

The 100-Year Extinction Panic Is Back, Right on Schedule

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“Do you think we’ll need to buy guns?” The student’s question seemed to drop the temperature in the room by several degrees. I was at a dinner with fellow academics, a few college students and a guest speaker who had just delivered an inspiring talk about climate justice.

Sensing confusion, the student clarified: Planetary catastrophe was inevitable in the near term, which means people would soon be living behind walled communities. Since Republicans would be armed, she said, she just wanted to know how to keep the people she cared about safe. The guest speaker took a moment to process this information, then suggested that the student worry more about growing vegetables than about buying guns.

That conversation has stuck with me over the years not because the student’s views were unusual but because they’ve become commonplace. The literary scholar Paul Saint-Amour has described the expectation of apocalypse — the sense that all history’s catastrophes and geopolitical traumas are leading us to “the prospect of an even more devastating futurity” — as the quintessential modern attitude. It’s visible everywhere in what has come to be known as the polycrisis.

Climate anxiety, of the sort expressed by that student, is driving new fields in psychology, experimental therapies and debates about what a recent New Yorker article called “the morality of having kids in a burning, drowning world.” Our public health infrastructure groans under the weight of a lingering pandemic while we are told to expect worse contagions to come. The near coup at OpenAI, which resulted at least in part from a

dispute about whether artificial intelligence could soon threaten humanity with extinction, is only the latest example of our ballooning angst about technology overtaking us.

Meanwhile, some experts are warning of imminent population collapse. Elon Musk, who donated \$10 million to researchers studying fertility and population decline, called it “a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming.” Politicians on both sides of the aisle speak openly about the possibility that conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East could spark World War III. Donald Trump has made “the N-word” — he hastens to specify “the nuclear word” — a talking point at his rallies. The conviction that the human species could be on its way out, extinguished by our own selfishness and violence, may well be the last bipartisan impulse.

In a certain sense, none of this is new. Apocalyptic anxieties are a mainstay of human culture. But they are not a constant. In response to rapid changes in science, technology and geopolitics, they tend to spike into brief but intense extinction panics — periods of acute pessimism about humanity’s future — before quieting again as those developments are metabolized. These days, it can feel as though the existential challenges humanity faces are unprecedented. But a major extinction panic happened 100 years ago, and the similarities are unnerving.

The 1920s were also a period when the public — traumatized by a recent pandemic, a devastating world war and startling technological developments — was gripped by the conviction that humanity might soon shuffle off this mortal coil.

Understanding the extinction panic of the 1920s is useful to understanding our tumultuous 2020s and the gloomy mood that pervades the decade.

Hearing that historical echo doesn’t mean that today’s fears have no basis. Rather, it is crucial to helping us blow away the smoke of age-old alarmism from the very real fires that threaten our civilization. It also helps us see how apocalyptic fears feed off the idea that people are inherently violent, self-interested and hierarchical and that survival is a zero-sum war over resources. That suite of ideas is traditionally associated with political

conservatism, though it can apply as easily to left-wing climate doom as to right-wing survivalist ideology. Either way, it's a cynical view that encourages us to take our demise as a foregone conclusion.

What makes an extinction panic a panic is the conviction that humanity is flawed and beyond redemption, destined to die at its own hand, the tragic hero of a terrestrial pageant for whom only one final act is possible. The irony, of course, is that this cynicism — and the unfettered individualism that is its handmaiden — greases the skids to calamity. After all, why bother fighting for change or survival if you believe that self-destruction is hard-wired into humanity? What the history of prior extinction panics has to teach us is that this pessimism is both politically questionable and questionably productive. Our survival will depend on our ability to recognize and reject the nihilistic appraisals of humanity that inflect our fears for the future, both left and right.

A changing climate, a changing world

Climate change around the world: In “Postcards From a World on Fire,” 193 stories from individual countries show how climate change is reshaping reality everywhere, from dying coral reefs in Fiji to disappearing oases in Morocco and far, far beyond.

The role of our leaders: Writing at the end of 2020, Al Gore, the 45th vice president of the United States, found reasons for optimism in the Biden presidency, a feeling perhaps borne out by the passing of major climate legislation. That doesn't mean there haven't been criticisms. For example, Charles Harvey and Kurt House argue that subsidies for climate capture technology will ultimately be a waste.

The worst climate risks, mapped: In this feature, select a country, and we'll break down the climate hazards it faces. In the case of America, our maps, developed with experts, show where extreme heat is causing the most deaths.

What people can do: Justin Gillis and Hal Harvey describe the types of local activism that might be needed, while Saul Griffith points to how Australia shows the way on rooftop solar. Meanwhile, small changes at

the office might be one good way to cut significant emissions, writes Carlos Gamarra.

As a scholar who researches the history of Western fears about human extinction, I'm often asked how I avoid sinking into despair. My answer is always that learning about the history of extinction panics is actually liberating, even a cause for optimism. Some of these earlier panics were caused by faulty, misinterpreted or creatively applied scientific developments. New paleontological and geological theories stoked a rash of extinction discourse in early-19th-century England, for example, and experts ginned up fears of famine and population explosion in the 1960s and '70s. Other moments of paranoia, like the various spasms of nuclear-induced distress during the Cold War, were grounded in all-too-real threats. Nearly every generation has thought its generation was to be the last, and yet the human species has persisted. As a character in Jeanette Winterson's novel "The Stone Gods" says, "History is not a suicide note — it is a record of our survival."

Contrary to the folk wisdom that insists the years immediately after World War I were a period of good times and exuberance, dark clouds often hung over the 1920s. The dread of impending disaster — from another world war, the supposed corruption of racial purity and the prospect of automated labor — saturated the period just as much as the bacchanals and black market booze for which it is infamous. The '20s were indeed roaring, but they were also reeling. And the figures articulating the doom were far from fringe.

On Oct. 30, 1924 — top hat in hand, sporting the dour, bulldog grimace for which he was well known — Winston Churchill stood on a spartan stage, peering over the shoulder of a man holding a newspaper that announced Churchill's return to Parliament. He won the Epping seat the day before, after two years out of Parliament. The dapper clothes of the assembled politicians and his wife in heels and furs were almost comically incongruous with their setting: a drab building with dirty windows and stained corrugated siding. It was a fitting metaphor for both the decade and for the future prime minister's mood. Churchill was feeling pessimistic.

The previous year saw the publication of the first of several installments of what many would come to consider his finest literary achievement, “The World Crisis,” a grim retrospective of World War I that laid out, as Churchill put it, the “milestones to Armageddon.” In September 1924, one month before his Epping election, two other notable events in Churchill’s intellectual life — one major, one minor — offered signs of his growing gloominess. The major event was his decision to run for Parliament as a constitutionalist with Conservative Party support, marking the end of his long affiliation with the Liberal Party and the beginning of a further rightward drift. The minor event was the publication of a bleak essay that argued new war machines may soon wipe out our species.

Bluntly titled “Shall We All Commit Suicide?,” the essay offered a dismal appraisal of humanity’s prospects. “Certain somber facts emerge solid, inexorable, like the shapes of mountains from drifting mist,” Churchill wrote. “Mankind has never been in this position before. Without having improved appreciably in virtue or enjoying wiser guidance, it has got into its hands for the first time the tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own extermination.”

In an eerie foreshadowing of atomic weapons, he went on to ask, “Might not a bomb no bigger than an orange be found to possess a secret power to destroy a whole block of buildings — nay, to concentrate the force of a thousand tons of cordite and blast a township at a stroke?” He concluded the essay by asserting that the war that had just consumed Europe might be “but a pale preliminary” of the horrors to come.

That Churchill had human extinction on his mind at the same time that he was contemplating the Conservative Party’s offer may or may not be an accident of biography and history, but it is telling all the same. The essay — with its declaration that “the story of the human race is war” and its dismay at “the march of science unfolding ever more appalling possibilities” — is filled with right-wing pathos and holds out little hope that mankind might possess the wisdom to outrun the reaper. This fatalistic assessment was shared by many, including those well to Churchill’s left.

Around the same time that Churchill foretold the coming of “means of destruction incalculable in their effects,” the science fiction novelist H.G. Wells, who in his era was also famous for socialist political commentary, expressed the same doleful outlook. Writing from Easton Glebe, his sprawling, ruddy-bricked Georgian home on an equally sprawling estate, the writer applied himself to the dark art of prophecy. When he was not playing with toy soldiers in the verdant garden or, on rainy days, teaching eminent guests the barn game — by all accounts, a pleasant diversion that involved a large ball and an ever-changing set of rules — Wells was busy contemplating the rather less merry prospect of human extinction.

“Are not we and they and all the race still just as much adrift in the current of circumstances as we were before 1914?” he wondered. Wells predicted that our inability to learn from the mistakes of the Great War would “carry our race on surely and inexorably to fresh wars, to shortages, hunger, miseries and social debacles, at last either to complete extinction or to a degradation beyond our present understanding.” Humanity, the don of sci-fi correctly surmised, was rushing headlong into a “scientific war” that would “make the biggest bombs of 1918 seem like little crackers.”

The pathbreaking biologist J.B.S. Haldane, another socialist, concurred with Wells’s view of warfare’s ultimate destination. In 1925, two decades before the Trinity test birthed an atomic sun over the New Mexico desert, Haldane, who experienced bombing firsthand during World War I, mused, “If we could utilize the forces which we now know to exist inside the atom, we should have such capacities for destruction that I do not know of any agency other than divine intervention which would save humanity from complete and peremptory annihilation.” One year earlier, F.C.S. Schiller, a British philosopher and eugenicist, summarized the general intellectual atmosphere of the 1920s aptly: “Our best prophets are growing very anxious about our future. They are afraid we are getting to know too much and are likely to use our knowledge to commit suicide.”

Other prominent interwar intellectuals worried about developments in nonmilitary technologies. Many of the same fears that keep A.I. engineers up at night — calibrating thinking machines to human values, concern that our growing reliance on technology might sap human ingenuity and even

trepidation about a robot takeover — made their debut in the early 20th century.

The Czech playwright Karel Capek's 1920 drama, "R.U.R.," imagined a future in which artificially intelligent robots wiped out humanity. In a scene that would strike fear into the hearts of Silicon Valley doomers, a character in the play observes: "They've ceased to be machines. They're already aware of their superiority, and they hate us as they hate everything human." As the A.I. godfather Geoffrey Hinton, who quit his job at Google so he could warn the world about the very technology he helped create, explained, "What we want is some way of making sure that even if" these systems are "smarter than us, they're going to do things that are beneficial for us."

This fear of a new machine age wasn't quarantined to fiction. The popular detective novelist R. Austin Freeman's 1921 political treatise, "Social Decay and Regeneration," warned that our reliance on new technologies was driving our species toward degradation and even annihilation, an argument The New York Times reviewed with enthusiasm. Others went to even greater lengths to act on their machine-age angst. In 1923, when "R.U.R." opened in Tokyo, a Japanese biology professor, Makoto Nishimura, became so convinced by the machine-facilitated extinction the play depicts that he sought to create other, benevolent robots to prevent the human species from being "destroyed by the pinnacle of its creation," artificial man.

One way to understand extinction panics is as elite panics: fears created and curated by social, political and economic movers and shakers during times of uncertainty and social transition. Extinction panics are, in both the literal and the vernacular senses, reactionary, animated by the elite's anxiety about maintaining its privilege in the midst of societal change. Today it's politicians, executives and technologists. A century ago it was eugenicists and right-leaning politicians like Churchill and socialist scientists like Haldane. That ideologically varied constellation of prominent figures shared a basic diagnosis of humanity and its prospects: that our

species is fundamentally vicious and selfish and our destiny therefore bends inexorably toward self-destruction.

To whatever extent, then, that the diagnosis proved prophetic, it's worth asking if it might have been at least partly self-fulfilling.

Despite the similarities between the current moment and the previous roaring and risky '20s, today's problems are fundamentally new. So, too, must be our solutions. It is a tired observation that those who don't know history are destined to repeat it. We live in a peculiar moment in which this wisdom is precisely inverted. Making it to the next century may well depend on learning from and repeating the tightrope walk — between technological progress and self-annihilation — that we have been doing for the past 100 years. It will depend, too, on rejecting the conservative doommongering that defines our present: the entangled convictions that we are too selfish to forestall climate change, too violent to prevent war with China, too greedy to develop A.I. slowly and safely. Extinction panics are often fomented by elites, but that doesn't mean we have to defer to elites for our solutions. We have gotten into the dangerous habit of outsourcing big issues — space exploration, clean energy, A.I. and the like — to private businesses and billionaires. Our survival may well depend on reversing this trend. We need ambitious, well-resourced government initiatives and international cooperation that takes A.I. and other existential risks seriously. It's time we started treating these issues as urgent public priorities and funding them accordingly.

The first step is refusing to indulge in certainty, the fiction that the future is foretold. There is a perverse comfort to dystopian thinking. The conviction that catastrophe is baked in relieves us of the moral obligation to act. But as the extinction panic of the 1920s shows us, action is possible, and these panics can recede.

Less than a year after Churchill's warning about the future of modern combat — “As for poison gas and chemical warfare,” he wrote, “only the first chapter has been written of a terrible book” — the 1925 Geneva Protocol was signed, an international agreement banning the use of chemical or biological weapons in combat. Despite the many horrors of

World War II, chemical weapons were not deployed on European battlefields.

As for machine-age angst, there's a lesson to learn there, too: Our panics are often puffed up, our predictions simply wrong. Human life and labor were not superseded by machines, as some in the 1920s predicted. Or in the 1960s or in the 1980s, two other flash-in-the-pan periods of A.I. hype. The takeaway is not that we shouldn't be worried but that we shouldn't panic. Foretelling doom is an ancient human hobby, but we don't appear to be very good at it.

In 1928, H.G. Wells published a book titled, "The Way the World Is Going," with the modest subtitle, "Guesses and Forecasts of the Years Ahead." In the opening pages, he offered a summary of his age that could just as easily have been written about our turbulent 2020s. "Human life," he wrote, "is different from what it has ever been before, and it is rapidly becoming more different." He continued: "Perhaps never in the whole history of life before the present time, has there been a living species subjected to so fiercely urgent, many-sided and comprehensive a process of change as ours today. None at least that has survived. Transformation or extinction have been nature's invariable alternatives. Ours is a species in an intense phase of transition." Much turns, as the novelist well knew, on that ambiguous final word. Both transformation and extinction are transitions, after all. Wells once quipped that after he died, his epitaph should read: "I told you so. You *damned* fools." He went out of his way to note that the italics were his choice, and the emphasis suggests that we might understand him to mean "damned" not just in the vernacular but also in the older sense of the word: The human species is condemned, a gaggle of fated fools that will inevitably follow our machines off that final precipice. Wells died in August 1946, a year after another of his uncanny predictions, the atomic bomb, was released on two Japanese cities, heralding the nuclear age. We have every reason to believe he went to his final rest sure that he was right. Perhaps he was even grateful that he had been spared the consumption of human civilization in atomic fire.

Yet even as the author's words remain prescient, returning to such warnings a century later provides something akin to hope, maybe even

optimism. We are living in the very world that many in the 1920s already saw coming. But we're also doing something they could not have predicted: surviving it. At least for now.