

Review

Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times

Alison McQueen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 244pp.

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Alison McQueen’s book is a significant contribution to political theory and to the use of the history of political thought as a source of categories for thinking about current problems. Her central thesis revolves around three assumptions. First, the existence of “political realism” understood as a particular approach to evaluating politics—characterized by a defense of its own autonomy,¹ political agonism,² the rejection of both utopia and moralization in politics, and the preeminence of order and stability over any other criterion, including justice, in political decisions (10–12). This definition of “political realism” allows the author to group other writers who, though from dissimilar times and circumstances, are members of the same family: Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau. The second assumption defines apocalypticism as the belief in an imminent end of the known world, the occurrence of the foregoing by means of a cataclysm, and the emergence—as a result of that end—of a radically new world. Again, this singular

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definition also allows her to unite in the same group phenomena as diverse as millenarianism, the Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ sect, the fear of nuclear destruction, and the alarm regarding global warming and climate change.³ Third, that in three historical moments, three authors (represented by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau), seeing realism as antithetical to apocalypticism,

pursue persistent and unsettled encounters with apocalypticism. At times, their realist commitments are deepened and enriched through these encounter None of these thinkers merely oppose or dismiss apocalypticism. They appreciate it, they confront it, and they use it. They see its dangers and its possibilities. (12)

The author argues that, beyond the politically active religious whose mission is to save the whole of humanity, there are also trends of climate catastrophism (or otherwise) that require the knowledge on the contexts in which the apocalyptic operates. In addition to this contribution, the text provides historical insight into each of its cited authors and their epochs.

After the first chapter, of introductory fare, in what is likely the weakest chapter of an otherwise sound book (the second), apocalypticism is presented as the product of a social imaginary originally configured from the apocalyptic gaze of Judeo-Christianity. Apocalypticism, here characterized as a frontal opposition to sovereign power, is accompanied by narration of forthcoming profane events that, from a transcendental and salvific perspective, assigns new meaning to them through hope in a world to come without the pathologies of the present (and where there is always the implication of overcoming a type of evil) (57–62). The most controversial part of the chapter defends the thesis that Paul the Apostle and Augustine of Hippo⁴ responded to apocalyptic contexts in a similar way as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau: both Christian figureheads take on archetypal political realism in apocalyptic contexts.⁵

In the third chapter she maintains that, at the time of Machiavelli, there was an apocalyptic undercurrent with its apogee in Savonarola. That context is argued to have determined the thinking of the author of *The Prince*, part of what she designates the “Savonarolan Moment.”⁶ The key point sustaining this is the final chapter of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli is read to have recognized the limitations of political realism in the face of apocalypticism while opposing it with tragic political action and the possibility of a perpetual and redeeming republic.

In the fourth chapter, Thomas Hobbes is positioned in opposition to the radical apocalypticism of the English Civil War. Unlike the Florentine, McQueen sees Hobbes response as a redirection of apocalyptic imaginary to the service of sovereign power. This rather Schmittean interpretation of Hobbes argues that the redirection counterposes a double—though, in the end, similarly theologically structured—political apocalypse: one biblical, and another “seemingly secular” (20). The first offers a deflationary reinterpretation of recent times, where radical promises are made consistent with the demands of the political order; while the secular version, in which the terror and chaos of the state of nature, introduces a lasting community ruled by a mortal God. By following these two paths, Hobbes does not escape the apocalypse, but redirects it and tries to safely return it to sovereign hands.

In the fifth chapter, one of the most solid, Hans Morgenthau’s work is interpreted in the context of the American post-war apocalypse. McQueen places Morgenthau in the context of, first, the atrocities of Nazism, then Soviet totalitarianism, and finally what the author designates as liberal internationalism,⁷ demarcating how the *zeitgeist* of nuclear weapon development and the possibility of large-scale human annihilation fueled his patently catastrophic and religious visions, apparently expressed secularly. McQueen’s novel hypothesis is that Morgenthau would not give a Machiavellian answer (indeed, that he would have distanced himself from it); but would rather, like Hobbes, try to redirect the horrific vision of the apocalypse towards imagining how to avoid it.

To be sure, this is an instructive and well-written book—and at times, captivating. However, McQueen's interpretation of both Machiavelli and Hobbes remains inattentive to the way in which materialism informed their respective anthropologies and worldviews. In both authors, Epicurean and neo-Aristotelian motifs underpin their criticisms of religion and shaped their images of the human being and social order. Likewise, the “political realism” of both authors was heavily influenced by the reading of Roman authors such as Tacitus and Sallustius; and, in the case of the Florentine, by readings of Polybius and Livy. At the very least, the sources Hobbes gathers from Venetian republicanism, such as Sarpi and others, should not be ignored.

It is possible to see in political realism a reaction that appeals to a form of *realpolitik* in opposition to any possible formulation of political idealism, be it utopian or moralizing. This consistency can be traced from Thrasymachus and Calicles, through Machiavelli and Hobbes, to Kissinger. Nevertheless, we should be careful in extracting

from certain common notes in authors who lived in radically different times, analogies that suggest an unproblematic continuity between them. In other words, the argument assumes that apparently similar circumstances (for example, civil wars or social instability) may explain what these authors have in common. If one accepts McQueen's premise that apocalypticism constitutes a social imaginary, where the latter may take ambiguously diverse forms from one epoch to the other, there is inevitably the risk of generating anachronistic interpretative categories (in this case, apocalypticism) to account for the shared traits among the authors under scrutiny.

Interest is sparked by McQueen's defense that there have been no "realist" political thinkers, if the latter is meant as an interpretation of reality understood exclusively through categories of rational calculation. She is absolutely right. It is perhaps plausible to maintain that political realism deals with a particular type of reality: that which disposes of the ergon that may act on social reality;⁸ and is at the same time acted upon by the latter, which also has the capacity to act. Indeed, the networks of entities that act in a given historical social reality make it difficult to determine historical continuities in diverse contexts.

The above may explain why the book controversially equates talking about ecological and environmental catastrophe—or expressing concern for climate change—with millenarian sects and beliefs. Among other reasons, it is polemic because these concerns work with radically different ideas of catastrophe; ideas, moreover, unrelated to the concept she has given of apocalypse and apocalypticism. According the author's own definition, these two concepts are not limited exclusively to the idea of future catastrophe, but rather imply the idea of a redemption posterior to catastrophe—none of which are present in the ideas of those who are today worried about climatic change and global warming. A comparison of this nature has become common in our contemporary political discourse—and we can expect it from someone like, say, Donald Trump. However, in a serious and engaging book like to one written by McQueen, it can only be conceived as a provocative rhetorical resource conceived to move and affect the reader.

Despite the criticisms made above, the book is, as I have already pointed out, an engaging and valuable addition to contemporary readings of Machiavelli, Hobbes and political realism that will be of interest to political theorists in general, but mainly to those working in the history of political thought and political theology in particular.

NOTES

1. In an author of “political realism” like Carl Schmitt, the essence of that autonomy is given by what he himself describes as: “Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. This is how the history of humanity begins. This is what the father of all things looks like. Here is the dialectical tension that keeps world history in motion—and world history has not yet come to its end” (Meier 2011: 46).
2. McQueen's use of agonistic seems close to that of authors like Bonnie Honig: “to affirm the perpetuity of the contest is not to celebrate a world without points of stabilisation; it is to affirm the reality of perpetual contest, even within an ordered setting, and to identify the affirmative dimension of contestation” (Honig 1993: 15). If so, it seems that there would be a meeting point in the understanding of politics by those who defend an agonistic democracy, such as Honig, and political realism. Perhaps it would be pertinent at this point to consider other ways of understanding the character of antagonism in realism. In this regard, Luis Oro, following Julien Freund, indicates that the conflictive character of political realism resides in different dimensions. Controversy eventually leads to violence, so the possibility of the use of force between parties is always imminent—like conflicts between states and internal groups in severe national crises. Agonality, on the contrary, supposes that “the other” is an adversary, and not necessarily an enemy. Oro points out (translated from the original): “what characterizes agonal conflicts is that they have an environment in which there is a system of rules to inhibit the use of force. Such rules are generally fixed beforehand and have as their purpose, on the one hand, to regulate the conduct of opponents and, on the other, to grant criteria to determine the outcome of the conflict, specifying for this purpose victory conditions. Therefore, [agonal conflicts] presuppose the existence of a political association in which internal harmony prevails and a society in which the supreme arbiter is the State.” Oro, moving away from Freund, distinguishes a third type of conflict produced by the intersection of unchangeable values that produces a clash between them, and which potentially has the effect (translated) “that one subordinates another. In such a case, a) symmetry (understood as a counterpoint or relation of antipodes) becomes asymmetry. Here, one becomes more valuable and more worthy at the expense of the other. b) That both arrive at a conditioned agreement. In such a case, both become relativized and thus lose some of their worth and dignity. c) That one destroys the other. In such a case,

one radically depreciates or denies the other, to the point of turning it into some *thing* ‘non-valuable’ or, simply, into an ‘anti-value’” [emphasis in original]. See Oro (2013), Freund (1965), and Freund (1983).

3. “With these further specifications to the concept of an imaginary, it becomes easier to recognize the ways in which apocalypticism might become unmoored from its scriptural origins. As the example of locusts and global climate change suggests, elements of the apocalyptic imaginary continue to recur today in locations far from their original theological roots, often in purportedly secular interpretations of the world. The apocalyptic imaginary has travelled beyond conditions in which its core features are believed to be literally true, or even recognized as the products of biblical sources. The apocalyptic imaginary, even in its fully religious form, rarely rises into complete awareness by those who draw upon its resources to make sense of the world” (McQueen 2017: 56).
4. “Within the early Christian tradition, those thinkers most concerned with the radical political potential of apocalypticism are Paul and Augustine—two figures who would later come to be the foundational voices of a Christian strand of political realism. Both Paul and Augustine take seriously the effects that apocalypticism has in the world, its capacity to captivate the imagination and impel people to potentially subversive forms of enthusiasm. Together, these writers deploy three strategies of which later political realists will also avail themselves: acknowledging the reality of the apocalypse while deferring its arrival, divesting the apocalypse of its most captivating and terrifying images, and embracing a tragic view of history that eschews apocalyptic certainty” (McQueen 2017: 44).
5. As the same author indicates in fn.104, Reinhold Niebuhr is the most renowned champion of the existence of a Christian political realism extending in time to Augustine and Paul. The controversial thing about McQueen’s assertion is to bring Hobbes and Machiavelli into line with that tradition. As she points out, there is evidence of the connections between Niebuhr and Morgenthau (beyond what can be discussed of the latter’s reasons for quoting and referring to the former). On the contrary, there are good reasons to link the realism of Machiavelli and Hobbes with their materialistic view of the human being and the universe, from which follows a pessimism about human nature.

6. “While Savonarola was at the center of this enthusiastic movement, the apocalypticism that captivated Italians and Florentines was much broader and deeper than the preaching of a single man. The ‘Savonarolan moment’, as I refer to it here, was a time at which a divine transformation of Florence seemed possible and even inevitable. Political upheaval and prophecy combined to transform a hope for a better world into an expectation that God would burst into secular history and build his heavenly kingdom on earth. I will argue that Niccolò Machiavelli’s work bears the mark of the Savonarolan moment” (McQueen 2017: 63).
7. “While the memory of the secularized apocalypticism of Nazism looms heavily in the background of this diagnosis, Morgenthau focuses his attention on the Cold War confrontation between Soviet Communism and American liberal internationalism. He devotes his sharpest critical attention to the latter. At its most extreme, liberal internationalism sees a devastating final war for a singular humanity as a prelude to a millennial democratic future. This kind of apocalyptic ideology, combined with a return to total war and the potential for large-scale nuclear annihilation, make the secularized eschatologies of the twentieth century even more dangerous than their religious predecessors. The postwar world, Morgenthau fears, seems headed for another total war, which ‘may end in world dominion or in world destruction or in both’” (McQueen 2017: 164).
8. Oro, in an appendix to the aforementioned book (fn. 2), distinguishes political reality by applying the criteria for reality—given by Spanish philosopher Zubiri—to that of political realism. Following Zubiri, he points out that reality is possessed by (translated from original) “that which has a certain *ergon* and, by virtue thereof, affects something, perhaps other entities that possess the same condition (*ergon*).” In the case of politics, only those that are the product of individuals or social systems would be of interest. With regards to the latter, there are parallels with Niklas Luhmann’s idea of social reality. See Zubiri (1998) and Luhmann (2008).

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