

# *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*

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*Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* begins with the observation that three of history's most important political realists<sup>1</sup>—Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans Morgenthau—wrote during times in which powerful political actors thought the world was ending. Given an apocalyptic context, what are the available responses? And how ought we to evaluate them? I answer these questions in the book and in two related articles, [“Politics in Apocalyptic Times: Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment”](#) (*Journal of Politics*, 2016) and [“Salutary Fear: Hans Morgenthau and the Politics of Existential Crisis”](#) (*American Political Thought*, 2017).

The book shows three major realist responses to apocalypticism.<sup>2</sup> While the early Machiavelli was *seduced* by apocalypticism, the later Machiavelli and the early Morgenthau *rejected* apocalyptic thinking and insisted instead on a clear-eyed, tragic acceptance of the brute realities of politics. Hobbes and the later Morgenthau *redirected* apocalypticism, using its own rhetorical resources to combat its excesses.

The scholarly contribution of the book is to show how attending to the apocalyptic contexts in which these thinkers wrote provides more plausible answers to some of the most enduring puzzles about their work. For instance, when we read Machiavelli alongside the Renaissance friar Girolamo Savonarola’s doomsday prophecies for Florence, the final chapter of *The Prince* starts to look less like an attempt to gain the favor of the Medici and more like an apocalyptic exhortation of despair and redemption. The normative contribution of the book is to show why rejecting apocalyptic thinking is often the best strategy. Despite its enduring appeal, as seen in today’s rhetoric over climate change, apocalyptic thinking risks engendering political withdrawal, resignation, or zealotry.

## Annotated Table of Contents

### Chapter 1: Introduction

This introductory chapter motivates the central concerns of the book, offers a summary of its core argument, outlines its methodological approach, and provides a plan of the subsequent chapters.

### Chapter 2: Understanding the Apocalypse

This chapter describes the canonical Judeo-Christian apocalypses, focusing on how they responded to their political contexts. These texts offer a radical critique of sovereign power, provide a powerful historical narrative that renders contingent events meaningful, and hold out the hope for a world without disagreement, conflict, or difference. The chapter then considers how (St.) Paul and (St.) Augustine, two early Christian thinkers whose arguments would shape the realist

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<sup>1</sup> I define *political realism* as a distinctive family of approaches to the study, practice, and normative evaluation of politics that tend to (a) affirm the “autonomy” (or, more minimally, the “distinctiveness”) of politics; (b) hold an agonistic account of politics; (c) reject as “utopian” or “moralist” those approaches, practices, and evaluations that seem to deny these facts; and (d) prioritize the requirements of political order and stability over the demands of justice (or, more minimally, reject any kind of absolute priority of justice over other political values).

<sup>2</sup> I define *apocalypticism* as a belief in the imminent and cataclysmic end of the known world and the arrival of a radically new future.

tradition, negotiate the dangers and possibilities of apocalypticism. I find in their work prototypical examples of the kinds of responses that will later be used by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau. I conclude with an effort to conceptualize apocalypticism not as a text or a worldview, but as a social imaginary.

### **Chapter 3: Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment**

This chapter situates Niccolò Machiavelli's work in the context of the apocalyptic excitement that gripped Florence in the late fifteenth century. The Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola was at the center of this enthusiastic movement. I argue that Machiavelli's work bears the mark of this context. The final chapter of *The Prince*, I suggest, is an apocalyptic exhortation that resonates strongly with the Savonarolan message. Machiavelli gravitates toward this apocalyptic solution in *The Prince* because he has failed to master the contingency of the political world and to explain the crises plaguing Florence. Recognizing the dangers inherent in such a solution, Machiavelli rejects the apocalyptic mode and embraces a robustly tragic sensibility characterized by openness to the variability and struggle of the political world. Yet even Machiavelli's tragic turn is haunted by redemptive hope for a perpetual republic.

### **Chapter 4: Hobbes "At the Edge of Promises and Prophecies"**

In this chapter, I locate Thomas Hobbes's political thought in the radical apocalypticism of the English Civil War. Hobbes responds to this threat not by rejecting the apocalyptic imaginary, but by redirecting it in the service of sovereign power. He fights apocalypse with apocalypse. I argue that Hobbes pursues two paths in his project—one that is overtly Scriptural and another that is seemingly secular. His Scriptural argument offers a deflationary reinterpretation of the end times, making its radical promises consistent with the demands of political order. Hobbes's political argument stages a secular apocalypse, in which the terror and chaos of the state of nature usher in an enduring commonwealth ruled by a mortal God. In pursuing these two paths, Hobbes does not escape the apocalypticism, but rather redirects it and tries to return it safely into sovereign hands.

### **Chapter 5: Morgenthau and the Postwar Apocalypse**

This chapter sets Hans Morgenthau's work in the context of postwar American apocalypticism. The development of nuclear weapons and the possibility of large-scale human annihilation fueled both overtly religious and seemingly secular visions of the end times. Concerned primarily with the secular apocalypticism that underpins strains of liberalism and rationalism, Morgenthau initially pursues a strategy of rejection and offers a tragic response that, like Machiavelli's turn to tragedy, emphasizes the ongoing and undecided struggle that shapes political life. However, I argue that Morgenthau later abandons this tragic response, turning instead to the Hobbesian strategy of redirection, or fighting apocalypse with apocalypse. Through a close reading of his remarkable essay on "Death in the Nuclear Age," I map Morgenthau's attempt to fight the possibility of nuclear annihilation by staging an imagined apocalypse of his own. A tragic worldview, Morgenthau concludes, is not enough. One must constantly imagine the apocalypse to prevent it.

### **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

In the concluding chapter of the book, I revisit and evaluate these responses to the apocalypticism and consider what guidance they might provide today as we think about how best to respond to catastrophes, and especially global climate change.

### Excerpts, Interviews, and Coverage

Adapted excerpts *Foreign Affairs* ([07/2016](#), [11/2016](#)) and the [New York Times](#). I have been interviewed about the book on [National Public Radio](#), for the [New Books in Political Science](#) and [Entitled Opinions](#) podcasts, and for the [Stanford Report](#).

### Advance Praise and Reviews

“This is an excellent addition to the burgeoning literature on political realism. Straddling political theory and international relations (IR) in a fresh and creative fashion, McQueen offers us a strikingly original portrait of realist responses to apocalypse. Moving seamlessly from Machiavelli to Hobbes to Morgenthau, from early modern debates about the nature of God to modern fears of nuclear annihilation and catastrophic climate change, she tells a fascinating story that raises profound questions about the dangers and the possibilities of political theology. Combining acute textual interpretation, felicitous historical contextualisation, and subtle normative analysis, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* makes a major contribution to political theory and international relations.”

~ Duncan Bell, University of Cambridge

“Richard Hofstadter famously coined the term ‘the paranoid style’ to describe a certain histrionic strand within American politics. In *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, McQueen audaciously outdoes Hofstadter by demonstrating the more widely pervasive ‘apocalyptic’ style characteristic not only of American political theorizing and practice but also of modern political thought more generally. McQueen shows how and explains why the rhetoric of doomsday, visions of tribulation and redemption, and ‘end times’ ideologies not only persist but actually pervade the supposedly secular age. She meticulously and ingeniously traces the apocalyptic quality of the contexts in which political authors/actors such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau wrote, and how this apocalypticism infiltrated their writings. The book is certain to make an enormous impact in the fields of political thought, intellectual history, and American studies, especially given the now fashionable ‘theological’ turn in political theory and the dramatic surge in apocalyptic politics throughout the world.”

~ John P. McCormick, University of Chicago

“Alison McQueen uses the common, apocalyptic context of their thinking to give us a novel perspective on the unlikely trio of Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau. The perspective unifies and illuminates, revealing aspects of their writings, and connections between their concerns, that are unseen in other treatments.”

~ Philip Pettit, Princeton University, New Jersey and Australian National University, Canberra

“The most important achievement of Alison McQueen's fascinating new book is that she launches an overdue conversation between and among different versions of ‘realism’, past and present. Shedding fresh light on Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hans Morgenthau, and other ‘realists’, McQueen

ignores the usual disciplinary boundaries between and among competing realist brands. Hers is an indispensable contribution not only to a growing body of realist scholarship but to political science and philosophy.”

~ William E. Scheuerman, Indiana University

“McQueen’s interpretations are compelling, and it is no mean feat to offer fresh and original readings of such well-studied thinkers, in turn asking us to ponder more carefully what it means to be a ‘realist,’ and what the limits of such an outlook are. Furthermore, her identification of two main ‘realist’ responses to apocalypticism—the ‘tragic worldview’ and fighting apocalypse with apocalypse—are persuasive, both as matters of historical record and as analyses of the conceptual issues in play... The richness of this book stands beyond doubt, and deserves all of the attention it will surely garner.”

~ Paul Sagar, *Political Theory*

“At a time when the study of the theological underpinnings of political thought is gaining ground, Alison McQueen’s new book is good news. As McQueen reminds us, political theorists often pass over the fact that half of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is a treatise on eschatology and ecclesiastical governance, or that Machiavelli concludes the *Prince* with a prophetic exhortation for the salvation of Italy from the ‘barbarians’ who periodically invaded it. Even a secularist like Morgenthau could not escape the allure of religious imagery in his most existentialist moments. McQueen’s fascinating book is due credit both for bringing these associations to the fore, thus joining the chorus of the ‘theological turn’ in political theory, and for forensically excavating the complex engagement of some of the doyens of realist thought with the symbolic resources provided by theological ideas and texts.”

~ Vassilios Paipais, *Contemporary Political Theory*

“This is a book of many virtues. The central chapters combine the intellectual historian’s deep sensitivity to context with the political theorist’s sharp eye for conceptualizing different theoretical positions that can then be abstracted from their particular historical origins. Indeed, it is rare to read a book that combines these attributes so successfully and which answers potential objections to such an approach less by abstract methodological discussion and more by handling the texts with the care, detail and circumspection they deserve. McQueen has produced an erudite, thought-provoking and enjoyable study... a deeply impressive study of how some of the finest thinkers in the realist tradition struggled with apocalypticism in their own times, which proves to be a rewarding place to start when thinking through how we might respond to similar problems today.”

~ Robin Douglass, *Perspectives on Politics*

“McQueen does an excellent job at bringing together diverse thinkers and new interpretations under the aegis of the realist tradition. For those who see a sharp line between religion and politics,

McQueen has offered a work that uses certain religious ideas to explain political philosophy. In fact, a fair reading of McQueen suggests that the line between religion and politics is actually quite blurry, with ideas traversing back and forth. With *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, McQueen has done a service to the fields of international affairs, political theology, and all those interested in the use of political rhetoric.”

~ Steven Lane, *Reading Religion*