

**Alison McQueen**

***Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times***

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In this book, Alison McQueen enlists three canonical political theorists – Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau – as guides to confronting the end of the world. That is, the looming planetary apocalypse brought on by the institutional ‘lock-in’ of economic reliance on burning fossil fuels and other highly toxic practices. McQueen does not vacillate when using the word ‘apocalypse’. She is emphatic that, ‘Today’s environmentalists ... are talking about the *real* apocalypse – an impending end supported by hard facts and data’ (p. 6). Her book demonstrates clearly the particular relevance of Machiavelli’s, Hobbes’ and Morgenthau’s work and the general relevance of their political realism to those of us who accept both ‘the science’ and ‘the social science’. That is to say, those of us who recognise as inseparable the fact of catastrophic global climactic change and the fact that ‘organised and well-funded movements’ (p. 201) continue to mobilise to ensure the maintenance and even extension of fossil fuel ‘lock-in’. McQueen was motivated to undertake the project by her professed distaste for the apocalypticism exhibited by Anglo-American political leaderships in the wake of the terror acts of September 2001, a feeling shared with many realists and, of course, many others. Reading the three canonical realists in the shadow cast by the ‘war on terror’, McQueen found herself intrigued by each scholar’s considered rejection of apocalypticism in their own times. The product of her reflections is an enthralling book. McQueen not only calls on political theorists to consider otherwise neglected aspects of the three scholar’s work while casting more familiar parts of their work in new light. She also prompts a wider community of scholars to pay close attention to the rhetorical hyperbole and, so, the normative challenges that confront all of us who seek to respond to apocalyptic circumstances in a calm, reflective manner.

In Chapter 1, the Introduction, McQueen identifies the four central commitments of political realism, which contemporary revivalists of the tradition such as herself inherit from Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau, among others. These are, (1) politics is a distinctive realm of human activity (2) characterised by agonism and conflict, (3) which means that the requirements of order and stability take priority over the demands of justice, such that (4) one must reject, as utopian and dangerous, responses to politics that prioritise some pre-political moral ideal or ethical principle. Methodologically, McQueen defends a dissenting interpretation of Cambridge School contextualism. She simply yet elegantly rejects Quentin Skinner’s eschewal of ‘doctrine hunting or tradition-building’ by arguing that political realism constitutes a tradition because ‘there do seem to be basic normative questions that recur through time [including]

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What is the best regime? Who should rule? Under what conditions is political power legitimate? And ... Which has primacy, justice or political order?' (p. 17).

Chapter 2 sets the stage by exploring how the responses of (St.) Paul and (St.) Augustine to the Biblical apocalypses presage and inform those developed by Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau. Following what for this reviewer is a somewhat redundant disquisition on apocalypticism as a 'social imaginary' (p. 52ff.) – I find the realist entreaty to examine actors' uses and abuses of morality and ethics, ideas of justice and virtue, or beliefs about what is right and good sufficient to make the point – McQueen defines the five features of apocalypse to which apocalypticism responds. These are (1) the imminence of the end, (2) its cataclysmic nature, (3) which together bring to an end some real or perceived evil, (4) marking a temporal rupture and (5) revelatory disclosure of the meaning of the past, such that it defines a new future.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 detail Machiavelli's, Hobbes' and Morgenthau's considered responses to the apocalypticisms of their times. McQueen exposes the Florentine's early flirtation with apocalypticism in the closing section of *The Prince*. And, his subsequent rejection of 'its quietism, political escapism, and romance with final solutions' in the *Discourses on Livy*, which for McQueen embodies 'a tragic sensibility [and] is epistemologically humble without being politically defeatist' (p. 97). Hobbes entertained no such flirtation. His work is pitted against apocalypticism from the outset. However, while *Leviathan* is read today for its secular political argument, McQueen demonstrates that this dimension of Hobbes' work needs to be understood as part of his 'scriptural response to' apocalypticism (p. 107). Hobbes does not embrace the tragic worldview. Rather, he 'redirects, ... fighting apocalypse *with apocalypse*' (p. 144). For Morgenthau, who witnessed two catastrophic world wars, the latter of which incorporated the Holocaust and fire-bombing of European and Japanese cities, the invention of nuclear weapons amidst the ensuing Cold War established the real possibility of global annihilation: '[I]n the shadow of ... thermonuclear war ... Morgenthau turns away from [Machiavellian] tragedy and adopts the Hobbesian strategy of redirection' (p. 148) as a riposte to the moralising utopianism of his Washington *bêtes noires*, the liberal internationalists. In short, the three political realists employed '*rejection* – a principled and considered turn away from apocalypticism and toward a tragic worldview' and reflexive '*redirection* – drawing on the rhetorical and imaginative resources of apocalypticism to combat its enthusiastic excesses' (pp. 13–14) proportionately, according to their own interpretations of the contexts into which their work would be received.

For McQueen, this means that Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau deftly separated acceptance of the apocalyptic conditions in which each lived from the utopian certainties of apocalypticism. Following the three, McQueen rejects as simplistic the marking of any clear distinction between apocalypticism

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and anti-apocalyptic thought. Instead, she demonstrates the importance of prudentialism. Of combining the two strategies, in different proportions, according to the situations in which one might find one's self, or in response to the interlocutors with which one might find one's self engaged. I highly recommend this book. In it, McQueen offers environmentalists – which for this reviewer means everyone who accepts both 'the science' and 'the social science' – a valuable set of signposts for dealing with, and perhaps resisting, the unfolding tragedy through which we must live.

ANDY SCERRI

Department of Political Science & International Studies, Virginia Tech  
[ajscerri@vt.edu](mailto:ajscerri@vt.edu)