

The Selling of the Apocalypse (1975)

It was late in February that one of those interesting items often folded into crevices of the daily news appeared on the wire services. A reporter had penetrated the Brooklyn headquarters of the Watchtower Society, whose Jehovah's Witnesses have for years predicted that the war to end all wars, the war to usher in the millennium, would begin this fall. He quoted the Society's spokesman and chief theoretician, 81-year-old F. W. Franz, as privately admitting that miscalculations have been made regarding the imminence of Armageddon, and that planning for this spiritual D-day had been indefinitely suspended.

Along with snake-handlers and holy rollers, millenarians are fair game for our ridicule. Yet whatever their style, in terms of the substance of their message, the Jehovah's Witnesses suddenly find themselves in a more conservative position on the issue of the Apocalypse than the cultural mainstream. Revelations seems a pale text indeed compared to some predictions which are now accorded the status of reasonable argument. We are told that the slouching beast is all around us. If the Second Coming were to occur tomorrow, many would go away annoyed, as they did from the Snake River jump, because the event failed to live up to advance billing.

Even though it is cut off from the saving grace of sectarian ecstasy, the Apocalypse sells briskly, one of the few corners of the marketplace where supply and demand move in aimable lockstep. We read human interest stories in the newspaper about the businessman who comes home from work every night and begins his *real* job:



stocking and fortifying his home against the coming breakdown of urban life. Television features the story of two New York stewardesses who successfully moonlight between flights teaching classes on mastering the art of disaster cooking: how to make a tasty quiche from powdered egg, dried onion, and hoarded water. An enterprising California man begins a school teaching survival plumbing, carpentry, wiring, and other know-how that will be necessary after the holocaust. All over the country, entrepreneurs start up in the dehydrated food business, packaging supplies of a high-protein, well-balanced diet suitable for eating or for use as currency when the inevitable mega-inflation has finally made it necessary to hazard a shopping expedition through a city whose garbage collection, law enforcement, and other systems have broken down, carrying a rucksack of greenbacks to trade for a pound of spun soybean fiber.*

The vision conjured of an approaching breakdown also has the appeal of being a tidy, complete fantasy, somewhat like the bomb shelter fantasy of the Fifties, and probably indicating comparable fears of impotence. In a recent *Esquire*, Alvin Toffler takes us through several cataclysmic scenarios on the coming crisis in the world economic order, finally concluding that we are actually in line for something so shattering that it will beggar all prior human experience and historical analogy—an “eco-spasm” that will alter the whole human enterprise. (“What we see here,” he says, proudly surveying the results of his imagination, “is a world out of control, perched on the edge of randomness.”) Hollywood has captured the appeal of this piss-the-bed dreamworld exactly in *Earthquake*, *The Towering Inferno*, and other trendy disaster movies.

The hard economic times that are indeed upon us seem negligible in comparison to our feverish imaginings: we experience the worst long before it comes and probably more completely than we will ever really need to. The obvious advantage of an Apocalypse

over a regular inflation/recession/depression is that it cuts swiftly through the ambiguity to an attractively primal morality. Disaster restores us to the world of elemental, life and death choices, to control over our destiny which modern life has stolen from us.

["LIFEBOAT ETHICS"]

That doomsday should be experienced as a fad long before it becomes a reality is in itself neither surprising nor necessarily bad. Yet it does suggest a further hardening of the emotional arteries. We are constantly being urged to take a “tough,” hardnosed attitude toward the difficult problems ahead; to get it together for the cultural deliverance trip that will soon shoot us over the rapids of history. It is not accidental that this mood settles down around us like a ground fog at the same time that a lapse into famine and mass death becomes a real possibility in many parts of the world.

What stands on the horizon of much of the third world (the Indian subcontinent, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia in particular) is not one of your homogenized disasters with far out special effects and a clever choreography of carnage, but the real thing. For years parts of the world have experienced acute malnutrition which (according to United Nations statistics) has made children vulnerable to a Pandora's box of disease, killing millions of them each year before they reach their fifth birthday. That could be (and indeed has been) ignored; it is not starvation *per se*. But the epic shifting of gears in the world economy during the past few years and the new attitude toward the equation between international resources, population, and production has upped the ante. The stakes now involve chronic starvation which will (according to moderate estimates) take the lives of 500 million people during the present decade, as many as 10 million of them before the end of the year. We have already seen a preview of this first horseman of the apocalypse on news coverage of the siege of Phnom Penh: young mothers in a helpless narcosis suckling nearly-dead babies with grotesquely stretched skin and bellies so huge that they seem to be getting

inflated by the breast. It is a phenomenon appearing elsewhere in the world, although without the added desperation of war. It is a responsibility that we, as the richest agricultural nation in the world, will sooner or later have to face. What do we do?

Nothing. At least that is the response of a growing percentage of the country's scientists who have been shaping the answer over the past few years, knowing that the question was bound to come up. Spearheaded by a cadre of population biologists, they are gradually arriving at the position that in the coming era *triage* must be a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy.* A leading spokesman for such a “realism” in our food policy is Garrett Hardin, professor of human ecology at the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, who has chosen the phrase “lifeboat ethics” to describe his views.

In a recent, widely-noted article in *Bioscience* (October, 1974, a shortened version appearing in the previous month's *Psychology Today*), he considers the fact that the population growth of the underdeveloped world continues to outstrip development of its industrial capacity and food production. “Metaphorically, each rich nation amounts to a lifeboat full of comparatively rich people. The poor of the world are in other, much more crowded lifeboats. Continuously, so to speak, the poor fall out of their lifeboats and swim for awhile in the water outside, hoping to be admitted to a rich lifeboat, or in some other way to benefit from the ‘goodies’ on board. What should the passengers on the rich lifeboat do? This is the central problem of the ‘ethics of a lifeboat.’”

Hardin briefly considers the alternative of acting by either Christian or Marxist ideals and sharing space in the lifeboat with the swimmers clamoring to get in. It is, he admits, a natural impulse. What happens if one gives in to it? “The boat is swamped, and everyone drowns. Complete justice, complete catastrophe.” Anyone contemplating such idealism is not only

* First popularized in the French trenches of World War I, the term describes the system by which the wounded were sorted into three groups in the field hospitals—those who would recover without aid; those who would probably not recover even with it; and those for whom it would make the difference.

* For a description of the process leading up to the Gotterdammerung, as well as a comprehensive plan for profiting from it—a genuinely American twist to traditional millennialism—see Harry Browne's best-selling *You Can Profit from a Monetary Crisis*.

unscientific, but (the one thing that is perhaps even worse) a "guilt addict" as well. Such emotionalism will be intolerable in the coming era. Hardin says that anyone bothered by the selfishness of the lifeboat has the option of yielding his place to someone less fortunate. "The net result of conscience-stricken people relinquishing their unjustly held positions is the elimination of their kind of conscience from the lifeboat. The lifeboat, as it were, purifies itself of guilt. The ethics of the lifeboat persist, unchanged by such momentary aberrations."

The lifeboat metaphor may be somewhat exotic, but the message is a familiar one. (It is, as a matter of fact, present in nascent form in Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons," a widely reprinted 1968 essay accorded the status of holy writ by certain conservationists.) We live in a world of limited resources and the earth's finite carrying capacity will soon be strained to the breaking point. Something must give. The first casualty must be our admirable but doomed ambition to be the "feeders of the world." The billions we have spent in sending food abroad during the last 20 years has earned us the right to finally look to our own interests. Why should a nation practicing such restraint that the doubling time of its birth rate is 87 years share its provisions with those retarded lands so incontinent as to allow their people to double in number every 21 years?

Without knowing or even willing it, we have entered a harsh Darwinian world in which the population biologist is philosopher-king, and an equal birth and death rate is the *summum bonum*. Hardin assures us that the conventional humanitarian view of this moral dilemma is actually corrupt; that it is really more blessed not to give. (As added moral sanction for this view, he cites the *realpolitik* of the third century theologian Tertullian: "The scourges of pestilence, famine, wars, and earthquakes have come to be regarded as a blessing to overcrowded nations, since they serve to prune away the luxuriant growth of human nature.") To help the imperiled nations even through their present crisis is a kind of evil; their high birth rate ensures that such help will only institutionalize this crisis as a central fact "The Fight of the Money-Bags and Strong-Boxes"

by Peter Bruegel the Elder



of their national existence and prolong the agony of these cursed lands. The human alternative is what Hardin's colleague Paul Ehrlich describes in another context as a "die off." We must let it be. History will vindicate us: by taking such a hands-off position, we were actually sheep in wolves' clothing. After a generation has perished, then perhaps these poor and chronically unlucky countries will have acquired the correct ratio of population to production and resources, beginning *de novo* and evolving aright. Ah! Zero population growth.

[TRIAGE IS HERE]

Hardin's lifeboat may sound like the Good Ship Lollipop under the command of Captain Queeg, or a metaphor similar to Swift's diabolical recipe for Irish stew in "A Modest Proposal." Yet it is neither pure buffoonery nor satire, and in the present international economic confusion and the apocalyptic mood composting in our intellectual as well as popular culture, this "ethic" has gained a certain benighted respectability. Gone are the days when Hardin and other hardliners on population—Paul Ehrlich, Kingsley Davis, et al.—could be written off scornfully by the Population Council and other pillars of the scientific establishment as "the California school." The green revolution has failed to live up to expectations. The energy crisis has stalled the industrialization of farming techniques around the world. Technological solutions for the hunger crisis, in fact,

seem increasingly remote. In a portentous statement, American Academy of Sciences President Philip Handler recently put at least one foot into the lifeboat when he noted that parts of Southeast Asia have no chance of feeding their millions in the future, and we must "give them up as hopeless."

Hardin's ideals seem *de rigueur* in governmental circles as well, although it has been difficult to determine just what U.S. food policy is. For the past few years, foreign diplomats have been pleading with this country to allow the issue of famine to be ventilated. Even many of those who professed to admire Secretary of State Kissinger's statecraft expressed dismay over his apparent determination not to make familiarity with the international food situation one of his accomplishments. Not until the recent World Food Conference did the U.S. articulate something like a policy; even then its position was exemplified less by official statements than by the bizarre performance of Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz. Tangled in his string of contemps (along with his Italian jokes, he managed the classic one-liner: "Hunger is relative."), was an interesting quibble with reporters. Pressed hard to describe his view of the present dilemma, he agreed that the food situation is "critical," but adamantly refused to use the term "food crisis" to describe it. It is a Lewis Carroll world where refusal to name the problem allows one to avoid it. Such a public posture contrasts starkly with the attitude implied in a statement leaked from a recent National Security Council meet-

ing: "To give food aid to countries just because people are starving is a pretty weak reason."

We never were quite the innocent prodigals trying to divide our loaves and fishes among the multitude that Hardin taxes us with being. There was an agricultural surplus so immense that it cost \$1 million a day just to store it; there was a foreign policy in which food aid could be useful. These two facts were wedded for a quarter of a century in an extremely practical exchange of grain and other foodstuffs for military bases and ideological friendship. The Russian wheat deal took care of the remaining huge American surpluses; the energy crisis has made sure that such surpluses will not happen again in our time. Food is now something we dare not "waste": it is our leading export item, our version of the Arabs' oil, our international leverage. It bolsters our balance of payments and keeps us in the game. It is no accident that final control over such surpluses has just been shifted to the National Security Council.

Although producing more than ever, we send just one-sixth as much food abroad for hunger relief now as we did a decade ago. Of the current \$1 billion in food aid, some 75 percent goes to our third world "allies." South Korea, Indonesia, South Vietnam, even countries like Syria whose only utility to the U.S. is that it looms large in Kissinger's diplomacy, get low-interest, long-term loans to buy our food. The other hungry countries go begging. Days after President Ford agreed to sell 2.2 million more tons of grain to the USSR, Secretary Kissinger told representatives of India that we could afford to sell them only 500,000 tons of grain for their serious needs. *Triage* is here already.

[PROTEIN IMPERIALISM]

That complex world where elaborate computer models predict the shocking velocity of the coming collision between food and population is not a friendly place for the layman. Yet it does not take extraordinary training or insight to look around and wonder if we aren't being asked to man the lifeboats prematurely. How can we believe in the single, hard alternative the population biolo-

gists and State Department strategists give us when we turn on the evening news and see protesting midwestern farmers shoot 1,000 calves and then bulldoze their carcasses into mass graves; when west coast poultrymen react to low prices by an act of "conscience" in which they drown hundreds of thousands of baby chicks in immense iron vats? At the same time Hardin and the others urge us to launch our frail craft and prepare to repulse all boarders, our government is paying nearly four times as much to U.S. farmers to keep 20 percent of the country's agricultural lands out of production as it does on food aid abroad. In a time when increased oil prices have sent fertilizer costs out of sight, Americans still apply three million tons annually to non-agricultural lawns, gardens, cemeteries, and golf courses—more than used on all farms in India and equal to half the crucial fertilizer shortage in the underdeveloped world.

More than half our agricultural lands are tied up growing feed for farm animals and livestock, much of it in high-quality protein grains force-fed to cattle in the feedlot. There the meals are supplemented by antibiotics and hormone treatments that fatten the flesh with that awful speed that marbles it with the tasty fat and carcinogens that win it a "prime" designation from meat inspectors. (Range-fed cattle may be more economical in utilizing vegetable protein, but their flesh does not possess this poisoned succulence.) Our cattle annually eat nearly twice as much grain as the entire population of India. Lester Brown of the Overseas Development Council notes that if we were to reduce our meat consumption by 10 percent for a year, it would free for human consumption 12 million tons of grain now being fed to animals.

According to a recent article by nutritionist Frances Moore Lappe (*Harpers*, February 1975) we eat twice as much protein as our bodies can absorb—10,000 pounds of meat for each of us by the time we reach three score and ten, and twice as much per capita as we did at the end of World War II. This habit is supported by a full-fledged protein imperialism. Only 7 percent of the underdeveloped world's food comes from imports. The Nether-

lands, on the other hand, heads the world's milk and dairy goods importers. Europeans buy up one third of Africa's protein-rich peanut crop for animal feed. The U.S. is the world's largest beef importer. As of 1968 we were buying some 700,000 tons of fishmeal from Peru and Chile to enrich our cattle and hog feed; this supply would have provided enough protein to satisfy the basic needs of 15 million people for a year.

What we have here is not a case for lifeboat ethics, but a sailing plan for a luxury liner. We count our calories for weight loss, while millions count them for survival. We sit in the first-class section of the boat like aristocrats from the Decameron, titillating ourselves with tales of an imagined apocalypse, while veritable disaster is all around us. For the coming decades at least, the question is not whether others will try to board our ship, but whether their needs will decrease the gluttony at the Captain's Table. We have so arranged the world that disaster is something that happens to others. Of the 143 first-class passengers aboard the Titanic, all but four were saved.

[NOVOCAIN FOR THE SOUL]

Malthus tells us in those no-uncertain-terms so greatly admired by population biologists: "A man who is born into a world already possessed has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone and will quickly execute her own orders if he does not work upon the compassion of some of her other guests." Compassion: in the version of reality we are being requested to embrace, it indicates a dangerous fecklessness. Anyone suggesting that it should play a role in the creation of policy is likely to be denounced as a leper-licker, a bleeding heart.

Even so, we must reject those who advise us to replace simple decency with a Stone Age survival strategy. Their theories on food and people are, in their own way, as abhorrent as the theories on race held by Jensen, Shockley, and the others. We must not allow ourselves to be mystified by their apparent expertise. (The present

situation is reminiscent of the groundwork laid by Southeast Asia "experts" justifying the early stages of the Vietnam war; they too said that basic sensibility did not qualify as a reason for opposing government policy.)

The question is not whether the United States can alleviate the food crisis, but whether it will be willing to make the sacrifices to do so. (Since we have spent the last half century pillaging dark continents all over the globe, to do so would not be a "gift," for those who suspect altruism, but the repayment of a debt.) We can conceive of an epic, multi-billion dollar effort to bring genocide to Vietnam, but not to save a generation from death by starvation. We are not even encouraged to consider the possibility, but prompted to write it off reflexively. This is the peculiarly coercive power of the lifeboat analogy: it stampedes us into acceding to our worst instincts.

We are given no alternatives. (Those who *insist* on making fools of themselves are allowed to deprive themselves of one meal a week and send the money saved to the local archdiocese for its hunger relief program.) Thus we are pushed further into the position of impotent voyeurs. The twisted morality of Vietnam is gone, or at least slumbering while awaiting a new call to arms.* The so-called Watergate morality was little more than the surprised discovery that we still had it in us to be outraged by scandalous corruption, a sort of joint pinch administered to prove that the war had not killed all power of feeling in our social nerves. We are left with the moral narcolepsy so well embodied in the Prussian monotone of the present Secretary of State. It is the sort of vacuum in which mountebanks can not only think the unthinkable out loud, but immediately attract a coterie of squealing preemies.

It is unlikely that we will be confronted by the spectacle of contemporary Goths and Vandals sacking Washington, D.C. The Apocalypse will be delivered up as it has been before—in

* The "case" for such a move appeared in the March 1975 issue of *Harper's*. The pseudonymed author (the article had the content as well as the form of a put-on) concluded that invading the Middle East would be a piece of cake: "If Vietnam was full of trees and brave men and the national interest was almost invisible, here there are no trees, very few men, and a clear objective." In the present atmosphere, knaves and fools get by.

that plausible, painless world where the only decision called for is the decision to be quiet. Meanwhile, we will be encouraged in the American desire to live in a guilt-free universe where it is not demeaning to be commanded into the lifeboats; where it does not sound absurd when someone asks if, strictly speaking, *something* has not just been killed when the aborted six-month-old fetus is tossed into a stainless steel container for an hour or so until its convulsive limbs have stopped clanking and then the thing nobody has admitted was alive can be finally pronounced dead and ready for use by medical students or specimen-starved embryologists.

It is our misfortune to live in a time when there is a mugger or rapist in every shadow and a Savanarola on every streetcorner. The contemplation of death becomes easier and easier—death of terminals, third worlders, the old, the unfit, the others. Between the lines of all the faddish talk of new ways to allow people to go gentle into that good night, one hears doctors joking in the locker room atmosphere of the operating theater about "pulling the plug." One cannot help but see in

the drive to ensure dignified last rights a hint of the social engineer's mentality: convince more people to take this biological form of early retirement and you free up space and facilities for those remaining.

One of the books that has gained a cult following among certain doomsters is Roberto Vacca's *The Coming Dark Age*. It forecasts a widespread and imminent collapse of the systems which support modern urban life. Is it purely quixotic to worry that the system most under pressure has nothing to do with the delivery or distribution of goods and services—that it is the more delicate and irreplaceable system of impulse and sensibility that establishes our basic humanity? Everywhere there are auguries telling us that *this* is the system that is truly obsolete: that it doesn't work any more and that we must have a more streamlined ethic to fit modern occasions.

It is our burden to be surrounded by pushers offering novocain for the uneasy soul.

Peter Collier is a freelance writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Copyright © 1975 by Peter Collier.

The book organized psychiatry
wants suppressed . . .

"INSANITY DEFENSE"

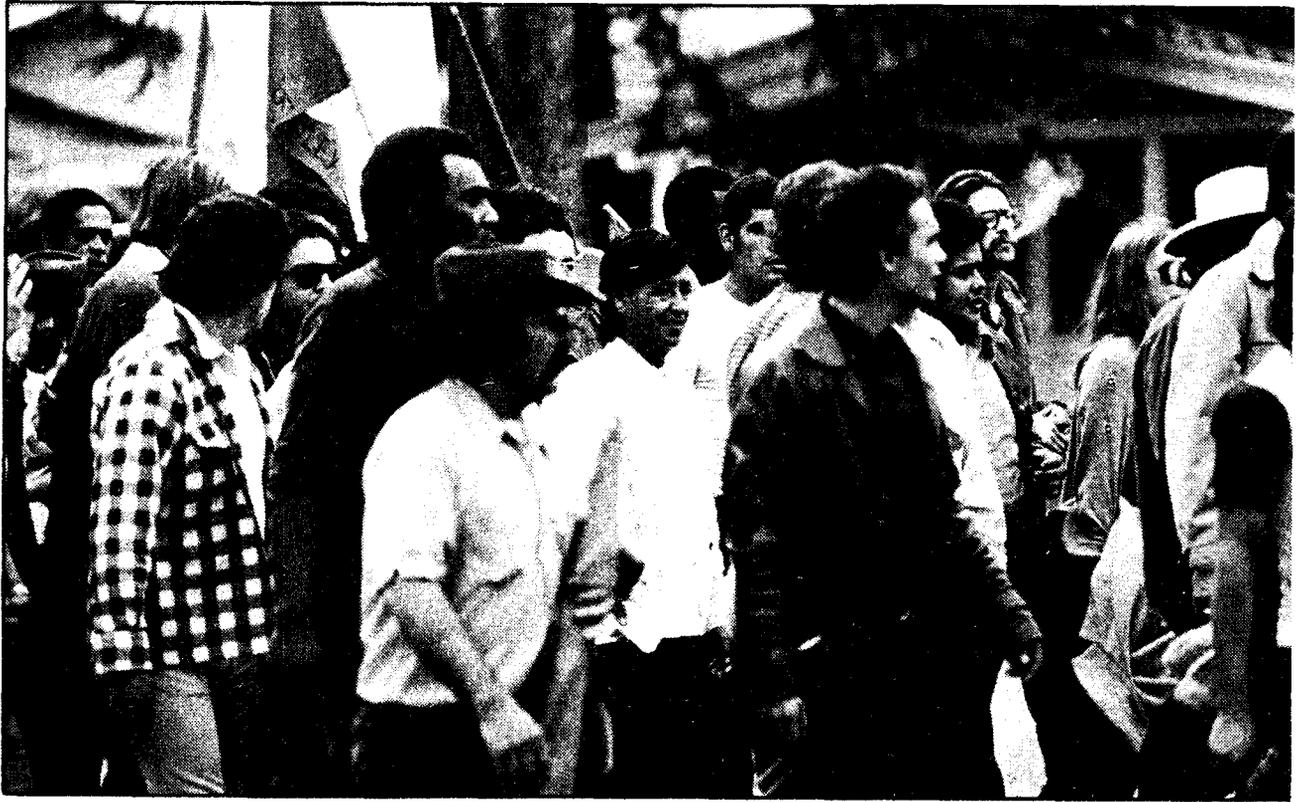
by RICHARD ARENS
Professor of Law, Temple Univ.

foreword by HAROLD D. LASSWELL

"... the book is a beacon . . . it tells us exactly what does happen . . . we have at present a kind of Watergate forensic psychiatry . . ."

—Frederick Wertham, M.D.
New York Law Journal 7/74

\$12.50—available immediately from
PHILOSOPHICAL LIBRARY 15 E. 40th St., NY 10016



Diane Coleman

A Moment of Rebirth

From the S.F. Examiner (Hearst Pub. Co.), March 2, 1975

MODESTO, CALIF.—More than 10,000 sympathizers of the United Farm Workers Union, led by Cesar Chavez, gathered here yesterday for a massive rebirth of the union's organizing offensive. As marchers streamed through this city of 85,000 where the giant E & J Gallo winery, the nation's largest, has its headquarters, they chanted bilingual slogans: "Boycott Gallo" and "Viva la Huelga". . . .

"If Mr. Gallo lets the workers vote," said Chavez, "we pledge ourselves that if we lose, we will call off the boycott and they can live happily ever after. But if we win, we're going to tell the Teamsters: *Vamos, Get out!*". . . .

