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## Book Review

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Hauke Riesch, *Apocalyptic Narratives: Science, Risk and Prophecy*, Routledge Studies in Science, Technology and Society (New York, Routledge, 2021), ix + 188 pp., \$160.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780367275730.

In *Apocalyptic Narratives*, Hauke Riesch, a senior lecturer in the sociology of science at Brunel University, London, considers how religious ideas regarding the apocalypse frame secular narratives about contemporary crises. For Riesch, 'apocalypse' is a 'diffuse' concept with roots in Jewish and Christian thinking, but that in contemporary Western societies is 'cultural baggage that we carry around with us and that we use to make sense of new and otherwise bewildering threats to our existence' (p. 4). The book considers how this 'cultural baggage' has shaped policy responses to a range of 'bewildering threats,' including climate change, nuclear war, pandemics, asteroid strikes, and geological cataclysms. Riesch argues that paying greater attention to religious discourses might provide public officials and scientists with more robust communicative tools for tackling ecological crises.

Riesch opens his study on a personal note 'This book represents my attempt to make some sense of how I should feel about my own apocalyptic fears—largely around climate change—by putting them into the context of the wider cultural heritage of apocalypse, and how the apocalypse as an interpretive narrative frame can push us into certain stances with regard to current fears' (p. 3). Of the many possible stances that apocalyptic discourses encourage, it is the sense of inevitability that Riesch fears most. Such a stance can lead to a sense that a given catastrophe is unavoidable and no amount of political engagement or social mobilization can divert us from a disastrous future. Pushing aside apathy and complacency, Riesch insists that mobilizing apocalyptic discourse as a communicative strategy opens both possibilities and dangers for responding to environmental crises.

At one moment, in Riesch's accounting, apocalyptic warnings of impending doom can provide opportunities for prodding people to reimagine potential post-catastrophe futures that are resilient and hopeful. His early chapters outline how the distinction between scientific knowledge and religious ideas is not always as clear as contemporary observers might assume. Riesch argues that contemporary secular concepts such as 'nature' and 'risk' do most of the same conceptual work as 'od' and 'fate' for religious believers (p. 1). Even 'secular' warnings about the catastrophic implications of climate change can take on the tone of religious apocalyptic prophecy in which dire secular warnings seem to happen within 'apocalyptic time'. For those who have ears to hear, 'signs and portents are everywhere' and insignificant events might be 're-interpreted as something the prophecy has foreseen' (p. 4). Whether policy makers frame contemporary problems

as explicitly or implicitly 'apocalyptic', the deep cultural structure of apocalyptic narratives underlying contemporary crises can help us understand their moral implications—especially as 'existential risks' that threaten all of humanity. Apocalyptic narratives give 'abstract concepts a moral agency that lets us explain the uncaring, unfeeling action of things of chance as decisions and action made by someone' (p. 60). As a result, Riesch concludes, there are potential political opportunities in drawing on apocalyptic discourses 'as a way of communicating the issue and drawing attention to its urgency and destructive potential' (p. 159).

However, apocalyptic discourse can frame catastrophes in terms of a self/other dichotomy or in-group/out-group dynamics that might encourage cooperation at small social scales—like local communities, regions, or even nations—but simultaneously thwart cooperation at larger orders of magnitude such as mass social groups or large-scale pluralistic political entities. Nowhere is this tension clearer than in Riesch's lucid discussion of the problem of risk in modern societies. In the concept of risk, Riesch sees a 'boundary object' that is a 'contemporary frame through which apocalyptic fears are being expressed' (p. 74-75). In his assessment of contemporary sociological theories of risk, Riesch prefers Mary Douglas's ideas to Ulrich Beck's 'risk society' model. Riesch notes that Douglas was suspicious of the idea that western conceptions of risk are rooted in rationalistic calculations and, instead, she insisted certain social taboos and forms of nonrational category-making manage the boundaries between things that do not fit into preexisting social categories. Scientists might want to insist that risk assessment emerges from the desire to manage uncertainty and control the future through technical means, but a cultural theory of risk suggests that contemporary thinking on the subject is shot through with nonrational ideas about identifying the 'amoral, disgusting and taboo-breaking behavior' driving global crises. Here Riesch invokes the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to blame marginal actors—the poor, migrants, political enemies, and so on—for the disease and its rapid spread. Riesch's reflections on efforts to categorize 'risky' social objects and to manage their disastrous consequences underscores that apocalyptic discourse has as many downsides for shaping public policy as it does potential benefits.

Finally, and perhaps most disconcertingly, the failure of past apocalyptic prophecies—from the perpetually deferred second coming of Jesus to the failed secular warnings about the 'population bomb' or global 'cooling'—might prompt many observers to shrug off the potentially catastrophic effects of climate change or the next global pandemic. This leads Riesch to conclude on a pessimistic note because apathy or optimism that things might not get too bad could lead to complacency (p. 163). In the end, with climate change, Riesch wants us to embrace the urgency and anxiety prompted by apocalyptic thinking to encourage people to see themselves as moral actors playing a key role in an eschatological drama with existential implications for all humans.

The result is an ambivalent ending to thought-provoking work that is long on discursive analysis but short of concrete communicative solutions. Riesch leaves his reader with the nagging sense that the apocalyptic narrative structures he identifies might help social groups deal with ecological crises by giving them a powerful sense of moral urgency. Or those same apocalyptic discourses might stoke divisions, promote conspiratorial scapegoating, and make ecological crises that much harder to avert. He closes by noting, 'While some authors writing

about global existential risks like nuclear war or climate change like to end with an upbeat optimistic note, I don't' (p. 163). Well, mission accomplished.

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