

Totaled



# Totalled

Salvaging the Future from  
the Wreckage of Capitalism

Colin Cremin



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# *Introduction:*

## *Year Zero*

At 4.7500 degrees longitude and 155.4000 degrees latitude you will find the Carteret Islands of the South Pacific. Made up of six atolls, they are inhabited by some 2,500 people. They lack access to basic infrastructure; there are no cars, shops or phones on the islands. Seline Netoi, who lives on one of the smaller atolls, survives on coconut milk and fish. Two metres of shoreline disappear each year. In 2009, the King Tide, which comes three times a year, completely covered the island.<sup>1</sup> Whether this is a result of sinking tectonic plates or climatic change is moot for those forced to leave the islands. Many have already evacuated; others refuse to leave. As Rufina Moi explains, 'There is nothing better than home. Our treasure is this island. We think of our mothers and fathers and grandfathers who are buried on the island and we cannot leave them. We might as well die with them because we love our Carterets.'<sup>2</sup> If the intensive exploitation of natural resources and their despoliation by industrial production, waste and warfare elsewhere in the world has a role to play, then what has happened here is a dispossession of land by abstract processes far removed in culture and geography from life on the islands. There is no accumulative moment after the fact of dispossession, just ocean. Neither a year zero for a twenty-first-century Marshall plan, nor a blank slate for private contractors to build on. Rising sea levels, desertification and radioactive soils make dead zones from which people have migrated and metaphors for the total loss we are threatened with by processes most of us are only dimly aware of. *Totalled* is about those processes or, more precisely, the relationships that bind the force of human subjectivity to a more abstract and destructive force threatening life not only in the South Pacific but throughout the world generally. It is a diagnosis of our material dependencies on, ideological affinities with, and libidinal investments in the forces and relations of capitalist production, distribution, exchange and consumption. The book examines how our drives and desires, crucial to the circulation and expansion of capital, is expended in work and consumption; it traces this expenditure in order to

consider how desire is made to work for capital and what this means for the whole of human society.

Capitalism encompasses the totality of societal relations, weaving ever more intricately into the fabric of all that it means to be human. It is a system that totalises and which has upended the modernity project through industrialised warfare, surveillance, commodification and control. With ever deepening crises and ecological catastrophes it threatens the total destruction of human civilisation. But in amongst this wreckage there are still functioning parts, machines to be salvaged through the collective force of the human imagination and the total mobilisation of the peoples of this earth to realise a different future to the apocalyptic endings forewarned of by scientists, prescribed by economists, accommodated by politicians and turned into spectacle by the entertainment industry. The plight of the Carteret Islanders signal one kind of year zero, one in which, as with the clocks that ticked before the Hiroshima bomb, time comes to an abrupt halt. But there is another year zero, the end of one epoch and the beginning of another – the end of class history: Germinal, the beginning of the post-revolutionary calendar.

While focused on the subject of hitherto more affluent times, the book has wider implications for how we think about capitalism, ideology and desire. It identifies in this moment utopian ideas, impulses and practices that are of central importance to a salvaging project. This is reserved for the final two chapters of the book. The preceding chapters present a grim picture of the current conjunction of forces: a diagnosis of what will here be referred to as an apocalyptic age, though one in which there remains the possibility, albeit faint, of changing the course of history.

### *Eros and Apocalypse*

There was a time when the future seemed brighter than it does today. There were traces of optimism even in early 2007 when the banking system appeared to be, as the saying goes, ‘as safe as houses’. But in truth, the times have always been apocalyptic. Lives are permanently at breaking point, subject to the contingencies of greater economic and ecological forces, subject to plagues and famines, speculative bubbles, redundancies and repossessions. The commodity is today’s great destroyer, a divider and

accumulator speeding through global communication networks, creating a chain reaction of fear, chauvinism, depression and a recurring apocalyptic fantasy present, as Jean Baudrillard put it, 'in homoeopathic doses, in each of us' (2010: 89). But such fantasies are opiates, a comforting drug that dulls us into thinking capital will collapse by itself under its own contradictions or that nature will have her revenge and wipe the slate clean. Business is at world's end.

Such fantasies and the fears that accompany them do not happen in a vacuum. Media obsessions with the end-of-the-world theme and the more scholarly concerns about the future – 'end times' (Žižek, 2010), 'inflection points' (Harvey, 2012) and human/nature 'metabolic rifts' (Foster, 2000) – are not merely ideological. They are echoes of economic crisis, rising carbon emissions and events from 9/11 through to Occupy, the Arab Spring and Fukushima. These events and unfolding processes characterise the first decades of what Franco Berardi (2011) pronounces the century with no future. Walter Benjamin was perhaps a little more sanguine when, between the great wars of the last century, he wrote 'all that one might have been in this world, one is in another' (2003 [1927–40]: 114). Recognising both the loss incurred to humanity by the conditions forced upon it and the impossibility of transcending those conditions, including alienation in a time of mass destruction, Benjamin felt there remained the faint possibility of renewal, if not for himself then for future generations.

Current renderings of the kind of horror and barbarism that Benjamin bore witness to are relayed to more affluent classes in the myriad of pixelated lights on flattened electronic screens; two-dimensional planes paralleling the one-dimensionality of the pseudo-politics they invite us to engage in. Brute reality in the slum regions of the world is delivered as a surreal otherworldliness to suburban enclaves. The 2008 banking crisis may not have precipitated another global war but for many who had enjoyed at least some of the fruits of incessant accumulation and expansion, the economic crisis brought the harsh realities of free-market capitalism closer to home. A financial trauma has given rise to countless other traumas as livelihoods are shattered and the prospect of a better life is reduced to a cinder. In these times of intractable, ever expanding and intensifying crises, austerity has delayed the creative moment in the economic cycle that Schumpeter famously spoke of. In this world, some 80 or so years after Benjamin

imagined a non-alienated future, simply being an alienated worker with a stable job has for many become today's utopian wish.

Apocalyptic fantasies flourish in times when the prospects for political transformation appear limited. Catastrophes have communising effects. When earthquakes strike, bombs explode and tsunamis deluge cities, the human predisposition to help those in need reinvigorates community if only for a time. Such moments are suggestive of a utopian capacity to transcend social divisions but are of political relevance only when imagined in advance, so that measures can be taken to prevent or mitigate the sort of outcomes currently forewarned of by ecological scientists. For Freud, our survival was a question of regulating the primal instinct for pleasure through an apparatus internalised in the human psyche. Eros, the foundation of culture, is sacrificed to socially useful pursuits that guard against unpleasure while expanding, through a delayed gratification, its very possibility. The more 'advanced' and differentiated societies become, the more abstract is our relationship to others, and the greater is the need, according to Freud, to strengthen the repressive apparatus in the unconscious. Discontentment is the outcome that reality demands, and only by repressing and sublimating our desires is the survival of the species guaranteed. It is a strange kind of reality though – one that demands submission to a work regime that leeches the lifeblood of the worker and coagulates it in things whose value is determined by exchange rather than social benefit. It is more accurate to say that our survival is brought into question by this relationship, rather than supported by it. Submission to the reality principle of capitalism today guarantees hardship, uncertainty and alienation. In such circumstances, reality demands revolution. This was Herbert Marcuse's wager and it is as relevant today as it was in the 1950s when he wrote *Eros and Civilisation* (2006 [1955]).

Futures are foreclosed by finance industries to which even the unborn are indebted. The stench of an apocalypse pervades the senses, portending misery without the aroma of redemption and renewal. Apocalyptic prophecies today differ from those of the past in several key and interrelated respects. They are globalised, standardised, rationalised, atomised and commodified in physical reality, ideas and desires. Material life is overcoded by cinematic phantasmagoria and the explosion on sites such as YouTube of footage of terrorist attacks, tsunamis and executions in real time. End points are rationalised by scientists who establish the link between environmental

devastation, industry and mass consumption, and by economists who describe the logic of capital as a natural and unstoppable juggernaut. The apocalypse is universal in scope, particular in cause, and isolated in the imagination of those who identify solutions in individual enterprise or see themselves as the narcissistic heirs of a post-apocalyptic scenario. Whatever the challenges we face as a species, the commodity, it would seem, is there to rescue us in the various market-based solutions to crises, be they economic, ecological or social. The harmonics of a collective imagination and enterprise is rent from history; self-aggrandisement becomes the *modus operandi* of choice in an uncontested reality. A culmination and convergence of three distinctive apocalyptic logics can loosely be mapped onto Jacques Lacan's three orders of subjectivity. First, the objective conditions upon which humanity depends have been universally shaped and undermined by processes of capitalist accumulation: a material (Real) logic. Second, visions of destruction – once the product of diverse localised myths and fantasies – have become homogenised and globalised: a symbolic logic. Third, this singular image of destruction is met, in the isolated thoughts of the individual, by no counter-hegemonic image of an alternative: an imaginary logic.

History, though, is never one-sided. It has a dual character, opposing tendencies charged positively and negatively, the twin poles of Eros and Thanatos, creation and destruction, life and death. The future is a void yet to be determined, a territory yet to be inhabited and an energy yet to be marshalled. It is a void of contestation where a collective force may either become a catalyst for emancipation or congeal in additional commodities put into circulation. The force of human desire is the basis of life and, through self-conscious and collective activity, the stuff out of which complex societies are formed. Marx named this force labour power, Freud libidinal energy, Lacan *jouissance*, Deleuze and Guattari desiring intensities. Herbert Marcuse, the first to develop a detailed theoretical synthesis of Marx and Freud, saw in the productive forces the historically unprecedented means to liberate the world from want and necessity. This would entail the desublimation or externalisation from the psyche of the repressive apparatus of the reality principle, namely the institutions of capital to which Eros, or the pleasure principle, had yielded. Taking as a starting point the idea of human subjectivity as an irrepressible force, connections can be established between theorists as diverse as Marx, Marcuse, Deleuze and Žižek. This is the

foundation of a pragmatic and synthetic theoretical approach – embracing the positivity of desire, an excessive force, and the dialectics of antagonism, a self-negating force – to the issues and themes of this book. When theory centres on questions of ontology and epistemology, when standpoints are hardened according to differences that from an explanatory perspective are sometimes trivial, critique is itself deprived of its emancipatory value. Theory, rather than explaining abstractions, becomes merely abstract, decorative and obscure, empowering masters to decipher the text for enthusiastic disciples to follow: reality is made to fit their scholarly investment in theory. A genuinely critical theory is in permanent motion, it offers explanations of abstract processes and, through engagement, aims to liberate thought from stupidity, chauvinism, obscurantism, cynicism and fear. Material life, the languages through which sense is made of that life, and the force of human desire that puts our world in motion – in short, materialism, language and desire – are the DNA of critical theory, and the stuff that connects a diversity of theorists who at first blush appear to have little in common. Rather than propound a theory divorced from empirical reality that suits a politics without demands, this book, by utilising theory as a tool, a weapon even, will propose ways in which the energies described above can be wrestled away from their destructive encounter with capital.

### *Chapter Content*

*Totalled* differs from my first book, *Capitalism's New Clothes*, in a number of important respects, but there are symmetries that justify calling this a follow-up. In that first book I outlined what I see as three overlapping and mutually reinforcing ideological injunctions of capitalism today: to be enterprising (exemplified by work); to be ethical (exemplified by common concerns about inequality and climate change); and to enjoy (exemplified by consumerism). That understanding is implicit in this current work, and is explicated at times through associated concepts such as 'reflexive exploitation' and 'guilt fetishism'. The first refers back to the argument that 'employability' is the overriding ideological injunction that demands from each of us an ever increasing amount of energy to fire the machine of capitalist abstraction, namely for profit. The second refers back to the way the effects of capitalism on people and planet are rendered intelligible

by a perverse logic that places the individuated individual as both cause and market-friendly solution. These are the central points from *Capitalism's New Clothes* to which the present book returns, specifically in Chapters 4 and 5, though contextualised within the over-arching and in key respects different aims of *Totalled*.

Of central importance here are the ways in which human desires are tied to the capitalist economy, specifically in the relational capitalistic logics of work, communication and consumption, and more tentatively, how they might be untied, in a negative act of subtraction or, from the perspective of a more positive ontology, exceeded to the point that they are rendered inoperative. Taking its cue from Fredric Jameson's contention that 'a Marxist negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper, must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised *simultaneously* with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or decipherment...' (2002 [1981]: 286), the book oscillates between the negative and positive. In its *totality*, the situation, to be clear, is dire, and the prospects for the left appear at the time of writing far from excellent. It is not the purpose of this book to make syrup nor by the same token to wallow in misery or draw comfort from the cheap cloth of cynicism. The purpose is to derive from the analysis some clarity in regard to the obstacles to universal justice and emancipation and the possibilities under current material, ideological and libidinal circumstances of overcoming them. The book does not bombard the reader with statistics on poverty, inequality or environmental degradation; where not stated for argumentative purposes these are taken as read.

Chapter 1, 'Materially Determined Apocalypse', situates current apocalyptic thinking in the context of today's crises, struggles and ideological perspectives. Rather than make the banal and meaningless point that apocalyptic fantasies are common to all human societies, it seeks instead to identify a materiality to what is claimed to be an apocalyptic age. It separates biblical apocalypses, in which redemption from oppression was envisaged, from a capitalist apocalypse, in which the only outcome is destitution and despair. While a desire for an end point may signal a utopian wish for an end to class divisions and the suffering caused through them, apocalyptic fantasies today signal feelings of powerlessness and are, it will be claimed, for the most part reactive, not least to the increasingly apparent effects of global warming and the apparent inability to tame market forces.

Chapter 2, 'The Three Orders of Apocalypse', maps the Lacanian categories of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary onto material processes, ideologies and subjective identifications, first centring on what can be seen as already occurring apocalypses through to their political neutralisation in popular culture. The apocalypse is mediatised and rendered a spectacle while at the same time generating a visceral affect not least because of how close to home – the centres of cultural production – the more egregious symptoms of capital now are.

Chapter 3, 'The Double Helix of Dissatisfaction', begins by expanding the definition of alienation sketched by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in order to account for the different ways we are now subjected to capital. The subject is locked into two mutually reinforcing spirals of dissatisfaction, one that relates to work and the other that relates to consumption. This is expanded on in the following two chapters. The main purpose here is to provide a general account of the capitalist mode of production and some of its impacts and ideological mystifications in regard to which the fundamental relations are hidden. Central to this is the ideology of austerity and related conditions of scarcity redolent in images of economic and ecological crises.

Chapter 4, 'Production Spiral', approaches work and consumption as relational logics that cannot be separated, no matter how often critics of production or consumption attempt to do so. This chapter revisits arguments from *Capitalism's New Clothes* on how the work ethic is transposed onto an ethic of employability and the inescapable injunction to become employable irrespective of whether we already have a job or the condition of the labour market. This is crucial for identifying the common purpose and bind in which our position as a class economically if not ideologically antagonistic to capital is defined.

Chapter 5, 'Consumption Spiral', centres on the consumerist component of this class relation, the moment when value is taken out of circulation and destroyed. The alienating condition of labour intensifies the need for consumer products both as repositories of labour and as objects of desire. The capitalist form of consumption is not only a compensation for alienated labour, it is claimed here to be a cause of a relational (to work) alienation. The chapter 'updates' the culture industry thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer, last revisited by Adorno in the 1960s, in view of the rise of social media and products that are individualised by their consumers. Whereas for Marcuse



the 'happy consciousness' found comfort in products whose properties were 'fixed', today the happy consciousness is derived from investments in a variety of apps, tools and so forth which are downloaded onto new machines that invite seemingly endless possibilities for creation.

The 'salvage' project begins in earnest with Chapter 6, 'Banquets of Worlds', which shifts the register by examining the utopian impulses pregnant in our drive to overcome material scarcities and feelings of dissatisfaction. Drawing on a number of perspectives, it is argued that utopia is an important political category that enables us to think about alternatives and challenge the proposition that capitalism is the 'only game in town'. Utopia is considered, with respect to utopian thinkers, as an impulse, idea and practice, of political value when attuned to possibilities within the current horizon and underlined by an aim to qualitatively extend that horizon.

Chapter 7, 'Clash of Axioms', considers the current strengths and weaknesses of movements opposed to capital and the obstacles to more generalised and politically effective forms of resistance. It approaches this in terms of the historical weaknesses of the left and the subject socialised through the neoliberal period, one that a genuine movement for emancipation has to work with rather than refuse. This is framed by way of a description of the antagonism between the 'axiom' of capital, namely surplus value, and the 'axiom' of communism, namely global emancipation from the commodity form and the realisation of a society based on common ownership of and determination over the means of production. Theories of state power, particularly that of Nicos Poulantzas (2000 [1978]), are deployed with respect to anti-statist, anti-centralist 'anarchist' tendencies on both the right and the left. The revolutionary proclamations of the 'multitude' are rejected as shrill and counter-productive, as too are the 'politics without demands' of recent movements such as Occupy Wall Street. We are not in a revolutionary moment and – barring some unforeseen 'event' that anyhow would be vulnerable to appropriation, as the so-called Arab Spring testifies – preliminary initially reformist steps, expanding the possibility for revolution, are what is required. If the compact of capitalism and desire has produced a car crash of sorts, the conclusion is that in amongst this wreckage there are empirical possibilities for salvaging the future from what at times appears to be a hopeless case.

The chapters are organised as a relay between the material realities that each of us in our different capacities encounter; the ideas through which

those realities are interpreted, brought into question and challenged; and the practices adequate to those challenges. Each chapter addresses separate but interrelated issues and together they provide the depth of analysis required to make concrete propositions in the final chapter on how the excessive force of subjectivity can become divorced from the destructive excess of capital.

*Totalled* is about a subjectivity of a particular time and space, a westernised – colonised – time and space; it is about a subject whose impulses, beliefs and actions bring about changes in the material environment. We are subject to changes that are more or less rapid, more or less pronounced, more or less sudden. In this dialectic of history lies the possibility of another world, not the kind sported on the banners of an amorphous anti-globalisation multitude, but one of open possibility, an ongoing project in the *realisation* of a more just, equitable, liberated and joyous world. It is a dream to nourish, an idea to enact, a possibility to concretise.