly unattainable ideal society" (Jones 2022, xi). At first glance, Jones appears

vulnerable to the criticisms directed against the end of the world by mid-twentieth-century liberals and post-colonial critics. By emphasizing the utopian moment of the apocalypse, it seems that the end of the world should be hastened rather than forestalled. However, Jones carefully defends his theory against this challenge, arguing that there is no necessary relationship between the apocalypse and authoritarianism. For Jones, the apocalypse with kingdom should be accompanied by an "epistemic humility," a simultaneous awareness of the uncertainty of the future and an openness to new possibilities (Jones 2022, 176). This is an important qualification that addresses the concern that the apocalypse might be used to justify totalitarian and colonial violence. If the end of the apocalyptic movement is conceptualized as uncertain and provisional, then its proponents are more likely to "take a wary view toward justifications for violence that appeal to utopian goals" (Jones 2022, 189).

McQueen and Jones refine two major modalities of apocalyptic thinking, negative and positive, such that they address anti-apocalyptic challenges. In the case of the negative apocalypse, this involves using it to raise matters of concern but refraining from offering solutions on how the catastrophe might be responded to, and in the case of the positive apocalypse, this involves treating the desired goal of the apocalypse with a strong degree of humility to forestall the use of violence. In this fashion, revising the modality of apocalyptic thinking helps address the anti-apocalyptic critiques raised above.

A question can be posed here: if both the desired consequences and the conduct of an apocalyptic movement can be affirmed, is this sufficient to affirm the movement as a whole? To consider this issue, we can return to the analogy with just war theory. In the case of war, an armed conflict might have a defensible end (i.e., a just peace) and employ defensible means (i.e., not targeting noncombatants), but this is insufficient to affirm the war. It is also necessary to consider its causes, or the circumstances that have resulted in the war in the first place. A war fought without just cause is indefensible regardless of its goal and conduct. A similar argument can be made about the apocalypse. The discussion thus far demonstrates that conduct is an important factor in mitigating the political risks associated with the apocalypse. There are certain things that apocalyptic movements, once they are active, should and should not do. However, this leaves the causes of the apocalypse largely open. It seems that anybody can employ the apocalypse at any time as long as it conforms to certain rules of conduct. The relative openness regarding causes is worrying because of the political risks associated with the apocalypse. As emphasized above, these are intractable; they can be mitigated but not fully addressed. Given this, it is prudent to consider a variety of ways in which the apocalypse can be controlled and regulated. As I demonstrate below, a cohesive defense of the apocalypse requires guidelines focused on both the conduct of the apocalypse once it has been mobilized and the causes that trigger the mobilization of the apocalypse in the first place.

---

[4] These are, of course, not the only recent attempts to defend the apocalypse (Cross 2023; Lynch 2019).

CAUSE: THE APOCALYPSE AND OPPRESSION

What does it mean to defend the apocalypse in terms of its causes? To address this question, I introduce the distinction between the apocalypse from below and the apocalypse from above. As we will see, by drawing this distinction between apocalypses deployed by oppressed groups and those deployed by dominant groups, it is possible to defend the use of the apocalypse in certain circumstances and answer the challenges posed to apocalyptic thinking, namely, the claim that it fosters an authoritarian understanding of history. I discuss the apocalypse from below in the first subsection, then turn more briefly to the apocalypse from above in the second subsection, and then consider some possible problems of the distinction between the apocalypse from above and below in the third and fourth subsections, before finally discussing how this distinction counters the challenges posed to apocalyptic thinking in the final subsection.

Before moving to this argument, a preliminary point should be made about the apocalypse from below and above. There are many apocalyptic images circulating in society that cannot be traced to any particular group; they emerge neither from above nor from below. In Frank Kermode's words, the "paradigms of apocalypse" pervade "our ways of making sense of the world"; they are a common resource (Kermode 2000, 28). For example, fears about nuclear warfare and climate catastrophe suffuse the cultural consciousness. There is a shared apocalyptic repertoire comprising images of mushroom clouds in the case of the former and flooded landscapes in the case of the latter. Apocalyptic visions are comprised of cultural elements that can be pressed into service by political projects for different and antagonistic purposes. While the apocalypse is not completely absent of meaning—as stressed above, it has a tendency toward authoritarianism that needs checking—it cannot be straightforwardly aligned with any particular political tendency (whether of the left or the right, theological or secular). In turn, the diverse political movements deploying the apocalypse have different social origins; they may emerge from above or from below. The apocalyptic content produced by the broader culture can be politicized in contrasting and conflicting ways by movements representing different interests. Given this, the distinction between the apocalypse from above and the apocalypse from below rests not on the origins of the vision of catastrophe deployed but rather on the origins of the movement deploying it.

Apocalypse from Below

There is a strong association between the apocalypse and the oppressed. Apocalyptic movements are most likely to emerge in contexts where people feel deprived or excluded (Adas 1979; Worsley 1957). Conservative critics of the apocalypse often highlight this relationship. Maimonides, "the most extreme representative of the antiapocalyptic tendency" in medieval Jewish theology, rejected all the apocalyptic myths that "lived in

the hearts of the believing masses, whom he contemptuously referred to as the 'rabble'" (Scholem 1973, 12). However, proponents of apocalyptic thinking also recognize this fact. Allan Boesak, a South African anti-apartheid liberation theologian, stresses the close relationship between the experience of oppression and the Book of Revelation: "Those who do not know this suffering through oppression […] shall have grave difficulty understanding this letter from Patmos" (Boesak 1987, 38; see also Richard 1995).

What exactly does it mean to say that an apocalypse comes from below? Anders offers a fruitful starting point here: "Apocalyptic conceptions always owe their existence to groups that are condemned to powerlessness by an almost absolute […] worldly power" (Anders 1981, 111). Now, I disagree that apocalypses are always linked to oppressed groups; there are apocalypses from above as well as from below. However, with this caveat in mind, Anders' claim is productive. It suggests that the totalizing nature of the change imagined, the complete destruction of the old order, is mirrored by the exclusion of the group from the structures of existing society: "Only [the powerless] need the final thought, because with its help they could get over the degradation they suffer in this world" (Anders 1981, 111). The apocalypse from below is grounded in a situation of oppression, which here refers to the "constraints on groups" that are structurally bound up with the "normal processes of everyday life" in present society and "systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions" (Young 1990, 42). Oppression involves the enclosure of certain social groups, such that their options are severely limited by the society in which they find themselves. They are caught in "a network of systematically related barriers […] which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon" (Frye 1983, 5). Given that the constraints experienced are consubstantial with the normal functioning of society, they are very difficult to challenge (Stahl 2017). Indeed, to remove the constraints implies a total transformation of society.

Whereas non-oppressed social groups have various opportunities for changing or improving their condition, the options for oppressed groups are much more limited. Negatively speaking, reforms within the political system are not only very difficult to achieve in a situation of structural oppression, but they are also unlikely to fundamentally alter the situation of the oppressed. Positively speaking, if the oppressed are to be included as equals in the dominant institutions and practices of society, something like an apocalypse is required.[5] The current social order is constituted through their oppression, and thus, any attempt to change their situation involves the destruction of the old order.

The apocalypse from below occurs when it is initiated by social groups that cannot move, cannot breathe,

---

[5] As discussed below, while oppression is not uniform and unchanging, all forms of structural oppression involve the denial of full equality.

without triggering the end of the world. Friedrich Engels, in his account of Thomas Müntzer's millenarianism in the sixteenth century, highlights the affinity between apocalyptic rhetoric and the emerging proletariat, suggesting that the "absolutely propertyless faction" used visions of the end of the world to question "the institutions, views and conceptions common to all societies based on class antagonisms" (Engels 2010, 415). In a similar fashion, Black socialist theorist C. L. R. James, in his discussion of the relevance of the Book of Revelation for anti-colonial struggles, stresses the resonance between John of Patmos' status as "a Jew whose country was ruled by the Romans" and his vision of a world where the Roman Empire is "beaten, defeated, ruined" (James 2013, 22). For those excluded from normal politics and unable to partake in decision-making processes, apocalyptic politics offers a means of changing the structure of the world.

Taubes comments that "apocalypticism negates this world in its fullness" (Taubes 2009, 9). The world that is to end is "the cosmos," with the latter understood not as a "harmonious structure" but as "an abundance of that which is bad" (Taubes 2009, 9–10). The totality of the old world, including its social, political, cultural, theological, and philosophical assumptions, is thus at stake. Ernst Bloch suggests the end of the world is "the metapolitical [...] principle of all revolution" (Bloch 1924, 238). It is metapolitical in the sense that it not only encompasses political relations but also goes beyond them, integrating revolutionary political changes within a broader account of breakdown and rebirth. Rather than proposing a change to this or that element of the present, it is predicated on total transformation. While normal politics is "situated in a very concrete, very local plane," apocalyptic politics "is situated upon a universal plane," providing an image of an overarching change (Ellul 1977, 22). Normal politics has little to offer the oppressed; its debates and struggles cover over an essential continuity and sameness. By contrast, apocalyptic politics imagines the destruction of the political domain (among other domains); its institutions, practices, and concepts cease to operate. It involves "opposing the totality of this world with a new totality" (Taubes 2009, 9). The apocalypse is akin to a "worldquake," with the desire to transform the world involving a shaking of all that is familiar about the present and a "groping for possibles we dimly envisage but do not quite understand" (Savransky 2021, 89–90).

In an important sense, for oppressed groups, the apocalypse *has already happened*. For certain people, the apocalypse is not merely a speculative event in the future but a concrete event in the past. For instance, fiction writer N. K. Jemisin usefully suggests that Black history is "the apocalypse again and again and again" (Hurley and Jemisin 2018, 472). In a similar fashion, Indigenous political theorist Nick Estes notes that: "Indigenous people are post-apocalyptic" (Serpe and Estes 2019). The important point to stress here is that apocalyptic thinking for oppressed groups is not only about the future. The apocalypse from below resists teleological narratives in which the end of the world straightforwardly unfolds out of the present (Alt 2023;

Althaus-Reid 2003; Westhelle 2012). Speculative accounts of catastrophes, images of worlds destroyed by cataclysmic events, are also an oblique commentary on the past and present. The destructive moment of the apocalypse involves a retrospective look at the processes that have produced the contemporary state of oppression, with Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo highlighting the relationship between "'big C' catastrophes," or "extraordinary events" that mark a decisive rupture (such as the Middle Passage), and small c catastrophes, or the "structural, long-term, dreary catastrophes" experienced by the oppressed in the aftermath (such as the everyday violence of racism) (Vázquez-Arroyo 2012, 213).

To live without possibilities, where the normal order of things has the subordination of the oppressed built into it, is to live in a postapocalyptic world. Aimé Césaire, who often drew on the Book of Revelation to critique colonialism, noted that: "The strength is not in us, but above us, in a voice that drills the night and the hearing like the penetrance of an apocalyptic wasp" (Césaire 2013, 53; see also Drabinski 2016; Munro 2015). With slavery and colonialism, a plague of locusts descended on Césaire's Martinique. If the apocalypse has happened once, then there is no reason why it should not happen again. Bloch productively notes that: "The corner-stone of apocalyptic thought is presupposed here: that the last days are a repetition of the first days in reverse" (Bloch 2009, 151; see also Bull 1999, 80). The positive moment of the next apocalypse, in that it fosters a hope for a better world, stems from the fact that it annuls and reverses the effects of the first apocalypse.

Given this, the apocalypse fulfills two key functions for the oppressed. First, the end of the world is a means of interpreting the historical situation of oppression. It demonstrates the limitations on possibilities within the contours of current society, highlighting the fact that oppression is bound up with the social order in its totality. As is well known, the word apocalypse is derived from the Greek term for unveiling and disclosing (*apokálypsis*). Apocalyptic visions commonly claim to draw out "aspects of the human condition" previously hidden behind a "protective screen" (Hall 2009, 3). The apocalypse from below is not unique in claiming to disclose important knowledge about the world. However, what is distinctive about the apocalypse from below is not that it claims to reveal but rather the affinity between the apocalyptic disclosure and the situation of the oppressed. The apocalypse reveals that the dominant institutions of the present are irredeemably corrupt. In a similar fashion, the situation of the oppressed is one in which there can be no meaningful change without a structural transformation of the world. The knowledge disclosed by the apocalypse thus has the capacity to clarify the position of the oppressed. By clarification, I mean both explaining, insofar that the apocalypse identifies the cause of oppression in the structure of the world as such, and purifying, insofar that the starkness of the apocalypse refuses tempered accounts of the situation of the oppressed in which the dominant order appears redeemable.

Second, the apocalypse from below functions as a "possibility-disclosing practice" aimed at keeping "the possibility of a different future open, resisting resignation and accommodation to what is" (Kompridis 2006, 263). The form of hope associated with the apocalypse, however, is of a particular sort. In Bloch's terms, it is not an abstract hope that declares that things might be better in the future but rather a concrete hope predicated on a hard-headed assessment of the current situation (Bloch 1986). If the very functioning of society is dependent on the exclusion of a particular group, then their participation in politics requires the destruction of the current order and its reconstitution in a new form. The apocalypse from below discloses possibilities in contexts that, *prima facie*, seem deprived of any liberatory possibility. This is not to say that pre-apocalyptic societies are unchanging. The modality of oppression may be altered, and the suffering associated with some forms of oppression may be intensified or lessened. Rather, by referring to hopeful or liberatory possibilities, it is to say that apocalypse provides a means of imagining the decisive end of the dominant logics of the current world (understood in the totalizing sense elaborated above). As John Collins notes, the apocalypse speaks "to the hearts of those who would otherwise have no hope at all" (Collins 2000, 159). For example, W. E. B. Du Bois' short story "The Comet" focuses on the experiences of Jim, a Black man, in a postapocalyptic New York destroyed by an extraterrestrial object (Du Bois 1920). With the arrival of the comet and the collapse of racist social structures, new possibilities open to Jim, from eating at a previously segregated upmarket hotel to falling in love with a white woman.

As indicated by the reference to Du Bois (as well as the references to Boesak, James, and Jemisin), a strong case can be made for understanding Black millenarian movements as an example of the apocalypse from below. From the Middle Passage onwards, Black people have used millenarian rhetoric to challenge racism, with the end of the world inspiring slave revolts such as that led by Nat Turner in 1831 and offering an interpretive framework for understanding events like the American Civil War (Hobson 2012). These visions of the end of the world are apocalypses from below because of the social situation of Black people. In Frantz Fanon's words, the violent transportation of Africans to the Americas consigned Black people to the "zone of nonbeing" (Fanon 1986, 10). White supremacy excluded Black people from the economic, cultural, and political structures of the plantation societies that emerged from the sixteenth century onwards. The system of enslavement, as Afropessimism suggests, induced a state of social death; the lives of those subject to racial oppression are disposable and ancillary, comprising a constitutive outside of white supremacist societies (Sharpe 2016; Wilderson 2020). The various reforms that have taken place in recent centuries—from the abolition of slavery to political independence in the Caribbean and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States—have not fundamentally transformed this situation of social death. Racism

persists, albeit in new forms (Alexander 2010). In this context, apocalyptic rhetoric plays a productive role. First, it reveals the ingrained nature of racism within societies formed by the transatlantic slave trade. In the absence of their complete destruction, white supremacy will reproduce itself. Second, it combines pessimism with hope. While freedom for Black people is not possible within the contours of the contemporary system (the pessimistic moment), the apocalypse reveals that this is not the only model for social relations (the hopeful moment).

Apocalypse from Above

With this discussion of the apocalypse from below in hand, it is possible to reflect, more briefly, on the apocalypse from above. Simply put, the apocalypse from above refers to visions of the end of the world articulated by those who are not oppressed, that is, groups that have opportunities for making decisions and effecting change from within the contours of the prevailing political system. When apocalyptic rhetoric is employed by dominant groups, it has different effects than when it is employed by oppressed groups. There are some particularly clear examples of the apocalypse from above. For instance, the apocalypticism of colonial forces in the Americas made it appear that they had no choice but to violently dispossess Indigenous people, when in fact this was a decision of a powerful group (Villagrana 2022). In a similar fashion, Nazi millenarianism, as elaborated further below, also suggested that the fate of the world rested on the elimination of Jewish people, thus masking the political choices made by the regime (Redles 2005). In the contemporary moment, Silicon Valley billionaires declare that the only way to survive the cataclysms of the twenty-first century—from nuclear warfare to misaligned artificial intelligence—is to escape, whether by building fortified bunkers or establishing space colonies (Rushkoff 2022). These examples demonstrate two important aspects of the apocalypse from above.

First, the apocalypse, when invoked by those with a role in dominant political institutions, obscures their social situation. As the etymology of apocalypse as revelation suggests, visions of the end of the world often claim to reveal hidden knowledge. However, there is a disjuncture between the revelation of the apocalypse and the situation of the dominant. The apocalypse reveals the current social order as irredeemably corrupt, but, for the dominant, this is a false revelation. For the non-oppressed, the apocalypse *has not* already happened, and they do not live in a world of absolute constraint. The revelation of the apocalypse masks the influence of the dominant by suggesting that they are largely impotent in current society, thus ignoring their capacity to take some actions and avoid others in the here and now. The problems and challenges they face, even if they are likely to cause huge destruction, can be addressed without recourse to apocalyptic politics, and the appeal to the latter can hide the contingency of the situation, thus making a choice appear to

be a necessity. While the apocalypse from below clarifies the situation of the oppressed, the apocalypse from above obfuscates the situation of the dominant, concealing their agency and misrepresenting the options open to them. For instance, the decision by billionaires to invest in space travel in a world of poverty and inequality is defended by the claim that it is the only viable way to safeguard the species against extinction (Davidson 2023). In other words, apocalyptic rhetoric makes it appear that they have no other option.

Second, in these cases, apocalypticism functions as a possibility-*closing* practice. When the oppressed invoke the apocalypse, it demonstrates the possibilities present in a world that is *prima facie* devoid of possibilities. However, when the non-oppressed invoke the apocalypse, it risks hiding the political possibilities that are already present. It suggests that history is directed toward catastrophe, a movement that can be either forestalled or hastened. This ignores that, for the non-oppressed, there are multiple pathways to pursue. For instance, in the case of colonial and fascist millenarianism, the decision could have been made not to commit genocide. The apocalypse reduces the range of different possibilities open to dominant groups. In the case of the apocalypse with kingdom, the end must happen for liberation to occur. In the case of the apocalypse without kingdom, it must be either prevented or fatalistically expected.

These are particularly clear examples of the apocalypse from above. However, there are thornier instances, cases where the desired consequences of the movement are not *prima facie* objectionable but nevertheless can be said to articulate the interests of dominant groups. I am thinking here of the environmental movement, where apocalyptic rhetoric has often been deployed to demonstrate the stakes of the climate crisis. The claim that climate change will cause the collapse of current society, and everything should be done to forestall this fate, certainly demonstrates the seriousness of the unfolding catastrophe (Cassegård and Thörn 2022). Indeed, climate apocalypticism can be articulated from below, with both Indigenous movements (Whyte 2018) and Black movements (Davidson and da Silva 2022) combining apocalyptic warnings about ecological breakdown with accounts of existing relations of violence and domination. However, white environmentalists in the Global North, or people who have a dominant position in global power structures by virtue of their relationship with settler colonialism and white supremacy, have also employed apocalyptic rhetoric (Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan 2020; Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020). These visions generally adopt a universal perspective, claiming to speak on behalf of humanity as a whole, even as they implicitly articulate the particular interests of certain dominant groups (Swyngedouw 2010).

Like other apocalypses from above, this form of climate catastrophe falsely limits the options available to dominant groups. Even in cases where the purpose of the apocalypse is only to warn about the consequences of climate change rather than propose a solution, the political pathways *already open* to these groups on the climate crisis are masked by apocalyptic rhetoric. For example, the eco-modernist solution to the climate crisis, which imagines that we can maintain the capitalist structures of contemporary society by developing new technologies (Shellenberger 2020), is quite different from the Green New Deal, which (as an aside, far more convincingly) suggests that reforms to capitalism are required to address the problem (Klein 2019). Both tendencies can be differentiated from emergent forms of climate fascism and nationalism, which posit that the well-being of people in the Global North is dependent on the ruthless exclusion of other people (Wainwright and Mann 2019). All of these pathways can be imagined and enacted without a complete transformation of the structures of society as they presently exist. For the latter to be justified, climate catastrophe needs to be combined with an account of the entwinement between the unfolding disaster and present inequalities, something that is often missing in white environmental apocalypticism with its claim to speak for humanity as a whole.

Intersectional Concerns

At this point, a possible problem with the distinction between the apocalypse from above and the apocalypse from below can be raised. From the perspective of an intersectional approach to oppression, it is often not possible to straightforwardly assign people to the category of the oppressed or non-oppressed (Collins 1990). Indeed, the tension between different forms of oppression is clear in the Book of Revelation, which critiques the colonial power of Rome using patriarchal language, especially the images of the Jezebel and the Whore (Pippin 1994). The apocalypse from below risks simplifying the situation of the oppressed, ignoring the differences between oppressed groups and the relative advantages of some groups over others.

By way of response, it should first be stressed that apocalypses from below mobilize people on the basis of their oppression rather than the basis of their non-oppression. To be described as an apocalypse from below, the participation of working-class men should be based on their class interests rather than their gender interests. Whether an apocalypse succeeds in speaking to the oppressed on the basis of their oppression can be judged by considering the content of the vision advanced. The desired consequences of the apocalyptic movement again become relevant at this point. The end should, however obscurely, express the interests of the relevant oppressed group. For example, as Marxist accounts of the German Peasant War suggest, Thomas Müntzer's slogan *omnia sunt communia* —that, after the apocalypse, all things are held in common—resonated with the class interests of the incipient proletariat (Bloch 1924; Engels 2010).

Second, and more importantly, the intersectional perspective emphasizes the partiality of the knowledge produced by apocalyptic movements. As Patricia Hill Collins suggests in her account of the relationship between intersectionality and standpoint theory, oppressed people have knowledge that illuminates aspects of the present political order, but this "knowledge is unfinished" (Collins 1990, 270). This chimes

with Jones' emphasis on the need for apocalyptic rhetoric to be accompanied by epistemic humility (Jones 2022). The knowledge provided by the apocalypse from below is incomplete. It strives for a totalizing account of the world but falls short of reaching this aim, ultimately articulating a particular experience of oppression. Yet, this failure is productive insofar that it invites dialogue both within and between apocalyptic movements. A range of standpoints on the end of the world are brought together to produce what feminist theologian Catherine Keller refers to as a "*communing polyphony*" where different apocalypses from below correct the limitations of others (Keller 1996, 275, emphasis in original). In the case of the Book of Revelation, feminist apocalypticism highlights how it reinforces gendered inequalities without rejecting its anti-colonialism.

Indeed, apocalypses from below can critique other apocalyptic movements, particularly those that purport to secure liberation for all. For instance, Engels identifies the proletariat as the apocalyptic class in the sense that it has the capacity to fundamentally upturn dominant political relations and an interest in doing so (Engels 2010). However, for Black people subject to forms of political expropriation and violent dispossession from slavery onwards, ending the economic exploitation associated with class-based forms of oppression is insufficient for liberation (Robinson 1983). While Keller's communing polyphony of apocalypses from below may reveal synergies between movements, it may also highlight irreconcilable differences. These tensions might even suggest a need to rethink the category of the apocalypse from below itself, which could mask important qualitative variances between apocalyptic movements. For instance, the apocalypse from below could fail to capture what Fanon calls the nonbeing of Black people, which places them not so much *below* as *beyond* present social relations.

The world that is to end is distinct to the particular group articulating the apocalypse. The experience of one form of oppression is not transferable to other forms of oppression; different apocalyptic movements produce distinct conceptions of the world that need to end. Even the most extreme apocalyptic visions—for instance, Anders' (1981) claim that nuclear warfare would extinguish humanity as a species—are still articulated from a particular position and refer to the end of a particular world. In Taubes' (2009) terms, while apocalyptic movements may attempt to imagine the end of *the* cosmos, once they enter into dialogue with other apocalyptic movements, this proves to be the end of *a* cosmos, a delimited totality of institutions, relations, and assumptions. In terms of Arturo Escobar's pluriversal politics, "a world of many worlds" is a world of many apocalypses, with the end of the *worlds* sometimes resonating with one another and sometimes conflicting with one another (Escobar 2020, x).

Apocalyptic Appropriation

A second worry about the distinction between the apocalypse from below and the apocalypse from above can also be raised here. Far-right apocalyptic movements often claim to act on behalf of an oppressed group that requires liberation. For instance, in the contemporary moment, QAnon, an antisemitic apocalyptic conspiracy theory that gained popularity in the United States in the late 2010s, asserts that a shadowy cabal of elites dominates the world to the exclusion of all others (Crossley 2021). I contend that far-right millenarianism is a form of the apocalypse from above. However, unlike other apocalypses from above (such as those associated with colonial movements in the early modern period), the millenarianism of the radical right promises a transformation of society and the liberation of the oppressed. There is a concerning affinity between the apocalypse from below and far-right apocalypses from above: they are both predicated on the creation of a political antagonism, a sharp friend versus enemy distinction.

Ernst Bloch's response to the Nazi use of apocalyptic rhetoric is interesting in this context (Bloch 1991). His *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1924) asserted the value of apocalyptic thinking for proletarian struggle. As such, Bloch—a German-Jewish Marxist forced into exile in the 1930s—was deeply troubled by the Nazi use of millenarian motifs, which claimed that the world was dominated by oppressive forces, namely, Judaism and Bolshevism, which needed to be overthrown for freedom to be realized (Redles 2005). Importantly, Bloch argued that the fascists *appropriated* the apocalyptic rhetoric of the oppressed: "The Nazi did not even invent the song with which he seduces. […] The very term Third Reich has a long history, a genuinely revolutionary one" (Bloch 1991, 117). They used apocalyptic rhetoric that was strongly associated with the oppressed, namely, the legacy of medieval peasant struggles (especially the Joachimite idea of the Third Reich), to mobilize support from subordinate classes in German society. At the same time, Bloch emphasizes that the leading class forces of the fascist project were non-proletarian. The apocalypse was pressed into "service and predominant abuse by big business" who had no intention of altering the fundamental class structure of German society (Bloch 1991, 143).

Bloch's analysis of the class origins of the Nazi apocalypse suggests that, regardless of its claim to represent the oppressed, it was still an apocalypse from above. His response to the Nazi appropriation of millenarian rhetoric reaffirms the value of considering the social location of apocalyptic movements. Focusing attention on the social forces underpinning apocalyptic visions has a critical function. It offers a means of piercing the radical veneer of far-right millenarian movements by revealing them as apocalypses from above. Bloch also helps refine the conception of oppression elaborated above. Oppression should not be mistaken for *the claim* to be oppressed, as in the case of aggrieved whiteness on the contemporary far right, which encourages a dominant group to see itself as disadvantaged by racialized others (Hooker 2023). In this case, the claim to oppression closes possibilities insofar that it makes the actions of the group appear more constrained than they actually are. Instead, the distinction between the apocalypse from below and the

apocalypse from above rests on an assessment of the structural nature of oppression, or how the dominant social forces within a particular context systematically advantage or disadvantage certain groups.

A Cause-Based Defense of the Apocalypse

The distinction between the apocalypse from below and the apocalypse from above offers a framework for defending the apocalypse in terms of its *causes*. The social location of the group articulating the vision of the apocalypse is key to whether we can regard its deployment as defensible. If the apocalypse is deployed from below, and assuming other conditions related to consequences and conduct outlined above are met, it can be affirmed because the figure of the end of the world is attuned to the social situation of the oppressed. The latter face a world where, because of past disasters and current social processes, there are very limited options for action. Given this, accounts of future destruction chime with their experience of society as presently constituted. Moreover, due to the fact that oppression is built into the normal order of things, one of the few ways of imagining change is through the total destruction of the cosmos. The apocalypse from below has a defensible cause because, in these circumstances, visions of the end of the world clarify the political situation and open new possibilities. By contrast, if the apocalypse is deployed from above, it fails to reflect the social situation of those articulating it. The dominant can enact change within the current political system, and thus, a defensible cause for employing apocalyptic narratives is absent. In the case of the apocalypse from above, the end of the world obscures the political situation and hides existing possibilities.

Importantly, defending the apocalypse in terms of this cause-based account answers the concerns of critics of the apocalypse. It fulfills the final step of my anti-anti-apocalyptic method. As suggested above, at the core of criticisms of the apocalypse is the idea that the end of the world implies an authoritarian way of conceptualizing history. In presenting the world as heading toward catastrophe, it undermines debate and pluralism in the present. I have suggested that this holds in the case of the apocalypse from above. Non-oppressed groups have the capacity to shape and reshape the world from within the dominant political institutions. As such, invoking an apocalyptic vision of history serves to occlude the multiple possibilities that are present for dominant groups. By contrast, in the case of the apocalypse from below, the end of the world does not constrain possibilities. For the oppressed, the denial of possibilities within the normal functioning of politics means that the end of the world discloses new possibilities—namely, a world where they fully participate in the making and remaking of the polis. The apocalypse thus contributes to a nonauthoritarian account of history, allowing for the contestation of dominant relations of power and the imagination of a reconstituted world.

The cause-based mode of anti-anti-apocalypticism defuses both critiques of the apocalypse discussed above. On the liberal and postcolonial critique, the utopian aspect of the end of the world fosters a teleological understanding of history in which the future is defined by the necessary movement from destruction to rebirth. The apocalypse from below offers a response. For the oppressed, the world of necessity and constraint warned of by critics of the apocalypse is already a reality. The future appears devoid of possibility; all events and processes within normal politics, in different ways, reinforce their excluded position and consign them to a restricted state. As such, one way to disclose hidden and repressed possibilities is via the imagination of the destruction of the old order and the positing of a new world. The image of the apocalypse closing possibilities by proposing an unalterable movement from catastrophe to utopia is reversed. Rather than the apocalypse involving an authoritarian account of history that constricts the movement forward, it liberates horizons of expectation when deployed from below. By contrast, the apocalypse from above more closely approximates the authoritarian understanding of history that is criticized. For the non-oppressed, the end of the world falsely suggests that there is only one route to a better world—through the end of this one—thus failing to acknowledge the multiple pathways open to dominant groups.

The apocalypse from below also helps address the claim, associated with contemporary green thinkers, that images of climate apocalypse foster authoritarian politics. This critique is relevant in the case of the apocalypse from above. In agreement with the green critics of apocalyptic politics, the end of the world, when deployed by the non-oppressed, produces a fearful attitude that undercuts debate about the different pathways on the horizon and obscures the political position of the group articulating it. However, the apocalypse from below has quite different effects; it clarifies rather than obfuscates. The interpretative function of the apocalypse, the fact that it not only envisions the future but also elucidates aspects of the present, is especially important here. The apocalypse from below is attuned to the experience of the excluded; it uses images of catastrophe to demonstrate the already existing condition of the oppressed. As the example of Black apocalypticism suggests, the totalizing nature of racism and colonialism—processes often elided in visions of climate apocalypse emerging from dominant groups in the Global North (Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020)—is revealed by the apocalypse from below. If the apocalypse has, in some sense, already happened, then the purpose of envisioning catastrophic events is not only to predict the end of the world but also to analyze its presence in the contemporary moment. All the dangers associated with the apocalypse—the death of people, the destruction of culture, and the devastation of ecologies—are already part of the lives of the oppressed (Munro 2015). The apocalypse from below, rather than falsely limiting the future, correctly diagnoses constrictions in the present.

The cause-based form of anti-anti-apocalypticism complements the conduct-based approach discussed above. Conduct- and cause-based defenses of the apocalypse offer different strategies for addressing the same

anti-apocalyptic challenges. Both focus on the association between apocalyptic rhetoric and authoritarian readings of history, with the former emphasizing self-limiting forms of apocalypticism that eschew claims to have exact knowledge about the future and the latter focusing on social situations in which imagining the end of the world draws out previously hidden possibilities. In many cases, cause and conduct, alongside reflection on the desired consequences of the apocalyptic movement, reinforce one another. However, neither cause nor conduct alone is sufficient. If cause is considered without conduct, then the apocalyptic movement might foster an authoritarian account of history by claiming certainty about the future (e.g., that the oppressed are destined for liberation and everything else should be sacrificed to this goal). If conduct is considered without cause, then the movement might encourage authoritarianism by obscuring the options available to dominant social groups within the present political order.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have considered the status of the apocalypse as a political concept. My argument is predicated on the idea that the apocalypse is a dangerous phenomenon. In particular, in suggesting that the future is fixed and not subject to debate, it fosters authoritarianism. As such, the apocalypse requires careful defense. Defending the apocalypse involves considering its consequences, or the society imagined if the movement is successful, and its conduct, or the modality of the apocalypse. For an apocalypse to be defended, it must be possible to affirm its desired consequences, and it should not inscribe new forms of domination and limit it to certain forms, with a particular emphasis on the importance of humility and uncertainty. However, I have argued that the causes of the apocalypse and the social location from which it emerges are also important. The apocalypse from below, in contrast to that from above, clarifies the present and opens possibilities. It discloses the restrictions on the agential capacities of the powerless in prevailing political institutions. Moreover, it demonstrates that the complete destruction of the latter is required to realize the political agency of the oppressed. I have thus proposed a strategy for defusing the idea, promoted by anti-apocalyptic thinkers, that the end of the world should be rejected as authoritarian.

As noted in the introduction, there has been a revival of apocalyptic politics in recent years. Whether it be Indigenous people fighting against ecological destruction (Whyte 2018) or billionaires claiming that colonizing Mars is necessary to stave off human extinction (Rushkoff 2022), political movements are deploying the apocalypse to articulate a disparate range of demands. In this context, there is a pressing need to reflect on the uses and abuses of apocalyptic rhetoric. The distinction between the apocalypse from below and the apocalypse from above offers one criterion for making judgments about the apocalypse. It allows us to affirm some visions of the end of the world as politically defensible. For participants in apocalyptic movements, the distinction may provoke reflexivity, asking them to critically consider the social origins of their struggle. For other, non-apocalyptic actors, it prevents the easy dismissal of apocalyptic movements as politically aberrant. In either case, given the dire stakes of the contemporary conjuncture, the need to make judgments about apocalyptic politics is unlikely to disappear.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms that this research did not involve human participants.

REFERENCES

Adas, Michael. 1979. *Prophets of Rebellion*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press.
Alt, Suvi. 2023. "Environmental Apocalypse and Space." *Environmental Politics* 32 (5): 903–22.
Althaus-Reid, Marcella. 2003. *The Queer God*. London: Routledge.
Anders, Günther. 1981. *Die atomare Drohung*. Munich, Germany: Beck.
Berger, James. 1999. *After the End*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Bloch, Ernst. 1924. *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*. Munich, Germany: Kurt Wolff Verlag.
Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols., trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Bloch, Ernst. 1991. *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice. Cambridge: Polity.
Bloch, Ernst. 2009. *Atheism in Christianity*, trans. J. T. Swann. London: Verso.
Boesak, Allan. 1987. *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press.
Bull, Malcolm. 1999. *Seeing Things Hidden*. London: Verso.
Cassegård, Carl, and Håkan Thörn. 2022. *Post-apocalyptic Environmentalism*. Cham, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
Césaire, Aimé. 2013. *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and A. James Arnold. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
Cohn, Norman. 1957. *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. London: Secker & Warburg.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge.

Collins, John J. 2000. "From Prophecy to Expectation." In *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John J. Collins, 129–61. New York: Continuum.

Cross, Ben. 2023. "Apocalypticism as Radical Realism." *Political Studies* 71 (2): 379–97.

Crossley, James. 2021. "The Apocalypse and Political Discourse in an Age of COVID." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44 (1): 93–111.

Davidson, Joe P. L. 2023. "Extinctiopolitics." *New Formations* 107–108: 48–65.

Davidson, Joe P. L., and Filipe Carreira da Silva. 2022. "Fear of a Black Planet." *European Journal of Social Theory* 25 (4): 521–38.

Drabinski, John E. 2016. "Césaire's Apocalyptic Word." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115 (3): 567–84.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1920. *Darkwater*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe.

Ellul, Jacques. 1977. *Apocalypse*, trans. G. W. Schreiner. New York: Seabury.

Engels, Frederick. 2010. "The Peasant War in Germany." In *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 10, 397–482. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Escobar, Arturo. 2020. *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*, trans. D. Frye. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Evans, Mark. 2005. "Introduction." In *Just War Theory: A Reappraisal*, ed. Mark Evans, 1–20. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann. London: Pluto.

Frowe, Helen. 2022. *The Ethics of War and Peace*. London: Routledge.

Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

Gergan, Mabel, Sara Smith, and Pavithra Vasudevan. 2020. "Earth beyond Repair: Race and Apocalypse in Collective Imagination." *Environment and Planning D* 38 (1): 91–110.

Global Challenges Foundation. 2022. "Global Catastrophic Risks Report 2022." Report, November 30.

Hall, John R. 2009. *Apocalypse*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hobson, Christopher Z. 2012. *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800–1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hooker, Juliet. 2023. *Black Grief/White Grievance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hurley, Jessica, and N. K. Jemisin. 2018. "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin." *ASAP/Journal* 3 (3): 467–77.

James, C. L. R. 2013. *Modern Politics*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.

Jameson, Fredric. 2003. "Future City." *New Left Review* 21: 65–79.

Jameson, Fredric. 2005. *Archaeologies of the Future*. London: Verso.

Jones, Ben. 2022. *Apocalypse without God: Apocalyptic Thought, Ideal Politics, and the Limits of Utopian Hope*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katz, Cindi. 1995. "Under a Falling Sky: Apocalyptic Environmentalism and the Production of Nature." In *Marxism in the Postmodern Age*, eds. Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener, 276–82. New York: Guilford.

Keller, Catherine. 1996. *Apocalypse Now and Then*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Kermode, Frank. 2000. *The Sense of an Ending*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Klein, Naomi. 2019. *On Fire*. London: Allen Lane.

Kompridis, Nikolas. 2006. *Critique and Disclosure*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Landes, Richard. 2005. "Roosters Crow, Owls Hoot: On the Dynamics of Apocalyptic Millennialism." In *War in Heaven/Heaven on Earth: Theories of the Apocalyptic*, eds. Stephen D. O'Leary and Glen S. McGhee, 19–46. London: Equinox.

Lee, Steven P. 2012. *Ethics and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Löwith, Karl. 1949. *Meaning in History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lynch, Thomas. 2019. *Apocalyptic Political Theology*. London: Bloomsbury.

Malm, Andreas. 2021. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. London: Verso.

McQueen, Alison. 2018. *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mitchell, Audra, and Aadita Chaudhury. 2020. "Worlding Beyond 'the' 'End' of 'the World.'" *International Relations* 34 (3): 309–32.

Mohamedou, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould. 2018. *A Theory of ISIS*. London: Pluto.

Moltmann, Jürgen. 1996. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Munro, Martin. 2015. *Tropical Apocalypse*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Ophir, Adi. 2007. "The Two-State Solution." *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 8 (1): 117–60.

Phillips, Elizabeth. 2015. "Eschatology and Apocalyptic." In *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, 274–95. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pippin, Tina. 1994. "The Revelation to John." In *Searching the Scriptures*, Vol. II, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 109–30. London: SCM.

Pohl, Lucas. 2022. "The Empty City: COVID-19 and the Apocalyptic Imagination." *City* 26 (4): 706–22.

Redles, David. 2005. *Hitler's Millennial Reich*. New York: New York University Press.

Richard, Pablo. 1995. *Apocalypse*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Robinson, Cedric. 1983. *Black Marxism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Rothe, Delf. 2020. "Governing the End Times?" *Millennium* 48 (2): 143–64.

Rushkoff, Douglas. 2022. *Survival of the Richest*. London: Scribe.

Savransky, Martin. 2021. *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Scholem, Gershom. 1973. *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Serpe, Nick, and Nick Estes. 2019. "Indigenous Resistance Is Post-Apocalyptic." *Dissent*. July 31. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/booked-indigenous-resistance-is-post-apocalyptic-with-nick-estes.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Shellenberger, Michael. 2020. *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All*. New York: HarperCollins.

Stahl, Titus. 2017. "Collective Responsibility for Oppression." *Social Theory and Practice* 43 (3): 473–501.

Sutton, Matthew Avery. 2014. *American Apocalypse*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Swyngedouw Erik. 2010. "Apocalypse Forever?" *Theory Culture & Society* 27 (2–3): 213–32.

Taubes, Jacob. 2009. *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Taubes, Jacob. 2013. *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tuveson, Ernest Lee. 1964. *Millennium and Utopia*. New York: Harper & Row.

Vázquez-Arroyo, Antonio Y. 2012. "The Antinomies of Violence and Catastrophe." *New Political Science* 34 (2): 211–21.

Villagrana, José Juan. 2022. *Racial Apocalypse*. New York: Routledge.

Voegelin, Eric. 1952. *The New Science of Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Vox, Lisa. 2017. *Existential Threats*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Wainwright, Geoff, and Joel Mann. 2019. *Climate Leviathan*. London: Verso.

Westhelle, Vitor. 2012. *Eschatology and Space*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Whyte, Kyle P. 2018. "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1 (1–2): 224–42.

Wilderson, Frank B. 2020. *Afropessimism*. New York: Liveright.

Worsley, Peter. 1957. *The Trumpet Shall Sound*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.