

Book Review: The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse

by Blog Admin

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*The planet is sick and human beings have to pay. Today, that is the orthodoxy throughout the Western world, and our ecological catastrophism is turning us into cowering children, writes **Pascal Bruckner**. Rather than preaching catastrophe and pessimism, Bruckner argues that we instead need to develop a democratic and generous ecology that addresses specific problems in a practical way. **Amelia Sharman** finds this philosophical work a frustrating read for the ways it ignores the large body of climate science on the significant detrimental impacts to many areas of the world.*



The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse. Pascal Bruckner. Polity. April 2013.

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The most recent in a series of books examining fear and guilt, *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse* is the newest publication from [Pascal Bruckner](#), a French philosopher who rose to notice during the 1970s as part of the anti-Marxist 'new philosophers'.

Offering a 'take no prisoners' attack on what he terms the "ecology of disaster" (p.184), Bruckner argues that the dominant theme of contemporary environmentalist discourse has become that of an inescapable environmental catastrophe with a central aim to instil fear into the hearts of the masses. As the fear of communism has collapsed, our new adversary is ourselves, as we become framed as the enemy of nature.

He argues that "ecologism has become a global ideology" that, in succeeding Marxism with a similar blend of "fatalism and activism" (p.18-19), requires us to believe in a coming apocalypse in a quasi-religious manner. This, ironically, echoes the climate sceptic trope of the 'Church of Global Warming', whereby scientists and others are said to 'believe' in the reality of climate change because it supports their paycheck, akin to evangelical preachers found with their hands in church funds. It is therefore no surprise that Bruckner's thesis has been welcomed by sceptical organisations, and that he was the guest of the UK's Global Warming Policy Foundation, delivering a [presentation on his book in April 2013 at the House of Lords](#).

While climate change is not the explicit subject of the book, with the more general 'cataclysmic ecology' instead used as a broader term, it is an oblique undercurrent running through the various chapters (creatively titled, among others, 'Blackmailing Future Generations' and 'Humanity on a Strict Diet'). Bruckner seems somewhat angry at the thought of having been promised a future based on inexhaustible resources which has now been pulled from under him. His arguments echo those who contend that while climate change is indeed happening and humans may be responsible, it is not a major problem, and we don't need to do anything about it (disputed in a concise [Deutsche Bank Group report from 2010](#)).

However, Bruckner's argument that it is difficult for people to react to the enormity of climate change when faced with claims such as "marine ecosystems will collapse between now and 2050" (p.32) is indeed valid, as it is well recognised that it is extremely difficult to internalise and react to the possible impacts of such significant future environmental change. He also points out the potential futility of solely making changes such as recycling and eco-friendly light bulbs when the scale of the issue requires much larger fundamental changes in human behaviour.

[The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse](#) Pascal Bruckner



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Nonetheless, it is tempting to level a criticism of cherry-picking at Bruckner, as he relentlessly builds his case according to a distinct ontological view. For example, by choosing to critique “little propitiatory gestures” (p.32) he ignores the pleas echoing around the world for large-scale paradigm shifts in how we view our relationship to the planet and to each other. Critiquing the encouragement of the small changes that individuals can make in their daily lives – which, when done en masse, would be significant – also seems unfair when the previous paragraph lambasts Al Gore and other ‘Greens’ for sharing information that one can only react to with “distress and passivity” (p.32).

However, it is important to remember that Bruckner is a philosopher, and this is intended to be a book of ideas and assertions, not one that is supported by research. He summons numerous concepts to support his critique of ecologism, although some, such as the contention that the Green movement is keen to evoke a “scatological fantasy focused on decomposition that begins with sorting rubbish” (p.150), are quite difficult to know how to address.

As part of his critique of ecology, he suggests two options for its future. Either it chooses “anti-humanism as its principle, celebrating rivers and forests the better to castigate human beings” (p.100) or chooses what he terms an “open anthropocentrism” (p.100) whereby non-human life forms are, to all intents and purposes, valued because of the benefit they bring to humans, albeit including their ability to broaden our sense of humanity. It seems a false dichotomy somehow, with the exhortation not to let our respect of the environment “lead us into an idolatry of nature” (p.102) where radical ecologism restricts our every move, seeming to be fear mongering of the very sort Bruckner critiques.

For a non-philosopher this book is a frustrating read, particularly given its lack of comprehensive references and its structure as a meandering philosophical tour, where references to Gaia sit alongside Rabelais, Francis Bacon and Robocop. The book also seems to wilfully ignore the results of a large cannon of climate science which indicates significant detrimental impacts, particularly to those in developing countries. Thus, likely to appeal more to philosophers, *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse* may also find an audience among those who share Bruckner’s anthropocentric world view.

Amelia Sharman is a PhD student at the [Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment](#) at the LSE. Her main research interests are in the relationship between science and policy, and uncertainty and controversy in political decision-making. Previously, Amelia was a Sustainability Specialist at the International Hydropower Association and a Senior Policy Advisor at the New Zealand Ministry for Economic Development. [Read more reviews by Amelia](#).