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Is Everything We Don't Like "Apocalyptic?" Mapping Two Influential Tendencies in the Critical Study of Apocalypticism and Millenarianism

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the scholarship underpinning two dominant clichés about apocalypticism and millenarianism using influential British scholarship from the 1950s as a starting point. The first cliché is that apocalypticism and millenarianism represent recurring, almost ahistorical irrational threats to the social and political order; the second is that apocalypticism and millenarianism belong to the socially and economically exploited and marginalised who are attracted to promises of future emancipation. Getting behind the cliches to the formative scholarly debates in 1950s Britain, the article turns to (among others) the influential and well-known work of Norman Cohn and the influential but less well-known work of A. L. Morton and the Communist Party Historians' Group of the early postwar years. Their historical and theoretical scholarship on apocalypticism and millenarianism is related to competing Cold War discourses about Marxism, liberalism, capitalism, and totalitarianism. Some attention is also paid to the wider legacies of their arguments and how and why their ideas have since been updated, absorbed, transformed, or simply ignored.

KEYWORDS

Apocalypticism; Millenarianism; Norman Cohn; A. L. Morton; Communism; Liberalism; Cold War

Introduction

The critical study of apocalypticism and millenarianism is a vast, sprawling field, attracting specialists from almost any area of academia imaginable. This should be no surprise. Whether apocalypticism and millenarianism are understood to involve the transformation of the existing social order, expectations of a Golden Age, revelations about the workings of the universe, or divine disclosures given to authoritative interpreters, such language cuts across ideological, social, class, economic, national, and religious interests and loyalties. It can be the language of the oppressed or the oppressor, reactionary or radical, violent or pacifist, innovator or conservative, and shades of opinion in-between (cf. Wessinger, 2011). Despite or because of all this, cliches and reductionist causal statements about the subject matter remain widespread, not least in relation to its alleged violent tendencies (Meggitt, 2020). This article continues the discussion of apocalypticism in the hands of scholars by focusing on the discussion of the legacies of, and theorising about, medieval and early modern apocalypticism and millenarian movements according to influential British scholarship of the 1950s. Rather than offering another definitive definition or uncritically deploying the technical Christian uses of the terms, I use 'millenarianism' and 'apocalypticism' roughly and interchangeably as they are used or assumed in the scholarship I am studying—namely, that they are seen as fantastical ways of conceptualising and promising dramatic change in the social, religious, and political order.

While scholarship (including much of what I discuss here) is obviously capable of recognising complexity in the study of apocalypticism and millenarianism, distinctive approaches and emphases invariably remain tied up with, and bolster, broader cultural cliches. Here I want to map out some of the (more complex) intellectual history behind two of the most prominent cliches by first turning to the background in British academic debates of the 1950s. The first cliché is that apocalypticism and millenarianism are non-domesticated threats to the social and political order. The second cliché is that apocalypticism and millenarianism belong to the socially and economically exploited and marginalised who are attracted to promises of future emancipation. When I look at the scholarship behind these two competing (though occasionally overlapping) tendencies, I turn to contextual questions of why certain ideas have come to the fore.

Apocalypticism and Millenarianism as Irrational Threats

We could, of course, go back to any number of starting points for when millenarian figures were constructed as a threat to the social and political order—it is a view which goes back centuries, even millennia. To take one example, the millenarian priest of the 1381 English uprising, John Ball, was remembered for centuries by the ruling class as an exemplar of a devilish threat to the realm and why apocalypticism 'from below' must be kept in check (Crossley, 2022). But arguably the most influential legacy of this negative understanding of millenarianism and apocalyptic movements in critical scholarship is found in the work of Norman Cohn, particularly in his most famous book, *Pursuit of the Millennium* (Cohn, 1957; 1961; 1970). Cohn had a distinguished academic career, remembered best for directing the Centre for Research in Collective Psychopathology at the University of Sussex. Cohn's work is (often overtly) a product

of Cold War thinking, and his life was tied up with various liberal, anti-irrational, and antitotalitarian causes (for biographical details see Lamont, 2009; Ferrari, 2019; 2021). Such was the direction he steered *Pursuit of the Millennium* from the original 1957 edition through to the revised and expanded edition in 1970.

For Cohn, Nazism and Soviet Communism, and even Marxism itself, picked up on an oppositional millenarian tradition that thrived in medieval Europe. “Would-be prophets or would-be messiahs,” Cohn claimed, preached apocalyptic ideas about the transformation of society to the “rootless poor.” Such thinking was “transfused with phantasies of a world reborn into innocence through a final, apocalyptic massacre,” and promised the destruction of evil enemies followed by the establishment of a glorious kingdom. This “revolutionary millenarianism” and “apocalyptic fanaticism” recurred in European history and was, Cohn claimed, a crucial precursor to the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century. Supernatural ideas may have been secularised in the twentieth-century variants but the structure of thought effectively remained, not least the promise of a violent destruction of enemies in the present or near future. Underpinning Cohn’s analysis was the assumption of an acceptable political alternative to violent apocalypticism, namely liberalism and social democracy (Cohn, 1970: xiv–xv, 11, 16–17, 285–88, 307–14).

Whatever the rights or wrongs of Cohn’s analysis, his ideas have long been credited and popularised in the media and among public intellectuals when dealing with ideas of apocalypticism, illiberalism, extremism, and irrationality, whether religious or secular, from analyses of 9/11 and ISIS to analyses of Extinction Rebellion and QAnon (e.g., Gray, 2007; 2019; McEwan, 2008; Fraser, 2014; Doward, 2020). This approach to apocalypticism as a threat to the social and political order returning in times of socioeconomic crises is a recuring tendency in scholarship and found in major contributions in international scholarship (e.g., Flannery, 2016). The prominent work of Jeffrey Kaplan cites Cohn as an important influence, listing him among those he has known only through their “writings and visions” (Kaplan, 2019: Acknowledgments), as well as endorsing his “strong argument favouring the millennial interpretation of German National Socialism” (Kaplan, 1997: 188–89). Because of his inherited framework, Kaplan’s analysis can jump centuries from first-century Jewish assassins to medieval revolutionaries and on to the American (far) right, all effectively unified and understood by this category of apocalyptic fanaticism with genocidal tendencies that rejects the accepted modes of governance of the world (Kaplan, 1997; 2016; 2019).

Collectively, the work of Burton Mack (e.g., among others, Mack 1988; 2011; 2017; 2019) shows in detail how themes from Cohn’s legacy were updated after the Cold War and in light of American culture wars where apocalypticism is most popularly (and in liberal scholarship, negatively) associated with the Christian right. In *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Mack, 1988), Mack outlined what he saw as the dominant western Christian myth grounded in the Gospel of Mark. He argued that the Gospel presents Jesus as an innocent victim and that this explanation became the justification for an apocalyptic and vengeful Christian mythmaking, underpinning countless acts of horror ever since in the West and taken up by America, or at least America when led by the Republicans. For Mack, such abhorrent forms of apocalypticism ought to be alien to modern “polycultural” democratic societies. As he

concluded *A Myth of Innocence*, “A future for the world can hardly be imagined any longer, if its redemption rests in the hands of Mark’s innocent son of God” (Mack, 1988: 376). This became the guiding principle for Mack’s subsequent work on the Christian apocalyptic myth as he analysed modern American society and politics.

There are certainly Cold War influences on Mack’s work, though he is less hostile to Marxism than Cohn. Indeed, there is occasional lukewarm social democratic acceptance of *some* Marxist and socialist ideas (e.g., Mack, 2017: 206–208; 2019: 85–86), though he ultimately distanced his work from classical Marxist concepts and reined in his criticisms of capitalism (see, e.g., Brown 2016; Crossley 2021). As Mack’s work progressed in the 1990s and 2000s, forged in the face of the American Christian right, the social democratic aspect was increasingly heightened as an alternative to the Christian myth (e.g., Mack, 2011: 167–68, 177–79; 2017: 206–208; 2019: 5, 7–8, 82–83, 87–104). While Mack never appears to have cited Cohn (to the best of my knowledge), they share very similar uses of language, ideas, and ideology as part of their creation of a benign liberalism freed from the constraints of irrationality and apocalyptic violence. This is because they too share the same liberal myth now updated from the era of the Cold War to the era of American culture wars (Crossley, 2021).

Mack has also been influential in his own way. In the American Jesus Seminar of the 1980s and 1990s, he was at the heart of the creation of an emphatically non-apocalyptic and anti-Reagan historical Jesus which promoted scholarly controversy for nearly two decades. His influence is now found among a new generation of scholars, including those associated who have built on the theoretical work of Mack and Jonathan Z. Smith, particularly at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion (see further Rollens, 2013; Sánchez, 2015). In these circles, Mack’s influence has also been praised by those who see apocalypticism as a power play of a displaced, scribal elite, taking on a role similar to Cohn’s rootless poor in the development of apocalypticism but shifting the blame elsewhere in class terms. A leading proponent of this view, Randall Reed, opened his book on the origins of apocalypticism by listing his key influences, including “most importantly” Mack whose significance runs throughout (see, e.g., Reed, 2010; cf. also Smith, 1978: 67–87; 1982: 90–101).

We should see this broadly liberal intellectual tradition concerning the malign impact of apocalypticism as part of wider contemporary and historic political western discourses on “fanaticism” as outlined by Alberto Toscano. As Toscano shows, “the fanatic” is regularly presented as someone beyond tolerance, rationality, compromise, and political debate, and often connected to the cliché of the irrational religious believer. The fanatic seeks the removal of all rival views and in doing so is dedicated to abstract notions of universalism and egalitarianism. For all the attempts at social and historical contextualisation, the fanatic effectively remains an ahistorical category and a recurring, timeless threat to the order of things who can be understood outside particular material conditions. In the twentieth century, the fanatic and fanaticism were associated with totalitarianism in relation to Nazism, Communism, and Islam, the latter coming to the fore as a crazed, terroristic threat to the West (Toscano, 2010). In other words, the fanatic stands outside the assumed boundaries of liberal-democratic

capitalism espoused by the ruling class and their networks and can be used to counter challenges from the left by tainting the left with irrationality, excessive religion, and overlap with the interests of the far right (cf. Žižek, 2000). Returning to British political discourse, this concept was used polemically in the media and by rival politicians to criticise the Jeremy Corbyn-led left. Corbyn was regularly seen as leading a "cult" or "sect" who represented an irrational "apocalyptic" tendency from outside the constructed liberal democratic centre (so, e.g., Perkins, 2015; Freeman, 2016; for discussion see Crossley, 2018: 132–61).

We could, of course, turn this understanding of apocalypticism back on its interpreters and advocates. By downplaying material conditions and material relations for understanding human history and causality, and by placing the emphasis so heavily on myth, ideology, and apocalypticism, the Cohn tradition is one of a liberal myth of innocence. It can be seen as part of an oversimplification of the language of apocalypticism which exonerates the more liberal wing of the state from complicity in violence or even in terrorist acts. This further explains why this model has been so pervasive in the history of modern scholarship: it has a ready-made liberal scholarly audience. In this respect, it is no surprise that the simplified model of apocalypticism has been especially suitable for adaptation in an academic subject area with a close connection to the interests of state security: terrorism studies (Meggitt, 2020).

Apocalypticism and Millenarianism as (Potentially) Emancipatory

While pervasive, such liberal frameworks are not the only frameworks that have influenced scholarship. Arguably just as prominent have been understandings of apocalypticism and millenarianism as countercultural (in a positive sense) and the language of the oppressed and the colonised (e.g., among many, the classic treatment in Lanternari, 1963), which can be paralleled with deprivation theories of sects, 'cults,' and religion (e.g., Aberle, 1970).

Around the same time as Cohn undertook his work in the 1950s, Eric Hobsbawm was developing an influential Marxist understanding of millenarianism and apocalypticism from a different Cold War perspective in British scholarship. Hobsbawm studied the material conditions of apocalyptic and millenarian movements in contexts where capitalism was beginning to take hold so that he might contribute to broader debates on the transformation from feudalism to capitalism. In his books, *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits* (Hobsbawm, 1959; 1969), Hobsbawm turned to millenarians and bandits in southern Europe and Latin America to assess how older forms of social agitation adapted, modified, or died in the face of capitalism. Hobsbawm understood rural banditry and peasant millenarianism as pre-modern, pre-capitalist forms of resistance. Pre-political rebels had once provided a defence against unjust princes, landlords, and tax collectors while millenarians offered a fantastical vision of a time and place without injustice and exploitation. This hope for the transformation of the world fed into, or was rendered obsolete by, the revolutionary politics of the twentieth century and bureaucratized resistance to capitalism.

Hobsbawm is often credited for pioneering this work in the British Marxist tradition but there were, of course, significant national and international precedents, most

importantly Friedrich Engels in the *Peasant War in Germany*. Engels saw significance in the demands for radical political equality, changes in property and labour relations, and various privileges in medieval peasant insurrections and challenges to the feudal order. He related these and their long-term legacies to different class interests in towns, among peasantry, and among those beyond the feudal system. Some heretical traditions, Engels claimed, were absorbed into bourgeois ideas. Medieval ideas could be more violent, more fantastical, and more radical in their notions of societal transformation than their bourgeois counterparts and so older communistic ideas were instead channelled into notions of liberty, equality before the law, charity, and republican governance (Engels, 1956: 55–60). We can also tie this in with Marx's famous statement about religion in the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Religion was indeed the opium of the people but as such this was "the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering" (Marx, 1843–1844). Unsurprisingly, then, there is a tension or dialectic involved in religion according to Marx and Engels, between an unsentimental historical materialist explanation of millenarian religion feeding into bourgeois power and a sympathetic understanding of religion revealing human hopes for a better world. Interpreters may emphasise one or the other aspect of this tension but the tension itself has been a constant in Marxist reception histories (Boer, 2013).

There were more immediate influences on Hobsbawm coming from British Communist historians. These influences do not receive the extensive attention that Hobsbawm and Cohn have in the critical study of apocalyptic and millenarian movements (see below), but they are arguably just as important. Certainly, it is regularly noted that Hobsbawm was one of a number of major British historians who belonged the influential Communist Party Historians' Group between 1946 and 1956. Others included E. P. Thompson and Dorothy Thompson as well as two other acclaimed interpreters of historic English millenarianism and radical religion (among other things): Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton. But two of most influential members of the Historians' Group rarely get mentioned today: the older figures of Dona Torr and A. L. Morton. Torr's primary influence was through mentoring younger historians (notably E. P. Thompson) which partly explains why she has not received much scholarly attention. Nevertheless, her influence was acknowledged in a festschrift including significant contributions from the Historians' Group (Saville, 1954). Her own main book was a life of the trade unionist Tom Mann which, due to her ill heath, needed assistance from Morton and Hill for it to be published in 1956, shortly before her death. Rather than a straightforward biography, Torr was insistent on including big picture chapters locating her subject in the centuries-long "English revolutionary tradition which extends from John Ball to Tom Mann." In this reading, the English Revolution marked a turning point in the transformation of "the popular traditions" from backward looking (e.g., Edenic, idealised era Anglo-Saxon liberties) to forward-looking traditions about building and transforming society (Torr, 1956: 110).

Morton and Hill were responsible for writing up Torr's chapters (from her detailed notes) on the centuries leading up to Mann. Morton was a fitting choice because his work and prolific output complemented Torr's in rethinking this historic tradition. Indeed, one of the main reasons the Historians' Group was established in 1946 was

to revise Morton's *A People's History of England*, first published in 1938. An interest in the evolution of religion in human society and, more specifically, apocalypticism and millenarian movements in major points of English history, had been a standard feature of Morton's writing from the outset. But his emphasis changed between the 1930s and 1950s (Crossley, 2023). In *A People's History of England*, for example, Morton saw the religious and millenarian figures of the English Revolution as often misguided, utopian thinkers expecting too much transformative change ahead of its time, with the potential to hinder the transformation away from feudal society. Even so, radical demands, he believed, would still develop into more influential pragmatic, democratic, and progressive ones. Yet it was, he claimed, the pragmatic and tactically astute Oliver Cromwell who was the more important vehicle for historical progression than radical millenarian groups because Cromwell recognised that "abstract principles were infinitely less important than the practical necessity of maintaining power" (Morton 1938: 242–43, 250).

However, by the 1950s Morton saw greater significance in radical millenarians in English history. He was now arguing that their hopes for a new England belonged to a recurring tradition which fed into socialist ideas, an argument he made in a number of publications including in his next major book, *The English Utopia* (Morton, 1952), and in a series of pamphlets and articles in the late 1940s and 1950s (e.g., Morton, 1941; 1947; 1949; 1955; 1958a; 1958b; Morton and Tate, 1956). Morton now had greater appreciation of heroic failures and saw that they too could be read as contributing to and anticipating long-term progressive developments which could come to fruition thanks to a mature twentieth-century working class now in a position to advance the cause of socialism. Morton's thinking was reflective of postwar emphases among British Marxist historians and, in addition to Hobsbawm, can be seen in the work of the famed historians Morton influenced and with whom he discussed ideas. Hill would go on to develop a well-known argument also associated with Morton's early postwar thinking, namely, that there were two English revolutions reflecting different strands of religious nonconformity (and millenarianism). One was the successful bourgeois-revolution-in-the-making led by Cromwell; the other was a failed radical revolution from below made up of millenarian prophets, apocalyptic preachers, and antinomians but which still managed to influence the radical Enlightenment (see, e.g., Hill, 1972; cf. Morton, 1949).

This shift in emphasis belonged to changing Communist thinking and attitudes over the same period. By the late 1930s, the Communist Party in Britain and internationally were engaged in creating a Popular Front alliance of leftists, social democrats, and liberals against fascism in anticipation of history then moving beyond decaying capitalism to the development of a socialist state. Thus, in *A People's History of England*, the heroic figures, including millenarians, were those who worked in popular alliances to further progressive causes and accepted that they had to limit or temporarily remove overtly radical or communistic ideas (e.g., Morton, 1938: 119–20, 124). For the Communist Party of Great Britain, when the Second World War was understood as a People's War this further roused hopes for a socialist future as did the promise of the National Health Service and development of a welfare state. But Communist disillusionment grew with the Labour government of 1945 both

domestically (e.g., conceding too much to the capitalist class) and internationally (e.g., supporting anti-Communist movements, close relationship with American imperialism). This was soon followed by 1950s C/conservatism, the loss of Communists in Parliament, and a decline in Communist Party membership numbers after a peak during the War. To counter or to compensate for this, Morton, Torr, and the Historians' Group sought to reclaim the English radical tradition of John Ball and the seventeenth-century revolutionaries from below and present the twentieth-century working class as the inheritors of earlier dreams of transformation (for discussion of the background, see e.g., Schwarz, 1982: 57–58, 64–67, 71, 73; Dworkin, 1997: 16; Callaghan, 2003: 50–56).

Concerns about the present were not just implicit in their readings of the past. Morton also challenged the political situation of the 1950s directly in his historical work. *The English Utopia* (Morton, 1952), for instance, contains constant criticisms of the Labour Party, their thinkers, and their utopian novelists, attacking the "futility of trying to build a welfare state while still leaving the capitalist class in undisturbed possession of the power it draws from its ownership of the means of production" (Morton, 1952: 181–82). Morton's work in the 1950s likewise included sharp attacks on American imperialism and a lauding of English cultural traditions (radical or not) and an alternative national story as a counter—all in sync with the Communist Party line of the time. Indeed, shortly after *The English Utopia* was published Morton himself wrote a polemical pamphlet for the Communist Party in East Anglia denouncing American cultural, military, and political influence in Britain with the self-explanatory title, *Get Out!* (Morton, 1953).

There were also personal influences on Morton's influential shift. One was his friend, the writer Iris Morley who died in 1953. Morley's historic novels and about struggles in English history (Morley, 1940; 1942; 1943) led Morton to rethink what he now saw as the lingering left-wing of English radicalism towards the end of the seventeenth century. Most specifically, Morton developed Morley's reassessment of the Monmouth rebellion and the battle of Sedgemoor (6 July 1685) and its background. Where he was generally dismissive in his scant treatment of the event in *A People's History of England* (Morton, 1938: 275), in the 1950s he now saw it as the last great hurrah of the "people" in the seventeenth century wanting to overthrow the old order and transform society into a democratic republic. Morton published an article on Sedgemoor in 1955 which has become a (now typically unacknowledged) milestone in the development of history from below. It opened with a reference to Morley's book, *A Thousand Lives: An Account of the English Revolutionary Movement 1660–1685* (Morley, 1954), and concluded by referring readers to her book for further details, not least because he deemed it the "most brilliant and moving historical work from a progressive standpoint" for years and stating that "no one who is interested in the real history of England should miss it" (Morton, 1955). The impact of Morley for Morton's understanding of concepts relating to apocalypticism should not be underestimated. In *The English Utopia*, for instance, he had even gone so far as to claim that the rebels of 1685 were "the last defenders of Cokaygne, the Utopia of all jolly fellows, of the proud, independent man, neither exploiting nor exploited, eating and drinking of his own abundance" (Morton, 1952: 86).

An appreciation of radical English history was hardly alien to Morton as a younger man nor in his personal interactions with friends. During his brief time as a teacher in Steyning in the mid-1920s, Morton became a close friend of the charismatic poet and publisher (and former disciple of the occultist Aleister Crowley), Victor Neuburg. Morton did not enjoy his time in conservative Steyning, but Neuberg provided a much-needed outlet to discuss radical history and another figure who Morton would study thanks to Neuberg's influence: William Blake (Morton 1958a; for discussion, see Crossley 2025). Neuberg died in 1940 and this may have provided additional impetus for Morton's rethinking.

Another crucial influence in Morton's life was his father-in-law, T. A. Jackson, a founder member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, who Morton had known certainly from the turn of the 1930s. Morton and Jackson were close—Morton had, for instance, dedicated a book to Jackson (Morton, 1945)—and Jackson had long been an advocate of the English radical tradition, including promoting the importance of John Ball and Ball's most influential modern interpreter, William Morris, all of which they discussed together. Shortly before his death in 1955, Jackson too was publicising similar views to Morton on the matter in the *Daily Worker* (e.g., 28 June 1950; 31 July 1950; 1950; 1953).

A further range of important influences came about when Morton moved to the mini hotbed of Communism in Leiston, Suffolk, just before the start of the Second World War. While Morton had connections with militant atheism in 1930s London, in Leiston he was involved with propagandistic activities through the *Leiston Leader* which included contributions on religious radicalism (see, e.g., *Leiston Leader*, May 1939; January 1940, March 1940, December 1944), notably by the popular local pastor Tom Morgan. Morton also became something of a regular at the Eel's Foot Inn where fishermen and agricultural workers would sing and dance. Morton and his friend and famed folksong collector, A. L. Lloyd, even convinced the BBC to record an evening of merriment in 1939, enhanced by a not ungenerous BBC drinks budget (Arthur, 2012: 186–191, 195). Among the performances was one of the American song, "Poor Man's Heaven," which tells us about defeating the rich and hopes of a land of plenty. The prehistory and reception history of this song would later be discussed in *The English Utopia* under the opening chapter entitled, "Poor Man's Heaven." It was around the time of his move to Leiston that Morton's interests in writing a history of English utopianism developed and when he began to emphasise and promote the socialist potential of religious traditions with an emancipatory message, influenced in particular by black American spirituals (e.g., *Daily Worker* 28 June 1939; 9 August 1939; Morton 1945).

Legacies

The example of Morton alone shows that there was much more going on in claims about the emancipatory potential of apocalypticism and millenarianism behind Hobsbawm's celebrated work. Morton himself (favourably) reviewed Hobsbawm's landmark book on the subject (Hobsbawm, 1959) in the *Daily Worker* (30 April 1959). Morton used Hobsbawm's work to focus on the uneven development of historical transformation to show how earlier peasant struggles linger and how they could

become “Communist strongholds.” In doing so, Morton stressed, such struggles became part of the development of socialism in contexts such as parts of Spain and Italy where capitalism was “weakly developed.” Morton further noted Communist precursors, including the “revolutionary teachings” of the millenarian Joachim of Fiore and the inspiration for Communists provided by the nineteenth-century “prophet” David Lazzaretti who was shot while proclaiming the Republic of God. Hobsbawm’s interests may have been southern Europe, but the historical materialist approach to apocalypticism and millenarianism was very much an outworking of the shared intellectual tradition driven by Morton in the Communist Party Historians’ Group.

So, despite the clear overlaps and influences, why have Hobsbawm and others (e.g., Hill, Hilton) received the scholarly acclaim for their work on apocalypticism and millenarianism while the pioneering figure of Morton has not? Unlike Hobsbawm, Hill, and Hilton, Morton did not hold a university position in Britain and this no doubt played its part. Furthermore, Hobsbawm, Hill, and Hilton all went on to become distinguished professors and hold academic positions of esteem: like Cohn, they became Fellows of the British Academy while Hill became elected Master of Balliol College, University of Oxford, in 1965. By contrast, Morton’s primary institutional allegiances were in eastern Europe, particularly in the GDR and Wilhelm Pieck University Rostock awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1975 (Cornforth, 1978: 17; Höhne and Nathan, 1983: 199). As this additionally suggests, Morton’s ideological positioning in the Cold War was factor. Indeed, while Morton stayed in the Communist Party following (among other things) Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet military intervention in Hungary in 1956, many leading historians and intellectuals (including Hilton, Hill, E. P. Thompson, and Dorothy Thompson) soon left. Hobsbawm remained, though he was something of a low-level dissenter and later became supportive of Labour Party centrism. By the 1980s, Hobsbawm had become involved with the Eurocommunist faction which sought to overthrow from within the traditional Marxism-Leninism of the Communist Party of Great Britain and which had some credibility among the liberal intelligentsia. Morton, by contrast, remained publicly supportive of a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party and historical materialist approaches to history until his death in 1987 (for the full story see Crossley, 2025).

Against this backdrop, we can see why the once influential Morton faded from western scholarly memories during the Cold War and beyond and why Hobsbawm and others gave their reading of apocalypticism and millenarianism a degree of intellectual prestige. This background also points to another legacy of the emancipatory reading of apocalypticism: the watering down of the historical materialism so integral to Morton and the Communist Party Historians’ Group. Fairly or not, as Jonathan White reminds us, historians of English radicalism such as Hill and Thompson have become best remembered for producing histories from below and foregrounding once marginalised figures rather than being remembered for their attempts to explain the transformation from feudalism to capitalism (White, 2021: 103–113). Hill’s most famous book—*The World Turned Upside Down* (Hill, 1972)—looks at the wilder apocalypticism and preaching of the English Revolution and provocative claims about, for instance, land ownership, democracy, sexuality, and theology. It may have assumed a historical materialist framework but became a classic because of its foregrounding of

progressive figures ahead of their time. The most famous quotation from any of the Historians' Group alumni is from E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*: "I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity" (Thompson, 1963: 13). As White showed, it was a more romantic but decontextualised reception of Thompson and the reading of the radical past in this vein that academic historians extracted from the British Marxist historians and become dominant in subsequent historical scholarship

In biblical studies and theology, where much of the definitional work on nascent apocalypticism has taken place, a removal of the harder Marxist legacy of the critical study of apocalypticism was uncontroversial, at least in western European and North American scholarship. This is because in the twentieth century, at least, they were fields dominated by confessional interests at odds with supposed atheistic Marxism associated with the Soviet Union (Crossley, 2019). With the Cold War now in the more distant past, Marxism has taken its place in biblical studies, even if it is not a dominant mode of interpretation (on Marxism and biblical studies, see Pettersen, 2020). Indeed, there are overlapping interests between biblical studies and the interests of the British Marxist historians on the emancipatory interpretation of apocalypticism—arguably the most dominant topic in the study of Christian origins in the 1990s and 2000s has been about the extent to which the early Jesus or Christian movement was anti-imperial. Even so, this reading of Christian origins is typically reflective of liberal-theological discourses concerning values of justice, love, humility, and personal identities beneath the language of 'subversion' (Myles, 2016).

This reading of Christian origins reflects a broader updating of the emancipatory reading of apocalypticism and millenarianism in the late twentieth century against the backdrop of postwar decolonisation movements, the fragmentation of the post-1968 left, and postmodern and postcolonial challenges to traditional Marxist and Communist dominance of leftist discourse. Different emphases came to the fore which impacted readings across the political spectrum, including on the role of women and sexuality. As we have seen, after 1968 Hill incorporated these emphases into his Marxist reading of the English Revolution. Morton did too. He had not previously excluded antinomians or women from his presentation of seventeenth-century radicalism and millenarianism, but they were issues that were nevertheless heightened after 1968 in his book, *The World of the Ranters* (Morton, 1970). But perhaps more indicative of a changing world was Sheila Rowbotham. Rowbotham was influenced by the British Marxist historians but also the different radical politics associated with the legacy of 1968. Beginning with *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (Rowbotham, 1973), she foregrounded women, gender, sexuality, labour studies, and history from below, helping shift the emphasis of radical history from an apparent English parochialism through to the inclusion of third-world women's movements.

Another important influence on the history of modern critical scholarship on the emancipatory readings of apocalypticism and millenarianism has, obviously, been Liberation Theology. While there have been tensions between Liberation Theology and the 'scientific' Marxism associated with the Communist Party, strands of Liberation

Theology overlapped with the work of the British Marxist historians. We have seen something of this in Morton's interest in spirituals while Hill included a comparative appendix on Liberation Theology in *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (Hill, 1993: 447–451). The overlapping concerns of the British Marxist historians and Liberation Theology resonate in the work of biblical scholars such as Norman Gottwald, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Richard Horsley, and Christopher Rowland. Among theological interpretations of biblical apocalypticism, Katherine Keller is perhaps the prominent public advocate today of these overlapping traditions updated in light of the pandemic (Keller, 2020; Keller and Thatamanil, 2020). Through the influence of Liberation Theology (for example), some of the interests associated with Morton and the Communist Party Historians' Group remain in western radical and liberal discourses. But, equally, the prominence of transformative apocalypticism in public discourses (at least in Britain) from the twentieth century onward is more likely to be found in implicit or explicit demands for a better welfare state, fulfilment of the ideals of liberal democracy, and equality of gender, sexuality, and race (Crossley, 2022). But understanding apocalyptic and millenarian movements as revealing something about changing modes of production and their dreams to be taken up by the working class to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, this is not.

Concluding Remarks

While negative and positive readings of apocalypticism and millenarianism as socially transformative thinking and movements have historic legacies stretching back centuries, we have seen that the 1950s were an important decade in drawing the ideological battlelines for the analysis of them. Indeed, Cohn's work itself provided some stimulus for the British Marxist historians to continue developing their work on the less domesticated side of English religious history. Morton and his close colleagues were aware of both Cohn's political leanings and appealing subject matter. In 1957, Hill wrote to Morton asking if he had seen Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millenium*, calling it a "black reactionary book, but full of fascinating material" (Hill, 1957). This assessment complemented Morton's who soon wrote a response to Cohn on the theme of "Millenium and Utopia." Morton praised Cohn for bringing together "a great mass of evidence, obviously based on a long and painstaking study of the original sources." However, Morton was also concerned about the way Cohn used his data as a "weapon against Communism" which in turn "distorts his vision of the past and the present." This, Morton argued, meant Cohn was overly reliant on irrationality, paranoia, and neurosis to explain why revolutionaries want to overthrow the social order. For Morton, Cohn had a "deep contempt and dislike for the people and for popular movements" and could only make close connections between medieval movements and modern Communism by "entirely disregarding the essential differences in historic conditions of the two epochs" (Morton, 1958b).

As this suggests, these two traditions of interpretation are both in competition and overlapping. To some extent, and major differences notwithstanding, there is a shared understanding of the historic significance of apocalyptic and millenarian movements and their influence—the main departure being, we might say, whether this is deemed a good or bad thing. While the Cold War shaped the Cohn and the Morton traditions,

by the end of the Cold War they were being remoulded. With liberal-leftist challenges to Communist Party-led Marxism of the late twentieth century and the end of the Soviet Union, the two traditions of critical analyses of apocalypticism outlined here have since merged into these sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing wings of the western liberal intelligentsia: put crudely, these are the concern for irrational terroristic threats and the concern for equality and democracy. The hard Marxist tradition associated with Morton may not have disappeared, but its legacy has unquestionably been transformed into something he would not have recognised. By contrast, the Cohn tradition remains strong and clearly recognisable in western scholarship on apocalypticism and millenarianism—a Cold War victory for him, if you like.

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