

Review Essay

Optimistic Apocalypics

Books Discussed:

Gar Alperovitz

What Then Must We Do? Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution

White River Jct., VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2013

Robert Jensen

We Are All Apocalyptic Now: On the Responsibilities of Teaching, Preaching, Reporting, Writing, and Speaking Out

Austin TX: Monkey Wrench Press, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

According to Eric Weinstein (2014), an apocalyptic number is a number of the form 2^n that contains the digits 666 (the number of the beast). So, 2^{157} , 2^{192} , 2^{218} , 2^{220} and so on are all apocalyptic numbers. Not being fond of either the occult or the anti-Christ, I do not personally care about this demonic numerology; but, I am not totally insensitive to the fantasies of others. I recognize, for example, that 666 has had meaning for assorted Christians since it made its early appearance in the last book of the New Testament (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine* 13:18). It also has a certain caché in popular culture and has played a part in commercial ventures from Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction* to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Given this kind of cultural deterioration, it might appear that the apocalypse just isn't what it used to be. Or, maybe, it's even more.

The term is a bit frightening. It conjures up thoughts of the End of Days, the mighty conflagration in which the forces of Good clash with the forces of Evil and (so we are assured) Good wins out, but not until there has been much carnage and suffering. You get what you pay for.

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Today, there is much apocalyptic talk, but it is becoming more and more a discussion of impending doom caused not by supernatural forces, but by forces that are all too understandable, down-to-earth and uniquely human. It's true that there are still a few hold-outs who deny the anthropogenic causes of climate change; generally, however, these are people directly employed by fossil fuel corporations or (in an almost magical instance of lexicological irony) by "conservative" political parties, which do almost

nothing to promote conservation, but do everything they can to encourage publically subsidized private-sector energy extraction from the Alberta bitumen beds to the opportunities for “fracking” the devil out of Ukraine in pursuit of rumoured natural gas reserves or, indeed, in the USA where, according to the Department of Energy (2013), over 40% of oil and well over 60% of natural gas production already comes from hydraulic fracturing process.

For those ideologically immune to worries about climate change or to the everyday horrors of air, water and soil pollution, there are plenty of other matters to be considered. For example, although we don’t hear much about them today, there are thousands of nuclear weapons in storage. They could easily pulverize all the major cities on the Earth several times over. Instead, however, Western governments seem transfixed by the notion that Iran and North Korea might one day develop a credible arsenal of their own. The prospect is enough to set the minds of latter-day Cold Warriors alight with the delight of a new excuse for Ronald Reagan’s whimsical world of Star Wars, but I’d like to remind them that even with additional wheels on the “axis of evil,” the continuing threat of nuclear annihilation is already a “real and present danger” every minute of every day.

In addition, there are great possibilities for singular or collective ways to bring humanity, if not quite the biosphere, to an abrupt end by means of desertification, pandemics a noxious atmosphere. Or, as Jim Dator told some American legislators in 1970: “we may revolt ourselves to oblivion, the stone age or 1984.” We seem, of course, to have survived the literal 1984, but the metaphorical one awaits; after all, Ronald Reagan did not know about “big data analytics,” but today’s leaders and today’s followers (thanks to people like Julian Assange and Edward Snowden) certainly do.

“For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good” (<i>Mark 14:7</i>), which has been taken as divine permission to ignore agony by greedy Gospel readers ever since.

What’s more, however, even if our species survives, the fact is that we are collectively exterminating other species at a rate equal to the mass extinctions that destroyed the dinosaurs and many other barely imaginable creatures that once inhabited the territory we claim as home. Indeed, further inklings of the future can be seen in the popularity of dystopian films such as *The Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Mad Max* (1979), *Waterworld* (1995), *28 Days Later* (2002) as well as in novels, graphic novels (formerly comic books), video games and combinations including *The Road* (2009, based on Cormac McCarthy’s novel of 2006). Likewise, the American television show, *The Walking Dead*, the (un)lifeworld of the twenty-first-century teenager is, itself, merely the latest in post-apocalyptic unrealities that give ominous twists to now relatively optimistic traditions established by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (*Frankenstein*, 1818) and H. G. Wells (*The War of the Worlds*, 1898).

The much-lambasted “prophets of gloom and doom,” are, of course, held up to ridicule by anyone who enjoys exotic foods in well-stocked supermarkets, the convenience of appliances such as clothes washers and clothes driers, the life-saving remedies of penicillin and processes such as fMRIs and robotic surgeries. Undeniably, we live richer, fuller and longer lives than even our recent ancestors; but, we should recall, this story of progress excludes the one or two billion people who endure desperate poverty and have little or no access to clean drinking water, much less adequate food, education and health care (though AK-47s seem plentiful). Of course, we are assured that Jesus Christ himself once said (*The Gospel According to St. Mark 14:7*): “For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good,” which has been taken as mild divine encouragement to display charity, but also as ultimate divine permission to ignore agony by greedy Gospel readers ever since.

The critics have a point. Few among even the most strident detractors of (post)modernity would willingly give up their blogs and twitter accounts and be content to retreat into the eighteenth or the twelfth centuries, much less to the Paleolithic age. Even Kurt Vonnegut’s repudiation of human evolution *Galapagos* (1985) came with the understanding that it was just a fable. At the same time, while it might be heartening to imagine that we will soon be able to create human organs for transplant out by using 3D printers and a supply of raw meat or to solve both energy and environmental problems by coming up with an effective and affordable fusion reactor (cold or lukewarm), we cannot absolutely rely on the wonders of modern science to achieve such objectives. We can, however, retain confidence that the scientific and technological agenda will be mainly determined by the for-profit corporations which now control the financial, manufacturing and distribution systems which, in turn, control almost everything else.

So it is that intimations of a salvageable future cannot come from the institutions that currently dominate our lives or, if they can, then they must be radically reshaped in order to enable them to perform as rescuers and redeemers, not merely as facilitators of narrow, short-term shareholders’ interests. Such reshaping is currently contemplated by any number of “grass-roots” innovators. Two are selected here for examination. Both take democracy quite seriously.

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Gar Alperovitz is the more well-known and formally accomplished. He is currently Lionel R. Bauman Professor of Political Economy at the University of Maryland. His estimable résumé includes listings as a former Fellow of King’s College at the University of Cambridge, a founding Fellow of Harvard University’s Institute of Politics, a Guest Scholar at the Brookings Institution, a Legislative Director in both the US House of Representatives and Senate and a Special Assistant in the American State Department. Gar Alperovitz, I should add, is fast approaching his 78th birthday. His work, however, is not yet done.

Alperovitz is an inspiration and the energizer behind and, to some considerable extent, the public face of some remarkable innovations in economics and ecology. Perhaps the most well-known ventures are the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio. Worker-owned and worker-managed, these successful enterprises include the industrial-strength Evergreen Cooperative Laundry, Ohio Cooperative Solar and the Green City Growers Cooperative. Based on ideas that are as old as the utopian socialist Robert Owen (1771-1858), but brought up-to-date because of economic and technological necessity, Alperovitz champions initiatives that stress local financing and sourcing, organizational democracy and environmentally sustainable products and processes.

There are hundreds of worker-owned and worker-managed cooperatives in the United States, where they are still something of a novelty. Elsewhere, for instance in Venezuela where almost one million workers run close to one hundred thousand enterprises, the idea of worker control may be far more advanced; but, the fact that the idea seems to be catching on in the world's largest economy is also encouraging. Add to it such concepts as credit unions or state and county-owned banks (e.g., the Bank of North Dakota) and the possibility of refashioning the economy from within gains credibility.

Marx said somewhere that revolutions are merely the kicking in of a rotten door. Alperovitz takes this to heart and offers an analysis that does not lead to political crisis—with or without violence—but which patiently colonizes the economy from within, gradually replacing hierarchical models with participatory initiatives as the old economy decays and ultimately collapses. The only questions are matters of time. Corporate capitalism will collapse or at least be overtaken by some new social order; nothing lasts forever. Alperovitz wants the new order to grow, perhaps feeding in the old, in preparation for a new and (he hopes) peaceful transition into a post-capitalist age in which democracy as method and equity as goal can prosper in an ecologically responsible manner. Whether there is enough time to allow such a reformation without precipitating environmental or political catastrophes remains to be seen.

I have never been an optimist nor a pessimist. I'm an apocalyptic only. Our only hope is apocalypse. Apocalypse is not gloom. It's salvation. No Christian could ever be an optimist or a pessimist that's a purely secular state of mind.

– Marshall McLuhan

Robert Jensen's biography and his contribution reviewed here are less impressive. He can be forgiven, however; for at the age of only 55, Jensen is a comparative youngster. What's more, he's been busy on the outside of institutional power. He calls himself a "Christian radical." He's worked on newspapers and he's been a teacher. He has a Bachelor's degree in science, a Master's in journalism and a Doctorate in media law and ethics. He seems to have lived a fairly quiet life in North Dakota where he grew up, in Florida and Missouri where he was in the newspaper business, and in Texas where he's been teaching courses in law, journalism and ethics. Then, along came the morning of

September 11, 2001. Contrary to the hyperbole about the *jihadist* attack on America, the world did not change, or at least not as much as Americans thought it did. But America changed and so did Robert Jensen's life.

Like a very few others, Jensen linked the attack to half a century of intrusive American involvement in the Middle East. He wrote and published an op-ed article in the *Houston Chronicle* three days after the event. He in no way sympathized with the terrorists, nor did he excuse their actions. He did, however, try to explain why such a thing could happen. He pointed out that, beginning with the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran in 1953, resentment against the USA had been a constant and growing factor in regional politics. Though not on the national scale on which similar comments by the far-famed literary figure, Susan Sontag, and the popular television comic, Bill Maher, experienced it, Jensen was immediately criticized in his local academic community, not least by Larry Faulkner, his university's president.

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No doubt contrary to the wishes of some "patriots," it is comforting to note that the principle of free speech and academic freedom were well enough established in that part of Texas for Jensen to keep his job and he is still teaching there today. Something important did happen, though. Professor Jensen has undertaken to become something of a public intellectual and, like Gar Alperovitz, he brings a stunningly optimistic message. He announces baldly that we are "all apocalyptic now!"

The word "apocalypse" is akin to the word "revelation." It speaks of an important truth that is revealed and the transformative effect that such an eye-opening exposure might have. Communications guru Marshall McLuhan, when asked if the onslaught of electronic communications technology that, he believed, would result in a "global village" made him feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future, candidly replied: "I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. I am an apocalyptic only." It turns out that Jensen is too, but in a good way.

The message contained in *We Are All Apocalyptic Now: On the Responsibilities of Teaching, Preaching, Reporting, Writing, and Speaking Out* (a short 54-page construction that is somewhere between a long pamphlet and a short book) is, despite the length and urgency of its title, a remarkably calm assessment of what people need to know and how people need to act if they are going to be conscious and conscientious in the contemporary world.

Proponents of innovation are not often given as cogent a view of reality as Robert Jensen provides. His argument is reminiscent of a number of calls to moral rectitude that have been made over the past decades. I am reminded, for example, of Noam Chomsky's brilliant piece that was published in the still-new *New York Review of Books* on February

23, 1967 and which I clipped out and took with me when I went off to graduate school in the United States several months later. Chomsky made it clear that intellectuals, in which dubious category he included practitioners of many occupations but which no doubt had its greatest effect on teachers, had a deep ethical responsibility to, in today's terminology, "speak truth to power."

Today, when we find our democratic governments engaged in constant surveillance, metadata analytics, voter manipulation and the suppression of scientists and public servants, to say nothing of toxic economic and ecological policies, we need an occasional (or maybe constant) reminder that things could be otherwise if we had the wit and the will to make it so. Anyone interested in innovation that *matters* would do well to read Alperovitz; anyone needing to jump-start the process of becoming interested in genuinely restorative, transformative or otherwise redeeming innovation can get the needed propulsion from Robert Jensen. These are two very different books, but they are connected, and they both matter.

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Editorial Note:

As this Review Essay was being prepared for publication, I received a message from Gar Alperovitz (who was unaware that he was one of the subjects of this piece). It concerned the launch of <PluralistCommonwealth.org>. It read in part:

Together with my colleagues at the Democracy Collaborative, we have assembled what we hope will be a useful resource for activists, scholars, and policy makers trying to come to terms with the system problem. If we

know the system is broken, and we want to move beyond both corporate capitalism and state socialism—how do we clarify the nature of a serious alternative?

The site begins with an overview of a few key texts drawn from some four decades of work which present the underlying principles of the model and explain its evolution. ... [It] then explains how the Pluralist Commonwealth addresses:

- Democratized ownership forms;
- Local democracy community culture, and the non-sexist city;
- Scale and regionalism;
- Climate change, growth, and the environment;
- Liberty and reduced work hours;
- Both planning and marketing.

Finally, a historical section attempts to put the Pluralist Commonwealth model in context. Explaining how struggles against war, poverty and deindustrialization helped shape the development of this systemic alternative vision.

Alperovitz concludes:

We intend the site to function as an ongoing, actively growing archive of material related to the Pluralist Commonwealth and related aspects of systemic change. Please visit the site today, share it with friends and colleagues, and let us know if there's anything we can do to make it more useful.

I'd add only that, if we are serious about innovation and are seeking not mere efficiency but normatively transformative change, this is a good place to start. Anything less serious isn't worth breath. – Howard A. Doughty