The Age of Catastrophic Thinking

"Probably," Norman Mailer wrote in 1957, "we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years." Today, however, we have something like an answer: We are living in an age of catastrophic thinking. Our social and cultural discourse on any number of subjects—the environment, the economy, public health, technology—is defined by a vocabulary and a worldview that can only be described as apocalyptic. The world, we are constantly told, is in a state of mortal crisis, and unless we act fast enough to stop it, we are all facing disaster and oblivion. Everything, it seems, is swiftly accelerating toward a terrible end.

While catastrophic thinking has become ubiquitous on any number of issues, it is nowhere more apparent than on the subject of the environment, especially the topic of global warming. Of course, this appears most explicitly among the various groups specifically dedicated to the cause of environmentalism, but the sentiment has already become a worldwide phenomenon. Perhaps its most famous exponent, former United States vice president Al Gore, used explicitly apocalyptic language to describe the problem in his Oscar-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth*.

> You see that pale, blue dot? That's us. Everything that has ever happened in all of human history has happened on that pixel. All the triumphs and all the tragedies, all the wars, all the famines, all the major advances… it's our only home. And that is what is at stake, our ability to live on planet Earth,

> to have a future as a civilization…. It is our time to rise again to secure our future…. It takes time to connect the dots, I know that. But I also know that there can be a day of reckoning when you wish you had connected the dots more quickly.

Global warming, however, is only the most popular vehicle for prophecies of environmental disaster. Overpopulation, we are told, will soon cause unprecedented starvation, war, crime, and mass extinctions. And chemical pollution, for its part, is said to affect the hormonal makeup of our bodies, resulting in the "feminization" of the species, so that sooner or later we will produce only female offspring, and the human race will lose its capacity to reproduce.

The current economic crisis has also given rise to a whole new genre of anxiety. In September 2008, former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan set the tone by telling ABC News, "Let's recognize that this is a once-in-a-half-century, probably once-in-a-century type of event…. There's no question that this is in the process of outstripping anything I've seen." In February 2009, the *Washington Post* informed its readers,

> The daily White House intelligence report that catalogs the top security threats to the nation has a grim new addition, reflecting the realities of the age: a daily update on the global financial crisis and its cascading effects on the stability of countries through the world…. The new director of national intelligence, Dennis C. Blair, told a Senate panel this month that economic woes have largely replaced terrorism as the country's no. 1 security challenge.

In January 2009, the *Guardian* reported, "Europe's time of troubles is gathering depth and scale. Governments are trembling. Revolt is in the air." Economists who had been marginalized for decades due to their predictions of an economic Judgment Day were suddenly in demand, such as dissident economist Ravi Batra of Southern Methodist University, who told the *Fort Worth Weekly* in December 2008: "We are on the verge of a social revolution—it's already started [with Obama's election]." The same month,

he told Watermark Financial, "August 2007 was the start of a long period of global economic turmoil. Now that the turmoil is here for everyone to see, my worst fears are confirmed. An economic collapse is upon us…. We will soon see a revolution and then, twenty to forty years from now, economic democracy and the end of monopoly capitalism."

Recently, the catastrophe *du jour* has been the swine flu pandemic, which has elicited outbursts of the most extravagant rhetoric from official circles. After the initial outbreak, Dr. Margaret Chan, the World Health Organization's director-general, announced, "Above all this is an opportunity for global solidarity as we look for responses and solutions that benefit all countries, all of humanity. After all, it really is all of humanity that is under threat during a pandemic." Seemingly taking its cue from Dr. Chan, the May 2, 2009 cover of the *Economist* featured a cartoon of the grim reaper—complete with bloody scythe—wearing a surgical mask and leafing through a world atlas. The headline above read, "The Pandemic Threat."

These various examples of apocalyptic anxiety may at first seem unrelated. In fact, they are remarkably similar. All of them predict a coming global disaster; all of them use ominous rhetoric and imagery to give weight to their prognostications; and all of them claim that mankind has only a very short time left to take action in order to prevent the cataclysm they are sure is coming. In light of this, one cannot help but wonder how and why catastrophic thinking has become such a prevalent feature of our day and age—and what effect this new *zeitgeist* may have on our lives.

The belief that global disaster is at hand is not new. In one form or another, it has been with us since the beginnings of human civilization. Pagan cultures from Mesopotamia to the Aztecs were always alert to the possibility of imminent cataclysm, while Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all posit a coming day of divine judgment. There is, however, a profound difference between the end-times predictions of our forebears and the apocalyptic prophecies of today. In the past, visions of the end of the world

often contained a strong measure of hope alongside the requisite fear and trembling. In the great monotheistic religions, the end of days was always to be followed by divine redemption, in which evil would be conquered, celestial justice would be rendered, and man would return to an Edenic existence, either on a utopian Earth (as in Judaism) or in the kingdom of heaven (as in Islam and Christianity).

This mixture of fear and hope survived well into the age of secular modernity. The social and economic upheavals of the Industrial Revolution were tempered by the belief that scientific progress would lead to a better world for all; World War I was to be "the war to end all wars;" the abyss of the Holocaust was followed by what many saw as the redemptive act of refounding the Jewish state; and even the threat of nuclear annihilation failed to snuff out collective faith in human advancement. It is worth remembering that at the very moment the world came closest to nuclear war, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, America was hurtling past the Soviets in the space race and would have a man on the moon in less than a decade.

Since then, the general mood has changed considerably. Humanity appears to have, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once put it, "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken." And nowhere have the symptoms of this collective ennui become more apparent than in our attitude toward technology. Certainly, the scope and pace of technological advancement has always had its critics and opponents, from the Luddites and Mary Shelley to modern eco-terrorists and technophobes. But until recently, the belief that science and technology had, at the very least, the *potential* to lift mankind to new heights managed to retain its grip upon the spirit of the age. Now, however, technology seems to be used mostly as, at best, a means of amusement, convenience, and pleasure. At worst, it is thought of as an instrument of dehumanization and destruction. Humanity, having pronounced the death of God, is now busy pronouncing the death of the Machine.

Indeed, the moon landings—the pinnacle of human technological progress—now seem to have been more of an end than a beginning. Despite the rapturous enthusiasm that greeted the first mission, later trips to

the moon were met, for the most part, with boredom. The only exception was the Apollo 13 accident, which, of course, had the attraction of being a disaster. Since then, NASA's flagship program has been the Space Shuttle, which, while having its scientific virtues, is essentially a glorified reusable satellite. Forty years after Neil Armstrong, humanity remains resolutely trapped in low Earth orbit.

This became painfully apparent when former president George W. Bush announced the Vision for Space Exploration in 2004. The ambitious plan was not met with rapturous enthusiasm or fear and contempt. For the most part, the reaction was one of total indifference. Real excitement was reserved for faster Internet connections, more complex and realistic video games, and more elaborate cellular phones. It was, perhaps, fitting that during the same week the swine flu outbreak monopolized the headlines, NASA quietly revealed that it was scrapping its plans for a permanent lunar base. The primary reason for doing so was, of course, budgetary constraints. And indeed, NASA's $17.6 billion budget for 2008 falls well short of the $21.33 billion spent on video games during the same year in North America alone.

While technology has almost ceased to be regarded as a means of engineering a better future for mankind, it has certainly not lost its capacity to terrify us. Scientific and medical breakthroughs that would once have inspired the human imagination are now routinely met with suspicion and even outright, unreasoning terror. A striking case of this occurred with the construction of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), a massive particle accelerator built on the Swiss-French border. The scientific community greeted the event with unreserved enthusiasm. Indeed, many physicists claimed that the LHC would lead to major scientific breakthroughs that might grant them unprecedented insight into the origins of the cosmos. As the world-renowned scientist Stephen Hawking explained,

> The LHC will increase the energy at which we can study particle interactions by a factor of four. According to present thinking, this should be enough to discover the Higgs particle, the particle that gives mass to all the

> other particles…. Their existence would be a key confirmation of string theory, and they could make up the mysterious dark matter that holds galaxies together. Whatever the LHC finds, or fails to find, the results will tell us a lot about the structure of the universe.

A great many people, however, were convinced—or convinced themselves—that the LHC would, upon ignition, destroy the Earth. MSNBC correspondent Alan Boyle reported "fears that the experiment might create globe-gobbling black holes or never-before-seen strains of matter that would destroy the planet." One opponent referred to the device as "a cosmological bomb billions of times more powerful than the atomic bomb." The assurances of noted physicists that the LHC was perfectly safe did little to assuage the sense of dread, which spread through the media and quickly took on a life of its own.

It is comforting, perhaps, to simply write this off as mere technophobia, but it actually reflects a broad social phenomenon. Apocalyptic fear of technology has even been enacted into normative law—most notably by the European Union—in the form of the "precautionary principle," which holds that if a given technology has the potential to cause catastrophic harm, it may be prohibited *even in the absence of scientific consensus on the issue*. Needless to say, the flaw in such a principle should be readily apparent to any thinking person: It is both a blank check and a self-fulfilling prophecy, because almost any technology has at least the *potential* to cause or contribute to possible catastrophe. The seemingly innocuous electric toothbrush, for instance, is made of plastic, which is not biodegradable; and it's powered either by batteries, which may leak and cause harmful pollution, or by electric power, which consumes fossil fuels and contributes to global warming. One is forced to conclude from this that the precautionary principle is not so much a legal or scientific principle, but rather a manifestation of collective panic.

This is not simply a case of the foolishness of crowds. To believe that technology may have its dark side requires little more than healthy

skepticism. To believe that a physics experiment is going to destroy the Earth, however, requires exactly the opposite. It requires an active suppression of the critical faculties, a suspension of disbelief so profound that it can only be described as willful. So much so that one is forced to conclude that something about humanity today is not only prone to catastrophic thinking, but actually attracted to it.

Certainly, fear of impending disaster is usually seen as a negative emotion. In fact, however, it has unquestionably positive aspects. First and perhaps foremost, it is exciting. In a world given over to comfort and entertainment, in which we are more and more interconnected while having less and less to say, fear provides a profound antidote to boredom and stasis. It motivates people and convinces them that their lives are important and meaningful. This is especially true if catastrophic thinking is combined—as it almost always is—with the belief that the disaster can be averted. All of today's popular apocalyptic scenarios make the claim that if we act now, and above all act *together*, there is a chance of preventing the end. The task of prevention, in turn, provides a sense of purpose, however misguided it may be. Moreover, it gives people the feeling that they have power over their surroundings, that they can influence the world around them for the better through conscious action. In many ways, this bears a strong resemblance to the religious impulse, especially in its need to proselytize.

It also serves to ameliorate another universal source of distress: the sense of alienation that haunts the modern world. Indeed, Dr. Chan reflected this malaise when she spoke of potential disaster as "an opportunity for global solidarity." As she correctly perceived, the fear of a worldwide calamity unites us by putting us all under the same threat and, thus, in the same boat. It provides a very real sense of global brotherhood and the feeling that one really is a part of all humanity. And, it must be said, this feeling is not entirely an illusion. People who join activist groups, political parties, and religious organizations usually *do* exhibit a communal spirit that is

lacking in other aspects of their lives. Even in the face of calamity—perhaps especially so—comradeship can be forged between strangers. Indeed, apocalyptic trepidation may well be the only way that many people today can even *conceive* of a single destiny for all of mankind.

It is difficult, however, to be entirely sanguine about the phenomenon as it exists today. Panic is not only a cheap and somewhat dishonorable way of motivating people. It is also a dangerous one. Fear, especially irrational fear, can be easily harnessed for nefarious purposes, as the history of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century amply demonstrates. People in the grip of apocalyptic terror are quite often willing to take extreme measures in order to prevent or even hasten the end they are certain is coming. The enthusiasm generated by catastrophic thinking can motivate people to do good, but it can just as easily give license to evil.

The most harmful aspect of all this, however, is that, while such thinking may bring us closer, in certain ways, to other people, it also fundamentally cuts us off from life. A life lived in fear, after all, is a wretched thing. Constant dread destroys any real possibility of a dynamic, spontaneous existence. That is to say, any life that is truly worth living. As a result, catastrophic thinking leads to a form of psychological oppression that is, perhaps, just as bad as the apathetic, sated mentality it seeks to replace. Real life, if it is to be more than mere existence, requires curiosity and courage. It demands an adventurous spirit. Whether these attributes can survive our current culture of catastrophic thinking is something all of us, for our own good and for others', should be asking ourselves.

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