



Why We Love the Apocalypse

People in the Peak Oil movement chafe at the label of doomer, but many of us do have an apocalyptic bent. Although plenty of Peak Oil commentary is sober analysis, a survey of major websites and books quickly brings up titles like *dieoff.org*, *oilcrash.com*, *The Death of the Oil Economy*, *The End of Suburbia*, and *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*. Peak Oil writings are awash with predictions that billions will die, civil order will collapse, and civilization will end. Scientists aren't immune — during geologist Ken Deffeyes's Peak Oil presentations, he displays the words "war," "famine," "pestilence," and "death" — the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The Right has the *Left Behind* books, and the Left has Peak Oil.

After I wrote an article ("Apocalypse, Not" see <http://www.patternliteracy.com/apocalypse,not.html> to read it) suggesting that Peak Oil may lead "merely" to widespread unemployment and hardship rather than collapse, hundreds wrote to tell me I was a naïve optimist and a cornucopian. While the end of the oil era possesses a "death and taxes" certitude, plausible post-peak scenarios span a wide scope. So why is the most extreme hypothesis the most widely known? I began to wonder why we seem to be so drawn to the idea of our own extinction.

The point of this article is not to argue for or against a Peak Oil collapse — a futile debate that won't end until we enter that future — or to discuss whether our civilization deserves to continue. Rather, it's an exploration into why, given an impending crisis or major challenge, many people in our culture spiral so automatically toward an "end of the world" vision rather than any of the countless alternatives.

Why the Apocalypse?

My earliest hypothesis was that a person's chosen belief system about our energy future was based more on personality than on data: Given the same information, people I knew to be optimists generally envisioned a positive future, while pessimists descended into doomerism. But with this simplistic reasoning, I was leaving out a growing mass of critiques of civilization itself by authors such as Joseph Tainter, Derrick Jensen, and Daniel Quinn, and others esteemed by many Peak Oil adherents. While these writers argue that civilization is evil, unsustainable, and must collapse, they also posit that human beings deserve something better — something that can only arise after this culture dies. This death-and-rebirth thinking didn't fit my "optimist versus pessimist" hypothesis; and seeing how vehemently and urgently people argue for doom-and-gloom — I've literally had my lapels grabbed — made me suspect that neither individual psyche nor the cold logic of reason was solely at work.

I now believe that Peak Oil catastrophism is largely a manifestation of our primary cultural myth: namely, that all things end with suffering, death, and then resurrection. Belief in apocalypse is programmed into western civilization. Given our heritage, "the end is nigh" is the nearly unavoidable response to times of uncertainty and rapid change.

Apocalypticism is at the core of the Judeo-Christian social mythology, and it influences our beliefs far more deeply than we are conscious of. Cultural beliefs are in the air we breathe. We are programmed by our knowledge of mortality and of the

natural world, as well as by millennia of myth-telling, to believe that all things, from organisms to businesses to civilizations, progress from birth to a shuddering death and, often, a renewal in new form. The idea of apocalypse, that some time soon the End Times will be upon us and all will be transformed, is one of the most fundamental tenets of the western belief system. A look at the history and particulars of apocalypticism reveals that Peak Oil catastrophism conforms to our apocalyptic myth in such detail that it is difficult to deny its role.

The archetypal apocalypse story in the West is, of course, that of Jesus of Nazareth. Both his life's story and his messianic prophecies of Judgment Day reflect oppression, death, and transformation, following the common arc of the apocalypse myth. This trajectory is echoed in the Peak Oil projection of increasing global despoliation and chaos, collapse, and the belief that "after Peak Oil, everything will change." But this myth has also emerged hundreds of other times in history. Jesus would have remained one of thousands of minor apocalyptic prophets, all predicting a similar end, if not for the brilliant public

Religions Roots of Peak Oil Doomerism

relations of Saul of Tarsus and other early Christians. And one of their tactics was to piggy-back the story of Jesus onto pre-existing apocalypse myths. Such myths predate Jesus by centuries. Ancient Greece, Persia, and Egypt are their primary birthplaces for the West; in Greek mythology, Zeus destroyed the world several times via flood, fire, and war. In one typical example, Zeus, seeing that humanity had become corrupt, ended the world by flood, sparing only two people to found a new race. This is the primal myth underlying the apocalypse scenario: humanity becomes wicked and is destroyed — except for a select few, who go on to birth a new world.

Always a Social Context

Most people think of apocalyptic groups as religious sects. Religion and apocalypse are still tightly wedded, but as religion has been replaced with other organizing principles such as science and economics, so too have the reasons given popular expression for the next apocalypse. Religious people express their doomsday beliefs through acts of their deities, but the common feature of apocalyptic belief is not religion: it is a social background of upheaval and anxiety. When times get tough, people in Western cultures gravitate to the idea that there will be an end to the wickedness and misery through disaster and collapse.

One clear example is one of the first Western apocalypse stories with a known historical setting, the prophetic dream of the world's end in the Biblical Book of Daniel. Here, political and social strife paints the background. The story was written about 165 B.C.E., during the height of a Jewish revolt against a Syrian-Greek tyrant who trampled on civil and spiritual liberties and forbade Jewish religious ceremony. The author envisions four beasts, each representing a successive ruler of Palestine, and the final beast will “devour the earth . . . and break it in pieces.” This rapacious empire would then be overthrown, and only Israel would be saved. Nearly every subsequent example of apocalyptic belief occurs at a similar time filled with upheaval, oppression, and alienation. Sound familiar?

Countless other apocalyptic movements have arisen in similar contexts of confusion and oppression. In 13th century Germany, Frederick II was enmeshed in bitter conflict with the Pope, claiming that the Church was irredeemably corrupt. During this clash, Joachin of Fiore arose as a prophet to preach of approaching last days when the Church would be destroyed, choosing 1260 as the date of its collapse. Later, in the reign of the singularly ineffective Frederick III, when the gap between rich and poor grew enormous, and lawless nobles extorted the populace, the Bohemian Wirsburg brothers attracted thousands who believed the final days would come in 1467. Apocalyptic cults arise, it seems, in a context of oppression, uncertainty, and corruption.

Some may argue that myths spoke of destruction brought about by supernatural powers, while the end times we face today stem from scientifically-proven sources such as resource depletion. But this, too, follows the constant remodeling of myths to suit the times. In ancient times, the apocalypse was believed to have been brought about by a god. In the early centuries of the common era, human warrior-leaders were the destructive force, while in the late Middle Ages, during a major migration of peasant farm-workers toward urban centers, it was the fury of the newly empowered laborers in the Jacquerie rebellion of 1356 that was predicted to bring down the nobility.

In the 16th century, astrology was the favored method of predicting the future and newly-improved methods of planetary observation were conscripted by catastrophists. In the 1530s, French astrologer Pierre Turrel used four different methods to calculate final dates of 1537, 1544, 1801, and 1814. Astrologer Richard Harvey marked the end as 1583, during a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.

The newly refined sciences were enlisted to prove the end was near. In 1578, physician Helisaeus Roeslin of Alsace used observations of a nova visible in 1572 to foretell a final date of 1654. In 1688, John Napier, inventor of the logarithm, made his first doomsday calculation based on a mathematical analysis of the Book of Revelation. The 19th-century astronomer Charles Piazzi Smith used the dimensions of the Great Pyramid to prove that the world would end between 1892 and 1911, while the date December 17, 1919 was chosen by meteorologist Allbert Porta, when six planets would enter conjunction, creating a magnetic force that would, this scientist wrote, “pierce the sun, cause great explosions of flaming gas, and eventually engulf the Earth.”

More recently, the stars have again predicted doom. David Berg, leader of the Family of Love, predicted that Comet Kohoutek would destroy the planet in 1974. A few of the dozens of other “scientifically verified” causes of world's end were a planetary alignment in 1982, comet Shoemaker-Levy 9's 1994 collision with Jupiter,

and of course, Y2K. As science has replaced faith as a source of social cohesion, so have our myriad predictions of apocalypse become more rationally defensible.

The Modern Doomsday

The United States is the most apocalypse-drenched nation on Earth. It was so even before the stormy death-rebirth cycle of the American Revolution: after Christopher Columbus's third journey to the New World, he began signing his letters “Christ-carrier” — and wrote that the world would end in 1650. Cults, charismatic leaders and apocalyptic sects find fertile earth in America to this very day from the Branch Davidians, to Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, or even the Y2K scare — we seem ready to find almost any reason to believe that the end is nigh.

As science has replaced faith as a source of social cohesion, so have our myriad predictions of apocalypse become more rationally defensible.

Our apocalyptic tendencies tend to peak in hard times. In the 1830s, the rise of the anti-slavery movement coincided with a resurgence of doomsday sects and prophets. William Miller, an abolitionist minister with 50,000 followers and a million or more sympathetic to his message, predicted that Judgement Day would arrive on October 14, 1844. After that date, his movement collapsed; but the abolitionists and their foes continued to invoke end-times rhetoric in their arguments. Slavery was seen, with good reason, as having the potential to destroy the nation. But instead of getting an end of the world, what the nation got was the Civil War: a hideous ordeal but hardly the End Times.

The doomerist Peak Oil scenario also replicates the final phase of the apocalypse story: that of rebirth after the collapse. Richard Heinberg, in a speech to the E. F. Schumacher society, said that after the peak, we will return to a more agrarian way of life, when “we actually regain much of what we have lost.” He and others envision a future with far fewer people, many of them living rurally and raising most of their own food using permaculture and bio-intensive gardening. Some argue that post-peak, only those with primitive skills such as tanning and flint-knapping will survive: suburban drones will die. So after the collapse, we follow the myth’s final trajectory into the survival of an elect, and a rebirth into the Garden of Eden.

My point here is not that Peak Oil doomerism is wrong. (For more on that analysis, see my essay “Apocalypse Not” at <http://www.patternliteracy.com/apocalypse,not.html>) The apocalypses may, for the first time, be right. But remember, as you feel yourself drawn to their story, that we are culturally programmed to believe in the End Times; that does not make such beliefs either rational or moral. Whether describing first-century Christians, 14th-century weavers, or oil addicts about to tumble down Hubbert’s Curve, people who take the apocalyptic view often have good reason to believe they are in mortal danger. The source of the threat varies — an angry god, a brutal empire, a class struggle, or resource depletion — but the response has remained the same. The path to “end of the world” thinking is well trod. But perhaps some of us can resist the natural urge to repeat the story once more, and remember that there are many routes into the future other than the one toward the lowest common denominator. ▲

Bibliography

Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Oxford University Press, 1970.

George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People’s Religion: American Faith in the 90s*, Macmillan, 1989.

Charles Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America*, Beacon Press, 1994.

Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

This essay was redacted and adapted with the author’s permission, from an essay titled “Origins of Peak Oil Doomerism”, published online at the author’s website at www.patternliteracy.com

— TOBY HEMENWAY is the author of the first major North American book on permaculture, *Gaia’s Garden: A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture*, and an adjunct professor at Portland State University. He is also Scholar in Residence at Pacific University and lives in the Portland, Oregon, metro area. For more information on his work, see his website at www.patternliteracy.com

The God at Winter

Through the winters we have danced with you,
Lord of Beasts, horned beauty,
Inhaled the smell of goat
And turned it to power.

We of your women have painted caves,
Drank the blood of white bulls.
Our visions sang of visions to come.
With our wine we have washed
Your ancient stones,
And with our bodies blessed them.

It was we who forged the moon blade,
Lorded in the druid’s hand, we
Who echoed the roar of our
Hunting men
And willed the mistletoe to fall.

Pan of the mountains,
Cernunnos of the endless cave,
Dance with us in the cold
Heart of winter,
And raise us into mist.

— Katharine Clark