**apocalypse rhetoric good – key to stop normalization of death**

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This idea that the world is already moribund gets picked up in mainstream writer Paul Theroux's disturbing futuristic novel, O-Zone, which once again is really just a hypertrophic version of today. When the billionaire Hooper Allbright thinks about his own era, and then waxes nostalgic about ours, we realize that if the future is ill-fated that's because it's merely a playing out of the present:

It was a meaner, more desperate and worn out world. It had been scavenged by crowds. Their hunger was apparent in the teethmarks they had left, in the slashes of their claws. There was some beauty in the world's new wildernesses, of which O-Zone was just one; but its cities were either madhouses or sepulchers. Fifty years ago was simply a loose expression that meant before any of them had been born. It meant another age. And yet sometimes they suspected that it had closely resembled this age -- indeed, that it was this one, with dust on it, and cracks, and hiding aliens, and every window broken: smoke hung over it like poisoned clouds. (13)

In the America of O-Zone what is more frightening than the routine round-up of economic refugees, the death-squads, the degraded environment, and the national "sacrifice zones," is the casual acceptance by everybody that this is the way the world must be, perhaps has always been. In Theroux's vision, the real horror lies in the way the slow apocalypse is normalized, the Unheimlich made Heimlich, murder and mayhem become healthful pastimes.

There are other writers who are sketching out the details of the end of the world, and they aren't even fabulists. A recent spate of articles in no less liberal organs than The Atlantic and Harper's take the first tentative steps down a road that should soon make earth's deathwatch a mainstream topic of journalism. Robert Kaplan's "The Coming Anarchy" looks at the Third World's accelerating social, political, and environmental breakdowns, and their potential effects on the First World in the coming century. The scenario of O-Zone might have been drawn from Kaplan's analysis: resource wars, massive migrations, climate change, tribalism and disease. Kaplan's case study is west Africa, where these stresses, clearly exacerbated by the legacy of Western imperialism and post-colonial development policies, are producing "criminal anarchy." "The coming upheaval," he suggests, "in which foreign embassies are shut down, states collapse, and contact with the outside world takes place through dangerous, disease-ridden coastal trading posts, will loom large in the century we are entering . . . Africa suggests what war, borders, and ethnic politics will be like a few decades hence" (54). Not just Africa will be affected, of course, for many of the problems there are endemic to the Balkans, Latin America, and much of Asia. As the state disintegrates in the Third World, the First World is destabilized by the chaos beyond its borders, borders it can no longer effectively control. Federal authority, incapable of dealing with regional problems, finds itself ceding powers to ever more isolated local communities.

That isolation will likely find itself playing out along predictable fault lines, as Michael Lind previews in a recent Harper's article. In Lind's view, the growing unwillingness of economic elites to support education, income redistribution, and health care, along with their retreat into the protected, privileged spaces of the neo-feudal society, combine to spell the end of the broad middle-class. The new underclass (Which Dares Not Speak Its Name due to its allegiance to the myth of egalitarian society) poses no threat to the economic royalists at the top, because as the war of all-against-all is felt particularly sharply at the bottom of the food chain, the various sub-groups that reside there can be counted on to perceive each other as the more immediate source of their problems.1 Lind sees a two-tiered society in the making: an upper tier, provided with work, security, comfort, hope, and insulation/protection from a disenfranchised, fragmented, and squabbling underclass, which faces a hard-scrabble existence with little chance of improvement. The proper image for the new world order with its international moneyed class: an air-conditioned, tinted-windowed, bullet-proofed limousine gliding safely over a pot-holed, squalid, dangerous street in Lagos -- or New York or Toronto.

Paul Kennedy, historian and author of Preparing for the Twenty-First Century, presents a wealth of evidence to support his own grimly compelling vision. Even as he performs the appropriate genuflections to the logic of the market and does a journeyman's work in ranking countries' "competitive advantages" as they face the road ahead, unlike his ebullient contemporaries Alvin Toffler or Bill Gates Kennedy has the good grace not to elide the incredible suffering that is going to occur in the Third World, and the honesty to admit the possibility of a no-win scenario all round. Kennedy also understands the importance of scale when it comes to thinking about human history, which in turn suggests the need to consider whether we are justified in thinking our past success in overcoming adversity provides any sort of basis for believing we are up to the challenges that now confront us:

this work also asks whether today's global forces for change are not moving us beyond our traditional guidelines into a remarkable new set of circumstances -- one in which human social organizations may be unequal to the challenges posed by overpopulation, environmental damage, and technology-driven revolutions and where the issue of winners and losers may to some degree be irrelevant. If, for example, the continued abuse of the developing world's environment leads to global warming, or, if there is a massive flood of economic refugees from the poorer to the richer parts of the world, everyone will suffer, in various ways. In sum, just as nation-state rivalries are being overtaken by bigger issues, we may have to think about the future on a far broader scale than has characterized thinking about international politics in the past. Even if the Great Powers still seek to rise, or at least not to fall, their endeavors could well occur in a world so damaged as to render much of that effort pointless. (15)

Unfortunately (for all of us), Kennedy's book goes on to prove that the tone in this introductory passage is entirely too tentative.

In general, apocalyptic scenarios take place against the prior and persistent conceit that human culture does truly move to culmination, that there is a larger goal or a target toward which time's arrow is moving. Like children inferring mommy and daddy will always be there because they have always been there in the past, we project our history forward under the presumption that the human presence on this planet is a durable one and, no matter how or why, purposive. We can't imagine an alternative. But while in cultural development there has been innovation, differentiation, and amplification, such changes can no longer be taken as evidence for an overall direction or telos. For there is no teleology at work here, let alone an eschatology, a dialectic, or even a simple logic. In fact, it is precisely the absence of any point to our history that makes this apocalypse unreadable except as an accretion of systemically deleterious effects which, incredibly, have become indistinguishable from progress. Skeptical of totalizing theories, postmodern intellectuals are reluctant to prophesy doom, but without coherent oppositional narratives to clarify such effects those who profit from the positive spin **have the stage to themselves.** Thus every sign gets read as its opposite, every trend that points to a decline is seen as the prelude to improvement, and every person becomes a shareholder in the fantasies of the boosters. In this environment of doublethink, the now-routine failure of corporations or nations to provide even short-term security for their members can be glossed as bitter but necessary "medicine," or as the "growing pains" associated with increasing economic "rationalization." We are left in the paradoxical position described in game theory as the "prisoner's dilemma" and in environmental thought as the "tragedy of the commons": the incentive for individuals to ignore the evidence for unqualified disaster far outweighs the personal risks involved in seeking to slow it. Everyone proceeds according to this same calculation, indeed is encouraged to do so, and everyone suffers minimally -- that is, until the collective moment of reckoning is reached.

Four Horsemen

     What is the hard evidence that taking the long view reveals an apocalypse already in progress? To keep our metaphor intact, we could speak in terms of the "four horsemen." There are the usual ones -- war, famine, disease, pestilence -- but to put a finer point on the apocalypse I'm describing we are better to call our riders 1) arms proliferation, 2) environmental degradation, 3) the crisis of meaning, and, crucially, 4) the malignant global economy.