

Review

Rationalising the Apocalypse

The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future by David Wallace-Wells

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When I was reading this book last week in my flat in Manchester's city centre the sky was black, the rain poured down in relentless torrents, and David Wallace-Wells scared the bejesus out of me. Global warming, plagues, and biblical floods. (I actually asked google how far Manchester is above sea level). *The Uninhabitable Earth* is capable of inducing something like panic in the most sceptical of souls.

After an introduction, *Cascades*, in which the interrelated elements of climate chaos likely to be induced by global warming are discussed, the reader is marched through twelve chapters on 'the twelve elements of chaos' with titles like *Heat Death*, *Drowning*, and *Plagues of Warming*. Most unnerving are the plagues. There are apparently bugs

trapped under the ice or frozen in the permafrost for millions of years that may be thawed back to life threatening human populations that have no immunity to zombie microbes, because the last time they were active on the surface of the planet, humanity did not exist. More recent killers, like the virus which caused the flu pandemic of 1918, may also be held in icy suspension until released by a warming planet:

Scientists suspect smallpox and the bubonic plague are trapped in Siberian ice, among many other diseases that have otherwise passed into human legend.

As the planet warms up mosquitos, ticks, and other disease-bearing organisms are also likely to range into new regions as the colder climes morph into warmer ones. There is also the possibility that some of the unknown bacteria that presently reside harmlessly inside human bodies, might, in radically changed climate conditions, become active in ways which are catastrophic to our survival. In May 2015 something of the sort happened to a population of saiga antelope in a large area of central Asia when *Pasteurella multocida*, a bacterium that had lived harmlessly in this antelopes' tonsils for many generations, suddenly proliferated into the animals' blood stream, wiping out the entire regional population within a matter of days. But, David Wallace-Wells is rational, cautious, even calm:

This is not to say we now understand what precisely about humidity weaponized *Pasteurella*, or how many of the other bacteria living inside mammals like us – the 1 percent we have identified, or perhaps more worryingly the 99 percent we house without any knowledge or understanding – might be similarly triggered by climate, friendly, symbiotic bugs with whom we've lived in some cases for millions of years, transformed suddenly into contagions already inside us. That remains a mystery. But ignorance is no comfort. Presumably climate change will introduce us to some of them.

This paragraph is of a piece with the rhetorical strategy adopted by David Wallace-Wells throughout the book. Scare the living daylights out of his readers, then modify the terror with rational uncertainty and caution concerning the extent of the damage we might encounter. He then concludes each particular meditation with the prediction that we will experience something like the horror he's outlined, even if only to a modest degree.

Projections and predictions tumble after each other as he lines up the dozen different elements of the catastrophe we face as global temperatures inexorably rise and chaotic weather becomes a new normal, destroying social, economic, and institutional stability.

Sections three and four of the book, *The Climate Kaleidoscope* and *The Anthropic Principle* are if anything less satisfactory, because the strategy adopted in discussions of the twelve elements of chaos, concerning the systemic disorders threatened by a warming planet, do not work so well when discussing capitalism, technology, consumption or the dystopian disappearance of the concept of progress. Here the projections and predictions are built, not on surveys of scientific literature and research, but on little more than guesswork and hunches. Thoroughly 'referenced' hunches to be sure, but hunches nevertheless.

Disappointingly, the book does not deal with the popular responses to global warming adopted by the general public and policy makers more concerned with our conduct than our future. The author does suggest that "plastic pollution is simply not a global warming problem". Similarly, he talks about the "parable of bee death" as another diversion like that of plastic straws, inspired by our "modern obsession with hygiene and lightness as a form of consumer grace. . . . familiar from recycling."

However, towards the close of his introduction, *Cascades*, David Wallace-Wells gingerly approaches such a discussion:

If the average American were confined by the carbon footprint of her European counterpart, US carbon

emissions would fall by more than half. If the world's richest 10 percent were limited to that same footprint, global emissions would fall by a third. And why shouldn't they be? Almost as prophylactic against climate guilt, as the news from science has grown bleaker, Western liberals have comforted themselves by contorting their own consumption patterns into performances of moral or environmental purity – less beef, more Teslas, fewer transatlantic flights. But the climate calculus is such that individual lifestyle choices do not add up to much, unless they are scaled by politics.

My hopes that the book might tackle this aspect of climate change were dashed as the author does not attempt to think in any detail about how political measures might take us beyond lifestyle choices.

Every time I sort out my garbage into the appropriate bins I'm gripped by the absurdity of such measures. I'm aware that rinsing bottles and cans probably uses more energy than it saves. Placing my used coffee capsules in the special recycling bag provided to take them back to the store, which is then trucked to some disposal depot, I am certain does little or nothing to help, despite the fact that the company's "sustainable quality program was co-developed with the Rainforest Alliance".

Increasingly, most of us go through these rituals, like throwing salt over one's shoulder, in the hope that the fates will be propitiated.

The really good thing about *The Uninhabitable Earth* is the way in which its author makes it abundantly clear that the scale of what we face could not conceivably be addressed by lifestyle changes. The concatenation of effects brought about by a warming planet leaves little doubt that only measures taken by states, individually, and in concert internationally, have the slightest chance of heading off the apocalypse.

Clearly, only technological innovation on a truly grand scale can moderate and then stop global warming. David

Wallace-Wells is somewhat dismissive of this idea in his chapter *The Church of Technology* which appears to be entranced with day dreams inspired by the movers and shakers of Silicon Valley rather than concrete measures which ensure that clean energy completely replaces fossil fuels. Or, that ways are found of storing and transmitting electricity more efficiently, that entirely new materials and new forms of power generation are developed, trees are planted upon an epic scale, and the clean-up and revitalisation of the oceans is begun.

Despite my many criticisms of this book, I think the introduction and the first twelve chapters are essential reading because of the way in which its author both describes and explains the manner and range of the overlapping and multiplying effects that rising temperatures will, if climate change is not halted, destroy everything that we have built.