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Chapter 11: If This Goes On …: The Rhetorical Construction of Future Problems

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11.1 Introduction

People who hope to draw attention to social problems find themselves competing in a sort of social problems marketplace (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, Best 2008). Rhetoric is central to this process; the most compelling claims attract concern from the press, the public and policymakers. Most often, sociologists study claims that depict problems of the present, arguments that some contemporary condition causes harm, that this is intolerable, and that something ought to be done to solve the problem. Such claims address the question: “What’s wrong?” Less common are claims that construct past problems, what we might characterize as postmortem attempts to answer “What went wrong?” (Lewis 2003).

This chapter focuses on a third type of social problems claim: predictive claims about the future, claims about what could – or will – go wrong unless action is taken. History – and literature – is filled with prophets, seers and other people foretelling the future or warning about impending crises. In many cases, we can compare their predictions with what actually happened; so we can say that some of those predictions proved to be accurate, while others turned out to be misguided. It is more difficult to assess today’s claims about tomorrow’s problems. At any given moment, there are plenty of folks telling us that trouble lies ahead. They compete in a social problems “futures market”, each trying to convince us to worry about their vision of what is to come. Of course, we may give more credence to some predictive claims, and less to others. When large numbers of scientists argue that global temperatures are likely to rise during the coming century, they are making a predictive claim, but then so are the people warning that the Mayan calendar indicates the world will end in 2012. Still, few people give these two forecasts equal weight.
11.2 The rhetoric of future claims
Future claims are rhetorically interesting. They vary of course. They evoke a wide range of rationales and authorities, including divine revelation, prognostications of soothsayers, models derived from natural or social science, speculation about possible worst-case scenarios, etc. Their intended audiences may range from small groups of true believers, to powerful policymakers, to the general – even global – public. But all predictive claims have one important feature in common: they are always subject to challenge and dispute. Critics, skeptics, and in fact pretty much anyone can question how – or whether – one can actually know what the future holds, and it is always possible to cast doubt on a particular forecast. Future claims lead to debates between prophets and skeptics, between urgent calls for action and doubts about the very reality of the threat. Thus, there is rhetoric that predicts future problems, and counter-rhetoric that calls those claims into question.

Of course, claims about the problems of the present and the past are also subject to dispute, but the inherent uncertainty regarding what the future holds makes the rhetoric of predictive claims particularly interesting. This is a topic of more than academic interest. In the aftermath of catastrophe, we may puzzle over why people failed to heed the warnings they were given. Explaining why some claims or counterclaims succeed or fail is central to the study of rhetoric. In particular, debates over future claims tend to revolve around four issues of uncertainty – prediction, magnitude, probability, and timing. This chapter begins by considering each of these issues in turn.

11.2.1 Prediction: What’s going to be the problem?
By definition, every predictive claim forecasts what the future holds. Many predictions are grounded in measurements; they envision that an observable trend will continue, or perhaps that it will change in some predictable way, for instance, grow at some increasing rate. Such predictions extrapolate from data about the past and present them as a basis for forecasting the future: things used to be not so bad, but today they are worse, and we can project that they will continue to get worse into the future. We are all familiar with such data-based projections: forecasts that the world population could reach 7.4 or 8.9 or even 10.6 billion by the middle of this century; that the world’s oil production will peak within the next ten years; that average global temperature will increase between 1.1 and 6.4°C by century’s end. These arguments use the language of trends and data as rhetoric. They often invoke scientists and other
experts, people who are understood to be capable, not just of accurately measuring the trends that led to today’s situation, but of being qualified to project those trends into the future. We live in an era – and in a part of the world – when scientists’ judgments tend to be considered authoritative, as our most reliable means of predicting the future. In turn, experts trade on this authority, using their professional credentials to bolster their predictions.

However, even apparently authoritative data-based claims are subject to dispute. Counterclaims may challenge the data, and argue that the way the trend is being measured or projected isn’t all that accurate. Or they may suggest that the experts disagree, that not all scientists are convinced that the predictions are correct. Or they may point to embarrassing instances when supposedly data-based predictions proved to be wildly off the mark (such as some climate scientists’ well-publicized warnings during the 1970s about global cooling). If experts’ trend-based predictions have been erroneous in the past, why should we believe them this time? In some cases, a discipline’s track record in making predictions may be spotty enough to warrant reservations about its authority to accurately forecast what will come (here, economics comes to mind). And, of course, it is always possible for some critics to dismiss the very authority of science, to argue that we need to turn to other guides (such as holy texts) to understand the future.

Trend-based claims invite relatively open debate centered on issues of evidence. Being able to measure something over time, to say that the problem was at Level A ten years ago, and at Level B five years ago, and at Level C today, suggests that it may reach Level D in five more years. We assume that there is some factor or set of factors that causes this trend, and that the processes that have produced change in the past will continue to work, leading to a foreseeable outcome. While critics may challenge these measurements and assumptions, there is at least some agreement about what is at issue.

Arguments over global warming – at least in my country – illustrate arguments over data-based predictions. Over the years, skeptics have argued that the evidence regarding global warming was ambiguous, that not all scientists agreed that global warming was occurring, that some of those experts who concurred that temperatures were increasing were unconvinced that this was caused by humans’ activities, and so on. In response, those most active in warning about global warming emphasized that increasing evidence that supported their claims, that there was growing consensus among experts that the threat was real, and so on (McCright and Dunlap 2003; Spencer 2007).
These are fundamentally arguments rooted in a rhetoric of authority. Most of us – and this includes most policymakers – are utterly unqualified to assess the evidence presented by scientific authorities; in fact, few scientists are well qualified to evaluate evidence produced by colleagues in other specialties, let alone disciplines. Thus, the issue becomes, not just should we believe – and act upon – forecasts made by people with scientific authority, but should we believe the reports we are given that claim to represent what those authorities are saying?

Of course, not all predictions rely on trends. In some cases there are forecasts of very rare, or unprecedented, or even unique events, so that it is impossible to construct a credible trend. Here, claims argue that something – the Second Coming, a terrible disaster, a new discovery, whatever – will change the world in ways that make current trends irrelevant. Such predictive claims are much harder to assess: What is the reasoning that justifies this prediction? What authority do those making this claim have? It is easier to construct such claims, but also easier to dispute them. In most of these cases, the rhetorics of both claims and counterclaims focus, not on the nature of problem, but on other key questions.

11.2.2 Magnitude: How big will the problem be?
Claiming that things will get worse is just the first element in predictive rhetoric. A second concerns the scope, or magnitude of the problem. Just how bad will things get? Because future claims must compete for our attention with one another (and with all of the present claims about today’s problems), the most compelling claims tend to predict that things will get very, very bad. The more ghastly the forecast, the more likely people will listen.

The twentieth century raised our threshold for what constitutes a really bad problem. Improved communication and transportation linked people around the globe, enabling bad news to travel farther and faster. Looking back, we see an impressive array of catastrophes: a global influenza epidemic (more than 20 million deaths); a worldwide economic depression; two world wars and dozens of lesser conflicts (accounting for perhaps 100 million deaths); highly rationalized systems of political repression (that killed tens of millions more); the emergence of vastly more efficient, more lethal weapons (with previously unimaginable killing capacity); a sudden leap in overall population; and so on. The collective sense of just how bad things could get would never be the same.
In response, during the second half of the twentieth century, people increasingly worried that the future might hold really big problems. Dystopian literature and popular culture flourished, but so did frightening projections by sober, expert authorities. For more than sixty years, for instance, the logo for the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has been a “doomsday clock” that attempts to assess the precarious state of humankind. The clock is periodically reset, as current events make the world’s prospects seem somewhat better or worse, but the hands have always shown just a few minutes until midnight. We have become aware of a variety of doomsday scenarios:

- The first, of course, involves the threat of a nuclear world war – horrific explosions killing hundreds of millions, followed by radiation poisoning killing hundreds of millions more. In the 1990s, there were arguments that the greatest danger might come from nuclear winter – dust clouds caused by explosions blocking sunlight, suddenly lowering global temperatures, wiping out most plant life, and leading to the starvation of most of those who survived the explosions and the radiation.
- There were also the various ecological threats associated with population, resources and environment. There was a choice of mechanisms that could cause it all to end. Overpopulation? Depletion of vital resources? Pollution? The current concern with climate change is just one scenario within this variety of doomsday thinking.
- There were new medical menaces – the possibilities of horrific, untreatable diseases spreading by air travel into sudden, global pandemics. HIV/AIDS made the threat seem plausible and invited the most dramatic projections. For instance, one book devoted to warning about the 2005-06 avian flu suggested that “the true worst-case scenario . . . [is] in the range of 1 billion deaths” (Davis 2005, p. 126 – emphasis in original). Even if the losses from that year’s bird flu – and from Ebola, SARS, and West Nile virus – failed to live up to the most frightening forecasts, it is easy to claim that the next epidemic (such as the form of swine flu that began spreading in 2009) might prove much worse.
- There was the prospect of an economic collapse. Could an increasingly interconnected world economy remain stable? In a densely populated, interdependent world, a failing economy could in turn unleash all four horsemen of the apocalypse – famine, disease, war and death.
And there were fears that our reliance on increasingly sophisticated technology might lead to ruin. Innovations such as cell phones or Frankenfoods might have devastating consequences. The world may have circumvented to the world-ending threats posed by Y2K or CERN's Large Haldron Collider, but what of a robot uprising? Or of nanotechnology producing “gray goo” that would envelope the entire planet?

Finally, in recent years, there has been increasing attention to the possibilities of huge natural disasters. Forget hurricanes and tsunamis. Think big. Do you realize that a major collision with a large meteor or asteroid – or an eruption of, say, the super-volcano beneath Wyoming – have the power to kill off most species? Again, these are scenarios that emphasize the possibility that dust or ash filling the atmosphere could block sunlight and thereby lead to the extinction of most plant and animal species. The growing scientific consensus that a wayward asteroid killed off the dinosaurs has attracted considerable attention to this possibility.

This is rhetoric to reckon with. These are predictive claims that warn of “an end to civilization,” “an end to life as we know it,” “an end to life itself.” In a world that now holds about seven billion people who are increasingly dependent on technology and interlocking political and economic systems, the possibility that trouble could spread and, in the process, topple one key element in the social system after another allows us to envision horrific possibilities.

Counterclaims often focus on the sophistication and resilience of modern social systems, on their capacity to keep small problems from growing out of control. Our knowledge of medicine or economics is greater than in the past, giving us the capacity to minimize the damage caused – or even, in some cases, to prevent the problem from occurring. Pandemic influenza may have killed tens of millions in the aftermath of the Great War, but modern medicine is more sophisticated, and probably able to avoid a repetition of that catastrophe. Or is it?

11.2.3 Probability: How likely is it that the problem will occur?
Future claims depict possibilities, things that might happen. But, skeptics may counter, what about probabilities? What is the likelihood that some scenario will occur? Is it worth worrying about something that is extremely unlikely to happen?
The most compelling response to such doubts is to argue that a projected future is certain – or nearly certain – to occur. Perhaps the forecast comes from an arguably unimpeachable authority – holy writ, or people whose expertise is generally accepted. In some cases, claims insist that some outcome is inevitable over the long haul – at some point, Earth will surely collide with another wayward asteroid – although advocates concede they cannot predict just when the problem will occur.

Where a threat cannot be depicted as certain – at least not in the short run – advocates may try to estimate the chances of the problem occurring. Obviously, the better the chances, the more forceful the claim:

The odds that a potentially devastating space rock will hit Earth this century may be as high as one in 10. (Easterbrook 2008, p. 74)

California has more than a 99% chance of having a magnitude 6.7 or larger earthquake within the next 30 years. . . (ScienceDaily 2008)

Such efforts to quantify probability often may be found in scientific modeling, where experts present calculations suggesting a range of likely outcomes, based on different assumptions about what might occur. Thus, we have already noted that projections for future world population growth or global warming are often presented as ranges – with the understanding that the future is likely to produce something between the highest and lowest estimates considered plausible.

Questions of probability also figure into counterclaims. One obvious critique of predictions of extremely rare threats, such as asteroid strikes or super-volcano eruptions, is to simply agree: yes, these things happen, but they don’t happen very often, the next event might be thousands, or tens of thousands of years in the future, and there isn’t a whole lot we could do about it in any case, so let’s not worry about it. In other words, the probability of the problem occurring within the reasonably near future is so small that, critics argue, the risk can be ignored.

A common response to such criticism is to argue that, even if the prospect is remote, the downside risk is too great to ignore. The chance of some outcome occurring may be very small, but so long as the threat is sufficiently grave, it cannot be ignored. Perhaps, if disaster arrives sufficiently far in the future, we can find ways to circumvent it; science fiction has long imag-
ined that humans will seek to spread beyond the solar system, if only to escape their dependence on an aging Sun. In the shorter run, we should seek to minimize our risks. Although most scientists agreed that operating the Large Hadron Collider would not cause a mini-black hole that would destroy the planet, the project’s critics insisted that, so long as there was even a tiny, remote possibility that a world-ending catastrophe might result, we could ill afford to take that chance. Such rhetoric demands that we take every doomsday prediction – even the most unlikely – seriously.

### 11.2.4 Timing: When will the problem occur?

Perhaps the most impressive formulation for a predictive claim is to argue, not just that a big problem will inevitably occur, but that it will take place on a particular date. Thus, according to some interpretations, the Mayan calendar forecasts the end of the world on December 21, 2012. This is an impressive variety of claim, in that it argues that (1) a very big problem (such as the end of the world) is (2) certain to occur and (3) on a specified date (4) in the near future. Of course, the Mayan prediction is hardly unique. There have been any number of time-certain, end-of-the-world predictions over the years; most often, these have been associated with particular religious beliefs, but secular versions are possible (as evidenced by Y2K fears). Such predictions are the subject of a sociological literature, where observers study the reactions of the faithful when the world does not end on schedule; it turns out the true believers have little difficulty adjusting to the world’s continued existence while maintaining their beliefs. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, for instance, rallied around five specific predictions that the world would end in 1878, 1881, 1914, 1918, and 1925, yet managed to endure when each forecast proved mistaken (Zygmun 1970).

A slightly different set of future claims insists that catastrophe is inevitable, although it acknowledges that the precise date cannot be known. Often, these claims feature rhetoric that suggests that the big problem is due, perhaps even overdue:

> [According to] Nature, perhaps the world’s most respected science journal … at least three-quarters of Earth’s species are wiped out every 62 to 65 million years. It has been 65 million years since the Cretaceous-Tertiary disaster extinguished the dinosaurs, meaning that we are now overdue for a cataclysm that will without doubt reduce our population by at least half … (Joseph 2007, p. 12)
Similarly, there were major eruptions of the super-volcano beneath Yellowstone National Park about 2 million, 1.3 million and 630,000 years ago, so the next event might occur any time now.

The problem with such formulations is that threats that occur on a schedule that can only be measured on a geological time scale lack a certain urgency. More pressing are future claims that depict threats that occur far more frequently, such as severe flu epidemics, or earthquakes on major fault lines. Here, claims tend to emphasize the near-certainty that there will be a problem in the not-too-distant future; there may be attempts to quantify the risk, preferably in seemingly urgent terms: “Seismic experts say a quake this size [7.8 on the Richter Scale] thumps the [Los Angeles] area every 150 years – and the last one occurred 151 years ago,” (Los Angeles Times 2008, C11). Such claims warn that a problem is not just predictable, but inevitable, and that it can be expected to emerge in the near future.

Alternative quantitative formulations adopt a slightly longer view. At least in the United States, flood-control engineers speak of 100-year floods, meaning water levels likely to be attained on average once per century; there may be calculations that it makes economic sense to build flood-control structures designed to contain a 100-year flood, while the costs of building to withstand a 500-year flood are considered prohibitive.

Yet another way to address the question of timing is to check off warning signs. Evangelical Christians, for instance, have long sought to interpret real-world events as the signs of Christ’s imminent return, as forecast in the somewhat oblique language of the Book of Revelations. The appearance of the anti-Christ, for instance, has been heralded in the rise of such figures as John Lennon, Mick Jagger, Bill Clinton and, of course, Barack Obama. To the degree that some predictions in Revelations seem to have been borne out, then surely the remaining forecasts must also be true, and can be expected to be fulfilled very soon. (Similarly, followers of other seers, such as Nostradamus, point to their uncanny records of accurate predictions [when properly interpreted].)

In sum, warnings about future problems – and resistance to those warnings – revolve around issues of what is being predicted, the prospective magnitude of the problem, its probability of occurring, and the timing of its arrival. Advocates argue there are reasons to be concerned – to anticipate certain problems, to worry that they will be large, that they are quite likely to occur, and this will happen soon. Skeptics doubt that the predictions will be
fulfilled – the projected problem may not emerge, or if it does develop, it won't be as severe or happen as soon as forecast. As forms of rhetoric, debates over what might seem to be very different issues – warnings grounded in, say, climate science and interpretations of the Mayan calendar – are actually fairly similar.

11.3 The consequences of rhetoric about future problems
The fact that there are so many predictions of future problems, and that they must compete for the attention of the public, the press and policymakers, means that that competition pits rival future claims against not only one another, but also the many claims about pressing present problems. This competition encourages alarmist rhetoric. With so many claims clamoring to be treated as priorities, advocates need to frame issues in the most dramatic terms: this is what is going to happen; it will be a very big problem; it is very likely to occur; and it will happen in the very near future. Such a threat arguably demands quick action. Inaction or delay will have catastrophic consequences. Half-measures won't work. The only salvation lies in an immediate, fully committed response.

These arguments often draw lessons from history. Look what happened to those who ignored predictions that came true. Look at the fates of those who assumed that the future would be no different from the past, who didn't understand the need to confront the impending danger. Their failures, the disasters that overtook them, offer proof that not heeding warnings – whether through arrogance or indifference or ignorance or whatever – can be catastrophic. We cannot afford not to act. This rhetoric always seems quite compelling to those who accept the arguments, and the authority of those making the claims. They believe the warning, and probably view the source as authoritative, the evidence as compelling, the logic as convincing. They support taking action.

On the other hand, not everyone will be so receptive. There will almost certainly be counterclaims promoted by critics and skeptics, people who remain un-persuaded by the claim's rhetoric, who discount the source or the evidence. This reaction may take the form of wholesale rejection: probably most people who receive the news that the Mayan calendar forecasts big – and probably really bad – things for 2012 simply shrug and ignore the warning. More interesting are those folks who concede that a prediction may be valid, but don't get caught up in the urgency.
Consider, for example, earthquake preparedness. Los Angeles and San Francisco are major cities built on major seismic fault lines. Both have experienced devastating quakes in the past, and all of the seismological authorities agree that there are other jolts in both cities’ futures. For decades, authorities have been distributing advice on how to be prepared for an earthquake; in particular, they urge citizens to have emergency kits in their homes and cars – packs stocked with flashlights, bottled water, and so on. Now virtually everyone who lives in those cities knows that there is a real earthquake danger; they talk about “The Big One”, and make jokes about California falling into the ocean. This is not a matter of debate; I don’t know of any earthquake skeptics. Yet only a small fraction of the citizens in these cities actually have earthquake kits. I have a colleague, a world-renowned sociologist who specializes in the study of disasters, the co-author of an important book on the challenges earthquake preparedness poses for Los Angeles policymakers, who lived in LA for years; she did not have an earthquake emergency kit. If asked, most Southern Californians will concede that a major quake could occur at any time, but they also know that the odds are it won’t happen today or tomorrow. There’s plenty of time to get prepared – someday.

We might dismiss this as the foolhardiness of an ill-informed public. But policymakers sometimes adopt an analogous sort of reasoning. Consider all of the criticism after Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans in 2005. It turned out there was a lengthy history of people warning that the city’s levees needed attention; there were repeated warnings that, when a major hurricane next struck the New Orleans area, the levees would likely fail, and those making the warnings noted that, sooner or later, such a hurricane would certainly arrive. And yet, levee maintenance was not policymakers’ top priority. Fixing levees is an expensive business; it costs a lot of money, and there is stiff competition for those dollars, with lots of other claims arguing that there are more urgent needs for that money. It is easy to imagine policymakers thinking that, while we’ll certainly need those levees someday, they’re not unlike earthquake kits, in that we probably won’t need them this year, because there’s only a tiny chance that there’ll be a major, levee-threatening hurricane this season. Why not spend that money on this year’s most pressing needs, and turn our attention to the levees next year? And the next year, of course, they could make the same calculations; year after year they gambled (always with the short-run odds in their favor), until they finally suffered a spectacular loss.
Obviously, it is easy to view this as a rather blatant policy failure, but it is hardly unique, at least in the United States. My parents married immediately after the Second World War ended, and I showed up 51 weeks later. I was, then, a first-year Baby Boomer, one of 3.47 million American infants born in 1946. Just a few months before I’m told the Mayan calendar forecasts the end of the world, I will be eligible for Social Security. For more than sixty years, policymakers have known with considerable accuracy how many boomers are out there, and when they will be able to collect Social Security. This is not very speculative: the demographic information is readily available and generally accepted; simple arithmetic can estimate how much money will be needed. Yet, over the years, in spite of numerous warnings, my country’s policymakers have chosen to address more urgent problems first, and thereby allowed the Social Security system to develop serious problems. The failures to convince ordinary Angelenos to assemble earthquake preparedness kits, like the failures of policymakers to maintain the levees in New Orleans and the Social Security Trust Fund, suggest a first problem with future claims: they describe the future – a future that isn’t here, that may not arrive anytime soon, and that seems less pressing than other, immediate claims on our attention and resources. Even when everyone accepts a bleak forecast, unless the threat seems immediate, it is hard to get people to take action.

Precisely because it is difficult to mobilize people to address the problems of the future, those who make predictive claims find themselves looking for ways to make their warnings more competitive in the social problems marketplace, more likely to attract attention, arouse concern and move more people to take action. Karen Cerulo speaks of “caldrons” – “a context in which competition is always bubbling; alliances are fluid; social bonds are constantly forming and reforming in accord with groups’ and individuals’ current interests and goals” (2006, p. 156). The public sphere is one such caldron. In such circumstances, it’s hard to get people to pay attention and stay focused on your predictive claims. The obvious solution is to devise more compelling rhetoric, to create dramatic arguments that will frighten the audience into taking action. Thus, advocates – who, after all, may be perfectly sincere in their belief that they have identified an important future problem – find it useful to emphasize the problem’s magnitude (that is, to suggest that it will be very large), its likelihood (that is, to claim that it is very likely to occur), and its proximity (that is, to suggest that it will arrive sooner, rather than later). It is easier to convince people to worry about a giant problem that is
certain to appear in the immediate future, than to get them concerned about a problem of uncertain size, that is more-or-less likely to occur sometime (who knows when) in the future.

There are, then, powerful incentives to ramp up the rhetoric, to start talking about doomsday scenarios in order to grab people’s attention. This may help explain why history is littered with apocalyptic predictions that never came true. But, of course, the memory of those erroneous forecasts can be used to construct counterclaims. If there have been many mistaken warnings in the past, why shouldn’t we suspect that today’s warnings will also prove to be exaggerated? Moreover, the more powerful the rhetoric, the more likely it will be disconfirmed. Forecasting a huge problem means that the occurrence of even a somewhat smaller problem serves to discredit the claim. Assigning a high probability to catastrophe casts doubt on the claim so long as the event does not occur. Predicting that a problem will arrive on a particular date – or within the very near future – makes it easier to disconfirm the prediction. In other words, the more powerful the rhetoric, the less credible the claim is likely to seem so long as the prediction is unfulfilled. In the face of those doubts, there is a powerful temptation to overcome the resistance by devising even more powerful rhetoric, launching a new cycle of even more extreme predictions that, in turn, inspire further doubt.

In recent years, scholars have tried to better understand the dynamics of failing social systems. History offers us plenty of examples of collapse, of political empires or religious beliefs that succeeded, expanded across continents and endured over centuries, their successes embodied in great palaces and splendid temples, only to wither. Recently, Jared Diamond published *Collapse* (2005), a thick volume that examines the failure of nearly a dozen social systems (including the Mayans) that endured for at least four hundred years (that is, they lasted at least as long as English speakers have inhabited North America). Diamond is most interested in accounts of collapse caused by ecological crises, by civilizations that exhausted their resources or found themselves constrained by climate change. For example, he argues that the global cooling cycle that began around 1300 (the onset of what is now recognized as the Little Ice Age), eventually forced Norse settlers to abandon their colony on Greenland. The cooler weather caused other, less dramatic, but arguably more consequential changes in Europe and Asia. Philip Jenkins (2008) notes how colder temperatures reduced harvests, which prompted famine and plague: “Whatever the religious coloring of particu-
lar societies, this was a world that directly attributed changes in weather or harvest to divine will, and it seemed natural to blame catastrophes on the misdeeds of religious deviant minorities who angered God” (pp. 136-37). Thus, the cooler weather led to Western European pogroms that decimated the Jewish population, while Christian minorities in several Muslim societies suffered severe losses. The link between climate change and religious persecution – hardly self-evident – illustrates that future problems may take unpredictable forms.

In fact, Diamond argues that history shows elites often being oblivious to warnings – whether in the form of predictive claims or empirical evidence that a society is becoming hard-pressed. Often short-run advantages to ignoring the danger seem more pressing than forecasts of doom to come. Add the fact that predictions are often exaggerated, imperfect, or incomplete, and it is not difficult to justify ignoring the rhetoric of warning.

Postmortem analyses of what went wrong often address whether anyone predicted that the problem would come to pass and it is easy to point to cases when the danger was anticipated in at least some quarters, yet action was not taken. In retrospect, it seems natural to criticize these failures to ward off the impending threat. Most critiques tend to blame policymakers for failing to act in the face of warnings. However, focusing on the rhetoric of future claims invites us to consider why some claims inspire action, while others are dismissed. What is it about the ways claims are presented, and about the ways that their audiences interpret these messages that leads to different outcomes? Understanding how we assess the risks of the future may help us avoid having regrets about the past.

References
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