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Zombie Experts and Anarchy Imaginaries: Fantasies of 'Crises to Be' in Climate Change Futures

Abstract

The characterization of human social response in crisis is most often apocalyptic and dystopic, especially when connected to environmental detriments expected from climate change. This article draws on the cases of zombie apocalypse experts and climate-fiction to situate an investigation into how diametric forms of knowledge compete, dominate, and then replicate in mediated popular culture as forms of truth. It builds on extensive work in areas of both lived disaster response and mythologies. The article links certain philosophies to popular culture as a driver in the construction of knowledge and truth. Here, Foucault and his conceptions of power and knowledge are used as epistemological lenses. The article also theorizes about the role of societal boredom that explains the power of fantasy over empirical science. Another goal of the article is to articulate the implications of this work on practical issues connected to climate change and human security. Mainly, the article argues the perpetuation of anarchy fantasies can foster and justify policies oriented towards social control.

Introduction

“Disorder, chaos, anarchy. Now that’s fun.”¹

Human response to crisis is believed chaotic and anarchic.² Social panic is assumed in the institutional management of crisis and disasters.³ The belief looting was common during Hurricane Katrina, for example, evoked responses intended to re-establish order among lawless citizenry.⁴ Similarly, climate change security challenges consist of expected problems ranging from riots, terrorism, pandemics, war, to the more extreme of man's existential termination.⁵ Climate change, as a collection of future terrors to be, re-writes apocalypse narratives that have pervaded human history.⁶ In the interstices of future horrors rests an assumption of Hobbesian wickedness inherent to human nature, cast as universally selfish and brutal.⁷

However, anarchy or social chaos, as a definitive feature of behavior in crisis, does not happen in practice. People tend to be prosocial, altruistic, self-organizing and chaos adverse. A multitude of events demonstrates, as stories of mass boat rescues by ordinary citizens during Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas are only one example.⁸ The 9-11 boatlift had over 500,000 people in 9 hours transported off the island of Manhattan by an improvised flotilla of mostly citizen boaters is another instance.⁹ Decades of research pointing towards similar examples in practice, primarily in disaster studies, suggests anarchy is uncommon, and perhaps, nonexistent.¹⁰ Thus, tensions exist between knowledge in practice. Observed human behavior seems to bear little, if any, weight with both lay publics and policy makers in this case.¹¹ House Bill 1177 in Texas demonstrates. This law permits unlicensed gun owners the legal right to carry for up to 168 hours after a disaster declaration.¹² Its justification comes largely from the belief looters and evildoers prevail in times of disaster. Again, this is relatively uncommon.

Future calamities of climate change evoke similar imaginations of social chaos. Crises and catastrophes, as much as it happens in life, are narratives and imaginaries comprised of “symbols, emblematic images, stories, legends, myths, or powerful icons shared by a given discursive community.”¹³ Narratives are ways people organize social experiences that imbed into collective memory through mass replication.¹⁴ Stories make

causal inferences about social phenomena, irrespective of whether a narrative represents an actual truth.¹⁵ The catastrophic, as a narrative, situates in the future. Crises arouse imaginations of possibilities vastly distinct from a predictable normalcy of the now.¹⁶ Fantasies of social chaos feed into and help reproduce these sensational master-narratives of crises. These can then dominate less evocative forms of knowledge like science and facts, whereby spectacular violence is debunked.¹⁷

Narratives and imaginaries take on life as replicated in modern technologic communication systems.¹⁸ Popular culture is one way this happens as it functions to transmit stories that shape how people come to know about social reality. While its ostensive function is to entertain, pop culture also serves to replicate narratives within large socio-communicative systems that have incredible reach. In this sense, narratives are much more than just entertainment.¹⁹ The overarching function of popular culture is thus narrative production, which constructs social identity and frame rationales for past and future actions.²⁰ Popular culture is both a force of crises representation, and knowledge production. Here, mediated popular culture is the, “everyday objects, actions, and events we experience through a media channel such as movies, TV programs, songs, comic strips, and advertisements that may influence us to believe and behave in certain ways.”²¹

Projections of truths about social behavior are replicated in mass mediated communication systems. These representations can supplant authoritative voices of knowledge, such as those within the realm of science. Truth is messy in practice.²² Foucault explains:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.²³

Foucault's perspective, therefore, articulates how certain forms of knowledge dominate others.

Power is an essential component of knowledge production in the view of Foucault. However, it is not held by individuals or entities; power does not live as a polemic. Rather, it is “exercised in networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit and exercise this power.”²⁴ Alternatively, as Foucault explains:

...the way in which power operates through the construction of particular ‘knowledges’ and argued that it is through discourse that power/knowledge is realised. Conceptions of truth and knowledge are fundamentally products of power. This combination of power/knowledge and the embedding of reason diffuses through the social body producing what people are and what they can do, structuring the ways things are thought about, how people see themselves and others, and how they relate to the world around them.²⁵

The article explores how anarchy narratives of crises seem to resonate more than those that advance altruism and collective action as truth. Examined here, are how narratives of social chaos prevail over those of altruism and social order recreation in crises, using 'regimes of truth' as articulated by Foucault.²⁶

Two specific cases exemplify how crises are articulated and understood, by general audiences. The first is the example of a zombie apocalypse fictionist, now held as an expert in crisis response. Max Brooks, writer of *World War Z*, shows how fiction transforms into authoritative knowledge on human behavior, without any form of scientific legitimation. Cli-Fi is the second case.²⁷ This genre of fiction is representative of expected social behavior in calamities associated with climate change.²⁸ With roots in books written in the 1960s by J.G. Ballard, modern, archetypal versions of the genre are exemplified in films such as “Waterworld” and “The Day After Tomorrow.”²⁹ Cli-Fi paints humanity in dystopic tones—the genre repeatedly reiterates visions of human behavior as anarchic in times of great upheaval.³⁰ Ultimately, these two cases help articulate how and why popular understanding of human social response to crises has displaced empirical knowledge. In this sense, fiction is perhaps, more compelling

than the stories about human behavior told within social science.³¹ The final argument is that social chaos as spectacle evokes emotions of excitement that mitigate a deep sense of societal boredom.

Zombie Experts and the Climate Apocalypse

Both cases use illustrative examples to present the implications for human action that occur when fictional ways of truth production are de-emphasized. The cases reflect versions of knowledge that strongly influence how crises are imagined. These are contrasted with multiple empirical studies that dually explore lived disaster response, and their mythologies.³² Foucault's regimes of truth are used as an epistemological frame. Ultimately, the article addresses what is possible in the advancement of alternative perspectives.³³

The Zombie Apocalypse Expert

Zombies are unique in genre literature in emphasizing the breakdown of modern society in the wake of an external threat. In propagating this narrative, constant references to the zombie canon can reinforce an apocalyptic perception about the future of modern society, as interest groups also appropriate and exploit the zombie narrative to pursue their own political agendas, their millenarian rhetoric helps to lay the groundwork for the societal breakdown that they claim to fear.³⁴

The story of Max Brooks embodies the quote above. Brooks, the son of famed comedian and film director Mel Brooks and actress Anne Bancroft, is a fiction novelist. He is famous for *World War Z*, a popular novel about a zombie apocalypse, made into a Hollywood film starring Brad Pitt. His most recent book is about the murderous shenanigans of Sasquatch. While he does not have formal training in crisis response or preparedness, Brooks has earned fellowship status at both West Point's Modern War Institute and the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security because his fictions seem to resonate strongly with officials and policymakers. He is a living demonstration of how fantasy is advanced as expert knowledge. A description from West Point follows:

Brooks' ultimate goal was to challenge old ways of thinking and encourage mental agility and flexibility for problem solvers and leaders. Brooks' unique, unconventional thinking depicted in his books has even inspired the U.S. military to examine how they may respond to potential crises in the future. *World War Z* was read and discussed by the sitting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Brooks has been invited to speak at a variety of military engagements— from the Naval War College, to the FEMA hurricane drill at San Antonio, to the nuclear “Vibrant Response” wargame.³⁵

His position as expert gained even more legitimacy when a wealth of media outlets asked him for preparedness advice in the initial stages of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak.³⁶ Brooks offered the following insight into what to expect regarding panic amongst people in the initial stages of the coronavirus situation:

Unfortunately, that [mass panic] happens in many crises. People lose their minds and they do irrational things and they hurt each other. You don't want that to happen. You've got to make sure you keep your head when things appear dark all around you. Because, number one, you can't fix the problem if you're too busy losing your mind.³⁷

Brooks' sentiments do not challenge the predominant beliefs of the status quo; rather, he provides validity to social chaos narratives of crises. Brooks builds off the main premise of his fiction novels in the advice he offers in the real-world context – bringing fiction into reality. The expertise offered with respect to the pandemic echo his writings of *World War Z* and the Great Panic:

It wasn't a surprise, the war...or emergency, or whatever you want to call it was already on. It had been, what, three months since everyone jumped on the panic, train. You remember what it was like, people just freaking out...boarding up their houses, stealing food, guns, shooting everything that moved. They probably killed more people, the Rambos and the runaway fires, and the traffic accidents and just the whole shit storm that we now call “the Great Panic”; I think that killed more people at first.”³⁸

Max Brooks sets an example of how chaos fantasies replicate in popular culture and become legitimate knowledge. His claims to truth extend to future responses depicted as apocalyptic, panicky, and anarchic.³⁹ Cli-Fi operates in a similar manner.

Cli-Fi

The orientation of films that deal with the dooms of an impending climate future are horrifically dystopic. Hollywood tends to envision an “a lone hero saving the world from apocalypse” in Cli-Fi movies.⁴⁰ This is an archetype in the movies “Waterworld” and “The Day After Tomorrow,” and were the first cinematic portrayals of climate change. The films reached mass audiences as highly popular representations of climate catastrophes outside of novels. These movies paint a picture of sudden mass destruction:

In contrast to balanced news reports and documentaries, the fictional Hollywood blockbuster presents a more extreme and fantasy-led view of a worst-case scenario and beyond. The “what ifs” of an intangible yet dangerous climate shift are replaced with deadly storm surges and iconic images such as the Statue of Liberty engulfed by ice.⁴¹

Rapid onset of climate change effects in popular Cli-Fi films were lifted from the 1983 movie “The Day After,” which was about nuclear winter.⁴² Much of the genre directly replicates the imagery of dystopian landscapes within the annihilation of atomic destruction. One example is that of “The Road” which falls within literary and cinematic Cli-Fi, also widely distributed among audiences. The description of the book paints such a picture:

A father and his son walk alone through burned America. Nothing moves in the ravaged landscape save the ash on the wind. It is cold enough to crack stones, and when the snow falls it is gray. The sky is dark. Their destination is the coast, although they don’t know what, if anything, awaits them there. They have nothing; just a pistol to defend themselves against the lawless bands that stalk the road, the clothes they are wearing, a cart of scavenged food—and each other. *The Road* is the profoundly moving story of a journey. It

boldly imagines a future in which no hope remains, but in which the father and his son, “each the other’s world entire,” are sustained by love. Awesome in the totality of its vision, it is an unflinching meditation on the worst and the best that we are capable of: Ultimate destructiveness, desperate tenacity, and the tenderness that keeps two people alive in the face of total devastation.⁴³

The movie casts a similar vision of reality. Here, the man and son must work together and evade a relentless cast of cannibalistic, marauding nomads that pepper doom-riddled settings and constantly threaten them. How and why regular people would turn to eating the flesh of humans, whereas the nameless man and his child would not, rests in the web of the spectacle created in post-apocalyptic fiction implies something about the inherent darkness of human nature.

A fundamental consideration with respect to the concerns of climate change often both depicted in film are issues of *human security*. This especially true with regards to so called ‘hot zones’ of crises – areas subject to extreme outcomes of climate change. These are deemed the most vulnerable sites of concern. In Cli-Fi, these are the areas of conflict or in larger discourses of climate change study – sources of human insecurity

Environmental degradation and the resulting scarcity of resources are understood as an additional and novel driver for conflicts. Taken together, these ideas constitute a discourse in which ‘the vulnerable are becoming dangerous’ – that is, a threat for national security in the Western world or even for international security. The vulnerable thus become dangerous enemies in the sense of the logic of security. And this clearly implies a preemptive logic and the exceptional measures of interstate conflict and military intervention.⁴⁴

Similar social panic, anarchy narratives haunt certain segments of society. Again, during Hurricane Katrina, mass looting, and roving gang myths effectively shifted the disaster response from rescue to that ‘shoot to kill’ orders perpetrated mostly among Black residents of New Orleans.⁴⁵ These orders built only on looting mythologies, not how people behaved in the response context.

There remains the question of why narratives persist, and what draws people in rather than the facts of science that demonstrate the propensity for human social organization? One possible answer is, the prospect of danger amid possible crises presents an alleviation from the boredom of everyday life not easily overcome by facts, science, and stories of altruism. Mythologies provide escape and is their power. Narratives can override other ways of knowing, commonly viewed as more legitimate than fiction. There are implications, however, in the influence on action and policy.

“Disorder, Chaos, Anarchy—Now That’s Fun”

“Historically, audiences love a good natural disaster, and not just because it’s fun to watch the world’s landmarks crumble, but also because these films reflect the times we’re living in.”⁴⁶

The anarchism crises seem to unleash justifies practices and policies designed for social control. Reasoning rests on misunderstandings about human behavior, as previously mentioned. These assumptions extend to visions of climate catastrophes in terms of mass enactments of human social behavior.⁴⁷ As such, “Today, the terminology of ‘catastrophic events’ has become widely used in relation to an array of potentially threats – from climate change to terrorism and global pandemics – and intervenes in a field of power struggles in which expert knowledge and authorities of governance must recalibrate and redeploy.”⁴⁸ This can engender a sense of futility, but also excitement. Dystopic visions of climate crises where society is shattered presents the possibility for drastic change away from the mundanity of the normal.⁴⁹ Given, what is a possible explanation for how one version of a social reality body of knowledge and truth comes to dominate the other?

Modern boredom (or *ennui modern*) as Gustave Flaubert¹ describes, has two central assumptions and works as a thinkable answer to the question above. The first is situational, or the familiar experience of boredom, which is simply a desire for something. For example, when someone says they are bored. The second form is existential – and is more profound. Existential boredom concerns a yearning for any desire at all and

according to Flaubert, describes the totality of the modern condition. Lars Svendsen, another philosopher, argues that such existential boredom arises from a circumstance of advantage – or perhaps even laziness - where a yearning for the entertainment of anarchy and societal violence provides a sense of meaning for people.⁵⁰ The shocking is what compels one out of the monotony of everyday life outside of what is achieved within normalcy. An antidote to this boredom is the prospect of societal violence not just as viewership, but also as achievable. The prospect of crises always on the edge of the horizon – of social chaos as a truism in disasters that could well happen helps, for a moment, extinguish that existential boredom.

These points on boredom clash with an ideal state of security and safety institutions hope to achieve in advance of disorder expected in the climate change future. In 1995, James Der Derian argued the “widespread, metaphysical belief” in the cruciality a security state.⁵¹ Similarly, Lene Hansen points out, “Security has now entered the realm of hyperreality it does not refer to anything real but is part of a self-referring system, which is perceived as more real than reality.”⁵² Security, in the face of the unknown, is a fundamental human need. This neglects an opposition that we can truly also truly live within the spaces of fear, ambiguity, and confusion. Security is a performance of control. At the same time, the eternal prospect for danger and its analogues justifies the perpetuated illusion of security. This recursive relationship must continue to exist recursively for security to persist.

A need for perverse stories that seek to entertainment, but also function as forms of truth with respect to human behavior in the worst of times, suggests troubling aspects of the State. Simone Weil’s concept of uprootedness is relevant here.⁵³ She argued that civilization is a disrupted state of being (le déracinement) defined by a great sense of alienation and unrestrained out-of-placeness within ravages of modernity. The extent and urgency of climate change is a perfect example of a major consequence of uprootedness. For Weil, the structure and function of the modern State is one of domination. The imposition of hierarchical systems of power has reached an apex where “money and the State have come to replace all other bonds of attachment.”⁵⁴ An inability to advance stories of altruism over dystopia, or to choose violent entertainment as representative of factual reality, demonstrates some major sociocultural problems built on

the convergence of our past with the present and injected into the visions of the future.

This article argues that at least part of the issue is a societal obsession with safety and security in conflict with a preoccupation and desire for, to some extent, the social destruction of crises. There is wisdom in what Simone Weil wrote in France in the 1940s,

Risk is an essential need of the soul. The absence of risk produces a type of boredom which paralyses in a different way from that of fear, but almost as much. Moreover, there are certain situations which, involving as they do a diffused anguish without any clearly defined risks, spread the two kinds of disease at once.⁵⁵

While risk is one essential need, for Weil another one is that of social order. Human behavior, as self-organizing and altruistic, not anarchic, in the context of crises, demonstrates that thing.

Policy Implications

The modern disaster movie was born in the 1970s when public opinion about institutions was at a low point. Vietnam and Watergate laid bare the follies of those in power, and movies reflected a distrust in those who have been tasked to protect their citizens. *The Towering Inferno*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, and *Earthquake* all depict a situation pointing to the resourcefulness of individuals while exposing the flaws of those in charge. Powerlessness is a thread running throughout these films whether the disaster at the heart of the story is man-made or natural in origin. Contingency plans are vital and, without them, the loss of life is far greater than it should have been if experts had been listened to.⁵⁶

There are potential policy implications from the perspectives offered in the article. Namely, the possibilities of just policies in the advancement of alternative knowledge forms over fantasy are underscored. Different ways of understanding human response to the future shocks of climate change occurs in both science as well as fictions. In this case, scientific, or empirical knowledge is a marginalized alternative to anarchy fantasies of

crises. The former points towards social behavior as more of a struggle to re-establish order through collective acts of altruism and helping than chaos.⁵⁷

The article makes explicit, how fantasies can become truth and inform lived reality in multiple ways. Distancing from the different, competing versions of truth, however, it is reasonable to expect human response to social disruptions of future of climate disaster would take on similar characteristics as those empirically documented. Anarchy fictions, as just that, but as accepted fact in the politics of catastrophe could be detrimental to the creation of empirically rooted policy solutions, as seen in laws such as Texas' HB1177, or in the overall response to Hurricane Katrina. The perpetuation of these imaginations can foster policies oriented towards social control. There is power in the amplification of fantasy as truth, where spectacle has come to organize human action and legitimate domination.

Resistance to spectacle depends on the extent of its power. Anarchy fictions are intoxicating to the point that fictionists become authoritative masters of knowledge about behavior in the sense there is perceived validity. Political participation is one way to overcome the power of the spectacle. Action is organized within the interstitial spaces - or the spaces in between on the ground – that is, if the spectacle does not have absolute control. On the ground in this case, means people enacting and practicing policies of crises management that reject measures of social control. Guy Debord imagined a resistance to modernity, or the society that created the hyperrealism of the spectacle.⁵⁸ This could take the form of a turnaround from policies of modernity, which is one of the main drivers of unbounded climate change in the first place.

The politics of crises are imaginaries that live in symbols, stories, images, and discourses. These seem to have more power than science, at least in terms of understanding expected human behavior as projected to disruptions of climate change.⁵⁹ This article does not suggest the science about climate change as anthropogenic is apocalyptic; the stories told in the body of interdisciplinary science are clear on this matter.⁶⁰ Rather, the point is chaos narratives are in opposition with a large body of documented lived experience. The danger is these forms of knowing have been, and can be further used, to justify policies built on domination.

Anarchy fantasies as accepted fact in the politics of catastrophe can be detrimental to socially just solutions. Policies of social control marginalize those most subject to inequities of power.

Endnotes

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- ² The author used the term anarchy colloquially as a synonym for social chaos or panic. Additionally, the author used the words disaster, crisis or crises and catastrophe similarly and interchangeably with the understanding, these words mean different things on a scholarly level.
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