Is it the end of the world as we know it? Apocalyptic reflexivity in and around organizations

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abstract

The main aim of this essay is to encourage organizational scholars to engage with the notion of the apocalypse in a theoretically novel and insightful way. Despite a growing interest in theories about possible futures and the end of the world as we know it, scholars have so far mainly focused on the catastrophic implications of the notion, overlooking its generative potential. We have thus devised a specific approach to help organizational researchers in thinking through and navigating the apocalypse. Building on the idea of 'apocalyptic reflexivity', we illustrate the possibilities related to cultural analysis, speculation, and action opened up by the apocalypse, together with their implications for all those interested in studying, understanding, and changing contemporary organizational dynamics.

> … the end of the world wanders in the world like its globalization. (Deguy, 2009)

All cultures and societies in human history have developed representations of the end of the world. Traditional views of the apocalypse include the great flood, described both in the Old Testament and the Epic of Gilgamesh; the destruction of Atlantis in Greek culture; the Mayan prophecy of the end of the world, which has recently regained momentum; the Ragnarök in Norse mythology; the Judgement Day of the Christian tradition; and the messianic

prophecies formulated by Nostradamus in the sixteenth century. These ideas are far from being just premodern conceptions, part of old religious traditions and superstitions that were eradicated by the Enlightenment and scientific rationalism. Numerous representations of the end of the world are still propounded in various forms of speculative fiction (Wolf-Meyer, 2019), such as novels (e.g., Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's cradle*), movies (e.g., *The day after tomorrow, Don't look up, Melancholia, Terminator, Oppenheimer*), TV series (e.g., *Black mirror, The last of us*) and comic strips (e.g., *The walking dead*). Even scientific and disciplinary cultures have been influenced by apocalyptic ideas, as demonstrated by the 'doomsday clock' created by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists of the University of Chicago in 1947 and constantly updated ever since.

As noted by Derrida (1984a: 29), 'the end approaches, but the apocalypse is long-lived' or, to paraphrase Kermode (2000), other than 'imminent', the end of the world is 'immanent' in human history. The last two decades are no exception, although it has been argued that the passage of the millennium has seen a particular upsurge of apocalyptic ideas (Wessinger, 2014). We live in times characterized by the proliferation of apocalyptic beliefs and the emergence of new apocalyptic groups and movements facilitated by digital technology (Bounds, 2020; Smith and Thomas, 2021; Zúquete, 2012). This trend has increased to such an extent that it can be argued, borrowing from Durkheim (2008), that contemporary global society dwells in 'apocalyptic effervescence'. This is not surprising since crisis periods, such as wars, natural disasters, economic downturns, and pandemics, have always favored the spread of apocalypticism (De Martino, 2019).

Apocalyptic reflections have not been alien to management and organization theories. In fact, there has recently been an apocalyptic fervor in organization studies that has generated various applications and understandings in the domain of management and organizing. For example, some studies demonstrate that apocalyptic discourses and ideas are frequently used as control devices in totalitarian societies and organizations (Clegg et al., 2012). Apocalyptic fears of organizational deterioration are also rhetorical resources with which managers and consultants can sustain the need for organizational change (Ybema, 2010). At a more individual level, employees at a service

company have perceived the failure of a change program as 'the end of the world' (Hay et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs may see the failure of their businesses as a small-scale apocalypse (Heinze, 2013). Entrepreneurs also need to develop psychological and behavioral strategies to cope with the fear of the 'looming mega-catastrophes' (Bendell et al., 2020). In relation to climate change, the apocalyptic visions disseminated in the media and business environments have been criticized for impeding solution of the problem (De Cock et al., 2021; Wright and Nyberg, 2015). Resilience managers are negatively referred to by colleagues as 'doomsayers' (Branicki et al., 2019), whereas CSR managers may deliberately present themselves as missionaries 'who bring messianic visions' (Carollo and Guerci, 2017: 640). Finally, other studies show that some people may need social support that reminds them that losing a job is not the end of the world (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), while others see the workplace itself as a sort of 'apocalyptic hell' (Höpfl, 2005).

The above examples evidence that the apocalypse in organization studies is not merely an empirical object of interest; it is also a heuristic used by organization scholars to make sense of and critically reflect upon certain topics and issues such as new technologies and their effects on the work experience (Gere, 2004; Jarvenpaa and Välikangas, 2020); group and leadership behavior in extreme situations (e.g., Allal-Chérif et al., 2021; Hällgren and Buchanan, 2020); the environmental apocalypse (Campbell et al. 2019; Gayá and Phillips, 2016; Gosling and Case, 2013); business-society relations of organized violence (Böhm and Pascucci, 2020); or the systemic crisis of capitalism (Fleming, 2019; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2019). So far, however, organization scholars have predominantly used the notion of apocalypse to convey and shed light on potentially destructive and catastrophic aspects of management and organizing (partial exceptions are Campbell et al. 2018; Gosling and Case, 2013; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2019). Although such theorizing styles are important in drawing attention to the fallacies of modern organizational templates, we consider them incomplete because they downplay the reflexive potential of apocalypse which can assist researchers in achieving pattern-breaking insights into organization and management practices. In this essay, we seek to reveal this

reflexive potential in a way that helps generate a new research agenda on apocalypse in and around organizations.

We start by introducing and discussing an apocalyptic vocabulary for organizational scholarship. We then propose an anthropological genealogy of the apocalypse as myth by looking at its cultural roots. Drawing on our genealogical inquiry, we then illustrate the speculative possibilities opened up by apocalyptic reflexivity, while pointing out its limitations and possible ways to overcome them. In the subsequent section, we discuss the capacity of apocalyptic reflexivity to generate radically new political potentialities in terms of action and disruption of the status quo. In the concluding sections of the essay, we elaborate on the implications of apocalyptic reflexivity for future research on organizational and social phenomena and propose new avenues for its application.

What is apocalypse? The case for apocalyptic reflexivity

In everyday language, the word 'apocalypse' is commonly used as a synonym for a disaster or catastrophe. However, according to its Greek etymology, 'apocalypse' means 'uncovering' or 'revelation': it is the emergence of a new shocking truth that puts everything that came before into perspective. For example, the *Apocalypse* of John (also called *Book of Revelation*), which is the last book of the Christian Bible and the one that has had the greatest influence on the Western cultural tradition (Barkun, 1974; Derrida, 1984a; Giorello, 2020), prophesizes the advent of the Messiah, which is not necessarily a catastrophic event. After the final battle between the forces of good and evil, the invocation 'come Lord Jesus' alludes to the return of Jesus, which means salvation for the community of the faithful – and catastrophe for all the others, especially for the Romans who were persecuting the Christians at the time when the text was written (Friesen, 2001). The Christian tradition also suggests that its communitarian ethos is another aspect that distinguishes apocalypticism from plain and simple catastrophism, in which individuals are typically alone in their struggle for survival (Lilley et al., 2012; Webster, 2021). In the Christian tradition, therefore, the notion of apocalypse implies catastrophe and destruction of human structures which, at the same time,

release a regenerative force for humanity to grasp since such destruction also brings salvation and renewal, at least for those who welcome its revelatory message.

Two other relevant terms deriving from Christian theology in the apocalyptic vocabulary are 'millenarism' and 'messianism'. Millenarism (or 'millenarianism', or 'chiliasm', from the Greek *chìlia*, meaning 1,000) refers to Jesus Christ's reign on earth, which, as indicated in John's *Apocalypse*, will last 1,000 years after his return and before the Last Judgement and the final defeat of Satan (Zúquete, 2012). The term 'messianism' is rooted in both the Christian and the Judaic traditions. It refers to a personification of the apocalypse in the figure of the Messiah, who, according to the Hebrews, will be a king from David's lineage.

Another relevant notion that originates from the Christian and Judaic traditions is that of 'eschatology', which stands for 'what heralds the eschaton' (Greek for 'end'). Eschatology is, therefore, the discourse on the last things, the representation of final events. Because an end may be randomly catastrophic or violent, eschatological narratives present a brighter or, alternatively, a darker view of the future. Thus, the eschatological discourse speculates about and reflects upon what comes after the end: the 'post-apocalyptic world'. Salvation, as prophesized by the Judeo-Christian vision of the realization of God's kingdom, is not always the most likely outcome, even for believers. Often, in fact, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives depict a bleak future awaiting humanity.

In essence, as the revelation of an unexpected truth, an apocalypse is a radical knowledge and learning event that, while implying destructive consequences on the one hand, represents an opportunity for reconstruction and renewal on the other – but only for those who are able to abandon their taken-for-granted world views and ways of being. This dialectic of destruction and renewal represented in the Judeo-Christian eschatological tradition can help push forward more normatively daring reflection on contemporary apocalyptic

challenges, such as the climate crisis[1]. Furthermore, such reflections can provide unexpected support for ecological activism and complement the scientific responses that aim to create awareness of upcoming catastrophes in Anthropocene. They can do so by stimulating speculative imagination and fostering emotional engagement with the phenomenon.

This symbiosis of scientific and religious reflections goes hand in hand with the dynamic-dialectical and radical views of reflexivity, which encompass both an initial movement towards de(con)structive reflexivity and a subsequent reconstructive reflexive effort (Alvesson et al, 2008). The underlying assumption is that there is an interplay between the unmaking of a certain world and the creation of a new world, including organizational ones. 'Apocalypse' can thus work as one of those 'threshold concepts' described by Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) that change the very way in which we engage with knowledge. Apocalyptic reflexivity takes a step further by positing a collective obligation to question our responsibility vis-à-vis the crises of our times and interrogate our role as researchers, managers, educators and citizens (Allen et al., 2019). The distinctive feature of 'apocalyptic reflexivity' as a heuristic of thoughtfulness is its capacity to bridge scientific and spiritual modes of thinking rather than reinforce the chasm between them. Consequently, it creates a broader space for action that extends beyond technocratic organizing or self- and group-centric spiritual renewal. This compels us to consider communal responses to crises and to envision radically new principles of mutuality/relatedness with other living beings. In existential terms, 'apocalyptic reflexivity' signifies a willingness to comprehend the world with a keen awareness of its ending. It rejects moral disengagement, agentic apathy, and 'tepid' transitional approaches when faced with the evidence of impending catastrophes.

As a result of the above considerations, we maintain that apocalyptic reflexivity and its related vocabulary can serve as a powerful stimulant for the

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[1] For example, the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis's 'Laudate Deum' (4 October 2023) openly addresses this issue: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html

transformation of organizational research. It can do so by opening up the radically new possibilities in terms of cultural analysis, speculative imagination, and activism described in the following sections.

Anthropological genealogy of the apocalypse

The idea of the end of the world goes back to the cultural dawn of human civilization. Indeed, the fact that representations of the end of the world have been found in many cultures around the world and in different ages (from Ancient Greece to native Mesoamerican populations' cults, from Christian and Hinduist sacred texts to European medieval mysticism, as well as in heretic movements and peasants' revolts), means that eschatological beliefs can be described as 'human' (or 'cultural') 'universals' (Brown, 1991).

Cultural anthropologists have demonstrated that millenarism, far from being limited to pre-modern rural societies, persists in contemporary societies and communities, as well as in urban settings (e.g., Barkun, 1974; Bounds, 2020). One familiar example is the 'New Age' movement, which, in its original eighteenth-century version, prophesized the advent of the 'New Cosmic Age of Aquarius', while being subsequently revitalized and reshaped during the 1960s and 1970s by the hippy movement (Kottak, 2018). Other well-known millenarian movements are the Mormon Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Rastafarians, who see the twentieth-century century Ethiopian emperor Hailé Selassié as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ.

One reason for the strength and persistence of apocalyptic predictions is that they have often demonstrated that they can survive the failure of their own prophecies. This aspect is well-documented in the classic study *When prophecy fails* by Festinger et al. (1956). The study focused on an apocalyptic sect called 'The Seekers' led by Dorothy Martin, a suburban housewife, who claimed that she had been contacted by aliens and informed that the world would end on December 21, 1954. After that day, the group and its leader enacted various strategies to maintain the validity of their claims, demonstrating the ability of members of apocalyptic cults to confirm their basic assumptions even when confronted with evidence that contradicts them. The capacity to overcome and survive 'prophetic disconfirmation'

(Barkun, 1974) by finding explanations, reframing, or postponing the prophesized times and events is a key characteristic of these groups (Fleming, 2019).

In anthropological terms, representations of the apocalypse and their related narratives are 'myths', which respond to a more general human need of signification of the world. Myths can be described as sacred stories believed to be true by the members of a certain culture (Stein and Stein, 2017). Myths do not belong to the normal time in which social life unfolds, although every social group has sought to position them in the chronological series of events (Hubert, 1904). Often, they have been located in the remote past, at the beginning of history: in these cases, they are 'myths of the origin'. In other cases, they have been envisioned at the end of history, thus constituting 'eschatological' or 'apocalyptic myths'. Notwithstanding this distinction, the two types of myths have features in common because they both articulate the norms and values of a social group, explaining how to behave, and how to distinguish 'good' from 'evil' (Hubert, 1904; Stein and Stein, 2017).

An author who has devoted himself to the study of cultural representations of the apocalypse is the Italian ethnologist Ernesto De Martino. His last research work, *The end of the world. A contribution to the analysis of cultural apocalypses* (2019), recently republished, is a collection of notes and essays that investigate apocalyptic narratives across different cultures and historical periods. De Martino's fundamental premise is that what he calls 'cultural apocalypses' are not prophecies of the end of the world, as is often believed, but prophecies of the end of a particular cultural world which has arisen in specific historical and social circumstances.

After examining a range of cultural sources – from the Romans' cult of death to Marxist millenarism, from cargo cults and decolonization movements to European modern arts, philosophy, literature, and even psychiatric reports – De Martino (2019: 575–576) distilled his arguments on cultural apocalypses as follows: such representations typically arise in difficult times, when a cultural world risks becoming meaningless and disappearing; and they work as a symbolic medium for renovated cultural values and action which can help individuals and societies overcome the critical moment. Apocalyptic myths

thus have apotropaic value, in that they work as cultural devices to avert bad luck and evil influences. This explains why millenarian beliefs usually flourish 'in times of crisis such as wars, pandemics and famines' (De Martino, 2019: 441).

In his study on cultural apocalypses, De Martino also directs attention to the individual-level manifestations of the apocalypse (what he calls 'psychopathological' apocalypses). Indeed, it is not just collective life but also individual life that can enter into a crisis following a traumatic event. Besides death, which can be considered an actual and irreversible end for an individual, other critical moments – such as the end of a relationship or the death of a family member or of a loved one – can be destabilizing and thus threaten the capacity to make sense of one's personal world. Once again, although these can be seen as principally individual problems, the healing practices for securing the threatened individual existence require collective, cultural techniques, such as the death rites and ritual forms of mourning that were the object of De Martino's earlier research work (De Martino, 2019; for an overview see Zinn, 2015).

In sum, it is both because of their strength and persistence – even when subject to 'prophetic disconfirmation' – and because of their eminently social and collective nature, that organizational researchers should pay attention to the apocalyptic myths and representations that are part of the organizational worlds that they study.

Speculative possibilities opened up by apocalyptic reflexivity

Moving on from its longstanding cultural roots, in the twentieth century, ideas about the apocalypse and the end of the world gained great traction among thinkers, artists, and philosophers due to the multiple catastrophes that characterized that century: the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, two World Wars, the Holocaust, and nuclear disasters such as Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Chernobyl. The twentieth century can certainly be described as 'apocalyptic', and its manifold traumatic events have induced intellectuals to reflect on their extreme consequences, often resorting to hyperbolic reasoning to disclose new speculative possibilities. For example, Adorno

(2004) reflected on the end of poetry after Auschwitz, thus alluding to the end of culture and of humanity overall. Differently, Fukuyama (1992) talked about the 'end of history' and its consequences after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The visions of the apocalypse in the twentieth century that have most stimulated and haunted the collective imagination are arguably the 'nuclear' or 'atomic' ones. These visions have recently resurfaced in the twenty-first century with the threat of escalation of the war in Ukraine and periodic alarming news concerning the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant. One of the first thinkers to engage in apocalyptic reflexivity in relation to the immanent possibility of nuclear catastrophe was Günther Anders. His apocalyptic reasoning started from the atomic bombardments of Japan (Anders, 1956) and then expanded to include the impending apocalypse of accelerated technological development more generally (Anders, 1980). He claimed that there is a 'promethean gap' between the technical means of humankind and humans' imaginative capacity: because humans cannot imagine the extreme consequences of the technical products they create (e.g., atomic bombs), they are inexorably and meekly sliding toward their own annihilation, without acknowledging it. To oppose this trend, Anders formulated a radical conception of the techno-apocalypse as a 'naked apocalypse', a complete annihilation of humankind which excludes any possibility of salvation. If no-one will be saved, he insisted, it will be as if humankind never existed, because there will be no-one in the future to mourn for us. This implies that all the past, present, and (the limited) future actions of humankind are meaningless. For Anders (1956; 1980), spreading awareness of such a terrible eventuality could help to prevent it.

Jacques Derrida illustrated his style of apocalyptic reflexivity in two essays published in the same year. In the first one, more conceptual in nature, Derrida (1984a) contested Kant, arguing that the latter had fallen into a conceptual trap when proclaiming the end of metaphysics and the triumph of reason. According to Derrida (1984a), Kant's argument that there cannot be any revelation in regard to metaphysical objects in philosophy was an ill-fated apocalyptic gesture which marked a fundamental shift in philosophical thought, de-absolutizing and constraining it within the limits of pure reason.

Derrida's comment on Kant's work highlights the potential dogmatism inherent to any apocalyptic discourse seeking to reveal an ultimate, definitive truth. Derrida (1984a) explained that the antidote to dogmatism, the closure of thought, is to keep the idea of the apocalypse open, since no-one knows what is coming or in what form. Only in this way can the apocalypse not represent a pre-determined end but rather the beginning of an end that remains unaccomplished, open to creative possibilities and contributions. Proving that he did not dismiss the idea of the apocalypse overall, in a second essay Derrida (1984b) talked in apocalyptic terms about the radical danger that global nuclear war represents to humanity. Sharing the same urgency and concerns as Anders (1956; 1980), he evoked the unmeasurable catastrophic consequences that such an eventuality might have for human existence.

Whilst apocalyptic arguments have also been used by Jaspers (1961) with regard to atomic weapons, other philosophers have been critical of applying the concept of the apocalypse to the issues of their time. In criticizing Jaspers, who equated the atomic threat with the totalitarian danger of the USSR, Blanchot (1964) declared that the concept of apocalypse is 'disappointing' for describing the new epoch inaugurated by atomic power. In Blanchot's view, the idea of the complete disappearance of humankind is implausible. It therefore fosters passivity instead of action, and also political conservatism. In *The writing of the disaster*, Blanchot criticized Anders because, whereas Anders (1956; 1980) argued that the apocalyptic imagination should be expanded, according to Blanchot (1986: 7) the disaster deactivates the idea of the end of the world, inasmuch as it 'escapes the very possibility of experience'. Similarly, Zupančič (2018) has recently suggested that a misplaced overuse of apocalyptic claims can restrict rather than extend imagination in relation to the social, economic, and environmental problems of today.

Thus, two polarized positions can be identified when it comes to speculative possibilities offered by apocalyptic reflexivity: to reject the notion as useless, because it fosters passivity and political inaction (e.g., Blanchot, Zupančič), or to use it to question existing social, power, and even scientific relations (e.g., Derrida, Anders). While acknowledging the limits highlighted by its critics (Blanchot, 1986; Zupančič, 2018), in the latter sense the idea of 'end of

the world' is a heuristic device that can help to rethink the current world and imagine alternatives (Schuback and Lindberg, 2017).

In literary practice, apocalyptic reflexivity relies on the narrative device of hyperbole, an exaggeration that equates a certain situation to its extreme consequences. Hyperbolic reasoning has been employed in science fiction to imagine alternative futures by means of a mechanism called 'intensification' (Wolf-Meyer, 2019). In a recent interview, Latour et al. (2018) evoked the hyperbolic power of apocalyptic reflexivity and affirmed that the apocalypse is a 'useful trope' for academics as well. From a theoretical point of view, Styhre (2011) has echoed this argument and suggested that if we regard organization theory as a literary genre, hyperbolic reasoning is useful for imagining alternative kinds of organization. Following this line of reasoning, our suggestion to organizational scholars is to employ speculative imagination to examine current issues and trends affecting organizations and societies, taking them to their extreme consequences in order to understand how to avoid them and, at the same time, foster alternative organizing.

Revelation as revolution: Political possibilities of apocalyptic reflexivity

The hyperbolic reasoning typical of apocalyptic narratives has not only speculative possibilities but also the potential to foster hyperbolic actions, such as radical change actions based on revolutionary acts of transformation and resistance. This has been true since the beginning of Christianity, as John's *Apocalypse* is a highly revolutionary book which has been used over time to contest various authorities considered corrupt or illegitimate. Whereas for the first Christians 'the beast' and 'the Great Babylon' referred to Imperial Rome, for the poor peasants in medieval times it was the feudal system, and for Luther and Calvin it was the Roman Church and its papist administrative structure (Giorello, 2020). Foucault (2007) argued that eschatological beliefs represented a form of counter-conduct to pastoral power in the Middle Ages, before being reconnected to orthodoxy by the Church with the Counter-Reformation.

Over time, apocalyptic thought has come to extend beyond the boundaries of religion, so that a distinction has been drawn between religious-spiritual forms of millenarism and secularized-political and philosophical ones (Barkun, 1974; Wessinger, 2014). Modern agitators have been strongly influenced by millenarism, starting with French revolutionaries and their aspiration to inaugurate a new era in the history of humanity (Anders, 1956). The same can be said for the secularized versions of the apocalypse of socialist and anarchist agitators, who substituted the 'Lamb of God' with the working class and its armed vanguards hoping to achieve a more just world (Giorello, 2020).

An interesting connection between spiritual-religious and secular-political apocalyptic conceptions has been advanced by the Russian philosopher Nikolaj Berdyaev (2000), who, while supporting the Russian revolution, also talked about a spiritual revolution that should have guided the political one, to prevent the onset of its darkest sides caused by rationality and unbounded technological development. A similar argument has been put forward by Walter Benjamin (2003 [1940]) in his famous 'Theses' *On the concept of history*. At the outbreak of World War II and the Nazi escalation in Europe, Benjamin blamed progress for the unremitting catastrophe; and to halt it he advanced both religious and secular arguments. Blending Marxist thought with Jewish messianism, Benjamin argued that revolution is the 'emergency brake' of history, and that it is a collective task and responsibility 'to bring about a real state of emergency' (thesis no. VIII). The messianic revolutionary interruption of progress is thus the response to the threats to humanity posed by the constant imminence of new catastrophes generated by the capitalist-bourgeois ideology of progress (see also theses VIII-X and XIII). In thesis no. XVIIa – which was found among the preparatory materials for the essay – Benjamin explained that a 'classless society' is the crucial messianic and political reference point. It serves as the goal for the struggle of the oppressed and as a criterion with which to judge all past and present systems of oppression (Löwy, 2016).

More recently, other authors have strongly criticized the ideology of progress and development sustained by the current capitalist system, and they have propounded revolutionary millenarian ideas. Paraphrasing Fredric Jameson,

Žižek (2011) affirmed that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, pointing out that capitalism is leading humanity to imminent ruin. Speaking from a post-Marxist perspective, Žižek prophesized that it would not be the proletariat revolutionary movement that led the struggle against capitalism in the twenty-first century. Rather, revolutionary resistance to the capitalistic system would be mounted by the 'slum dwellers', who currently represent the largest reservoir for revolutionary political mobilization. Another Slovenian philosopher, Srećko Horvat (2021: 2), has postulated his apocalyptic reflections by noting that the world has been shaken by 'decades of neoliberalism, and centuries of capitalism as the dominant world system based on extraction, exploitation and expansion, the effects of which suddenly surfaced in the year 2020 and, literally, infected our bodies and minds'. Borrowing from Benjamin, he thus calls for 'activating the emergency brake of history' to flatten the curve of climate crisis and the impending nuclear threat, in the same way as the curve of the spread of the COVID-19 virus has been flattened.

It must be recognized that beyond revolutionary messianism, apocalyptic claims can be used for control and for politically reactionary purposes (Swyngedouw, 2010). For example, before the English revolution, the king was considered the Godly Prince of the *Book of revelation*; moreover, the Nazi Reich was proclaimed to last 1,000 years. Millenarian ideas 'lend themselves to manifold, often contradictory uses' (Barkun, 1974: 129) and, as a revelation of some kind of truth, any apocalypse is always, to some extent, dogmatic (Derrida, 1984a). At the same time, as argued by many thinkers and philosophers (e.g., Benjamin, Foucault, Žižek, and Horvat), by relying on its narrative-prophetic dimension, the apocalypse can work as a liberatory and emancipatory force, thus avoiding its most authoritarian interpretations. This is evident in how subaltern groups in society have adopted an apocalyptic posture towards political mobilization. For example, claiming that many proposed solutions to current crises are technicist and male-dominated, Żylińska (2018) has called for a 'feminist counterapocalypse'. Similarly, Montgomery (1996) has noted that apocalyptic imagery has been used in African-American literature to expound a separate black cosmology and to prophesize the re-establishment of racial justice.

Because of its insistence on the imminent collapse and moral bankruptcy of the current social system, apocalyptic reflexivity thus furnishes a valuable social critique that opens new avenues for political action outside the institutions of the old world, which are infected and are resistant to any reformation. The apocalypse represents their complete destruction, the final dismantlement and the ultimate act of purification separating good from evil, the oppressed from the oppressors (La Mantia and Ferlita, 2015). In a similar vein, apocalyptic reflexivity should pave the way for a politically bold reimagining of organizations and for possibilities that may arise from the ruins of iron cages and panoptica.

Discussion: Implications of apocalyptic reflexivity in and around organizations

What would adopting an apocalyptic reflexivity along the three lines of reasoning suggested above – i.e., apocalypses as myths, apocalypse as hyperbole, and apocalypse as a radically transformative political act – imply for organizational scholars?

From the point of view of the anthropological genealogy of the apocalypse, Spicer (2020) has recently noted that 'environmental jolts', such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly impacted organizational cultures and the way in which organizational actors make sense of their worlds. However, organizational researchers have paid little attention to the apocalyptic myths and representations that are part of organizational cultures. In this regard, we believe that a reinvigoration of organizational anthropology (Bate, 1997) should involve further theoretical and conceptual integration. Because organization theory has already borrowed concepts and theories from anthropology (on rituals see, for example, Islam and Sferrazzo, 2022), we thus urge organizational scholars to explore the apocalyptic myths and representations that circulate in and around organizations, especially in critical times.

In addition to those mentioned in the introduction of this essay (the failure of a firm, as reported by Heinze, 2013; the failure of a change program, as reported by Hay et al., 2021; job loss, as reported by McKee-Ryan et al., 2005,

etc.), it is likely that other delicate moments of organizational and working life are commonly interpreted as apocalyptic: for example, the death of the founder of a family firm as the end of that company-world; or a collective redundancy procedure, which entails numerous job losses, as the Armageddon. Amid delicate and traumatic events of organizational and individual life, organizational researchers should investigate the meanings attributed by different organizational actors to apocalyptic ideas and representations and evaluate their healing potential, for individuals as well as for collectivities. It should also be considered that representations of the end of the world are normally included in complex cultural systems like magic and religion (De Martino, 2019; Stein and Stein, 2017). Within those systems, a variety of cultural forms, such as rituals, ceremonials, myths, legends, symbols, and artifacts, interact in similar manner to what occurs in organizational cultures (Trice and Beyer, 1984). It would thus be important to understand how apocalyptic myths and representations interplay with the other cultural forms already studied by organizational scholars.

Moreover, understanding apocalypses as myths offers an unprecedented opportunity for apocalyptic self-reflexivity in organization studies. Following the thought-provoking invitation of Webster (2021: 10) to consider theory 'as an emic experience rather than an etic analysis', organizational scholars should look at organization studies as a scholarly (sub)culture and examine on a meta-theoretical level their own apocalyptic claims – for example, regarding the climate crisis (e.g., Campbell et al., 2019; Gayá and Phillips, 2016; Gosling and Case, 2013) – along with their own implicit assumptions. Understanding how these claims resonate (or contrast) with broader apocalyptic discourses at the societal level, or with cultural apocalypses in actual organizations, can help to reinforce the 'symbolic efficacy' (Lévi-Strauss, 1985) of those claims.

In strictly theoretical terms, there is some apocalypticism in the debate on the end of bureaucracy (e.g., Clegg, 2012; Courpasson and Reed, 2004), which entails the dissolution of the organization studies field itself through the disappearance of its principal research object. More explicitly, O'Doherty (2007) has prophesized the end of organization studies due to their internal fragmentation and incoherence. Here, it would be interesting to

apocalyptically self-reflect on how organizational scholars can overcome the current crisis of organization studies and what solutions are envisioned by the members of this scholarly (sub)culture.

In regard to the speculative possibilities opened up by hyperbolic reasoning, organizational scholars are already using the concept of apocalypse to discuss, for example, the disastrous consequences of technological development (Gere, 2004; Jarvenpaa and Välikangas, 2020) or of pandemic crises (e.g., Allal-Chérif et al, 2021; Brammer et al., 2020). Rather than simply emphasizing specific topics of interest, however, they could conduct such discussion in a more theoretically informed way by building on the contributions of the thinkers and authors who have highlighted the critical and interpretative value of the apocalypse. For example, the work of Anders could be integrated into debates about the impact of technological development, automation, and artificial intelligence on organizations and societies, to highlight their potentially disastrous consequences (e.g., Willcocks, 2020). Moreover, considering that the very thought of an 'end of all things', although it might seem exaggerated, is often used to give things *an end*, meaning 'a purpose', it could be asked what ends organizational actors or groups that resort to apocalyptic discourses are attempting to achieve. For example, what is the deep meaning behind forecasts by CSR managers of the disappearance of their professional world, and how can this help to foster or, alternatively, to weaken their mission? On the one hand, 'end of the field' predictions could be employed as a strategy to push for a full institutionalization of CSR within organizations, eliminating the need for normative guidance (Risi and Wickert, 2017). On the other hand, apocalyptic predictions could be employed as a tactic to alert the public or even to pursue more particularistic and personal objectives because few believe in the end of the need for social responsibility under capitalism, since it is impossible to imagine a fully sustainable corporate world (Ergene et al., 2021).

At the same time, there is a risk that research communities focused on one single research issue or topic may adopt a closed, sectarian view of their own version of the apocalypse – be it a pandemic, economic collapse, or climate change – which could lead to a fragmentation of collective aspirations for change (de Sousa Santos, 2020). Building upon Derrida's (1984a) call to keep

the idea of the apocalypse alive and intellectually invigorating, a possible solution to the potential disintegration of apocalyptic reflexivity would be to highlight the multiplicity and interconnectedness of the apocalyptic threats that affect contemporary organizations and societies, thereby expanding the potentialities of apocalyptic reflexivity to its fullest extent. Only in this way would apocalyptic reflexivity work as a fulcrum of multiple speculative efforts (e.g., deep ecologism, feminist theory, critical race theory, etc.).

Finally, regarding the politics of the apocalypse, organizational scholarship has already noted that apocalyptic discourses and ideas have been used as means of social control in totalitarian societies and organizations (Clegg et al., 2012; Ybema, 2010). However, we believe that the emancipatory potential of apocalyptic reflexivity has not been fully explored in organization studies. Therefore, we ask how apocalyptic reflexivity could be used as a means of resistance to managerial control or to foster revolutionary change in organizations and society. Various actors can build on such emancipatory potential, from social and environmental activists to organizational members and professionals interested in a radical reformation of extant modes of organizing. Similarly, apocalyptic claims can be a valuable resource for scholars who are trying to envisage a sustainable future for organizations (e.g., Campbell et al., 2019; Gayá and Phillips, 2016). Beyond sustainable change, other types of change can be considered 'revolutionary', such as creating non-exploitative relations between business and society (Böhm and Pascucci, 2020; Brammer et al., 2020), establishing gender equality, racial justice or, more in general, generating alternative organizational worlds that affirm a radical distinction from previous forms of organizing (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2019).

Overall, if organization studies are considered to be not merely a scholarly project but also a political one, the revolutionary scope of apocalyptic reflexivity is useful for all scholars who are interested in not only interpreting organizations but also changing them, as some critical management scholars have already suggested (see Fleming, 2019; Fournier, 2006).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, we highlighted that apocalyptic reflexivity and its related vocabulary simultaneously entail a movement towards destruction-catastrophe and one towards complete reconstruction-renewal. Its dynamic-dialectical character, as we have argued, yields ample theorizing potential for organization studies, which we have deployed along three main theoretical coordinates. First, the cultural-anthropological dimension of the apocalypse can, due to the persistence of apocalyptic beliefs, help activate collective healing practices in organizations and communities. Second, the hyperbolic reasoning typical of apocalyptic reflexivity can be used to take current issues and trends to their extreme consequences and to completely rethink organizations and management. Third, and as a consequence, it can instigate activism and revolutionary transformations of organizations and, potentially, societies.

In following this path, we have shown that the apocalypse is not the end of the world *per se*, the total annihilation of humanity or of the Earth; rather, it is the end of particular socio-cultural worlds that can generate radically new possibilities. In the words of the rock group R.E.M., 'it's the end of the world as we know it'. It is its special connection with knowledge that makes the concept of 'apocalypse' (i.e., 'revelation') a powerful heuristic (Latour et al., 2018). As in the Middle Ages, apocalyptic thinking is particularly useful in times of 'interregnum' when 'a variety of morbid symptoms appear' (Gramsci, 2005: 276). At the same time, it must be remembered that any apocalypse involves insurmountable pain and sorrow, and that only a collective salvation (not an individualistic one) can be considered genuinely apocalyptic.

In conclusion, as organization researchers we believe that the apocalypse induces us to rethink our own epistemic relations with the world. Furthermore, apocalyptic reflexivity in and around organizations can help to refine and extend the symbolic means at our disposal to face and possibly overcome our crisis-ridden times.

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