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KÄTE HAMBURGER CENTRE FOR APOCALYPTIC AND POSTAPOCALYPTIC STUDIES (CAPAS)



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In 2007, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) instituted, for a total of six plus six years, the Käte Hamburger International Centres with the purpose of advancing innovative, interdisciplinary and internationally visible research in the social sciences and the humanities. Each centre focuses on a topic that requires particularly international and comparative approaches. They provide space for a group of up to ten international scholars and scientists to conduct six to twelve months of collaborative research. In the second round of Käte Hamburger centres, the BMBF will award Robert Folger and Thomas Meier funding to establish a Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies (CAPAS) at Heidelberg University in 2021.

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APOCALYPSE NOW?

We depart from the premise that apocalypses are characterized by radical changes in living conditions, which lead to fundamental reforms in how we live. Apocalypse does not equal annihilation: etymologically it means revelation. The apocalyptic doom of a world, understood broadly as way of life, reveals the true meaning and destiny of this world from the beginning. In an apocalypse, the destructive forces that we can observe in the real world take the shape of an auto-destruction already inherent in its foundations. Hence an apocalypse is not a catastrophe befalling from an outside that leads to general, senseless destruction; the apocalyptic ending of a world reveals that this world and its foundational project was doomed from the start. An apocalypse does not mean an absolute end of all things, humans, or of nature in its totality; it is the beginning of a postapocalyptic utopian or dystopian project of a new world that transforms the previous ruin into a founding event. This notion of apocalypse accounts for the apocalypses and post-apocalypses derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition but is not limited to them: any ending of a world (e.g., an individual or collective project associated with shared values, a telos and a more or less stable environment), which implies a more or less radical change in the conditions of living, can be experienced as an apocalyptic revelation that shapes the future. For instance, anthropogenic global warming and the possibility of the collapse of a stable ecological system are an empirical reality, yet the framing that it is given in public discussion, cultural imagination, and in science is apocalyptic: we are reminded (or interpellated in the Althusserian sense) that this crisis was already implicit in the project of modernity (technological progress, the exploitation of natural resources, the capitalist logic of interminable growth), and that our way of life is not sustainable. The current COVID-19 pandemic will not lead to the extinction of humanity, but the imagery evoked to describe it is frequently apocalyptic in the sense that it reveals that our way of life (relative unrestricted mobility and individual freedom) is presumably unsustainable: dystopian and utopian postapocalyptic visions will shape the new normal.

The Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies (CAPAS) at Heidelberg University fosters transdisciplinary research on how crises and collapses of systems affect societies, individuals, and environments. We can empirically observe potential catastrophic change, yet an understanding of its cultural framing and the cultural shaping of human experience

requires the arsenal of approaches used in the humanities: thus, empirical and interpretive-humanist approaches are complementary in understanding and shaping measures and attitudes toward change. In light of this transdisciplinary approach, it is an essential part of CAPAS' mission to intervene in current debates beyond established and emerging socio-cultural and scientific epistemologies. Our centre draws on the potential of the humanities to explore and question possible futures that are not accessible to the empirically based natural and social sciences through the reconstruction of ideas and experiences of apocalypses, with an emphasis on post-apocalyptic worlds.

The end of the world as a trope and experience is not limited to global (e.g. global warming, COVID-19) or even cosmic dimensions (e.g. the collapse of the universe). It can also unfold in relation to localized crises (international, regional, social, individual, as in the case of cancer or dementia). It can be all encompassing, or it can be experienced in particular fields (ecology, economy, politics, society, religion, etc.). Our objective is to employ a transdisciplinary perspective of the apocalypse as a boundary concept (in analogy to Star and Griesemer) toward the production of a differentiated description of systemic changes in societies (as transformation, collapse, catastrophe and annihilation vis-à-vis crisis, threat, development, and adaptation), individuals, and their respective environments in the past and the present. Research on reactions to and visions of the aftermath of catastrophes as post-apocalyptic scenarios are an essential corollary to this approach. Since ends of worlds and their consequences frequently have global dimensions, and since apocalyptic imaginaries are characterized by strong transcultural processes, our research builds on the intellectual resources of the global scientific community, in worldwide cooperation with innovative research centres and universities. CAPAS has the ambition of reaching out to society through a range of measures of publicity. Thus, the centre constitutes a platform for reflection on perceived doom and contributes to an informed public opinion about the social challenges we face today.

TRANSDISCIPLINARY AGENDA AT CAPAS

The inter- and transdisciplinary nature of our research centre accounts for the fact that the apocalypse as a trope, figure of thought and discourse, as it is studied in the humanities, is complementary to empirically observable catastrophic change in natural and/or social systems, which is the focus of the social and natural sciences.

THE ESSENTIAL PREMISES OF OUR RESEARCH AGENDA ARE:

1. The trope of the apocalypse conceptualised as an absolute limit, as a point of no return, allows the study of various essential “boundaries” of our epoch (ecological, economic, technological, military, cultural, institutional, psychological, etc.) as a complex system. In this sense, the apocalypse is not primarily a research topic, which can be approached in an interdisciplinary way. Rather, the notion apocalypse constitutes the line of flight or heterotopical platform for a broad range of academic disciplines that study the finiteness of comprehensive orders or self-reproducing systems.
2. The apocalypse as a trope has a diagnostic function since it focuses on self-destructive tendencies of past and existing worlds. It enables a critical view of the world and humankind’s place in it, and a critical approach to the challenges facing us today vis-à-vis collapse of systems and scenarios for the future. This defines the practical dimension of our centre, which is committed to academic research as well as to public outreach.
3. This outreach fosters awareness of the historicity of apocalypse, debunking simplistic views of current crises either as a mere discursive construct, or as a simple empirically ascertainable phenomenon. It charts the discussion of possible reactions and solutions to current existential crises against the background of (post)apocalyptic expectations.
4. Research on re-constructible apocalypses of the past and their representations does not serve antiquarian curiosity, instead it sheds light on probable or likely systemic collapses in the present.



BASED ON THESE PREMISES, CAPAS IDENTIFIES THREE INTEGRATED RESEARCH AREAS THAT ENABLE US TO STUDY APOCALYPSES AND POST-APOCALYPSES IN A SYSTEMATIC WAY:

- A) An archive of imaginaries of the apocalypse. Images, tropes, discourses of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse, relating to actual catastrophic events as well as imagined ones.
- B) Historical experiences of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse. Research on historical events that were perceived as apocalyptic and their aftermath, from antiquity to the near present.
- C) Apocalypses of the present. Departing from the premise that we are already “living in the end times” (Žižek) because the unsustainability of our way of life has been revealed, scholars and scientists conduct research on current phenomena that are perceived as existential risks, and their possible aftermath. Projects may address global crises (global warming, pandemics), other ends of world on an individual level (disease), or the breakdown of consensus in social groups and communities, when the original project is impugned at the moment of existential crisis.



The rationale of the research area organization is merely heuristic; the fellows’ projects ideally address aspects traversing any of these areas. The purpose of this structure is to establish a dialogue between the humanities, and the social and natural sciences, creating innovative forms of transdisciplinary research. CAPAS invites researchers from all academic disciplines working on apocalypses, existential risk, system collapse, and the respective aftermath of these breakdowns. Researchers are expected to engage in a discussion of the cultural, social, technical means of (re) action, prognosis, and designs for the future.

The exchange of (trans)disciplinary knowledge cultures must not remain within the confines of academia, but rather it should engage in a dialogue with non-academic protagonists and thinkers. We invite artists interested in the topic of apocalypse and post-apocalypse. We also welcome the contributions of representatives of indigenous groups facing existential threats. The intellectual exchange with indigenous activists is an antidote to Eurocentric epistemologies, rooted not in a particular region but in academic institutions across the world.

PROGRAMME (PROVISIONAL)

CAPAS will receive funding for the period 2021–2025, with the possibility of renewal twice (four plus four years). This possibility is already reflected in our research program. It is provisional in as much as it can be modified as a reaction to recent developments, such as COVID-19 pandemic, and allows the fellows to develop their own research agendas.

I. 2021–2025 Imaginaries and concept of the (post-)apocalypse

The first funding period of CAPAS explores ideas of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds resulting from global transcultural and transversal processes. It will establish a theoretically sharpened terminology, and gather a culturally, disciplinarily differentiated, yet trans-disciplinary imaginary of the (post-)apocalyptic. Special attention will be devoted to the main regional research foci at Heidelberg University: South/East Asia and the Americas.

- i. 3-2021 to 2-2022: Due to current events, the first group of fellows will analyse the apocalyptic imaginary that frames the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia, Europe and Latin America, and will take into account the respective “post-apocalyptic” vision or course of action.
- ii. 9-2021 to 8-2022: Focus on (Latin)America and Asia
- iii. 9-2022 to 8-2023: Focus on Europe and (Latin)America
- iv. 9-2023 to 8-2024: Focus on Europe and Asia
- v. 9-2024 to 2-2025: Synthesis: (post-)apocalyptic imaginaries in a comparative perspective. Differentiation from other tropes of radical transformation (i.e. change, crisis, catastrophes), taking into account past, present, and future.

II. 2025–2029: Spheres and complexity of the (post-)apocalypse

Based on the conceptual work accomplished in phase one, we will analyse (post-)apocalyptic imaginaries and experiences systematically and comparatively in significant spheres of society affine to scenarios of doom: in ecology (as the collapse of a system), in the field of religion (as millenaristic expectations), and in politics (as the disintegration of societies, scenarios of post-truth, postdemocracy etc.).

III. 2029–2033: Models and interferences of the (post-)apocalypse

In the third funding period we will concentrate on the individual, social, and global coping strategies for apocalyptic scenarios (i.e., utopia, dystopia, affirmation, negation, and evasion): imaginaries of life, survival, and perishing in times of the apocalypse. The focus will be the diverse models of (post-)apocalyptic experiences and reactions and how they interfere.

At the core of our inter- and transdisciplinary methodology are discussions with fellows on a regular, as well as on an informal basis. They will have the opportunity to exchange and discuss their ideas with the academic community at Heidelberg University. Research results will be presented in workshops, conferences, and at outreach events. Fellows are expected to contribute to the centre's publications.



SETTING

The outstanding research infrastructure and international visibility of Heidelberg University, with its long tradition in the humanities, provides a perfect environment for a research centre that invites fellows from all over the world, and from a broad range of disciplines. Founded in 1386, Heidelberg University is modern Germany's oldest university and one of Europe's leading research institutions, as reflected in international rankings and its success to attract substantial third-party funding from a broad range of institutions.

CAPAS provides an inspiring environment for research. The team at CAPAS will do its best to assist the fellows in every respect. The centre's two academic directors are Robert Folger and Thomas Meier. The managing director is Felicitas Loest. Max Sieckmeyer is the management assistant. Laura Mendoza is in charge of assisting the fellows in all formal and logistical matters. Gregor Kohl oversees the centre's state-of-the-art video conferencing equipment and provides technical support in general. Three postdocs will coordinate research at the centre. Each of them is responsible for one research area, and one functional area (events, publications, public relations). Moreover, three PhD students are associated to one of the research areas, where they work on their own project. Each PhD student also contributes to one of the functional areas. Student assistants support research and administration at the centre, for instance, through the acquisition of secondary literature, or through the organization of events. The recruiting process to complete the team is currently underway to ensure the centre's inauguration on March 1st 2021.

CAPAS will be located in the newly established Mathematikon on the Neuenheimer Feld Campus. It provides state-of-the-art infrastructure and a comfortable working environment. Participation in campus life is facilitated by proximity to the University Guesthouse, the campus cafeteria, sports facilities, and shops, as well as lecture halls and libraries. The libraries and institutions of the humanities on the Old Town Campus and Bergheim Campus can be reached in 10–20 minutes by public transport (a bus stop is in front of the Mathematikon). Student assistants will deliver books and other publications from the University's 30 libraries directly to the fellows at the centre.

In addition to being the home of a renowned academic institution, the city of Heidelberg and its surroundings offer an outstanding experience and quality of life to our fellows during their stay. Heidelberg – the name represents the world-famous castle, the picturesque Old Town with all its charm, the inviting landscape between the hills of the Odenwald and the Rhine Valley, as well as its rich cultural scene. This makes Heidelberg a coveted and sought-after place to live. Our Fellows have the option to stay at the University's Guesthouse, located within walking distance from CAPAS at the centre of the Neuenheimer Feld campus, offering a pleasant environment for diverse leisure activities and a stimulating international campus flair. For fellows travelling with family, there are larger apartments available, as well as a wide variety of childcare options. The CAPAS-team is happy to help with any special requirements and to offer assistance with issues like visa, entry formalities, and taxation.



