

Knowing the Time, Knowing of a Time

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The Alleged Hysteria: Current German Media's Handling of the Apocalyptic Year 2000

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Now, you may ask, why of all topics we should be interested in these 'querelles allemandes'? The most constructive answer to this question is a deconstructive one: The German media are actually not German media at all, but stations in an international flow of information; especially current German visions of apocalyptic catastrophes mostly bear the mark of Hollywood and the millenary movements being debated in there media, are for the most part German subsidiaries of US enterprises. For example, the largest apocalyptic sect with more or less of a fixation on a particular date is the Jehovah's Witnesses and it is known to have been founded by a merchant from Pittsburgh; the Seventh-Day Adventists, a small but much-cited sect, goes back to a Baptist preacher from Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Conclusion: Precisely because the pre-, post- and anti-millenary German discourse is not genuinely German, it is of more than only German interest.

Nonetheless, the discourse in Germany definitely has specific features. One of its evident exceptional qualities is the claim to have an exceptional quality, namely the conviction, held especially by the liberal German intelligentsia which is committed to occidental Rationalism, that the Germans have had a deplorable affinity to millenary thought. As proof of this affinity, and mentioned among other things, are the 16th century movement of the Anabaptists, apocalyptic premonitions in 18th and 19th century German Pietism, and allegedly millenary under-currents in political movements such as the national movement in Germany since the Napoleonic Wars, radical sections within the labour movement and in National Socialism. In addition, the ecological movement in Germany today, which compared internationally is relatively strong, is sometimes interpreted as expressing a 'typically German' hostility towards civilization and an inclination towards pedagogic dictatorship. This is not the place to analyse in detail the thesis of an apocalyptic 'German Sonderweg', a peculiarity of German apocalyptic thought. However, there is strong reason to believe that this form of post-fascist German self-criticism overrates the theory of secularisation and underestimates the specific new quality of modern thought as Hans Blumenberg has rightly postulated.

What is to be examined more closely now is the fact that claims about a particular inclination towards apocalyptic thought in German culture play a key role in current media debates. Since the early 1990s political and media commentators have repeatedly warned about an apocalyptic

hysteria approaching with the turn of the century. Matthias Horx, for example, wrote in 1997 about the turn of the century: "The Americans greet the new century with euphoria, the British and the French react quite laid back. Among the Germans, however, there always prevails that ill tension between emotiveness and fear which has again and again proven fatal historically."¹ Other observers do not see the Germans as being at the centre or part of the centre of an apocalyptic hysteria, but as mere participants; yet they also speak of great and even of growing fear among Germans regarding the year 2000. Time and again we get the diagnosis: "An apocalyptic mood prevails in Germany."

However, should any of you think about heading for Germany straight after this conference in order to conduct field research on millenarism there, you will be disappointed, just as the believers in an apocalypse will be on the 1st of January 2000: for it will be difficult to actually find the apocalyptic hysteria which some diagnose and others predict. What will be evident are fears about the future in Germany with concerns about environmental destruction being greater than in most nations. In an European comparison Germany and Sweden are placed at the top in this respect. However, in Germany too most fears revolve not so much around the global, but the individual future: the threat of unemployment, poverty in old age, illness and accidents. Environmental concerns are rated as less important; for example, in a survey conducted in 1994 they only came seventh; the fear of a war then came ninth. However, the fear about an end of the world or humanity only played a minor role in this context.² In a survey conducted in 1995 on the topic of what caused most fear regarding the next ten years, 59% mentioned crime, 52% unemployment, but only 7% an 'end of the world' at an unknown date.³ Also, a look at membership in all German apocalyptic sects with a total of barely more than one million members, does not corroborate a rising apocalyptic fever. The New Apostolic Church which has expanded rapidly worldwide, has grown only slowly in Germany; Jehovah's Witnesses conceded that their membership was stagnating in 1996 for the first time since 1980, which might even conceal that there are decreasing numbers. In turn the Seventh-Day Adventists, who are readily cited in the media as the prime authority on the apocalyptic turn of the century, have only 34.000 members in Germany.⁴ Incidentally, their Swiss branch has just taken the Danish author A.T. Mann to court, because he had ascribed speculations about an end of the world in 1999, 2000 or 2001 to them; now they are asking him to recant this statement and they emphasize that "in accordance with our religious conviction we dissociate ourselves from any dating of the end of the world."⁵

However, not only is the acute apocalypse not increasing in Germany with the approach of the year 2000 - 'German Angst' as a whole appears to be decreasing. In any case surveys conducted by

¹ >stern-online<, 5.4.1997.

² See Sueddeutsche Zeitung, 29.9.1994.

³ Ibid., 16.1.1996.

⁴ See Michael N. Ebertz (1997): Anfaellig fuer apokalyptische Rufer? Soziologische Aspekte. In: Hans Gasper/Valentin, Eds.: Endzeitfieber, Untergangspropheten, Endzeitsekten. Freiburg, Basel, Wien, Herder, p. 216f.

⁵ Adventistischer Pressedienst APD, News 9/97.

German insurance companies, which are probably more reliable in this respect than the German newspaper feature sections, have just concluded that although the general level of fear was higher in 1998 than in 1990, it had clearly decreased compared to 1996 and 1997.⁶ Possible explanations for this development -such as the economic situation, hopes for a new government, etc. - cannot be discussed in detail here. In any case, can the current mood in Germany be summed up by: Apocalypse? No!

We are therefore facing an interesting phenomenon: a rather meagre actual hysteria contrasts with a flourishing discourse on hysteria. How does this weird contradiction come about? The sensation-seeking mass media and the related need for thrill on the part of the populace are the usual suspects in this regard. But this idea of profiting from a lust for fear is only of limited explanatory value here since we are not dealing with the (undoubtedly existing) lust, but with the critical discourse on hysteria, representatives of which are not found in the entertainment section but in the political, science and feature sections. Their overestimation or exaggeration of current millenarism, so the first thesis of this paper, mainly serves to counteract the ubiquitous loss of legitimacy on the part of the hegemonic political and economic elites and of the traditional cultural and educational elites.

The most prominent prognosticator of a growing millenary panic in Germany was chancellor Helmut Kohl who a few years ago had noted immense fears among the German people, all of which would supposedly converge in the night of New Year's Eve 1999. He countered this fear with a vision of the year 2000 as the "year of a new emergence into the 21st century."⁷ In doing so the former chancellor went along with those conservative and liberal commentators who opposed growing concerns about an ecological and social decline in general, and rising disappointment with the politics of the German government in particular, by trying to conflate quite justifiable fears with clearly irrational apocalyptic and millenary fears, that is to "laugh them all off", to dispose of them altogether and to set the "professional optimism of the political class" against them. This strategy presumably also serves to reassure the individual and seeks to prove that not only the fears of others, but also one's own are unwarranted. In any case its political function is to locate politically and intellectually most heterogeneous analyses of crises within a 'cartel of fear', which is ultimately homogeneous, and in turn to associate this cartel with the most irrational fear about the future, namely the fear of a particular date.

We are here dealing with a strong response by the elites to the equally strong critique of these elites contained in many prognoses of quasi-apocalyptic future catastrophes. How important a role this critique of the elites plays in the current pessimism about the future can be demonstrated, among other things, by a call to write about the "end of the world", which I initiated in 1995 in the largest German magazine *Der Stern* under the title: "The end of the world? Opinions, warnings and phantasies."⁸ More than 350 statements were sent in, many of which comprised numerous

⁶ See *Suedwestpresse*, 29.9.1998.

⁷ See *DER SPIEGEL*, no. 45, 1995, p. 60.

⁸ See Bernd Juergen Warneken: *Die Stunde der Laien. Eine Studie ueber populare Apokalyptik der Gegenwart*. In: *Schweizerisches Archiv fuer Volkskunde*, vol. 94, 1998, p. 1-20.

pages. About half of the authors declared humanity's future to be under threat; one third consider its end in the nearby future as likely. Yet, only a small minority of respondents referred in their diagnosis of the crisis and predicted catastrophes to knowledge about the revelation, to traditional fortune-tellers, popular religious prophets or the biblical apocalypse, and only little more than one percent expected an end or turn of world history in the year 2000. Respondents who perceived an acute threat to the continuation of human life, or at least of modern civilization, only rarely referred to natural forces beyond human control, such as a cosmic impact, but more to destructive influences of our very civilization. In the view of many respondents, especially from the middle and lower social classes, the immediate threat of self-made global catastrophes compromises entitlement to leadership by today's elites - this is taken as proof that these hegemonic groups do not act according to popular norms, adhere to mistaken norms or are simply unqualified. An at least implicit, often explicit consequence of the nearing end of the days of these elites is the enhancement of the cultural and social resources held by one's own group, which are undervalued by the hegemonic politics and culture.

In this connection representatives from lower social classes point out, among other things, that they possess greater moral capital, live more modestly and have more life experience than many executives. Even more frequent than these quite traditional strategies of self-assertion by subordinate classes, however, is the consciousness on the part of those classes of a counter-expertise which draws on the findings of modern science (and which only some authors integrate into religious systems of thought). In this connection technological expertise is mobilized as well as economic, psychological or philosophical knowledge. The texts that were sent in thus impressively confirm the theses put forward by Anthony Giddens or Ulrich Beck about the social diffusion of scientific thought and the resulting scientific transformation of protest against expertocracy. This entails, on the one hand, political opposition to the use of science by powerful elites and, on the other hand, the rebellion of new classes and alternative ideas about education against the institutionalized administration of legitimate knowledge. We are experiencing here a revolt of self-educated people against those who possess educational titles as well as of marginalized people against established bearers of these titles.

The mistaken presumption of a widespread apocalyptic hysteria therefore can be understood not least as the apology of elites who find their capability to solve problems challenged. Their far too arbitrary use of the term "apocalyptic fear" turns the competition amongst different rationalities into a fight between enlightenment and superstition. In this context parallels between current fears about the future and alleged apocalyptic fears around the year 1000 are readily drawn, neglecting the question of whether the pleasure in quoting these past descriptions of an expected end of the world does not simply express backward looking phantasies. Instead the elites prefer to conflate current concerns about catastrophes with the panicked actions of illiterate farmers during the Middle Ages and thus to simultaneously reinforce the well-known elitist dichotomy between male-fearless actions of leadership and female-hysterical actions of the masses.

Identifying today's alarmism as openly or latently millenary, however, not only serves to deny its rational and empirical substance from the outset, but in conjunction with the ready assertion that millenarism bears a close relationship to political extremism, this also serves to exclude the Kassandra from the 'common ground of democrats'. What can be observed here is an inclination

to splitting off, to an Othering of what has been defined as unpleasant: right-wing and liberal critics of apocalyptic fears prefer to locate millenary desires for dictatorship and violence in the history of socialist movements, whereas left-wing liberal and left commentators like to emphasize the enmeshment of millenarism with the ideology of the so-called Conservative Revolution and German fascism.

Commentators from the liberal centre are more just in so far as they ascribe chiliastic thinking equally to left- and right-wing radicalism. Nonetheless they share the view of left and conservative critics (while overestimating the apocalyptic components in German socialism and German fascism), that millenarism almost necessarily tends towards violent and even totalitarian politics. Yet, history provides plenty of examples that apocalyptic movements may go together perfectly well with moderate reform politics. This error made by liberal criticism of the apocalypse is connected with a further mistake, namely the assumption that one's own bourgeois, progress-orientated camp provides to one zone free of millenarism. Damian Thompson has said what is to be said about this: "The cherished liberal notion, that faith in 'progress' was a rational alternative to apocalypticism, does not bear close examination. On the contrary, apocalypticism's role in the evolution of our understanding of progress is vitally important."⁹ In other words, bourgeois liberalism and the prophets of an apocalypse differ not so much in terms of a gulf between reason and superstition, but in terms of a pessimistic view of capitalism which has inherited some pre-millenary motives and an optimistic belief in a capitalist age of prosperity and peace which undoubtedly carries a post-millenary heritage too.

We may sum up now:

First: There is a tendency among Germans who don't believe in the apocalypse to exaggerate fears about the end of the world relating to the year 2000.

Second: This exaggeration involves, not least, the ultimately futile attempt to connect the criticism of elites contained in fears about the future to irrational motives, that is, fears about the turn of the century, or at least to denounce it as an ally of such an irrationalism.

Third: This denunciation is reinforced through connecting millenary thought with totalitarian movements, for instance, in German history, and preference for not recognizing the affinities of one's own political camp or cultural milieu to millenarism.

I wish to add a final observation to this third thesis about the questionable Othering of apocalyptic thought. It is the observation that some of the fiercest critics of apocalyptic thinking themselves draw on classic-apocalyptic rhetorics regarding the year 2000 and that this borrowing is not just superficial or playful in character. Please allow me to cite a few relevant quotes. Hugo Stamm, a critic of sects, writes in his book "Im Banne der Apokalypse" ("Under the Spell of the Apocalypse") published in Switzerland and Germany: "Having caught the apocalyptic virus, millions of Christian fundamentalists, esoteric believers, sect members and adherents of cults let

⁹ Damian Thompson (1996): *The End of Time. Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*. London, Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd., p. 72.

themselves be pulled under the spell of sects and visionaries. (...) In fact, apocalyptic elements are accumulating to an historically unprecedented extent. Never before have the signs pointed to the end of the world as strongly as they do these days. (...) A crisis of the mind is ascending which may become an historico-cultural challenge for the new century."¹⁰

Elements of a millenary alarmism are clearly evident in these elaborations: we are living in a unique phase of history; an unprecedented storm will shake the world; the powers of darkness are getting ready for attack; a big decisive battle is going to take place.

A German-American coproduction called "Endzeittaumel" ("Apocalyptic Frenzy") published in the "Skeptisches Jahrbuch II" ("Yearbook of Scepticism II") reads quite similarly. It includes among other things the translation of a warning by the American sceptic John Mosley. Quote: "We are approaching the year 2000, and from all sides (...) we hear (...) that the end of the century will coincide with the end of civilization and possibly even of the world. (...) A shiver runs down my spine at the thought of what will happen at the turn of the century (...). The coincidence of Nostradamus' prophecy, a series of linear planetary constellations and the turn of the century all will bring about innumerable forboding predictions of disaster. We already survived the 'end of the world' before and we will survive it again, but for those who defend rational thought this will be a very busy time."¹¹

Undoubtedly this is also reminiscent of the biblical apocalypse. Again we are told about manifold signs in the sky which signal approaching disaster, only that in this version not humanity's whole existence, but only its intellectual existence is threatened. Here again we find the martyrs too, now as defendants of rational thought on whom the powers of darkness inflict harsh trials and who will have to suffer because of "the testimony they had given." (Revelation VI, 9) But we also know that the defendants of disbelief can be sure of their victory, just as the defendants of belief were in the book of revelation, in that those who follow the light will expel the powers of darkness. For the approach of the 1st of January 2000 unaccompanied by catastrophes will defeat the millenary dragon and put it in chains for the next thousand years, so that it may no longer "seduce the nations"; the martyrs, however, who "had not worshipped the beast" will ascend to the throne and rule for one thousand years. (Revelation VI, 16)

As you see, there is no reason to pity German researchers of millenarism for not having enough material to study. Even if the explicitly declared millenarism in Germany does not offer a very large field of research currently, we may occupy ourselves instead with the hidden millenarism of those who oppose it.

¹⁰ Hugo Stamm (1998): Im Bann der Apokalypse. Endzeitvorstellungen in Kirchen, Sekten und Kulturen. Zürich, Pendo Verlag AG, p. 9.

¹¹ Kohn Mosley (1998): Die Jahrtausendwende kommt! Droht uns im Jahr 2000 ein kosmisches Desaster oder ein prophetischer Fehlschlag? In: Michael Shermer/Benno Meinhof-Christig/Lee Traynor, Eds.: Endzeittaumel. Propheten, Prognosen, Propaganda. Skeptisches Jahrbuch II. Aschaffenburg, Alibri Verlag, p.117.