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Apocalypse Now?: Social Change in Contemporary America

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One drawback to a propensity for catchy titles is that they often require some explanation. That may be the case this evening. Fortunately, the point of this paper, if not the title, is simple and straightforward: it is to lodge an argument against a common idea about contemporary American culture, and to suggest the general outlines of an alternative. The interpretation in question (what I refer to as “apocalypse now” arguments) is that a significant, even fundamental, characterization of recent American experience is an unprecedented amount and rapidity of “change,” however that may be defined.¹ A tendency to view one’s own times as especially portentous, as being the locus of unusually significant and dramatic change, may be endemic, but this theme has become particularly widely articulated in the past several decades.

The central document in the popularization of cataclysmic change as a predominant feature of modern society is surely Alvin Toffler’s 1970s best seller, *Future Shock*. “Change” is the basic subject of the book. According to Toffler the pace of history progressed not in a linear fashion, but multiplied geometrically. This exponential “acceleration of change,” the strain of life lived at an “ever faster clip,” was a “disease” of modernity that threatened massive social breakdown. The fundamental problem facing contemporary Americans was “too much change in too short a time.” Modern society was being “overwhelmed by change.” *Future Shock* bristled with phrases—“supernormal rates of change,”

society. And for much of our history the United States has been a rapidly changing society. I suspect that Americans most affected by the 1960s, the “dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” a time when apocalyptic and utopian thinking came easily, have been especially preoccupied with change.¹²

“Change” is obviously a vaguely defined, variegated, complex thing. Therein lies much of the difficulty. It occurs on different levels, and there is not necessarily a close correlation between the levels. It takes place at different rates at different places, not only in different societies but also within a single society and among different strata and groups of that society. Societies may experience intellectual, artistic, cultural, political, economic, or social change at different rates and in different ways. My tactic here will be to isolate several levels or approaches to discussions of historical change. While some obviously fit my argument better than others, I think virtually all suggest that viewing the last half of the twentieth century as a period of quiescence and stability is at least as valid as the claim that we are going through a period of hypernormal change.¹³

Two apocalyptically inclined works, Kennedy’s *Rise and Fall* and Francis Fukuyama’s controversial essay (and later book), “The End of History,” stimulated thinking about large scale, geo-political change.¹⁴ The collapse of communism in Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union have surely been dramatic and important events; if the end of the Cold War is not apocalyptic, you may wonder, what is? But in many other ways, the period since the end of World War II has been one of unusual stability. None of the major events of the arms race or the emergence of the non-aligned Third World or the rise and fall of the Cold War had more than a negligible effect in nudging the military balance of power from the basic structure it assumed at the end of World War II. One would have to go back to the Pax Britannia after the Napoleonic Wars to find a comparable era of international stability. The U.S. is presently enjoying one of the longest periods of freedom from significant military conflicts in our entire history as a nation. Furthermore, today’s status quo seems likely to extend into the foreseeable future.

Turning to the economic side of great power relations, the growing significance, first of the OPEC countries, then of Western Europe, and foremost of Japan and the “Pacific Rim,” is undeniable. But we might also be permitted some scepticism regarding the barrage of predictions over the past two decades proclaiming the imminent economic collapse of the United States and the coming domination of OPEC, the European Union, or Japan or China. Japan’s rise has been less dramatic than that of the United States and Germany in the nineteenth century, and so far there has been no decline of the U.S. corresponding to that of Great Britain or France in the early twentieth century. Further, many of the economic changes that have occurred are in the nature of a gradual return to *status quo antebellum*, to the basic situation of the early twentieth century, prior to the distortions created by World Wars I and II. In short, economically as well as militarily and politically, it is at least plausible to suggest that in international

relations the last fifty years have been as much characterized by stability and continuity as by dramatic change.

A common tendency for those living in situations of historical continuity is to exaggerate the magnitude of contemporary events, because there is little perspective or vantage point for measuring, or assessing comparatively, the significance of change that does occur. Thus, for example, the Vietnam War is almost routinely treated by historians as a dramatic turning point in our history and superpower status. But it took a period of only a half decade from the fall of Nixon and Saigon to the presidency of Ronald Reagan to show how exaggerated those claims were. The "lessons of Vietnam" had amazingly little effect on American foreign policy. For all practical purposes Reagan ignored that the Vietnam War happened. And perhaps with some reason. It would surely be difficult for generations who witnessed and participated in the momentous foreign policy events of the first half of the twentieth century to see Vietnam as having the same scale or magnitude. It seems to me at worst dishonest, and at best mistaken, for us to portray it so. It may, of course, have had a great psychological effect on the generation of those who participated in or opposed the war, but that is a different matter. Kissinger's hopeful prediction that Vietnam would be a "footnote" to the history of the era may turn out to be fairly accurate in international relations. In any case it should require only a modicum of common sense to realize that the two World Wars were indeed major turning points in history, times when "the fate of the earth" really was in the balance, when the outcomes would have been of dramatic significance for Americans and much of the rest of the world. Nicaragua, Panama, the Gulf War, and even Vietnam were simply not "world historical events" on anything approaching the same scale.¹⁵

Much the same situation prevails when one turns to domestic political and economic matters. Watergate was once portrayed as one of the major turning points of American history, before fading into near total historical oblivion. The energy and farm problems of the 1970s were obsessively commented upon as great national crises; they too faded into obscurity. Then the issue of political and economic turning points shifted to the significance and depth of what was routinely referred to as the "Reagan Revolution." But the non-existence of a real "Reagan Revolution" has surely been clearly established, if by nothing else than its repetition a decade later by a nearly identical "revolution," the 1994 congressional elections. Despite liberal warnings that conservatives were provoking economic crises that were occasionally compared to the Great Depression, and even more exaggerated conservative claims that they had rescued the nation from fifty years of economic catastrophe, nothing much really happened. The last profound changes in the structure of the American economy came with the New Deal. Contrary to all of the campaign rhetoric on both sides, Reagan and Gingrich did not attempt to dismantle the New Deal; they did not even seriously impinge on Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. Primarily, conservative attacks on the welfare state affected additions to the basic structure that occurred under Nixon, Ford, and Carter, and even most of their programs were untouched. The

the Vikings, an undoubted historical event but one without widely significant impact, than of 1492.

Other elements of future shock theory perhaps have more substance. It is hard, for example, to deny the influence of television on American society. Even here, however, we may underestimate the degree to which radio and movies anticipated and preceded the impact of television. Movies had short runs, changed every few days, were often serialized on an almost weekly basis, brought us nearly live news in the form of newsreels, and were seen by a wide segment of the population on a regular basis.²⁰ Interestingly, in some respects the current pay and cable trends in television are returning that medium to something similar to the role of movies in the early part of the century.

Possibly the most important item in both the scholarly and the popular perspective on recent change concerns computers, or, more broadly, the “electronic revolution.” This was a central issue for McLuhan, Toffler, and Naisbitt, and is mentioned in virtually all history texts as a significant issue. At least since *Time* magazine made a computer its “Machine of the Year” in 1983, the modifiers “revolution” and “age” are regularly attached to the word computer. Computers seem to me to have a status somewhat similar to that of television: they are surely important; it is the unique magnitude of their influence that is in question. And again it seems incumbent on those who assert their importance to support their statements and not simply expect readers to take their opinions as self-evident truth. What, for example, does it really mean to say that we live in an “information age?” How, precisely, have computers revolutionized modern life? What strikes me, (even as I compose this essay on a personal computer), is that the direct impact on most people’s lives has been rather limited. The focus has now shifted from the clearly oversold personal computer revolution to the Internet. But compared with the similarly rapid spread of the automobile, for example, computers still seem to have had a smaller historical impact. Fifty years after the invention of the automobile, they had had a transforming effect on the culture; fifty years after the invention of computers, they remain for many people primarily a form of entertainment. After twenty years of home computers, after fifty years of the computer age, how fundamentally different would our lives be without them?

This line of argument could be extended to cover many other topics. At least since the discovery of DNA and the publication of *The Double Helix* (New York, 1968) breakthroughs in genetics and biological science have been an important focus of apocalyptic predictions. The birth control pill and AIDS are other common suggestions of events that have changed our lives in fundamental ways. Once again, the point of this essay is patently not to deny that Hiroshima, or the moon landing, or television, or computers, or genetic cloning are important factors of historical change or to deny that scholars ought to be concerned with them. It is instead simply to insist that historical change is a relative, comparative thing, that the changes of recent years are perhaps not so unique as our journalists and pop social scientists would have it, and that the past half century may from

a broader perspective seem a time of stability, an era marked by continuity rather than by exceptional change.

Have we really seen in our times technological and industrial changes that equal those of the twenty-five years on either side of the turn of the century: the automobile and airplane, radio and telephone, the exploitation of electricity and the internal combustion engine? This era of immense technological and industrial change laid the foundations for the mass/popular culture, consumer based capitalism of the twentieth century. Are we not essentially still living off this heritage, living out the consolidation and maturing of this particular new world, rather than creating a brave new one of our own? I find it hard to believe that anyone who could have had the experience of living through both eras would find our more recent one a time of unprecedented change. Or, put in more personal terms, I think that my children, growing up in the 1980s, probably share more in common with their grandparents who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s than those grandparents did with their grandparents, who immigrated, homesteaded and pioneered in Kansas after the Civil War.

At least since the expulsion from Eden, work has been one of the basic defining characteristics of the human condition. The curse of surviving “by the sweat of your brow” has occupied a major part of human existence. How much has work changed since World War II? The overall outlines, the necessity of an eight-hour-day, forty-hour-week job, have not altered significantly since the Great Depression. Indeed, there are a variety of indications that the average number of hours worked by Americans has risen in the past thirty years. Compare that with the steady reduction in the requirement for work that took place preceding World War II. The successful campaign for the eight hour day and forty hour work week was one of the transforming achievements of American history, but it was substantially accomplished between 1900 and 1940. Since then there has been little progress in reducing God’s curse on Adam and Eve, particularly in the United States.

Physical mobility is another material foundation of history: it is one of the basics of Toffler’s argument. Yet one would have to go back to the colonial era to find a period with as little change in physical mobility as in the past half century. By far the most important element of modern American human transportation, the automobile, has changed only negligibly in several decades, as have most forms of public transportation. The speed at which most of us get around has if anything regressed over recent years. The interstate highway system, begun in the 1950s, is the last major transportation innovation experienced by most of us, but even that lacks the impact of, say, the Brooklyn Bridge or transcontinental railroad or New York subway of earlier years.

Similar stagnation affects air travel, which is becoming more widespread but remains otherwise relatively unchanged since WWII. As just one example, the Air Force was still using early 1950s era B-52s in the Persian Gulf War. A comparable rate of change in the early twentieth century would have found us

Certainly neither movement has fulfilled the expectations of its most ardent partisans; there are probably as many reasons for emphasizing the persistence of the status quo as to emphasize the positive changes. Most importantly for my purposes, since these are not the changes of most apocalypse theorists, they are somewhat beside the point here. They do not really weaken the argument against the prevalent change thesis.

To summarize a few points in conclusion: there are obviously some large truths in apocalypse now arguments. Compared with pre-industrial, pre-modern cultures, change is clearly a dominant feature of modern life. But apocalypse theories claim more than that; they concentrate changes that have been a part of modernization and industrialization into recent years, to argue that we are still experiencing these events as changes, when many of them have been effected for years, or even generations. One problem is a loose chronology: American society has witnessed the kinds of change Toffler and others discuss, but the era of hyperchange was not the period since World War II. At the latest, the Second World War was the last truly apocalyptic, watershed era in American history.

There is little wrong with journalists exaggerating changes in society. And for reformers of all sorts, people who want society to respond to any manner of problems, exaggerating the developments of the present is a time-honored way of getting the public's attention. This too may be perfectly legitimate. No one should expect reformers or popular writers to compare the present too closely and too constantly to the past.

But it is precisely the professional business of the historian to do this: to have a longer vision, and to impart it to students and to a public audience. If we do not, surely no one else will. To portray CD players or cellular telephones or voice mail or the Internet as technological developments that are revolutionizing society is fine for the limited time frame of pop culture futurists, but historians should know better. Public memory and vision may be short: the purpose of history is to make them a little longer.

This will not be easy. The apocalyptic argument is in essence about progress. And despite all of the talk about the demise of that idea in American society in the twentieth century, it remains one of the most deeply embedded, passionately felt aspects of our culture. Apocalypse now thinking reaffirms our belief in progress. At bottom the gee-whiz world-of-tomorrow fantasies of utopian change just around the corner, still with us at Epcot and with our apocalyptic futurists, are paeans to the idol of material progress. While I hardly want to challenge or explore the notion of progress here, I do think it too easy a solution to bolster our own (faltering?) sense of progress by diminishing its presence in the past. The argument, expressed graphically by Kenneth Boulding, that the "world of today . . . is as different from the world in which I was born as that world was from Julius Caesar's" is at best a gross distortion of historical reality when applied to contemporary America.²¹

The argument presented in this essay is sketchy and thinly developed in the extreme. If it has been at all successful it has raised more questions than it has

settled. I hope that I have provided the impetus to encourage some of you to think with me about the nature of change, and of how to situate our contemporary era in the larger context of American history. Perhaps, as I suggest, a rethinking of this small part of contemporary American culture is in order. If not, at the very least apocalyptic change interpretations should be confirmed and placed on a more solid foundation by specific, detailed examination.

Notes

Special thanks to Michael Blayney, Fred Nielsen, and Michael Schuyler for comments, suggestions, and encouragement along the way, and to the editorial staff of *American Studies* for pointing out a number of errors and infelicities in style.

1. A bit more on the title: I am only obliquely concerned here with another strain of social criticism that has an equal, perhaps better, claim to the label of apocalyptic. I refer, for example, to many works such as Jonathon Schell's *Fate of the Earth* (New York, 1982), Robert Scheer's *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (New York, 1982), Helen Caldicott's *Missile Envy* (New York, 1984), or the controversial television mini-series "The Day After" that have been concerned with scenarios of nuclear apocalypse. Equally numerous and grim are prognostications of economic apocalypse, of which the classic example is Howard Ruff's immensely popular *How To Prosper During the Coming Bad Years* (New York, 1979), but also including Ravi Batra's *The Great Depression of 1990* (New York, 1987) and a number of pot-boilers by Paul Erdmann. In a similar category are Garrett Hardin and Barry Commoner's predictions of overpopulation and famine instigated ecological apocalypse, or the AIDS and ebola virus inspired spate of books and movies dealing with bacterial and viral apocalypse themes, from Stephen King's *The Stand* (New York, 1978) or Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague* (New York, 1995) to *Outbreak* and *Twelve Monkeys*. My concern here is with only those milder apocalypticists who believe, not that the world as we know it is really ending, but only that the U.S. is currently going through some great change or turning point in its history.

2. *Future Shock* (New York, 1970), 1-3.

3. *Ibid*, 12, 17, 18.

4. *The Third Wave* (New York, 1980), 1-18.

5. Especially in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964) and *The Coming of Post Industrial Society* (New York, 1973).

6. *The Future as History: The Historic Currents of Our Time and the Direction in which they are Taking America* (New York, 1968), 14.

7. Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York, 1970). Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York, 1982) and *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990s* (New York, 1990). Terkl, *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream* (New York: 1988). Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Power from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987).

8. American Studies scholar William Bridges is a good example. Bridges' keynote address and a discussion afterward at an August 1988 workshop at Wayne State College on "Science, Technology, and the Human Condition" provoked many of the themes in this paper. A popular educational and business consultant, Bridges has written several books on the theme of "transition" in modern America that closely parallel Toffler: see *Transitions* (New York, 1980) and *Surviving Corporate Transition* (New York, 1988).

9. Gates, *The Road Ahead* (New York, 1996).

10. See especially "To Dance With Change," *Policy Perspectives: The Pew Higher Education Roundtable* (April, 1994), 1-12, but numerous other issues of this publication as well.

11. Politics and Culture of the Great Plains Conference, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 11-13, 1996. Session titled "The Future of the Plains: A View From the Grassroots." Chuck Hassebrook quoting Neil Harl, and Keith Mueller on The Nebraska Center for Rural Health Research.

12. Bill Moyers titled his PBS documentary on the 1960s "Change, Change" and Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" has a good claim to be the unofficial anthem of the decade.

13. Much of the scholarly scaffolding for this essay comes from an analysis of the ways in which history textbooks treat contemporary U.S. history, and especially the popularity of "apocalypse now" themes in these textbooks. For the sake of space and time most of this foundation material has been omitted from this version of the paper. My apologies if this creates any confusion.

14. Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* (Summer, 1989), 3-18. A condensed version appeared in the July 30, 1989 *Washington Post*. See too *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

15. I have some qualms on re-reading this paragraph. It condenses in an elliptical and abrupt fashion a long, complex, and tentative argument. While I would not repudiate any of it, I do hope not to appear dogmatic or strident about this.

16. Phillips, especially in *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, New York, 1969), but see also *Post-Conservative America: People, Politics, and Ideology in a Time of Crisis* (New York, 1982), *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York, 1990), and *Boiling Point: Republicans, Democrats, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity* (New York, 1993).

17. From comments made for Plenary Session III, "From Culture Concept to Cultural Studies," at the MAASA annual conference in St. Louis, April 19-21, 1996.

18. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York, 1985). Also James J. Farrell, "Making (Common) Sense of the Bomb in the First Nuclear War," *American Studies*, (Fall, 1995) 5-41.

19. The incident is related in Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations*, 2nd. ed., (New York, 1994), 1204-05.

20. Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York, 1975). Larry May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York, 1980).

21. Quoted in Toffler, *Future Shock*, 22.