# Environmental Movements & Doomsday Prophecies

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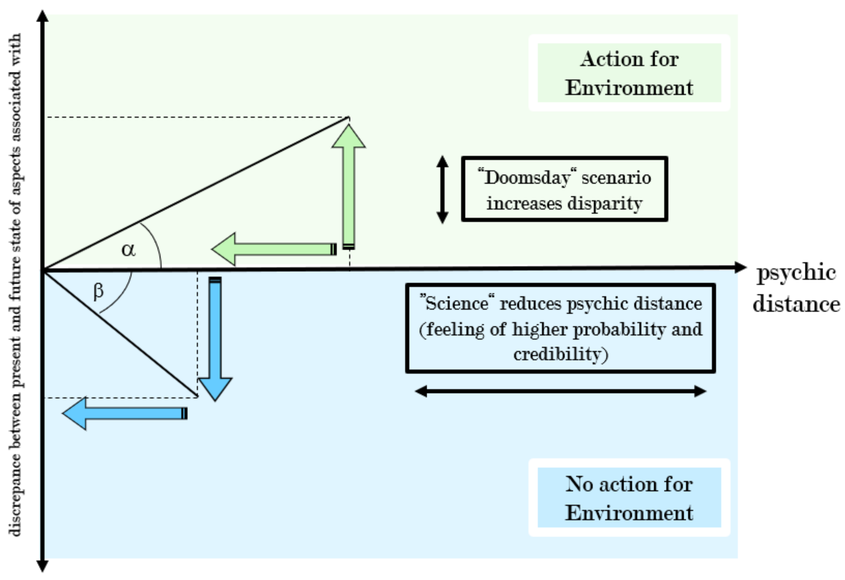
## Summary

1. This research project aims to investigate the use of doomsday scenarios by environmental movements (EMs) as instruments of mobilization. Furthermore, it aims to examine the relation between the use of doomsday imagery and political radicalism within different environmental movements.
2. Arguing from a basis of several motivational theories (Locke, Latham, Heckhausen), it was possible to show that end-time scenarios have a high potential for mobilizing people for environmental movements, and in this sense can be an effective instrument of political agitation.
3. Using miscellaneous empirical methods of qualitative content analysis and statistical techniques for cluster analysis by researching environmental movement's agendas, I found substantial evidence that there is a strong connection between the use of end-time scenarios as an instrument of agitation and their radicalism (e.g. their attitude towards the use of violence). At the same time, the scientific foundation of the end-time scenarios differs considerably between the movements.

## Preliminary considerations: Doomsday scenarios as a motivator for political action

Mankind has always shown a fascination with doom as well as a tendency to abandon rationality, not to question and to denote facts in favour of beliefs and emotions. An agitator, who wants to covey one or very few ideas to a huge number of people, can use those tendencies to his advantage (definition after Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov). The prospect of doom has often caused responses of panic, scapegoating, and intense religious practice. And still today the prospect of doom is used to justify the agendas of environmental movements and to mobilize people for their cause. Environmental movements usually struggle to fight for change that lies years or even decades in the future. Doomsday scenarios allow to make this year-long prospect more imminent, more urgent and therefore more important. They aim to convey the idea that the "pay-off" or loss in case of not taking action can reach a dimension of "all or nothing" for EMs. The prediction of an "apocalypse", attempts to appeal to the very basic need in humans for survival. Many environmental movements suggest that in the case of no action the planet and mankind would face the end of the world. Consequently, action has to be taken now. Therefore, doomsday scenarios are an essential tool of agitation for environmental movements.

**Why doomsday scenarios work!**
**Effects of (pseudo)scientifically based end time-scenarios in Heckhausen's motivational framework**




Graphical representation of the Heckausen approach according to Hugo Kosbiel, Goethe University Frankfurt.

**(1) T**o gain influence, political movements fight (also among themselves) for members/supporters. This "resource" is scarce and must be mobilized. *(see "Preliminary considerations")*

**(2)** Scientifically based and "self-created" end time scenarios can be an instrument of agitation for environmental movements in the fight for members and followers. *(see "Background")*

**(3)** Various motivational theories show that end-time scenarios can have a mobilizing effect on people. *(see graphic "Motivational framework")*

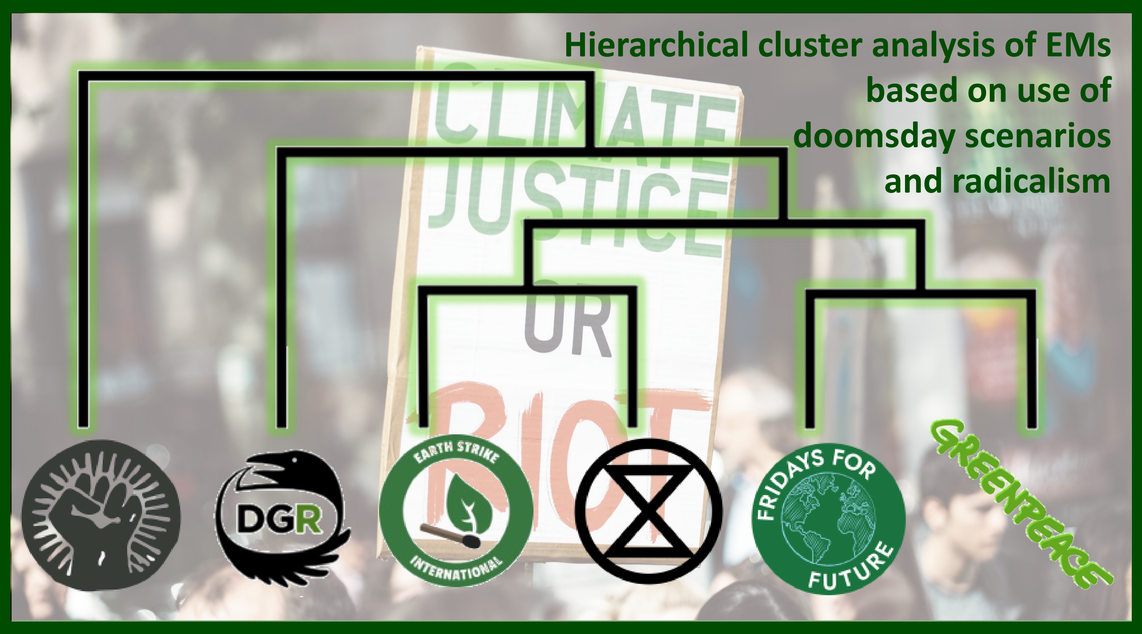
**(4)** The "urgency" of action created by using end-time scenarios leads to increased radicalism within the movements. *(see example "Word cloud")*

**(5)** EM form clusters that agitate with varying degrees of intensity through end-time scenarios and propagate radicalism in action. *(see "Cluster Analysis")*

**(6)** That gives an EM a kind of uniqueness which adresses a certain kind of potential following/members and therefore helps to reach the goals in box (1).

## Background: The Ambiguity of Science

Science is used and largely accepted as a seemingly objective institution that gives claims credibility. Rarely is it acknowledged that Science, particularly in predictive matters exists on a spectrum. This spectrum then allows individuals, governments, corporations and movements to choose whichever scientific prediction best suits their narrative. This way science is used to legitimize and justify actions and demands and is simultaneously exploited as a rhetorical tool. The environmental historian Michael Egan said about Paul Ehrlich and associated scientists popular around 1970 that ,over time, their rhetoric "seemed to move debate away from the rational scientific claims" and became increasingly drastic in their predictions. For environmentalism that means that science takes on a very ambiguous role. On the one hand it can identify current problems and possible solutions as well as determine potential dangers and catastrophes. On the other hand it can be used to manipulate people into believing in a speculative future. The EMs analysed for this project show very different attitudes towards science, the scientific community and science as a solution for the future.



**Word cloud for Deep Green Resistance**
illustration of some insights from the qualitative data analysis

## Analysis & Results

- First, I was able to confirm my research hypothesis that EMs make use of end-time scenarios as a tool of agitation in very different intensities. Second, the content analysis, conducted with the qualitative data analysis software "CATMA" was able to show that end-time scenarios correspond closely with the legitimization of different types of means of political confrontation, including violence.
- The subsequent quantitative research (to secure the impressions in terms of a triangulation of the research perspectives) showed a clear cluster formation of the EMs.

**Explanation**

(1) Resulting from a hierarchical cluster analysis conducted with the statistics software "R", the dendrogram above splits into two different big sections, separating Earth First (EF) from all other movements. The reason is that EF expressed an outstanding amount of radical views and discussed radical action but dedicated less text to considering the present and possible future state of the earth. Their entire online presence is created to make more people take action. Since barely an explanation for taking action is given, EF seem to consider this knowledge a given for anyone interested in joining their movement. This separates them from all other movements investigated which have shown to have more balance between these two aspects.

(2) The next split in the graph is Deep Green Resistance. DGR showed the highest amount of doomsday scenarios within their text while also expressing high levels of radical tendencies. They aim to illustrate what will happen to the world if no action is taken and why it therefore justifies almost any action imaginable, going as far as to express their willingness to sacrifice lives for the good of the planet.

(3) Two closely related clusters that have formed are also visible in the dendrogram. The first one being Extinction Rebellion and Earth Strike. Both movements declare their willingness to use civil disobedience and go beyond simple protests. They clearly promote the idea that no action will likely result in rapidly approaching doom.

(4) The final cluster consist of Greenpeace and Fridays for Future. Despite Greenpeace' reputation of being radical, nothing stated on their website contradicts peaceful intent. Their online presence is largely dedicated to briefly informing about topics of environmentalism and environmental justice individually and is less focused on conveying a doomsday like future. Fridays for future does not act beyond peaceful demonstrations and states no plans to do so, making it probably the most peaceful movements out of all six. They have a strong focus on the urgency with which they demand actions and consider taking action an absolute necessity. However, in terms of detailed and frightening doomsday predictions and scenarios they do not come close to the other movements listed to their left.

**Result:** The analysis has shown that clusters emerge when looking at different movements and their radical tendencies in relation to their use of doomsday predictions. To speak of a possible but clear link existing between radicalism and the use of doomsday scenarios however would require the analysis of further movements.

## Selective Bibliography

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