

Christian Jakob

End Times

The New Fear of the End of the World and the Battle for our Future

Sample Translation by Sarah Wolbach

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Apocalypse Now? A Primal Fear Makes a Comeback

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Apocalypse Now? A Primal Fear Makes a Comeback

*Hunger, storms, wars, and
a sun that cooks us.*
David Wallace-Wells

Christopher Clark is one of the most well-known living historians. Perhaps one of the most important insights of our time, however, was gained not through his research work, but during a visit to a restaurant with his students. Every year, he takes his graduating class at Cambridge University out to eat, he said in 2022. “We talk about all kinds of topics, and I realized for the first time that not only do most of these young people not have long-term plans, but they can hardly imagine that there is a future at all.” That’s certainly just an anecdotal observation, Clark said. But he believes “that these young people are not alone in feeling this way.”

Overshadowed Progress

His feeling is not wrong. Where once belief in progress dominated, more and more young people today see a future full of gloom (Ch. 1). In 2021, 10,000 people under 25 were surveyed worldwide for a study. 56 percent of them believed that humanity was doomed.

The fact that many objective living conditions – infant mortality, nutrition, access to water and education, life expectancy – have greatly improved for more people today than ever before is overshadowed by a growing awareness of the existential, above all ecological, crises that seem no longer controllable to many. There is “no ecologically relevant field of action in which the sum of known and

new damages would not have permanently set new records,” economist Niko Paech writes, speaking of the “ecological emergency.”

When the unsustainability of our way of life became apparent, we were already living “in the end times,” according to philosopher Slavoj Žižek. “The climate apocalypse is coming. In order to prepare, we have to admit that we will not be able to prevent it,” also claims author Jonathan Franzen. Leading climate researchers reject this statement as “complete nonsense” – the climate collapse is very much still preventable. But what Franzen says fits the emotional experience of a time in which the Frankfurter Theater offers “Apocalypse Resistance Training” for elementary school classes, and many may no longer hope for the self-preservation instinct of mankind.

The anticipation of the apocalypse is ancient (Ch. 2). In recent years, however, several things have happened that have given new impetus to this old image. Not all of it, but much of it, is connected to the climate crisis. The past ten years have been the hottest since records began, and around 2018 emerged not only Greta Thunberg’s school strike but, subsequently, Fridays for Future. Studies that spoke specifically of the impending end of humanity also began spreading (Ch. 4). The scenarios upon which they were based pointed to global warming of up to 5 degrees by the year 2100 and thus to a state in which human survival would become questionable.

As recently as 2017, US journalist David Wallace-Wells described a coming world in which the sun “cooks us.”

In 2022, Wallace-Wells then changed his tune: Especially after the emergence of Fridays for Future in 2018, a lot had happened in global climate protection, so that the most apocalyptic scenarios are no longer likely. Today, a few years later, climate science considers 2 to 3 degrees of global warming most likely. Thus, “a new climate reality is coming into view,” according to Wallace-Wells.

But even in this new reality, parts of the earth will be uninhabitable, and suffering, displacement, and death will be the result for many people. The fear of the end of the world has always been deeply rooted in humans. As “climate anxiety” (Ch. 20), it has once again come to the surface of collective consciousness. And there it finds all kinds of companions, for it is not only climate change that frightens many people.

Multiple Crises, Multiple Anxieties

As Russia invaded Ukraine, the fear of nuclear war, one nearly forgotten after the end of the Cold War, returned. It interwove with other manifestations of crisis to form a gloomy panorama: the recession that has emerged since COVID and the war in Ukraine – is this the new 1929, which at that time ultimately paved the way for fascism? Impending blackouts (Ch. 14) due to the gas shortage – *the* scenario that preppers (Ch. 16) had been awaiting for a long time. Or the supply chains, which were already crumbling in the pandemic: did the sudden shortage of fever medicine in the pharmacies indicate the end of a globally entangled economy in which hardly anyone, without far-flung suppliers, is still capable of production (Ch. 10)? After all, people have long been warning of precisely this scenario of a collapse of the globalized economy.

With the rise of COVID-19 (Ch. 5), many saw the beginning of an “age of pandemics” in which ever more rapidly mutating viruses threaten humanity. For the contrarians, on the other hand, the state policies for Coronavirus were the start of the end of freedom and beginning of a totalitarian regime. Some anticipated downfall from the virus, others by the fight against the pandemic.

People are afraid of the takeover of artificial intelligence (Ch. 9), the extinction of species, drought, hunger, water shortages, chemical contamination, destruction of nature (Ch. 3) and – though not very many – the end of the effectiveness of antibiotics. Others fear that the growing number of refugees could lead to fascism and wars. Conversely, right-wingers fear the global economic crash

(Ch. 13), power outages (Ch. 14), or the extinction of the white race (Ch. 15) due to migration movements – and are preparing for the final battle against the “Great Reset,” the alleged world domination project of a global elite.

Some of these fears are irrational. Many are not. And there is a great willingness to think of crises that are independent of each other, or only partially connected, as a comprehensive civilizational descent. “Fragile States – Apocalyptic States of Mind and their Communalization” was the title of a lecture at the Annual Meeting of the German Society for Psychoanalysis 2021. “All over the world, social and economic crises are coming to a head,” it said. More and more frequently, voices were being raised that painted the scenario of a system collapse.

For some, this helps them cope with the barely comprehensible complexity of the world: when catastrophes are everywhere, the thought that there is something universal, something bigger behind them offers a deceptive relief. Few think of the economic system in this context – many are closer to conspiracy beliefs. And nowhere is doom so eagerly conjured up today as it is in right-wing extremist circles. They see, not incorrectly, their ticket to power in the stoking of these fears (Ch. 13, 14, 16). Because “this unquestioning desire for fear and the associated indulgence in painting great dangers have a long tradition in Germany,” wrote the publicist Wolfgang Pohrt, as early as 1985.

The sociologist Frank Furedi also spoke of a “culture of fear” in 2005. He said there had never been such a “massive accumulation of fear campaigns as in the last 25 years.” Today, the objective crises are piling up. And fear is multiplying. Everywhere, not just in areas related to the climate, suddenly “tipping points” are the talk of the town.

In the past, it was the Bible (Ch. 2) that preached doom with prophetic announcements of the apocalypse, which would be followed by the kingdom of God. Since the Enlightenment, but also more recently since the invention of the

atomic bomb, religious ideas have been the unconscious cultural structure upon which natural science predicts.

The tendency of people to anticipate their demise has always been high (Ch. 2). “For verifiably 3000 years, every generation has had the idea that it will be the last on earth, or that at least its children will experience the apocalypse,” writes psychoanalyst Wolf-Detlef Rost. This reflects a “mixture of a sense of guilt and grandiose fantasies of being the last human generation, thus becoming the executor of history.”

Seen in this light, man tends toward exceptionalism – he is always convinced that he is living at a turning point in history, as the Göttingen sociologist of religion Alexander Kenneth-Nagel believes. “From A for atomic power to Z for zombies,” the apocalypse occupies the minds of modern man. But unlike in earlier times, man today is himself responsible for the crisis – and is now becoming the custodian of his own salvation – or the absence of it. Therefore, modern apocalyptic scenarios “generally represent calls to action,” according to Kenneth-Nagel.

And these calls are followed by many today. It was “in the spring of 2018, when it smelled like a forest fire all over Berlin at the end of April,” when he realized that it was “already far too late to avert climate collapse,” writes Tadzio Müller, a longtime climate activist, about his “climate depression.” He says that the springtime forest fires in northern Europe made it clear to him that “the escalation of climate crisis effects has been so rapid that the macro tipping point of the ecosystem had already been passed; that we were moving with giant strides toward an unlivable world.”

Climate research does recognize regional tipping elements, but whether a “macro tipping point” exists, however, is not certain. Nevertheless, many are very afraid of it. The idea that such a macro tipping point will be surpassed is

widespread today – even if it is only a symbol for the end of the old normality, for many feel that this is disintegrating.

When he meets new people, his first question is usually, “What do you think, how many ‘good’ years do we have left?” Müller writes. Most of them assume “a maximum of 10 good years.” “And yet, every day, normal – or rather normally insane – life just goes on.”

Müller is one of the most well-known climate activists in Germany. He is tirelessly active on social media, and there is hardly an event that he does not report on. His pessimism is obviously counterbalanced by enough residual hope to keep him active. This is also true for the climate movement as a whole, which is wrongly accused of apocalypticism. Their resistance, their willingness to make sacrifices, their determination can only be explained by the fact that they believe they can achieve something if they only build up enough pressure. And for many, the slogan “Stop the climate catastrophe” has long since been replaced by “Every tenth of a degree counts.”

They are not, therefore, earnestly fatalistic. Those are people who no longer give collective ability to shape the future, to resist destruction, a chance – due to repression, detachment, feelings of guilt, ignorance, egoism, or simple complacency (Ch. 21). They say, “It’s no use anymore anyway.”

This view replaces the belief in something better, something that must be fought for, with partly misanthropic undertones. Thus, it is heard again and again that the extinction of mankind would only benefit the planet. This isn’t a rare mindset today. It is the echo of a far-reaching current of right-wing ecology that sees the biggest problem in the fact that there are “too many” people (Ch. 3). In the climate and biodiversity crisis, therefore, some see humans as the enemy to be fought, rather than the destructive conditions they have created. And fatalism suppresses the awareness of the urgent need to find solidarity-based answers to worsening living conditions.

The extent to which belief in the end times has crept into our consciousness today is also shown by the subtextual shift of a term that has recently been heard more frequently: late capitalism. It is in vogue because it conveys the expectation that what we know is coming to an end. But today, late capitalism has become disconnected from its former pledge: the promise of a transition to socialism. Today, hardly anyone can say what will follow late capitalism. The term now rather conveys the suspicion that capitalism has made people bring about their own end by overexploitation of the natural world – without anything better being able to take its place. Here it becomes apparent that the left has not succeeded in developing a charismatic countermodel to neoliberalism after 1989.

The Culture Industry Continues

Today there is more talk of doom than of new beginnings. And the culture industry is following suit. Perhaps it is also leading the way. End-time films are creating an apocalyptic imaginary, and in literature, the eco-dystopia is probably more popular today than ever before. The “whole apocalyptic tone has condensed,” says Robert Folger, the director of the Heidelberg Käte Hamburger Center for Apocalyptic and Postapocalyptic Studies (CAPAS). “What Netflix is producing today – it’s all very, very post-apocalyptic. Where do all these fantasies come from?”

Perhaps they originate from the manner in which the media works today. The fear of the world is “always communicatively manufactured,” says historian Frank Bösch – and, it must be added, it is characterized today more than ever by a systemically negatively distorted perception. This distorts the image of the world and reinforces fear and defensiveness. Today, the age-old belief in doom is compounded by the existential risks of our time – and a self-perpetuating dynamic of media catastrophizing.

One of the reasons for this lies in the mission of the journalistic media: they are there to expose risks and dangers, to show what is going wrong. And this

takes up a disproportionately large amount of space in reporting. Good news is no news: positive stories have no priority, and therefore are hardly ever conveyed.

At the same time, journalism has been struggling for years with declining circulation and revenue, digitalization, and competition from social media (Ch. 11). Its basic mode of generating attention through dramatization is thus reinforced. Under the premises of the attention economy, social media functions in the exact same way. This increased tendency to dramatize is the second element of negative perception distortion.

There are two additional factors on the part of the news consumers.

First, until just a few years ago, people learned about the world primarily from what a small group of journalists found newsworthy. They got most of their knowledge from a handful of television stations and a few newspapers. These followed semi-professionalized rules of collective negotiation of relevance. Self-reinforcing cycles of mass excitement and hysteria were harder to come by than they are today. The prevailing world view was leveled and moved largely within a limited discursive corridor. But this had its blind spots, which had a lot to do with the distribution of social power. Alternative media, therefore, rightly emerged as a countermovement.

Today, journalistic media are competing against an infinite number of bloggers, activists, NGOs, companies, and government agencies as creators of a worldview. Users can follow whomever they want on social media, and thus have much more influence on what they are offered to read. The extent to which they can determine their image of the world in this way is historically completely new. This favors the reinforcement of previously held convictions through selective news consumption. “If you believe that climate change means the imminent end of humankind, you can easily find confirmation on the Internet,” says Berkeley climate scientist Zeke Hausfather, co-author of Greta Thunberg’s 2022 book *The Climate Book*. “And if you’re of the opinion that climate change is a left-wing hoax,

you can find plenty on that, too.” This effect, known as the “echo chamber” or “filter bubble” effect, has been extensively documented. And yet the depth of its impact has probably not even been grasped yet.

The second bias effect on the part of news consumers is a phenomenon known as “negativity bias”: bad news is perceived disproportionately. This cognitive preference of the human brain once increased the probability of survival, and the evolutionary mechanism is now well proven. For the consumption of news on social media, this means that bad news stories are clicked, liked, processed, and stored by the brain. For some, they can’t let go. Around 2018, the term “doomscrolling” emerged; in 2020, the jury of Australia’s Macquarie Dictionary chose it as the word of the year: “Do your thumbs ache as you scroll through the seemingly endless barrage of bad news from 2020? So do ours,” wrote the jury. The word was a “prominent feature of 2020, with all its troubling news, from the bush fires to the US elections and, of course, the coronavirus.” The fixation on catastrophic scenarios and the increasing inability to see shades of gray, uncertainties, and progress leads to a dynamic that encourages the shrillest tones. Agitation, demagoguery and end-fighting, panic, repression, defensiveness, and escapism are the consequences.

The Possibility to Shape the Future

However, the expectation of the end times, as it is negotiated in our region, is also a Eurocentrism of a very special – and particularly empathy-less – kind. It is often based on the fear of one’s own economic decline from a historically and globally uniquely privileged position. After all, crises cost prosperity. The conviction that the next generation will be better off than the current one no longer seems tenable. The fear of not having a future may, in fact, only be the suspicion that the future may no longer be the way we would like it to be. The extent to which the real ecological and social collapses in the Global South already mean the end of the world for many people already living there is ignored.

For one thing is certain: existential risks have very different effects – and historical, colonial inequalities play a decisive role in this. Those who are already losing their livelihoods generally bear the least responsibility for this – and have the fewest resources to prepare themselves for the risks (Ch. 6, 22). Changing this situation requires strength and faith in the ability to shape the future.

Karl Marx concluded the Communist Manifesto with the famous sentence that the proletarians had “a world to win.” In this way, he bequeathed to the left the belief in progress that it contained. “A New World from the Ashes of the Old” was the slogan chosen by the anarchist CrimethInc Collective from the US. In it, the belief that a left-wing movement can make a better world is retained. The destruction that is taking place is seen here only as a transition to a better tomorrow. It is an encouraging thought, but it finds few supporters today. And with the loss of belief in a better tomorrow comes the loss of the ability to fight for and shape it. This book is intended to show how faith in a better future can be preserved without denying the crises of our time and taking away the justification for many people’s fears.

Rights Inquiries

Inka Ihmels (she/her)
Aufbau Verlage GmbH Co. KG
i.ihmels@aufbau-verlage.de

And wonderful agents in following territories:

Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia

Corto Literary Agency
Marija Bošnjak (she/her)
marija@cortoliterary.com

Brazil

Luciana Villas-Boas (she/her)
Villas-Boas & Moss Literary Agency
luciana@vbmlitag.com

France

Marie Lannurien (she/her)
Books and More - #BAM agency
marie@bamlitagency.com

Greece

Evangelia Avloniti (she/her)
Ersilia Literary Agency
eavloniti@ersilialit.com

Hungary

Rita Tillai (she/her)
Balla-Sztojkov Literary Agency
ballalit@ballalit.hu

Italy

Barbara Griffini (she/her)
Berla & Griffini Rights Agency
griffini@bgagency.it

Israel

Geula Geurts (she/her)
The Deborah Harris Agency
geula@thedeborahharrisagency.com

Netherlands

Linda Kohn (she/her)
Internationaal Literatuur Bureau BV
lkohn@planet.nl

Poland

Anna Kolendarska-Fidyk (she/her)
AKF Literary Agency
akf.agency@hot.pl

Romania

Simona Kessler (she/her)
Simona Kessler International
Copyright Agency
simona@kessler-agency.ro

Russia, Ukraine

Maria Schliesser (she/her)
Literaturagentur Maria Schliesser
schliesser.maria@gmail.com

Spain, Portugal, Latin America (except Brazil)

Amaïur Fernandez (she/her)
International Editors' Co.
Agencia Literaria
amaiur.fernandez@internationaleditors.com

Turkey

Amy Spangler (she/her)
AnatoliaLit Agency
amy@anatolialit.com