

EISA PEC 2022

15th Pan-European Conference on International Relations

Athens, 1–4 September 2022

Pandaemonium: Interrogating the Apocalyptic Imaginaries of Our Time

Pandaemonium is the capital of Hell in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. In Greek, it literally means 'all kinds of demons.' One could argue that there is no better term to describe the dizzying multiplicity and urgency of crises that humanity is faced with in our times. Simply listing them could convince even the sceptics: climate change and ecological degradation, populism and the crisis of the liberal world order, the US-China geopolitical rivalry, the current and predicted global pandemics and the challenge of biotechnology, the constant threat of nuclear weapons and other WMDs, the uncharted waters of Artificial Intelligence and the concomitant philosophical and ethico-political issues that it raises. The list is not endless, but discussions about various 'ends' (such as the end of the Anthropocene, the end of the dominant capitalist model of global growth or the end of the liberal world order) have become the order of the day.

The apocalyptic imaginary is often invoked to convey a sense of urgency and imminence associated with a host of existential, geopolitical, and socio-economic challenges that humanity as a whole is confronted with. Previously, a similar vocabulary had been used to describe the disastrous effects of the events of the 20th century too (two world wars, genocides, industrial warfare, totalitarianisms, dawn of the nuclear era, etc.). Some would perhaps claim that it is unhelpful or politically debilitating to employ the apocalyptic imaginary to address political problems. And yet, few would disagree that the nature and intensity of contemporary global challenges raise fears, anxieties and provocations that may even call the future existence of the humankind into question.

Of course, this picture of a world newly in apocalyptic turmoil is particular rather than universal, not because the perils described are not global in reach, but because world-ending events have been an everyday, lived experience for many marginalised and/or subaltern communities and individuals, subjected to the ravishes of colonialism, war, slavery, extreme poverty, and environmental collapse. Moreover, the impact of the upheavals described above are felt unevenly, depending on geography, class, gender, and race. Indeed, not only the experience of disorder and impending chaos vary in different locales, but the interpretation and proper responses to the existing and coming apocalypses differ too.

What is more, though for many the current state of affairs is a cause for pessimism and despair, for others, it is seen as an opportunity. Rising powers, for example, have reason to hope and work toward shaping an order more favourable to their interests

and values while techno-optimists across the globe discover in technological innovation the solution to a number of social ills rather than a cause for concern. At the same time, the sense of chaos and unruliness fuelled by the convergence of those apocalyptic challenges give rise to visions of carnivalesque phantasmagorias of creative destruction and salutary violence. After all, *Pandaemonium* names the mischievous politics of the Joker that carry a fundamental ambivalence claimed both by those who embrace chaos—in the hope that the current turmoil will challenge contemporary configurations of authority and power and open up new creative possibilities—and by those who see it as an opportunity to establish new concentrations of power and emergency rule.

Apocalyptic figures, like the Joker or Loki, seem to reveal the Janus face of power and its subversion, or even power's anarchic nature behind the mask of authority. As Agamben has shown in his *Pulcinella*, such odd trickster figures, a mixture of mischief and joyful innocence, may not only be seen as agents of the apocalyptic end of humanity, but also as playful daimons of salvation, happiness, love, and hope.