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**FROM THE REDEMPTIVE TO THE NON REDEMPTIVE
APOCALYPSE
IN 20th CENTURY GERMAN THOUGHT**

During the first decades of the last century an extraordinary number apocalyptic of thinkers and artists in Germany «sketched out a future condition of perfection, which is to be created not by God, but by the nation, or the people, by a race or class, by the human spirit, or the new art»¹. Klaus Vondung's succinct formulation captures the utopian, man-made dimension of this modern apocalyptic imagination, with its distinctly pessimistic, radical and prophetic mood, its fascination with violence and destruction, as well as its hope of aesthetic or political deliverance. There has been no shortage of explanations for this phenomenon. The modern apocalypse, so one strand of argument holds, is the ideological face of terror and violence. In the 1960s, Norman Cohn argued that the apocalyptic mood became the underpinning of modern totalitarianism, pointing to the ways in which the rhetoric of Hitler's anti-Semitism was framed in the «tones of apocalyptic fervor characteristic of the popular Christianity of the Middle Ages and the millenarian sects who believed they had a divine mission to purify the world by wiping out the "sons of Satan"»². A second strand, represented by Frank Kermode, and which could be called the compensation thesis, claims that individuals and mass movements are drawn to an "apocalyptic set" that allows them to suffer the ravages of war or terror in the anticipation of a new and more perfect age. More dramatically, the age of "glitter and doom" (the title of a recent New York exhibition of Weimar painting) can be seen as a familiar era, not at all unlike the mood of catastrophe and doom that followed 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the debacle in Iraq. Yet a third stresses the anthropological and social dimensions of the apocalypse – an apocalyptic culture – that creates self-reinforcing communities of belief and knowledge that claims deeper access to elusive truths unavailable to the benighted.

What ties all of these strands together is their extremely negative assessment of the apocalyptic mentality as an expression, compensation for, or irrational subculture of violence and destruction, distinctly alien to a liberal and rational culture and society. Recently, historians of the early modern period have put into question the overidentification of apocalyptic thought with totalitarianism, pointing to a much earlier and broader variety of apocalyptic writers and popular preachers, including moderate messianists who preached communal property but eschewed radical violence. Scholars have also questioned the assumption that the apocalyptic mind-set was restricted to marginal individuals and exotic communities, naming for example, Columbus, Kepler and Newton among others, as purveyors of the apocalypse among the elites and learned classes³. In the eighteenth century we find the same apocalyp-

1 K. Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia (Mo) 2000, p. 437.

2 N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Secker & Warburg, London 1957, pp. 102-104.

3 A. Grafton, *The Varieties of Millennial Experience*, in «The New Republic», 1999, n. 13, vol. 221, pp.

tic tone in less bloodthirsty, more democratic, disturbers of the peace like Tom Paine, or in some of the mainstream trade union movements. Today, we find descendents of this more moderate apocalypticism in the “Earth-First movement” which was founded in the 1980s and subsequently divided into those who insisted on non violence and public education and the more radical practitioners of eco-terrorism. One can also criticize the characterization of the apocalypse as totalitarian or proto-totalitarian, by pointing to the profusion of doctrines of transfiguration and regeneration among European intellectuals and artists. There was more than one single violent path to redemption. Some were political, others imaginative, utopian, absurdist, iconoclastic, still others nostalgic and traditionalistic.

Nor is it true, as is often assumed, that the apocalyptic epoch is behind us. Michael Barkun has discovered a wide variety of apocalyptic and millenarian subcultures in contemporary America, some religious, others less so, many of them wedded to conspiracy beliefs, and almost all convinced that they are in the possession of “stigmatized knowledge” that is marginalized or suppressed because it is a threat to the dominant organization of power. Apocalyptic mind-sets come in many forms – religious, secular, and “improvisational,” – a mélange of psychology, religion, esotericism, radical politics and science fiction. Barkun calls this «an unprecedented millenarian pluralism»⁴. In his brief survey, *Apocalypses*, Eugen Weber asks: «if apocalypticism and millennialism are not exceptional and cranky, why are they so commonplace?» Is it simply that «when troubles are dominant apocalypse is in the ascendancy»⁵.

There are, of course, periods of millennial intensity and periods of millennial quiescence. In twentieth century Germany, there are at least two distinct epochs of apocalyptic thought, each with its own register. The first and most familiar is what Leo Bersani has identified as the post World War I culture of redemption, the extreme modernist contention that politics or aesthetics can become «an alternative to an inferior and depreciated world of mere appearance»⁶. The apocalypse assumes the form of an interruption the order of progressive history or, more precisely, as Walter Benjamin famously put it, as the opposite of «homogenous empty time», a «time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)»⁷. In the years after World War I, Manichean scenarios of world destruction and world redemption, images and symbols of the corrupt, unfulfilled earthly world of pain and degradation, and prophecies of fulfillment and perfection became familiar tropes in politics, radical art movements, and philosophy. Especially in Germany, writers on the left and on the right felt at home in the climate of catastrophe. As Thomas Mann put it, «after the first World War the French left it the Germans to dream of apocalypses»⁸.

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4 M. Barkun, *Millennialism and Violence*, Frank Cass, London Portland (OR) 1996, p. 177; M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, in “Comparative Studies in Religion and Society” n. 15, University of California Press, Berkeley-London (Calif.) 2003, p. 243.

5 E.J. Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1999, pp. 234, 235.

6 L. Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1990, p. 2.

7 W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 1969, p. 257.

8 T. Mann, *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus. Roman eines Romans*, Bermann-Fischer, Amsterdam