

History at the End of the World?

Edited by Mark Levene,
Rob Johnson and Penny Roberts

*History, Climate
Change and the
Possibility of
Closure*

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Edited by Mark Levene, Rob Johnson and Penny Roberts
in association with Rescue!History

<http://www.rescue-history.org.uk>

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Acknowledgements

This is a book which has come out of Rescue!History, an independent network of radical academics, independent researchers and committed campaigners. Since its inception, in late 2006, the network has sought to put its expertise and skills towards alerting not just academics and students but also a wider public of the dangers inherent in the human present and future by way of a better understanding of our past. Necessarily, our work focuses on anthropogenic climate change, the most urgent but also all-encompassing of challenges now facing humanity. We do not receive any long-term funding or research grants to pursue this work and thus acknowledge, with gratitude, the help we received from the Humanities school at the University of Southampton and the School of Historical Studies at the University of Birmingham to support a small conference the network hosted at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, in April 2008.

The success of the conference, ‘An End to History? Climate Change, the Past and the Future’, proved the launching pad for this book. We had a number of other potential essayists for this volume over and above our final band of sixteen. Thanks to Jens Justinussen, Cleo Paskal and Rachel Pope who ultimately were unable to contribute.

More centrally, both Colin Feltham and Richard Maguire played leading roles in the inception of this volume, both at the conference and beyond. We owe to both a debt of warm gratitude. A further inspiration was Stefan Skrimshire, whose volume *Future Ethics, Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination* (Continuum, forthcoming) complements, in key respects, our own. Behind the scenes, Colin Richmond, as always, provided grist to the intellectual mill. From a different perspective, Crisis Forum, out of which Rescue!History developed, has provided moral and more immediate practical support. My deepest thanks to David Cromwell, just for being there in the background and, above all, to Marianne McKiggan who stepped into the breach at a critical moment to get us to, and beyond, that final hurdle. Finally, to my co-editors, Rob Johnson and Penny Roberts, a

heart-felt salute for their conscientious efforts, not to say sheer grit and perseverance.

To overcome the emergency humankind now faces will require a much broader engagement with the issues that Rescue!History raises. A thank you to all students, colleagues and fellow travellers who have helped this small contribution to the greater task.

ML

Kineton, Warwicks

December 2009

Introduction: A Chronicle of a Death Foretold?

Mark Levene

Recently, I ran an undergraduate class on the nuclear arms escalation of the early 1980s. None of the students present were born before 1990 so it was all history to them. To try to bring home the sense of underlying angst which pervaded the Cold War I asked them if they might be able to elicit any memories or experiences from their parents. Rather tellingly, almost as if that earlier generation had either blotted out the memory or had had little awareness of what was going on at the time, the exercise proved a damp squib. A few weeks later, however, one student kindly emailed me with some information she had gleaned from her father who had been in the Royal Navy:

He said for a lot of the 1980s he was based on a naval ship and that ‘he spent half his career being trained in what to do if there was a nuclear war’, he remembers being told that if the Russians did attack their life expectancy on board was 15 minutes.¹

It may seem rather odd to begin a book which purports to be about climate change harking back to the nuclear threat. But it may offer a necessary reminder that we have been living under the shadow of our own self-destruction now for some sixty years, and the manner in which we may finally arrive at that point—or, alternatively, avoid it—contains multiple dimensions and possible directions.

Premonitions of an end to the human are in themselves nothing new. They are in-built into the human psyche, along with spectacular notions of the sky falling in or the earth being ravaged by fire or flood. Quite correctly so, as natural disaster could—indeed can—strike at any time. But whereas in the ancient past a cosmic order was always dependent on outside forces, and our own part in the drama was to propitiate the gods for fear of incurring the full weight of their

1 Thanks to Emma Hemsley.

displeasure, our own time is fundamentally different in the degree to which we imagine ourselves to be the true masters, if not of the universe, then certainly of this planet.¹

Even a few centuries back, as Elaine Fulton and Penny Roberts develop in these pages, crisis on earth, climatic or otherwise, had as its corollary a collective, religiously-based recognition of human *limitations* in the face of divine judgement. The repeated response was to repent. If we really are now in a state of terminal crisis, central to that condition is our assumed ability to dispense with such ideas as superstitious nonsense. Why should we need to abase ourselves before an imaginary God, or gods, when we have proven our ability to control the environment as we see fit? Yet, perhaps, this is the reason why at the heart of the present human condition lies a profound paradox. The historical moment when ‘we’—or at least the hegemonic elements within that ‘we’—have come closest to assuming a complete break with *natural* history, proves to be exactly the same moment when the potential for nature’s blow-back is at its most total and devastating. And, as Dave Webb attests in his chapter, *both* nuclear weapons and anthropogenic climate change are the two strongest—as well as closely interrelated—contenders for pushing humanity to that brink.

To be sure, there are obvious differences. The actuality of nuclear war would obliterate millions in an instant. From where we currently stand, the effects of carbon emissions leading to global warming seem more like a slow strangulation, the outcome of which might more closely mirror T.S.Eliot’s ending of the world, ‘not with a bang but a whimper’.² Even so, from different directions they bring us up short on this critical point: the level of technical sophistication which has enabled the harnessing of the energy of the universe—now unraveling at speed—is founded on a social formation which has lost either its fear or understanding of the necessity of restraint. Or put another way, divested of the usually religiously-based ethical injunctions which have historically provided that safety net, we are—at the time

1 Divine displeasure was almost always provided through the gods’ ability to wreak environmental devastation. See for example, Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come, The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

2 T. S. Eliot, ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925).

when the need is greatest—emotionally and culturally as ill-equipped as we ever have been to deal with catastrophe.

As Jonathan Coope later explores, this amounts to a pathological condition. But it also may explain why the trajectory towards self-destruction is likely to accelerate. Unable or unwilling to read backwards into deep human experience we assume that there will always be some scientifically-ordained technical fix by which we can punch our way out of whatever mess we have made for ourselves. In relation to climate change the most extreme rendition of this thinking, to date, are various proposed geo-engineering schemes designed not to decelerate global warming but rather to all the more tightly ‘manage’ the climate, albeit again for hegemonic needs. Dependent on extraordinary combinations of technological precision, scaled-up material resources and military-style planning, they represent just the sort of high-stakes technocratic problem-solving which began with the atomic bomb-building Manhattan Project.¹

Another contemporary tendency is to assume that there must be some opportunity at hand to be wrested from the encroaching disaster. For instance, as the Arctic ice cap melts, the fossil fuels (the sequestered solar energy) underneath will become accessible, thereby staving off for a few more years a scarcity of the very resources central to both developed and developing economies. The fact that emissions from fossil fuels are the major driver of global warming is likely to play little or no part in such calculations, especially as these will be determined in terms of national-cum-corporate interest, probably precipitating a militarised scramble for the Arctic.² Humanity at its twilight may well be one characterised by the calamitous geo-engi-

1 See Jay Michaelson, ‘Geo-engineering, A Climate Change Manhattan Project’, <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~mfogg/links.htm>. More generally, Dave Webb, ‘Geo-engineering and its implications’ http://www.crisis-forum.org.uk/events/workshop1_resources.php. Significantly, as I write, the Royal Society is publishing its own report supporting in principle a range of geo-engineering techniques. See Catherine Brahic, ‘Top scientists call for geo-engineering plan ‘B,‘ *New Scientist*, 1 September 2009, <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn17716-top-science-body-calls-for-geoengineering-plan-b.html>.

2 Scott G. Borgerson, ‘Arctic meltdown: the economic and security implications of global warming,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 87:2 (2008), pp. 63–77. Also Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine, The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2008).

neering effects of iron fertilisation of the oceans, or spraying sulphur aerosols into the stratosphere, resulting in an even more rapid collapse of the global commons with world-wide starvation ensuing. Or, yet again, by an unregulated and rampant social Darwinism in which the most powerful players in the international system struggle against each other to hold or conquer all residual energy and food resources. In such circumstances the likelihood of nuclear confrontation is high. Global warming could yet be trumped by nuclear winter.¹

But reading the near-future in such bleak terms must seem decidedly perverse. And surely its effect can only be counter-productive? Not only does it fly in the face of all the UN sponsored, NGO-abetted, national, EU and other collective-state efforts to arrive at an internationally agreed deal on halting and reversing carbon emissions, it also, more parochially, would seem to be at odds with the purpose of this book. After all, its creators came together under the aegis of the Rescue!History network whose name does not suggest a misanthropic celebration of the end to history.

Even so, one premise of *History at the End of the World* is of our need to step up to the plate and consider the strong possibility of human foreclosure as a consequence of practices, economics, technologies and socio-cultural behaviour which we might otherwise take to be normative, even benign. Until we have done so, our ability to move onto a new and safer path which might genuinely meet the challenges posed by the encroaching crisis is highly unlikely to succeed.² Whether governments and other ruling elites can—in the wake of Copenhagen—facilitate an orderly, non-violent retreat from the carbon economy is something upon which contributors to this book may not necessarily agree. What is being proposed, however, is that the task requires a much more all-encompassing vision of the possibilities and pitfalls of human society, and *societies*, than that currently on offer. And who better to guide us in this direction than those who study the past?

1 See Webb's chapter, 'On the Edge of History, the Nuclear Dimension'.

2 See David Cromwell and Mark Levene, eds, *Surviving Climate Change, The Struggle to Avert Global Catastrophe* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), for further development of this theme.