



What if Doomsday came and nobody noticed?

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The most thought-provoking image of the week for me was the World's End Bar in Dumfries under water. TV cameras lingered on the pub's forlorn sign standing proud above the lapping waves. Was this just another cruel irony - that the aptly named World's End should find itself vulnerable to climate change related flooding? Or were we in more biblical territory - witnessing a first prophetic warning of the coming apocalypse?

This looks like a somewhat flippant rhetorical question. But it has become a real bone of contention within the green movement, and is worth reflecting on more widely.

Most people would now accept that we are living in challenging times. But just how significant are the changes going on around us? The 'forecasters' tell us that last week's floods were a once in a thousand years event. But the climate scientists say these 'forecasters' are really 'backcasters'. We are entering a period of climate chaos for which past patterns are no guide. We should anticipate and plan for more extreme events.

It is this reading that gives rise to a growing urgency around the [UN conference on climate change in Copenhagen](#) next month. Prospect magazine's [cover image](#) is of a polar bear paddling a canoe through flooded streets. The headline reads: 'Eleven days to save the planet'.

This kind of rhetoric is seen by some in the green movement as self-defeating and borderline psychotic. What if the Copenhagen summit does not save the planet? Where will the rhetoric of the environmental movement have to go next?

The [debate is already engaged](#). The '[bright greens](#)' like to see climate change as an opportunity to grow a flourishing green economy with green jobs and a cascade of new green technologies. They see the 'dark greens' as doom mongers, increasingly alarmist in their predictions of death and catastrophe and painting a picture of future 'sustainability' closer to survival than to flourishing.

James Lovelock, founder of the Gaia hypothesis, has definitely turned dark: [The Revenge of Gaia](#) soberly tells us that by 2040 the human population will have been severely depleted. For those that are left, Lovelock has reluctantly become an advocate for nuclear power. We must conquer our fear of nuclear catastrophe, he warns, in order to avoid a catastrophe of larger proportions.

This is apocalyptic thinking. It has become much more noticeable in recent years. The blurb on Thomas Homer-Dixon's book [The Upside of Down](#), for example, reads 'if you only read one book about the end of civilisation this year, let this be it'.

The global financial crisis has fed the flames. Last week I met someone from the [Institute of Collapsonomics](#) - set up to study what happens when civilisations fail. We actually already know quite a lot. Dimitry Orlov, who lived through the fall of the Soviet Union, notes a common pattern. First the financial system fails, then the economy, then politics turns sour, then society begins to fragment and finally the culture collapses. There are powerful warnings for us here.

A related initiative is the [Dark Mountain project](#) and its programme of 'uncivilisation'. It takes collapse as a given and urges us to face up to living through the consequences of 'ecocide' in as creative and human a way as possible.

The project takes its name from a Robinson Jeffers' poem from 1935 - another time of cultural crisis - that depicts the road to inevitable catastrophe as 'the dance of the dream-led masses down the dark mountain'. It asks whether we can engage our artistic imagination to fashion new myths that might sustain us through the inevitable perils ahead. Implicitly recalling Orlov, it is calling for an intervention at the cultural level rather than the technical.

Apocalyptic thinking certainly seems to be a powerful way of thinking about the future. Like all 'futures thinking' it is really a commentary on the present. Thus through the 20th century [apocalyptic fiction gradually shifted](#) away from natural disaster or alien invasion and came to depict humanity as the agent of its own destruction (losing control of technology, nuclear war, environmental mismanagement etc). It became a vehicle for exploring the more worrying aspects of trends in society at the time.

The same can be said of apocalyptic policy pronouncements. They are intended to rally support for visionary, far-reaching changes in society. But we are afraid of the dark. And fear inhibits intelligence. And we know from experience that visionary, far-reaching change is more likely to occur *after* catastrophe than before it - so dark warnings do not offer much hope.

The danger then is that as a society we fall into a default pattern of assuming that challenging events like last week's floods - or a three day strike at Grangemouth refinery, or the collapse of a large financial institution - are just temporary interruptions. Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible. The process of 'recovery' is under way.

But what if the 'interruption' were to last a decade? There comes a point when a 'return to normal', to the patterns of the past, begins to seem less likely than the emergence of a very different pattern of living. When we start thinking in those terms we become 'forecasters' rather than 'backcasters'. We start to see each 'interruption' as a rehearsal for greater challenges ahead. And we are then able to apply all that we know about collapse as a natural and creative part of the lifecycle of all complex societies.

This way of thinking also prompts, at an individual and at a societal level, a question about what it is that we can do without? And what can we not afford to lose (and I am not talking here about white goods!)? These are not questions of policy or engineering. They are questions about culture. They remind us, to paraphrase the Dark Mountain project, that the end of the world as we know it is not necessarily the end of the world.

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