SUMMARY: Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times
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Overview

Beliefs about the end of the world are often seen as a fringe phenomenon. We imagine a band of vulnerable people who, under the direction of a charismatic leader, have gathered in a rural bunker to await the apocalypse or to pursue their doomsday expectations to a violent consummation. Some of the most prominent cases of apocalypticism (e.g. the Branch Davidians, Heaven’s Gate, Aum Shinrikyo, ISIS) certainly seem to fit this pattern. Yet apocalypticism is far from marginal. Not only are such beliefs central to a strong and influential strand of American evangelicalism, they also occupy a prominent place in our political and popular culture—from the rhetoric of the war on terror to the discourse of global climate change. In part for these reasons, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in both overtly religious and seemingly secular visions of the end of the world and their importance to our spiritual, political, and moral life (Landes 2011, Pagels 2012, Scheffler 2013, Sutton 2014). Whether they are held by the marginal or the powerful, whether they are overtly religious or seemingly secular, apocalyptic beliefs share an expectation of an imminent and cataclysmic end to the known world and the arrival of a radically new future. And for those who are ill at ease with the status quo, this expectation can be captivating and seductive.

This book suggests that we find a deep engagement with apocalyptic beliefs in an unexpected place—the political realist tradition. Within the fields of political theory and the history of International Relations thought, there has been a renewed interest in political realism (B. Williams 2005, M. Williams 2005, Geuss 2008, Bell 2009, Scheuerman 2009, Floyd and Stears 2011, Maloy 2013). Members of the realist tradition are seen to take conflict and power to be constitutive of politics, reject as utopian those approaches which seem to deny this fact, and prioritize the requirements of political order and stability over the demands of justice. On its face, this tradition seems like an unlikely site for extended engagements with apocalyptic beliefs, which combine terrifying fears with hopes for a radical transformation of the social world, to powerful and often unconstrained emotive effect.

Yet several thinkers who are taken to be defining members of the realist tradition developed their political ideas against the backdrop of widespread apocalyptic expectations. For instance, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980) all wrote during times when powerful political, social, and religious actors were announcing the imminent end of the world. Machiavelli wrote in the context of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola’s disturbing apocalyptic visions about the future of Florence. Thomas Hobbes developed his political thought against the backdrop of both radical and royalist attempts to cast the English Civil War in apocalyptic terms. Working much later, Hans Morgenthau wrote his most influential works on international politics in the aftermath of the Holocaust and in the shadow of the atomic bomb and the looming threat of nuclear annihilation. However, there has been no sustained attention to the way in which these thinkers’ realist commitments might have been shaped by these fears and hopes about the end of the world.

This book seeks to examine the relationship between apocalypticism and political realism in the thought of these three canonical political realists. I demonstrate that the apocalyptic contexts in
which Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau wrote had profound effects on the development of their thought. The three thinkers pursue sustained engagements with apocalypticism in ways that sometimes deepen and at other times challenge what are often taken to be their quintessentially realist commitments. Through an historical and contextual analysis, I argue that these engagements take one of two forms. The first is rejection—a principled and considered turn away from apocalypticism and toward a tragic worldview that emphasizes the ease with which virtuous actions can produce terrible consequences, insists on the limits to effective political action, and warns of the impossibility of final and enduring political settlements. This is the response adopted by Machiavelli in his later work and by Morgenthau in his earlier work. In Machiavelli’s case, this response encourages the development and maturation of his realist thought. In both Machiavelli and the early Morgenthau’s cases, this rejection is the result of a serious and troubled engagement with apocalypticism. The second approach is redirection—an attempt to draw on the rhetorical, visual, and imaginative resources of apocalypticism to combat its enthusiastic excesses. It is an approach that fights apocalypse with apocalypse. This is the tack taken by Hobbes in order to make his case for the Leviathan state and by Morgenthau in his later writings on nuclear weapons. For both Hobbes and the later Morgenthau, this attempt to respond to apocalypticism by redeploying it puts pressure on central aspects of these thinkers’ realism and provides them with the imaginative tools to secure adherence to utopian schemes. Taken together, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau’s responses offer us a series of meditations on how best to respond to outbreaks of apocalypticism and the catastrophes that incite them.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction
This introductory chapter motivates the central concerns of the book, offers a summary of its core argument, outlines its methodological approach (historical contextualism), and provides a plan of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: Theorizing Apocalypse: From Context to Concept
This chapter offers a contextual and political reading of the two canonical apocalyptic texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition—the books of Daniel and Revelation. I locate these works within their historical contexts and highlight the ways in which Daniel and Revelation imagine and respond to concrete political developments. The chapter then examines two early Christian attempts by Paul of Tarsus and Augustine of Hippo to contain the radical political potential of these apocalyptic texts. While they are interesting in themselves, these containment attempts have a larger significance for this project, as Paul and Augustine are often taken to be the two foundational figures of a Christian strand of political realism. I identify responses to apocalypticism that will later be deployed by Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans Morgenthau in their respective times. Finally, the chapter expands on a latent intuition in Paul and Augustine’s work—that the power and potential danger of apocalypticism lie in its capacity to captivate the imagination. I explore what it might mean to theorize the apocalypse not as a genre of literature, or even a worldview, but as an imaginary.

Chapter 3: Niccolò Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment
This chapter situates Niccolò Machiavelli’s political work against the backdrop of Florentine apocalypticism. I focus particularly on the preaching of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, who promised that God would violently irrupt into secular history and create a heavenly kingdom
on earth. I argue that Machiavelli’s work bears the mark of this Savonarolan context. The final chapter of The Prince, I suggest, is an apocalyptic exhortation that in its rhetoric and imagery amounts to a secular political reiteration of the Savonarolan message. I propose that Machiavelli gravitates toward this apocalyptic solution in The Prince because he has failed to understand and master the contingency of the political world by containing it with analytical categories, ordering it with general rules, or analogizing it with metaphors for fortune. Yet in the Discourses on Livy, Machiavelli rejects the apocalyptic mode, embracing instead a robustly tragic sensibility that is epistemologically humble without being politically defeatist and that is wary of the promises of a redemptive politics. Even in the Discourses, however, we continue to see strange hints of apocalyptic hope, suggesting that Machiavelli cannot fully abandon the redemptive vision of the Savonarolan moment.

Chapter 4: Thomas Hobbes: ‘At the Edge of Promises and Prophecies’

This chapter considers the thought of Thomas Hobbes in the context of the explosion of apocalyptic prophecy in seventeenth-century England. The chaos and violence of the English Civil War only seemed to confirm the apocalyptic expectation that God would come to earth to save the elect and condemn the damned. I argue that this apocalyptic imaginary shaped Hobbes’ later work, and particularly Leviathan. While Christian eschatology had initially been deployed as a legitimating tool by kings and church authorities, the apocalyptic imaginary escaped this effort at sovereign control and was suddenly abroad in the land. Hobbes responds to this threat not by condemning the apocalyptic imaginary, but by redirecting in the service of sovereign power and civil peace. He fights apocalypse with apocalypse. Hobbes pursues two paths in his project—one that is overtly Scriptural and another that is seemingly secular. His Scriptural argument takes aim at both the conveyors and the content of apocalyptic prophecy, ultimately offering a deflationary reinterpretation of Christian eschatology. Hobbes’ political argument stages a secular apocalypse, in which the terror and chaos of the state of nature are the narrative prelude and rhetorical prerequisite to an enduring commonwealth ruled by a mortal God.

Chapter 5: Hans Morgenthau and the Postwar Apocalyptic Imaginary

From the Nazi belief in a millennial Reich to the redemptive hopes that nuclear war could usher in a new world of peace and prosperity, the Judeo-Christian apocalypse insinuated itself into the seemingly secular ideas and images of the twentieth century. This chapter argues that Hans Morgenthau’s postwar work is centrally concerned with the dangers of this secularized apocalyptic imaginary. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, his work takes aim at the eschatological hopes of contemporary political religions. While the memory of Nazism looms large during this period, Morgenthau’s primary target is liberal internationalism. In its most aggressive form, this secular religion sees a decisive battle against the forces of tyranny as the necessary prerequisite for a permanent democratic peace. Morgenthau’s response to the liberal apocalyptic imaginary is to reject it. Like Machiavelli, he opposes the apocalyptic longing for the violent birth of a new world with a tragic insistence on the inescapable and undecided struggle of politics. However, in the early 1960s, in the shadow of the terrifying prospect of thermonuclear war, Morgenthau turns away from tragedy and adopts the Hobbesian strategy of redirection, fighting apocalypse with apocalypse. Against dangerously optimistic scenarios of nuclear war, he offers a terrifying account of an apocalypse without worldly redemption. Faced with the novel threat of nuclear annihilation, he seems to conclude that tragedy is not enough. We must constantly imagine the apocalypse in order to prevent it.
Chapter 6: Conclusion
In this concluding chapter, I revisit Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau’s strategies for responding to the apocalyptic imaginary and offer a brief normative and practical assessment of the strategies of rejection and redirection. Taken together, I suggest, these encounters with the apocalyptic imaginary offer us a series of meditations on responding to catastrophe that is as relevant now as it was in the unique circumstances of these thinkers’ respective times.

Works Cited