Chu on Uekötter, 'Exploring Apocalyptica: Coming to Terms with Environmental Alarmism'

Review published on Monday, March 7, 2022


Reviewed by Leo C.L. Chu (Cambridge University) Published on H-Environment (March, 2022)
Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57113

If the ongoing global pandemic and ecological turmoil have plunged us into chronic anxiety over the future, historians suggest that such anxiety has been with us for a long time and is unlikely to go away any sooner. Exploring Apocalyptica: Coming to Terms with Environmental Alarmism, edited by Frank Uekötter, includes eight intriguing cases of political debates over human impacts on the environment and the diverse actors, rhetoric, and evidences mobilized in the presentation of certain looming crises (or lack thereof). Notably, since all except one case take place between 1960 and 2010, their lessons can still inform contemporary ecological issues. Indeed, as Uekötter writes in the introduction, the objective of the book is to “map a legacy and follow the chain of events all the way back to apocalyptic moments that resonate to this day” (p. 11). This larger framework then guides the contributors through the various forms of alarmism, the actions they suggest, the responses they trigger, and their lasting influences.

The first chapter focuses on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when German states began to impose forest laws in fear of wood shortage. Bernd-Stefan Grewe illustrates the interests different players had in (de-)legitimizing the supply crises: the aristocrats promulgating protection laws but aggressively logging their private forests, industries competing and blaming each other for fuel shortages, foresters trying to justify their emerging discipline and interventions, and peasants evading the often loosely enforced laws to acquire firewood. The lack of clear statistics made it difficult to estimate the actual situation of forests, and Grewe argues that wood shortage before industrialization was a “real phenomenon in a socially, temporally, and spatially limited context” (p. 35). This ambiguity is dispelled, as chapter 4 shows, in the media sensation over forest death (Waldsterben) in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1980s. Uekötter and Kenneth Anders point out the roles the government and green groups played in the birth of this crisis. As environmentalists initially put their focus more on nuclear power than on the emission of sulfur dioxide, the suspected cause of acid rain and forest death, the warning of forest death in popular media only became an unambiguous emergency when activists joined forces with the government. Pollution-reduction technology in coal power plants was soon heralded as the solution, and the result was a win-win situation in which green groups entered mainstream politics while the state used pollution control as a “boon to the development of science and technology” (p. 105).

Sandwiched by the forest chapters are the two definitive apocalyptic tropes in the 1960s and 70s:

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.
disastrous pollution and resource depletion. In his dissection of air pollution in postwar America, Uekötter contends that, due to the diffused effects of air pollution, grassroots groups often relied on apocalyptic rhetoric as “the common denominator of the horror scenarios” (p. 44). However, the Clean Air Act of 1970 was not simply a response to such apocalypticism but also the efforts of a network of lawmakers and private sectors that did not deploy alarmist discourses. Patrick Kupper and Elke Seefried’s inquiry into the 1972 report Limits to Growth similarly points out this complexity. With its forecast of population explosion, exhaustion of raw materials, and lethal pollution, the report predicted global economic collapse by 2100. The grim picture was soon under attack across the political spectrum and scientific disciplines, but, as Kupper and Seefried suggest, the power of the report is precisely its ambition to unite “ecological values and interpretive frameworks with aspirations for reform and the creation of a new society” (p. 72). While it is difficult to determine if environmental jeremiads prevented the doomsday they prophesized, the controversial nature of their statements surely opened up debates and potential actions for the perceived crises. Notably, the sense of emergency can also be forged in absence of a clear environmental crisis. Chapter 6, by Anna-Katharina Wöbse, discusses Greenpeace’s occupation of Brent Spar, an oil storage buoy about to be disposed by Shell in the North Sea. Ironically, both Shell’s attempt to defuse the situation and Greenpeace’s plan to galvanize outcry were counterproductive: Shell’s public relations campaign was ridiculed, while Greenpeace’s data of toxic substance at Brent Spar proved to be false. To prevent further damage to their images, the two parties made a truce and Shell agreed to dispose the buoy on land. This episode thus illustrates how environmental actions can end in anti-climax.

Chapters 5, 7, and 8 bring the stage from the Global North to the Global South. Kevin Niebauer studies how scientists in the 1970s challenged the Brazilian government’s plan to develop the Amazon rainforests. Global environmental groups then politicized the debate in the 1980s by popularizing the charismatic biodiversity in need of saving. Nevertheless, after media attention tapered off in the 1990s, later cases of deforestation, such as the destruction of rainforests in Southeast Asia, did not revive the same media coverage as the Amazonia did. The other two chapters likewise depict the challenges as well as opportunities to use the environmental crises of a particular place as the base of broader political actions. Shalini Panjabi elucidates the complicated geopolitical and ecological circumstances of Dal Lake in Kashmir. A region decorated with boats, houses, and gardens, Dal Lake suffered from the conflicts around Kashmir in the 1990s which disrupted pollution control and waste treatment. Local authority declared a campaign to “clean up” the lake in the 2000s, but citizens instead argued for better municipal services and the continuation of their right to dwell on the lake, which, they added, would benefit tourism in the region. As Panjabi nicely puts it, the lake is “a landscape, not just a physical environment: a landscape that reflects people’s identities, aspirations, struggles, and power plays” (p. 168). Finally, Grewe examines the struggle of mainly female Adivasi protestors who forced the closure of a Coca-Cola plant in the Plachimada village in the southern Indian state of Kerala. By attacking Coca-Cola as a whole, the India subsidiary’s callous handling of the alleged groundwater pollution doomed the American headquarters’ plan to organize counter-environmental assessment reports. This case again highlights the agency of people from the Global South to deploy narratives of environmental crisis to solicit international support, and the strategies diverse players adopted to gain alliances and legitimacy.

The cases from the Global South nonetheless challenge the analytical framework the book chooses. While the activists are keen to adopt environmental crises to garner public attention, their struggles depend on long-term community building and everyday negotiation with other players in the arena of
environmental governance. The focus on the representation of alarmist discourse may at best capture the most obvious moments of conflicts and at worst trivialize and delegitimize the narratives that are viewed as “apocalyptic.” How can historians write about popular responses to environmental changes that, in our era of Anthropocene, blur the distinction between the local and global, the natural and social, science and politics? Alarmist discourses may indeed be adopted by actors to trigger short-term responses to a particular disaster, but to do justice to the uneven impacts across ecological and social terrains, historians have to look beyond the apocalypticism and recover the complex human and nonhuman agency that escapes the narrative of imminent crises. In this way, *Exploring Apocalyptica* sheds light on the current limitation of environmental history and readdresses the needs to engage a wider array of evidences, methodologies, and materiality on this changing earth.


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/).