

Book Reviews

Political Theory

2018, Vol. 46(6) 959–1008

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Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times, by Alison McQueen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 244 pp. US\$ 80.00, ISBN 9781107152397.

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DOI: 10.1177/0090591718771055

The apocalypse will strike many as an unpromising topic in contemporary political theory. Surely this is the preserve of religious fanatics, and the politically unhinged? Not so, shows Alison McQueen. The apocalypse has not only been with us since the beginnings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it remains a permeating feature of our political reality.

On the right, apocalyptic narratives of a looming existential confrontation between the (Christian) West and the (Muslim) East have been standard for well over two decades now, becoming turbocharged in the wake of 9/11. In the run-up to the Iraq War, George W. Bush presented the righteousness of the American cause in explicitly apocalyptic terms, drawing repeatedly from Christian cataclysmic imagery, continuing a style in American politics employed by both Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt (3–5). In his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump painted a picture of American economic and social failure, about to be brought to a spectacular end by radical Islamic terrorists. “Casting himself in the role of a messiah, Trump promised to lead the United States away from Armageddon and make the country ‘great again.’ Trump’s rhetoric borrows from the narrative of apocalypticism, whilst shedding much of its Christian imagery” (5). Apocalypticism is not, however, under the monopoly of the right. Leftist anti-nuclear campaigners have long emphasised the cataclysmic consequences of nuclear war so as to divert political attention towards disarmament, whilst the environmental movement stresses the almost unimaginably awful consequences of failing to bring anthropogenic climate change under control. After all, if global temperatures rise at current projected rates, the result may be the end of human life. Whether campaigners present this vision (as former vice president Al Gore does) in overtly Biblical language, or in terms of dispassionate secular science, it is still a prediction of apocalypse (6).

But of what concern is this to political theorists? McQueen’s contribution is to identify and analyse what she calls the “apocalyptic imaginary.” Drawing

on the work of Charles Taylor, McQueen understands this as pertaining to more than “a genre of literature or . . . a historical text” but is rather “a way of making sense of our world” (52). Texts and imageries of a coming Armageddon are important when it comes to apocalyptic predictions, but what is central to the apocalyptic *imaginary* is that it purports to provide meaning: about the struggles we are currently engaged in, what our existential place in them is, and how we (or at least, the saved) will finally transcend this vale of tears to achieve final redemption. Thus, whilst much apocalyptic imagery and literature is rooted in Judeo-Christian theology, the apocalyptic imaginary can be decoupled from these theistic origins, coming to shape “the thinking of self-consciously secular political actors as well as those motivated by profound Christian enthusiasm” (56). And the point about enthusiasm—in the older, quasi-pejorative sense of an excess of religious fervour—is particularly important for McQueen. On her account, the apocalyptic imaginary is politically salient, and thus dangerous, because of its tendency towards zealotry.

According to McQueen, the apocalyptic imagery promises not just Armageddon, but redemption. Once the flames have passed, those who are saved will also be purified. This means a “seductive vision of a world without politics” (42), where “difference, disagreement, and conflict can be eliminated” (194). As a direct consequence, because the final state of affairs that the apocalyptic imaginary envisages is a utopian one, this licences the righteous to pre-emptively unleash hell on those who stand in the way of salvation, or who are identified as the reason that the apocalypse is coming in the first place. “The danger of seeing things this way is that it legitimizes violent extremism” (193). Enthusiasm breeds bigotry, and bigotry - if unchecked—breeds murder. The apocalyptic imaginary fuels such bigotry with a vision of political insurrection required to end politics once and for all.

For these reasons, McQueen shows, three of the most prominent “realists” in the history of political thought were deeply preoccupied with the challenges posed by the apocalyptic imaginary. It was because the apocalypse is able to exert such a powerful pull over human imagination that the canonical figures of Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans Morgenthau, each gave considerable attention to addressing it. And as McQueen’s careful historical work in her three central chapters demonstrates, for each of these thinkers apocalypticism was not merely an intellectual problem, but a live political issue that needed to be confronted as a matter of practical urgency. Each lived in their own distinctly apocalyptic times, and thus their “realist” interventions can only be fully understood contextually, which requires recovering—as McQueen does in impressive detail—the wider apocalyptic imaginaries each was writing in response to.

In the case of Machiavelli, McQueen presents his thought as deeply conditioned by the apocalyptic enthusiasm given direction and focus by the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, the most visible and notorious figurehead of what McQueen (in a deliberate allusion to J.G.A. Pocock's seminal study) calls the "Savonarolan moment" in Florentine politics, "a time at which a divine transformation of Florence seemed inevitable" (63). On McQueen's interpretation, the ambiguous and perplexing final chapter of *The Prince* itself engages in apocalyptic exhortation, calling for a prophet who will act as a redemptive figure by giving "political contingency both a meaning and an end" (103). In other words, Machiavelli himself partakes in the post-political promise of the apocalyptic imaginary. Yet, according to McQueen, in the *Discourses on Livy* Machiavelli repudiates his earlier stance and embraces instead a "tragic worldview" (104), emphasising the inevitably cyclical and unending nature of politics. Whilst the *Discourses* have long been recognised as preoccupied with the inevitability of decline and corruption in earthly politics, McQueen's novel suggestion is that it was in significant part Machiavelli's wrestling with apocalypticism that led him to this outlook.

In the case of Hobbes, McQueen offers a detailed reconstruction of the oft-neglected parts 3 and 4 of *Leviathan*, demonstrating how Hobbes sought to defang the apocalyptic enthusiasm that had played such a devastating role in fomenting the English Civil War. Hobbes aimed to offer "a deflationary Christian eschatology that affirms important parts of the narratives of Daniel and Revelation while making apocalypticism safe for sovereign power and civil peace" (195). McQueen simultaneously reads Hobbes's infamous presentation of the state of nature as a form of secularised apocalypse designed to fight the political effects brought about by the deployment of religious narratives of impending cataclysm. This means that, on the one hand, Hobbes uses apocalypse to fight apocalypse. But on the other, Hobbes himself "embraces" one of the apocalyptic imaginary's "most radical hopes" in his vision of the Leviathan state as a utopia wherein the discord and conflict of life without sovereign power can be indefinitely banished (146).

Finally, McQueen interprets Hans Morgenthau as first adopting Machiavelli's "tragic realism," before turning later in life to the Hobbesian strategy of fighting apocalypse with apocalypse. The explanation for the change is again the relevant apocalyptic context. In his earlier work, Morgenthau's main target was the liberal internationalism associated with Woodrow Wilson, which he assimilated to apocalyptic thought owing to its facilitating a worldview in which a "final" great war could be justified on the grounds that it would prevent all future wars. Morgenthau's infamous "realism" in international relations is, for McQueen, a version of Machiavelli's insistence that there is no place beyond politics (domestically or

internationally). Promising to power-craving humans, now equipped with modern political ideologies that functioned like religious faiths, that they could be redeemed through armed conflict would lead only to endless cycles of destruction. Yet the arrival of the thermonuclear age drastically changed Morgenthau's outlook. The destructive power of atomic weaponry deprived human beings of any "hope for secular redemption in the wake of nuclear annihilation," but the enormity of what such an event would entail was so overpowering that he feared it would not be confronted honestly by those living in its shadow (190). This unleashed the danger of insufficient vigilance against the prospect of nuclear apocalypse, via a complacency about what it would mean for the final eradication of not just human life, but all human meaning. In response to this, McQueen argues, Morgenthau paralleled Hobbes in adopting a strategy of fighting apocalypse with apocalypse: in his later work, asking "us to imagine the apocalypse in order to prevent it. In so doing, Morgenthau hopes that we may be able to effect the kind of profound human transformation required to accept a world state" (190). This, however, ultimately led him to advocate the sort of radical change in human nature that his earlier work warned was impossible, and to advocate for the sort of globalist solution he previously railed against as a dangerous chimera.

McQueen's interpretations are compelling, and it is no mean feat to offer fresh and original readings of such well-studied thinkers, in turn asking us to ponder more carefully what it means to be a "realist," and what the limits of such an outlook are. Furthermore, her identification of two main "realist" responses to apocalypticism—the "tragic worldview" and fighting apocalypse with apocalypse—are persuasive, both as matters of historical record and as analyses of the conceptual issues in play.

If there is a weakness in the book's thesis, it is in the attempt to assimilate religious visions of apocalypse to contemporary (secular) threats to the endurance of human life on this planet. We can certainly take McQueen's point that to a religious believer who expects impending Armageddon, there is as much a certainty about the future as the environmentalist's belief in impending climate doom, or the CND campaigner's warning of the consequences of nuclear exchange (6). Nonetheless, the "apocalyptic imaginary" that McQueen analyses is only politically salient in the ways she identifies with regards to apocalyptic visions that partake in some form of theodicy, wherein the day of reckoning is followed by a promise of salvation, which in turn provides political impetus, because adherents fundamentally *welcome* the coming destruction (even if also stressing its horrors). Aside from a handful of laughable magazine articles from the early 1960s that McQueen cites, which claimed that shortly after a nuclear holocaust Americans could embrace a new pioneer spirit (one suspects that CIA money can't have been far away), has anybody seriously maintained that nuclear war, or our impending climate

catastrophe, is a sign that the elect are on the verge of the sunlit uplands that lie beyond politics, and hence that short-term extremist political action is legitimated accordingly? In warning us of the secular apocalypses that we face in the twenty-first century, campaigners may draw upon religious depictions of raining hellfire to try and mobilize imaginations. But the apocalypses we face really are different, because the product of major technological advancements coupled with knowledge of our resultant possible near futures, rather than religious faith issuing in rationally unsupported beliefs in impending catastrophe. And the difference this generates is crucial. The threat from climate change doesn't come from too much politics leading to a frenzy of destabilizing enthusiasm. It comes from *too little* politics, as our present institutional structures find themselves thwarted by the scale of the collective action problems we are currently trapped in.

McQueen hopes that a modern strategy of following Hobbes and Morgenthau—by emphasising the horror of a coming environmental apocalypse so as to try and prevent that very apocalypse from coming to pass—may save us yet (199–205). For my money, though, it is clear that such a strategy has already failed: spelling out the enormity of what we face does not mobilize, but paralyze. This ultimately leaves us with McQueen's other "realist" response to apocalypse: a tragic outlook which becomes "a burdened worldview." Whilst this might be "a morally appropriate response to the dangers of the apocalyptic imaginary" nonetheless "its insistence on a world so resistant to mastery, so unresponsive to virtuous intentions, so capricious in its reward for goodness does not offer much consolation" (199). Indeed. But this world was not made for us, nor we for the world. Why should we expect such consolation to be forthcoming? McQueen herself, it seems, shares with her principal authors a vestigial hope that the realist may partake in the optimism of the apocalypticist. But whether or not one follows her in that, the richness of this book stands beyond doubt, and deserves all of the attention it will surely garner.

Habermas: Think Again

Habermas: A Biography, by Stefan Müller-Doohm. Translated by Daniel Steuer. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016, 598 pp.

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DOI: 10.1177/0090591717731107

Jürgen Habermas's reputation among political theorists is pretty low these days. He has become a kind of stock player in the theater of contemporary political theory. We know him as the inventor of the Consensus Machine, a