

Thomas Lynch

A Political Theology of the World That Ends

The end of the world is a multivalent concept. Millenarian ideas can inspire peasants, but just as easily fuel American interventions in Middle Eastern politics. Anti-colonial calls for the end of the world may have revolutionary potential, but the threat of the end of the world can also be invoked to cultivate fear and legitimise increasingly oppressive political regimes. Not only is apocalypticism multivalent, it requires a degree of ontological certainty. As Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argue, “[e]nd of the world’ only has a determinate meaning...on the condition that one determines at the same time *for whom* this world that ends is a *world*, who is the worldly or ‘worlded’ being who *defines the end*. The world, in short, is an *objective perspective*.”¹

This combination of political ambiguity and ontological certainty makes apocalypticism an uneasy theoretical position, easily assumed to be reactionary, even if unintentionally so. Consider Catherine Keller’s diagnosis of the “apocalypse pattern”: the habit of declaring the end of the world. “Whatever the anti-imperialist merits of the original [pattern] may be, I consider the habit *as a habit* destructive, and perhaps first of all self-destructive.”² Her response is to offer a counter-apocalypse, dancing and wrestling with endings of worlds, without accepting the finality or closure of the “straightforward” apocalypse.³

While Keller’s response is a paradigmatic example of playing with the multivalence of apocalyptic ideas, neither accepting them on their own terms nor insisting on rejecting them as such, her counter-apocalypse is predicated on rejecting the ontological certainty diagnosed by Danowski and Viveiros de Castro. Even amongst those who argue more forcefully for apocalypticism, myself included, the emphasis is usually on untangling the problem of political multivalency. In this chapter, I focus on the problem of ontological certainty. Too often, the call for the end of the world is unclear about the nature of this world and, consequently, whose world is ending.⁴ I consider two objections to the concept of “the world”

1 Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 20.

2 Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 11.

3 Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 19.

4 I attempt to address this issue of “the world” in my *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes, and Malabou* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 13–26. This chapter is a reformulation and expansion of those initial ideas.

and argue for a kind of ontological certainty regarding the world. Against critiques which link apocalypticism with a kind of hysteria⁵ or find it reducible to another form of imperialism,⁶ I argue for a form of apocalypticism which is opposed to the world as a universalist project.

Against The World

Discussions of the end of the world presume that there is something called the world that could end. While this apocalyptic pronouncement can function for individuals in an analogous way (“I feel like my world is ending”) and at the level of larger communities (the arrival of Europeans in the “Americas” resulted in the end of many Indigenous worlds), it is less clear that one can speak coherently of the end of the world when “the world” is taken as something which is singular and planetary in scope; when the world is understood as The World.⁷ There are at least two compelling reasons for rejecting this grander sense of The World. The first is that this concept is philosophically incoherent. The second is that this notion of The World is an imperialist attempt to impose a unitary imaginary on a planet that is home to many human and other-than-human worlds.

Perhaps the most succinct philosophical argument for the incoherency of The World is offered by Markus Gabriel.⁸ For Gabriel, The World is synonymous with totality. “It is supposed to be the place where everything takes place.”⁹ His “meta-metaphysical nihilist” position is derived from his ontological claim that all things must appear in a “field of sense.” Nothing appears without a background. If The World is the ultimate background – that in which all other things appear – then there is nothing in which The World itself appears. Defined this way, The World falls prey to an infinite regress and cannot exist.

A fuller account of Gabriel’s argument would require engaging with his development of a new realist philosophy and a greater exploration of his notion of fields

5 Tyrone S. Palmer, “Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation,” *Qui Parle* 29:2 (2020): 260.

6 Indigenous Action, “Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto,” *Indigenous Action*, March 19 2020, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.indigenousaction.org/rethinking-the-apocalypse-an-indigenous-anti-futurist-manifesto/>.

7 It is common to use “the world” in a variety of ways, so for the sake of clarity I have used “The World” when speaking of that which ends in apocalypticism.

8 This argument is put forward in a book-length argument in his *The World Does Not Exist* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015) and in a shorter, more technical form in *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 187–207.

9 Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 187.

of sense. Without delving into this wider ontology, it is sufficient to point out that his primary objection is to The World as a totality. The whole, everything, cannot be conceived of “at once” because there is no perspective from which this whole, that we ourselves are part of, could be seen.¹⁰ His emphasis is on the inherently totalising nature of the world. He readily admits that there exist “infinitely many worlds, which in part overlap but are also partly independent of one another.”¹¹ His objections are levelled at the closed totality of the concept of *The World*.¹²

Gabriel is aware that The World so conceived might seem to be a “peculiar object,” so he also considers alternatives that cast The World as “a relative idea, a horizon, or a source of infinite eidetic variations.”¹³ For Gabriel, these ideas are no more successful. In order to exist, something must be an object (though not necessarily a physical one),¹⁴ and these attempts to discuss The World as something other than a totality ultimately wind up positing a non-object object.¹⁵ In other words, everything that can be discussed exists in a field of sense and is thus an object. To insist that The World is not an object, but then turn it into an object of discourse, is self-defeating. The result is a kind of new realist apocalypse; not the end of The World, but the end of the world perspective.¹⁶

Gabriel’s argument is, of course, dependent on his definition of The World. It is certainly the case that when The World is discussed in the context of apocalypticism, underlying metaphysical claims are being made (even if only implicitly). Yet when someone worried about climate change adopts an apocalyptic tone, The World is indicating something different from Gabriel’s understanding of the term. For example, when people worry about the end or “postponing the end of the world”¹⁷ or “the end of civilisation,”¹⁸ these concerns are not about the field of sense containing all other fields. This different understanding is not only evident in discussions of climate change. When Aimé Césaire writes that the end of the

10 Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 196.

11 Gabriel, *Why The World Does Not Exist*, 65.

12 Gabriel, *Why The World Does Not Exist*, 65.

13 Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 200, 205.

14 “Material objects are not the only entities that exist, as there are also logical laws and human knowledge which we can recognize in the same way as material objects” (*Why the World Does Not Exist*, 119).

15 Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 205.

16 Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 206–7.

17 Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (Toronto: House of Ansa International, 2020).

18 Adam Vaughan, “Is it True Climate Change will Cause the End of Civilisation by 2050?” *The Independent*, June 6, 2019 accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2205741-is-it-true-climate-change-will-cause-the-end-of-civilisation-by-2050/>.

world is the only thing worth beginning, a claim later picked up by Frantz Fanon, Frank B. Wilderson III, Calvin Warren and others; they too seem to mean something other than the totality in which all other things appear.¹⁹ Yet Gabriel is right in that whatever this other sense of The World is, it seems to be a kind of object. This notion of The World is more like a “form of life” that is imagined, feared or hoped to be ending. A form of life in this sense is “not quite a race and more than culture or style, this phrase refers to those ways of being in the world – always lived collectively – without which one would no longer be who or what one is.”²⁰ Understanding The World in this way, one is not met with the same problem of infinite regress.

Though this argument evades Gabriel’s critique, it also returns the debate to my initial set of questions. If the goal is to offer an account of the ontological certainty seemingly required by an apocalyptic pronouncement, turning to “forms of life” does not offer much of a solution. Conceiving The World in these terms is either doomed to relativise The World into different worlds or take one vision of The World, one form of life, as universal. It is thus still subject to the second critique: that taking any given apocalyptic threat – nuclear annihilation, climate change, the instabilities of capitalism, some combination of all of these – as a threat to The World assumes that one can speak coherently of a shared World. This assumption falsely unifies the diversity of life-worlds in an imperialist gesture.

While there are different versions of this critique, motivated by different concerns,²¹ I will focus on Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s particularly interesting version of this argument. Not only is it situated within recent critiques of “an antiblack world” in which calls for the end of the world are increasingly common, she references Gabriel’s critique in support of her rejection of “the imperial Western humanist conception of *the world as such*.”²² For Jackson, The World is anti-black, in

19 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1988), 71; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 120, 337; and Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 171.

20 Jairus Victor Grove, *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 2. In the context of the present discussion, it is worth noting that Grove’s definition would work just as well without the phrase “the world.”

21 See, for example, Audra Mitchell and Audit Chaudhury, “Worlding Beyond ‘the’ ‘end’ of ‘the world’: White Apocalyptic Visions and BIPOC Futurisms,” *International Relations* 34:3 (2020): 309–332.

22 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 39. I read Jackson’s “*the world as such*” in terms of The World. I have not changed Jackson’s wording, but this equivalence is explored in the ensuing discussion.

that blackness bears “the weight of *the* world,” or the weight of preserving the illusion of The World.²³ This World is built on the destruction of “local knowledge,” even if that destruction is never as total as the presumed coherency of The World would indicate.²⁴

Jackson sees this argument as extending Gabriel’s rejection of the world. Reading Gabriel alongside Édouard Glissant, she argues:

the world is problematic as a concept, not because of its ontological invalidity but its epistemological spuriousness[.] [...] we can conceive of and contemplate *the* world as a unitary whole or totality as Glissant puts it, but we cannot know it. Any claim to knowledge of *the* world as *such* is tantamount to imperialism. Moreover, because we cannot know it and [it] appears in no context does not necessarily imply its ontological inexistence but rather this contextlessness should interdict any definitive – rather than speculative – claim about it, including affirming or precluding its existence.²⁵

For her part, Jackson’s response to *the* world as *such* is “diasporic practices of world-making” which do not operate according to the binaries, hierarchies, or praxes of *the* world as *such*, but “fails to signify in those terms, and mutates those terms and their grammar beyond recognition.”²⁶ In other words, worlds against *the* world as *such*.

A similar critique of The World is offered by Tyrone S. Palmer:

I take “the World” here to mean not a given material reality or a thing-in-itself but a *conception* meant to contain the totality of all things “in relation”—what Heidegger terms the “domain of all domains”—one that, I argue, is constituted through and held together by an anti-Black imperative. That the World takes on the appearance of dominating *the entire field of reality* is representative of a Western imperial, humanist grip on the very terms of conception and phenomenality through the field of metaphysics. The World thus marks an ensemble of processes that necessitates the violent abjection and domination of Blackness for its articulation as a coherent, ordered whole.²⁷

Palmer, who draws on Jackson and Gabriel, emphasises both the constructed nature of The World (“conception”; “ensemble of processes”) and its lack of success (“meant to contain”; “takes on the appearance”). The World is not what it pretends to be. Here the critique of The World as anti-black circles back to the problem of conceptual coherence. For Palmer, as well as for Jackson, The World is meant to be

²³ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 85.

²⁴ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 86.

²⁵ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 234n32.

²⁶ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 118.

²⁷ Palmer, “Otherwise than Blackness,” 273n1.

all there is. The foundation of this World is a rejection of blackness which means that this coherence or ordered wholeness is never finally achieved. My argument for apocalypticism depends on agreeing with this claim, while also holding that the “ensemble of processes” that “take on the appearance of dominating *the entire field of reality*,” is The World that must end.

Even for this vision of apocalypticism, however, Jackson’s and Palmer’s critiques are more worrying than Gabriel’s argument about conceptual incoherence. Discussing the end of The World requires reflecting on whose world is ending and what that might mean to those who are excluded from, or marginalised within, The World. Jackson is firm in her conclusions: “‘The world,’ and especially ‘the world as such’ [...] fails as a concept (at knowability) but succeeds as an idea(l) of imperialist myth [...] This critique is not limited to any particular representation of ‘the world’ but is a rejection of the concept of ‘the world.’”²⁸ Jackson’s argument highlights a tension between aspects of something which is world-like in its totalising drive and the undeniable fact that this totalisation is never complete. There are always those living at the edges of the world, rejecting, resisting, and evading the notion that The World is all that is. Palmer’s response is more pessimistic, calling for “the end of *all possible worlds*, the *end of worlding* as a project of Human ontogenesis.”²⁹

Jackson’s critique points toward resources for an alternative conception of The World. Her work frequently returns to the notion of the “onto-epistemo-ethical,” which is sometimes shortened to “onto-epistemological.” She adapts these terms from Karen Barad, who in turn defines onto-epistemology as “the study of practices of knowing in being.”³⁰ The addition of “ethico” or “ethical” indicates the inseparability of ontology, epistemology and ethics.³¹ Jackson also engages with the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, who uses the term “ontoepistemological” throughout her work *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.³² While Silva provides a glossary at the beginning of the book, ontoepistemology is not included as one of the terms and she does not define the term elsewhere in the text. It is clear throughout her work, however, that she is speaking to the connection between being and knowledge in the sense that neither of these categories are settled. Jackson shares

28 Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 230n11.

29 Palmer, “Otherwise than Blackness,” 267.

30 Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs* 28:3 (2003): 829.

31 Karen Barad, *Meting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 185.

32 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007).

this concern in her efforts “to destabilize or even rupture the reigning order of representation that grounds the thought-world relation.”³³

While Jackson, Barad, and Silva use ontoepistemological in slightly different ways, at its core conceiving of The World, in these terms, allows one to recognise that The World is not all there is yet is more than an illusion or appearance. It goes further than historicism in arguing that while The World is contingent, it is inescapable in that The World dictates what is possible. In other words, attempts to transform or reform The World, by whatever means, can only draw on the resources of The World. Anything else requires its end.

In Defence of a Concept of The World

Though Jackson offers a particularly strong critique of the concept of The World, I am arguing that her critique of its essential imperialism is precisely what makes such a concept necessary. In thinking of The World in ontoepistemic terms, one must account for the materiality that accompanies the concept. In other words, the making of The World is the conjoined process of material transformation and epistemic imperialism. This claim is not entirely new and drawing on earlier work on the unification of the world combined with a concern for the imperial nature of this unification will show how understanding the making of The World is essential for understanding what it might mean for that World to end.

This language of the unification of The World is borrowed from a thesis advanced by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, who writes of the “unification of the globe by disease.”³⁴ Ladurie argues that in the period between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, this process of unification begins in Eurasia and then spreads to the “New World” as a “‘common market’ of microbes” cataclysmically transforming human life.³⁵ These microbes travel through newly established trade routes in an unparalleled pathogenic migration.³⁶ Disease makes The World out of a globe. The late fifteenth century is an essential moment in this unification. As Ladurie shows, European expansion begins the material transformation of the globe which makes the concept of The World plausible. This expansion results in

³³ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 39.

³⁴ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Mind and Method of the Historian* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), 29.

³⁵ Ladurie, *The Mind and Method of the Historian*, 30.

³⁶ Ladurie, *The Mind and Method of the Historian*, 39–40.

genocide on such a large scale that it likely impacted the global climate, contributing to global cooling.³⁷

This period is not only significant for this microbial joining of different regions of the planet, though. In order to maintain attention to the “epistemic” as much as the “onto-,” it is also important to note that it is in this same period that shifts in the classification of humans lay the foundation for modern concepts of race. The year 1492 not only marks an unprecedented spreading of disease, it inaugurates a “new world view.”³⁸ As Sylvia Wynter argues, Columbus’s journey plays a key role in establishing a theological knowledge of “an earth that would now be perceivable as single and homogenous.”³⁹ A theological geography of the uninhabitable and habitable regions of creation begins to be transformed into a concept of a planet divided into peoples and lands that can be expropriated and those that cannot.

If Ladurie and Wynter trace the beginnings of the world, Günther Anders describes the moment that this project of totalisation reaches its apex in the nuclear arms race. In the mid-twentieth century, one can speak of a World capable of ending because for the first time there was an obvious and known risk that all human and many other forms of life could be destroyed by nuclear annihilation.⁴⁰ In addition to this unification by fear, The World is unified by radiation. The testing carried out beginning in 1945 spread “geochemical residue” that has been absorbed into the environment.⁴¹ All human beings bear traces of the detonations that continued into the 1990s. These explosions are the most dramatic and extensive marker of this unified World, but, as Kathryn Yusoff argues, they are accompanied by markers of:

the more geologically dispersed events of the “Great Acceleration” of the 1950s, with its material conversions of fossil fuels; dissemination of black carbon, inorganic and spherical carbonaceous particles, worldwide; new geochemical compounds of polyaromatic hydrocarbons, polychlorinated biphenyls, and pesticide residues; doubling of soil nitrogen and phosphorus

37 Alexander Koch, et. al., “Earth system impacts of the European arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 207 (2019): 13–36.

38 Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origins of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 5–57.

39 Sylvia Wynter, “Columbus and the Poetics of the *Propter Nos*,” *Annals of Scholarship: An International Quarterly in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 8:2 (1991), 264.

40 Günther Anders, “Apocalypse without Kingdom,” *e-flux Journal* 97 (2019), accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/97/251199/apocalypse-without-kingdom/>.

41 Kathryn Yusoff, “White Utopia/Black Inferno: Life on a Geologic Spike,” *e-flux Journal* 97 (2019), accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/97/252226/white-utopia-black-inferno-life-on-a-geologic-spike/>.

due to the Haber Bosch process of artificially producing nitrogen fertilizer; and dispersals of new materials, such as aluminum, concrete, plastics, and synthetic fibers.⁴²

As with debates about the starting of the Anthropocene, it matters less precisely when one can speak of The World beginning. What is clear is that The World has not always existed, but there is a World now. It is not a World all experience in the same way, but it marks all of our bodies, alongside the bodies of other animals and the rest of the bodies which endure The World. That World is ending in slow but intensifying ways. Rather than focus on the possibility of other possible worlds, apocalypticism holds that another end is possible and enquires about the kinds of relations opened up by living towards these different ends.⁴³

The World as a Universalist Project

This account of the making of The World is in full agreement with Jackson's assessment of the imperialism of the concept. Ladorie's account of the unification of The World by disease is clearly connected to colonialism. Nuclear proliferation is not, at first glance, as straightforwardly imperialist. Yet, as Malcom Ferdinand shows, Anders either does not know or does not acknowledge that the testing that animates fears and contaminates bodies was frequently carried out on colonised lands, including in Algeria and Polynesia. Beyond the explosions themselves, there is "the damage caused by the plundering of mines in Africa by Great Britain and France and by the exploitation of the subsoil of Aboriginal lands in Australia, the First Nations in Canada, the Navajo in the United States, and of the Black workers forced to extract uranium in apartheid South Africa."⁴⁴ The World, as an ontoepistemic object, is not static, but formed through the material transformation of the Earth. This transformation is entangled with the conceptual changes that enable these transformations while being transformed themselves. Rather than rejecting the imperialist concept of The World, then, it is imperative to reject the imperialist World itself.

The account thus far does not go beyond historicism. To go further, to identify not only what makes The World but the nature of its insistence, requires turning to

⁴² Yusoff, "White Utopia/Black Inferno".

⁴³ On the possibility of another end see Marcello Tari, *There is no unhappy revolution: The communism of destitution* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021), 8. Tari rejects apocalypticism, but as I argue below that his concept of destitutive power has apocalyptic possibilities.

⁴⁴ Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London: Polity, 2022), 8.

the presumed universality that Jackson and Palmer identify as essential to The World. This universality means that The World is not simply what is but defines the limits of what can be.⁴⁵ The philosopher and sinologist François Jullien defines universality, in its strongest philosophical form, as asserting “from the outset, before any confirmation has been given by experience, that such a thing *must* occur in this way.”⁴⁶ Jullien’s concern is with intercultural dialogue, specifically between China and “the West” or Europe. He identifies a key problem for universalism, namely that appeals to or the search for universality forgets the epistemological and cultural origins of the concept of universality itself. The concept of the universal is assumed to be universal.⁴⁷ This forgetting is necessary to move from a notion of the universal as “maximal extension” to the universal entailing “a prescription.”⁴⁸ When one speaks of universal human rights, for example, the word “universal” cannot mean “equally enjoyed by all” as any history of human rights discourse clearly shows. Rather it means that these are rights that are *a priori* the possession of any human being by virtue of being human. Similarly, The World as a universalist project does not deny that there are living and non-living things on Earth that have not been fully incorporated into The World, but marks these elusive or excluded beings as aberrations.

Adopting this reading of the universal as essential to the World casts Ladurie’s and Anders’s argument in new light.⁴⁹ While both are sensitive to some of the geopolitical issues that eventually constitute The World, neither is concerned with this question of universality. If their work is a resource for emphasising the ontological dimension instead of the epistemological (what is the world that it can be known), Jullien restores the need to think the two together in an ontoepistemic account.

Having identified this universalism as essential to The World, it is possible to differentiate it from related terms such as “the earth,” “the globe,” and “the planet”

45 Daniel Colucciello Barber, “World-Making and Grammatical Impasse,” *Qui Parle* 25:1–2 (2016): 181.

46 François Jullien, *On the Universal, the uniform, the common and dialogue between cultures*, trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Polity, 2014), 1.

47 Jullien, *On the Universal*, 2.

48 Jullien, *On the Universal*, 3.

49 Jullien’s account is not the only recent effort to think through the nature of universalism. Some of these accounts take universalism in the direction of maximal extension. See for example Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008) or Madhavi Menon, *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2015). Serene J. Khader’s “non-deal universalism” is closer to the sense of universalism discussed here, but she attempts to untangle her universalist project from imperialism and Eurocentrism. See her *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

(and their various permutations). The earth can be understood in ecological terms, as in references to “the Earth-System.” If an ecosystem is defined by those things inhabiting a place together then the earth is the global ecosystem. “Global” is thus a judgment of scope in relation to the earth. To say something is a global phenomenon or to discuss globalization is not to say something is homogeneously present but that it is hegemonic. The end of The World is the end of something global; the end of a universalist project, which claims to have achieved an impossible universalism and is thus doomed to constantly and ever more violently reassert itself.

This is not the only way of understanding the relationship between these terms. For example, Ferdinand describes “globalization” as “the totalizing extension and standardizing repetition of an unequal economy on a global scale.”⁵⁰ “Worldization,” by contrast, “is an opening, through the political action of a living together, of the infinite horizon of encounters and sharing.”⁵¹ This more positive use of world does not carry the same connection to universalism. My argument is not about a definitive account of a concept of the world, but to understand how the concept of The World developed here identifies a problematic which is overlooked in work that rejects apocalypticism as such. The universalist nature of The World is why historicist accounts do not go far enough. Being able to articulate the emergence of The World – its contingency – does not mean that it could easily end, nor that it is capable of being reformed. Over the course of the histories described above, The World is endlessly becoming what it should be in an *a priori* sense. The World is necessary, even if that necessity is itself contingent.

The End of the World

At this point, it is worth asking what is significant about the concept of The World and apocalypticism as a framework for thinking its end. Throughout the chapter, I have identified points of continuity with Jackson, Palmer, and others. Given the multivalency and theological baggage of apocalypticism, why not move on to other ways of thinking the end?

One key reason for maintaining that The World can be conceived of as an ontoepistemic object is that the materiality of The World is an obstacle to its overcoming. The pollutions described above cannot be undone through conceptual re-imaginings. The water is still toxic even if one thinks in terms of worlds or the pluriverse. When Jared Sexton writes of the struggle for “another world in and

⁵⁰ Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, 17.

⁵¹ Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, 17.

on the ruins of this one, in the end of its ends,”⁵² these ruins cannot be only metaphorical. The lie of The World is that it is an ordered totality, all that is and can be. It is not enough to reject that lie: one must undo the conditions which make it believable (at least for some).

As for apocalypticism, the various rejections of the idea are often animated by legitimate concerns. It can be a form of surrender while apocalypticism has animated imperialist ventures. Wynter, along with many others, points out the centrality of apocalyptic motivations to Columbus’s calamitous ventures.⁵³ Yet these rejections frequently confuse two modes of apocalypticism; what Jacob Taubes names apocalypse from above and apocalypse from below.⁵⁴ Imagining the end has not only motivated those who set sail to conquer unseen lands and hasten the apocalyptic return of Christ, it has been absorbed, transformed and turned against those colonial intruders.

“Above” and “below” are perspectival positions, so the question is how to identify from which perspective one is thinking. Taubes contrasts his own apocalypse from below with the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt’s apocalypse from above. Schmitt thinks from above, because he thinks from the perspective of “the powers that be.”⁵⁵ The problem is that the line between “the powers that be” and those who contest those powers is not always as obvious as Taubes assumes.⁵⁶

This distinction can be clarified by reformulating it in terms of constitutive and destitutive power. Schmitt thinks about the apocalypse as a threat to that which must be preserved. He offers an “avertive” view of the apocalypse.⁵⁷ The chaos of the apocalypse must be restrained at all costs. Schmitt is a thinker of constitutive power: the making and conserving of the world.⁵⁸ Taubes is thinking of a destitutive apocalypse, one that sees this chaos as the only source of possibility,

52 Jared Sexton, “All Black Everything,” *e-flux Journal* 79 (2017), accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94158/all-black-everything/>.

53 Wynter, “Columbus and the Poetics of the *Propter Nos*.”

54 Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 13.

55 Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 13.

56 On Taubes’s own identification with the “Occident” see Daniel Colucciello Barber, “Relational Division,” in *Nothing Absolute: German Idealism and the Question of Political Theology*, ed. Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 73–86.

57 Catherine Wessinger, “Millennialism in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

58 As I argue in my *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes, Malabou* (14–8), Schmitt’s *Nomos of the Earth in International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2003), can be read in terms of this form of constitutive power. It is an account of the earth being constituted into The World.

though a possibility that remains shapeless. Destituent power, as Giorgio Agamben explains, is “inoperative” and, therefore, useless.⁵⁹ That is not to say that it is inactive, but that it takes the activities of The World and renders them inoperative according to the logic of The World, opening up new possibilities or meanings for those activities. Again, these new possibilities are not defined: apocalypticism is an end without ends. Or, in the words of Marcello Tari, destituent power “demands nothing; it makes a negative claim.”⁶⁰

This distinction is not the only contribution that Taubes makes to the possibilities of apocalyptic thinking. He too seizes on the universalist pretence of The World. He writes that The World is “a power system” which presents itself as the only thing possible. Drawing on the Gnostic elements that he mixes with Judaism and Christianity, he declares The World is a lie that operates through this pretence. It is a prison of unfreedom. Apocalypticism is not concerned with social transformation but opposes the “totality of this world.”⁶¹ Or, as Wilderson writes of his emphasis on “a total end of the world”: “They’re trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We’re trying to destroy the world. Two irreconcilable projects.”⁶² Through this destructive and creative negation, something (always undefined in Taubes) is founded anew. The World, understood in this way, is contingent. It has a beginning and it can have an end.

Conclusion

There is something in the concept of The World which captures the unavoidable ontoepistemic force of that which ultimately must be negotiated. Without a way of speaking of this World, however it is named, something is lost in trying to understand the overlapping crises that define the present; crises that are not crises in

⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “What is a destituent power?” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014): 69.

⁶⁰ Tari, *There is no unhappy revolution*, 49. Using Tari to formulate apocalypticism is to read him against himself as he explicitly rejects apocalyptic accounts of destituent power (*There is no unhappy revolution*, 45). However, his rejection of apocalypticism is clearly rooted in a different account of the world (the world is not The World) and his critique of apocalypticism could just as easily contribute to an extension of Taubes’s thought as a rejection of the category of the apocalyptic.

⁶¹ Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 9.

⁶² Frank B. Wilderson III, “‘We’re Trying to Destroy the World’ Anti-Blackness & Police Violence After Ferguson: An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III.” *Ill Will Editions* (2014), accessed May 17, 2021, <https://illwill.com/were-trying-to-destroy-the-world-anti-blackness-and-police-violence-after-ferguson>.

The World but of The World. The importance of this concept does not diminish the force of the most damning criticism of this notion of The World. Regardless of how well intentioned one might be, it is nonetheless a totalising concept that continues an ontoepistemic imperialism. The positions considered in this essay argue that positioning The World against worlds lends this World a false reality. In so doing, one erects barriers that are not there. If the imperialist project of the Anthropocene or Eurocene (or whatever one wishes to call it) is what threatens a wide variety of life in the Earth-System, describing this project as a vast, nearly inescapable force neglects the thriving multiplicities of the pluriverse. The World, these arguments hold, is not as successful as those who focus on its end seem to think.

And yet, the onto- of the ontoepistemic means that there are realities that resist discursive reformulations. The waters of all the many worlds contain plastic, the bodies of all the many worlds contain radiation and all the many worlds are threatened (if unequally) by those who consume and waste at never before imaginable rates. When Palmer writes “The world thus marks an ensemble of processes that necessitates the violent abjection and domination of Blackness for its articulation as a coherent, ordered whole,”⁶³ I take this as succinct description of The World as a universalist project. The problem is not the concept of The World, but The World itself; The World that must end.

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⁶³ Palmer, “Otherwise than Blackness,” 273n1.

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