

History 4727
Fall 2022

The History of the End of the World

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For thousands of years people have been getting ready for the end of the world, giving rise to millenarian movements that have sometimes changed history. More than once, large numbers of people have experienced events such as the Black Death, the Little Ice Age, colonial conquest, and “strategic” bombing that seemed very much like the end of *their* world. And over the last seventy-five years, governments and international organizations have made major investments in predicting and preparing for catastrophic threats. Efforts to manage or mitigate these dangers have had world-changing consequences, including “preventative” wars, and new forms of global governance. The very idea of the end of the world, in other words, has a long history, with a demonstrable impact, which provides instructive lessons as we contemplate things to come.

This course will explore this history, beginning with eschatology and millenarian movements. In part two, students will learn how different conceptual frameworks can be applied to assessing and managing risk, and understanding how people perceive or misperceive danger. They will learn how they can be applied to identify the most important challenges, drawing insights from different disciplinary approaches. The third and main part of the course will consist of comparative and connected analyses of the age-old apocalyptic threats -- war, pestilence, and famine -- in their modern forms, i.e. nuclear armageddon, pandemics, and ecological collapse. By examining them together, we can compare the magnitude and probability of each danger, and also explore their interconnections. We will see, for instance, how nuclear testing helped give rise to the environmental movement, and how modeling the aftereffects of nuclear exchanges helped advance understanding of climate change. Similarly, scenario exercises have shaped threat perceptions and disaster-preparedness for pandemics and bio-warfare as much as they did for nuclear war and terrorism.

Readings and discussions will explore how planetary threats are interconnected, and not just in the techniques used to predict and plan for them. Applying nuclear power to the problem of global warming, for instance, could undermine longstanding efforts to stop nuclear proliferation. Climate change and mass migration, on the other hand, create new pandemic threats, as a more crowded and interconnected world becomes a single ecosystem. Yet billions spent on building up defenses have created more capacity and opportunity for bio-terrorism. Who would actually use a nuclear or

biological weapon? Perhaps a millenarian group hoping to ride death, the fourth horse of the apocalypse, straight to heaven.

Course requirements

Readings will average 250-350 pp. per week. Other requirements include:

- Regular, on-time attendance and active participation, 15%
- Weekly contributions to on-line Courseworks discussion, 15%
- One oral report on a week's reading with a five-page written version to be distributed to the seminar in advance, 20%
- A final paper related to themes and topics from the course chosen in consultation with the instructor (10% for the 2-page topic and 1-page annotated bibliography, due October 15, and 40% for the final paper, due December 15). Note that while the course includes readings from many different disciplines, the paper must address a historical question. This might be on a relatively contemporary topic, but the assignment is to approach it as a historian, and draw on historical concepts, e.g. continuity and change, determinism versus contingency, agent and structure, etc.

The following text(s) can be purchased on line or through Book Culture and are also on reserve at Butler.

Daniel Ellsberg, *Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*
Jacob Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism*
Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*
Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*

September 7: Course Introduction: Why Are Historians So Afraid of the Future?

The Beginning of the End of the World

September 15: Apocalyptic Traditions

Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs Through the Ages*, chapters 1, 3, and 5 ([courseworks files](#)).

Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements Against European Colonial Order*, “Introduction” and “Prophetic Rebellion as a Type of Social Protest” (xvii-xxvii, 43-112, 183-189) ([ebook](#))

September 22: Modern and Post-Modern Apocalypses

Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, chapters 4-10 ([ebook](#))

Mark Juergensmeyer, "QAnon as Religious Terrorism," *Journal of Religion and Violence* (2022)

Secular and Science-Based Ways to Think About Risk, Security, and Catastrophe

September 29: Risk and Security as Objects of Social Analysis

Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, introduction, preface, and chapter one ([ebook](#))

Jef Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?: From Concept to Thick Signifier” ([clio](#))

Claudia Aradau and Rens Van Munster, *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown*, Introduction and chapter 1 ([ebook](#))

Kasperson, et al. “The Social Amplification of Risk: A Conceptual Framework” ([clio](#))

October 6: Normal Accidents, Ordinary Disasters, and other Exceptional Circumstances that Provide New Rules

Scott Sagan, “Learning from ‘Normal Accidents’,” *Organization & Environment*, March 2004, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 15-19 ([courseworks files](#))

Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*, chapter 4 ([courseworks files](#))

Mike Davis, “The Dialectic of Ordinary Disaster,” from *Ecology of Fear*, 1-55

Didier Fassin and Mariana Pandolfi, eds., *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, introduction and chapter 1, 9-58

October 13: How Do We Know What We *Should* Be Worried About?

Martin Rees, *On the Future: Prospects for Humanity*, preface, 1-164 ([ebook](#))

Richard Posner, “How To Evaluate the Catastrophic Risks and the Possible Responses to Them?” from *Catastrophe: Risk and Response*, 139-198. ([ebook](#))

October 15 -- PAPER TOPICS DUE

Going Nuclear

October 20 - The Origins of Overkill

Daniel Ellsberg, *Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, chapters 1-13

Connelly, et al., “General, I have Fought Just as Many Nuclear Wars as You Have: Forecasts, Future Scenarios, and the Politics of Armageddon” (clio)

October 27 - Nuclear War and Environmentalism

Jacob Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism*

Climate Change: The End of the World As We Know It

November 3 - The Climate Has Always Been Changing: What’s New and What’s True?

William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”

Mike Hulme, “The Public Life of Climate Change: The First Twenty-Five Years,”
[courseworks files](#)

Roger Pielke Jr. and Justin Ritchie, “[How Climate Scenarios Lost Touch With Reality](#)” and responses by Chris Field, Marcia McNutt, Kate Marvel, Gavin A. Schmidt, and Peter H. Jacobs

Robert Giegengack and Claudio Vita-Finzi, “Climate Change: Past, Present, and Future” (optional)

November 10 - The Anthropocene Era: The End of the Natural World

Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*

Wallace McNeish, "From Revelation to Revolution: Apocalypticism in Green Politics," *Environmental Politics*, vol. 26, no. 6 (2017): 1035-1054 (clio).

Pandemics

November 17 - Plagues and Peoples: When Worlds Collide

Alfred Crosby, *The Colombian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, preface and 3-63 ([courseworks files](#)).

Charles Rosenberg, "What is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective" ([courseworks files](#))

November 24 - University Holiday. No Class

December 1 - The Politics of Contagion

Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*

Richard Neustadt, "The Swine Flu Affair"

December 8 - Tournament of Doom

Students will be randomly assigned to one of four teams a week in advance of the class. Each team will make the case for why one or another danger poses the greatest threat to the general welfare, in terms of both the magnitude of the potential damage and the probability it will actually occur absent an urgent and concerted response: nuclear attack, climate change, pandemics, or violence inspired or incited by apocalyptic thinking. At the end, each student will score the other three teams from first to last based on the logic and evidence of their arguments. The winning team will win two extra points in their course grade.

December 15 -- FINAL PAPER DUE

Columbia Statement on Academic Integrity

The intellectual venture in which we are all engaged requires of faculty and students alike the highest level of personal and academic integrity. As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity.

Scholarship, by its very nature, is an iterative process, with ideas and insights building one upon the other. Collaborative scholarship requires the study of other scholars' work, the free discussion of such work, and the explicit acknowledgement of those ideas in any work that inform our own. This exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited.

In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent.

Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated. Students failing to meet these responsibilities should anticipate being asked to leave Columbia.

The Columbia Center for New Media, Teaching, and Learning defines plagiarism and its consequences at Columbia University:

ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/compass/discipline_humanities/documenting.html#plagiarism

Disability-Related Accommodations

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with Disability Services (DS). More information on the DS registration process is available online at www.health.columbia.edu/ods. Faculty must be notified of registered students' accommodations before exam or other accommodations will be provided. Students who have (or think they may have) a disability are invited to contact Disability Services for a confidential discussion at (212) 854-2388 (Voice/TTY) or by email at disability@columbia.edu.