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# Totalled: Salvaging the Future from the Wreckage of Capitalism

By Colin Cremin, Pluto Press, 2015

*Reviewed by Chris McMillan*

**T**HERE WAS ONCE a time, so Slavoj Žižek claimed, that capitalism did not need to be named. Where the fall of the Berlin Wall and of communism had signalled the ‘End of History’, the ‘Washington Consensus’ and the subsequent global adoption of neo-liberal dogma meant that the political was removed from political economy and capitalism was simply ‘the economy’. In these times, as Fredric Jameson had argued, it was ‘easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’.

With the Global Financial Crisis, however, capitalism became the direct object of analysis again, if only through a focus on its contingent aberrations. More pertinently, the idea of the end of capitalism has been restored to the imagination of popular Leftist thought. Here a range of books have emerged that engage

with both the possible end of capitalism and a post-capitalist future, including Paul Mason's *Post-Capitalism*,<sup>1</sup> Nick Srnieck and Alex Williams' *Inventing the Future*<sup>2</sup> and Derek Wall's *Economics after Capitalism*.<sup>3</sup>

In *Totalled* Colin Cremin adds his distinctly Marxist voice to this chorus. The primary claim of Cremin's theoretical polemic is that capitalism not only 'encompasses the totality of societal relations' but threatens 'the total destruction of human civilisation'.<sup>4</sup> He posits that we are libidinally, materiality and ideologically bound to capitalist processes of which we are 'only dimly aware'.<sup>5</sup> Ambitiously, Cremin contends that, despite his grim analysis of the destructive foundations of capitalism, the 'end of class history' and a revolutionary return to 'year zero' remain possible.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in a classical Marxist vein, 'Only the proletariat, by ending class divisions, can win this [class] war' and progress us to the 'timeless axiomatic' of 'utopian communism'.<sup>7</sup>

Cremin begins his analysis through a reading of apocalyptic fantasies, whereby 'the stench of an apocalypse pervades the senses, portending misery without the aroma of redemption and renewal'.<sup>8</sup> The persistent presence of these apocalyptic visions signals both the limitations of our belief in the prospect of political transformation and our reactive powerlessness, opening up the fantasy-space for apocalyptic events rather than tarrying with the causes of our dismay.<sup>9</sup> Such an analysis is both effective and insightful, although Cremin perhaps overplays the apocalyptic despair in the Western world, where not all citizens sense that 'To breathe this air today is to inhale the stench of a billion

1 Paul Mason, *Post-Capitalism*, London 2015.

2 Nick Srnieck & Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future*, London 2015.

3 Derek Wall, *Economics after Capitalism*, London 2015. See David Parker's review, this issue.

4 Colin Cremin, *Totalled*, p. 2.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

living deaths'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in his excellent theoretical and empirical analysis of the contemporary apocalypse/utopian divide, Cremin does not discuss what is perhaps the most prominent contemporary utopian discourse: that of progressive/rational endeavour, whether in searching for functional immortality<sup>11</sup> or in achieving certain Millennium Development Goals such as 'halving extreme hunger by 2015' through the kind of economic 'science' favoured by the likes of Jeffery Sachs.<sup>12</sup> These developments are certainly not a reason to forego the critique of capitalism, or indeed Cremin's revolutionary dreams, but they do suggest a resilient modernist utopian narrative of continual progress to which more credit could be given.

Cremin identifies the source of our apocalyptic resignation in what he labels the 'The Double Helix of Dissatisfaction': the realms of production and of consumption through which we are alienated and drained of libidinal energy. Here Cremin re-covers much of the ground of his excellent first book, *Capitalism's New Clothes*,<sup>13</sup> particularly in regards to employability, where he suggests that the desire to be employable is the most directly experienced cause of our implicit daily endorsement and enjoyment of capital. Ironically, capitalism's contemporary struggles have only served to increase the power of capital over labour such that the pressure to be the object of our present or future boss's desire (the Big Other/Boss) pervades every aspect of the (potential) employee's life. As the employee seeks employability, they are left to consider how to fulfil their bosses' desire in order to move towards the ideal job. As a result, not only are workers alienated and exploited by capital, but they are driven to embrace their desire to improve their employability as 'every stage of exploitation is a stepping stone along the slow march to ideal employment'.<sup>14</sup>

This analysis of employability is perhaps the most insightful aspect of *Totalled*. And yet Cremin's vigorous defence

10 Ibid., p. 12.

11 Ker Than, 'Hang in there: the 25 year wait for immortality', *Live Science*, accessed November 5 2015, <http://www.livescience.com/6967-hang-25-year-wait-immortality.html>.

12 Jeffery Sachs, *The End of Poverty*, New York 2005.

13 Cremin, *Capitalism's New Clothes*, London 2011.

14 Ibid., p. 43.

of the primacy of production and of employability as the ‘Master Signifier’ structuring our approach to capitalism is also its most problematic.<sup>15</sup> Fiercely rejecting the idea that we now live in a consumer society, Cremin argues that it is work rather than consumption that defines contemporary identity.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, class remains the one antagonism that cannot be overcome in the absence of an arrest to capitalism’s capacity to generate surplus value.<sup>17</sup>

The apparent foundational influence of production means that a change in economic structure would lead to radical differences in our subjectivities and our shared social lives. Here ‘It is inconceivable that in a society emancipated from the logic of surplus value there would be a culture industry to stoke desires for lifestyles that the more affluent classes currently enjoy’ and ‘under a different mode of production, travel would be of less economic value and also less seductive when the inhabited space is no longer alienating’.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, a revolutionary change in economic structure would mean that work is ‘life-enhancing rather than alienating’.<sup>19</sup> For someone who often cites Lacanian theory, however, the implied possibility of overcoming alienation through changes in economic structure seemingly outside of subjectivity is puzzling.

Following Cremin’s analysis of the dismal grip of capital within which we are socially, politically and psychically embedded, he turns to the ‘utopian impulse in humanity’.<sup>20</sup> Cremin identifies this utopian imagination as ‘assert[ing] itself in the gap between how life really is and how it ought to be’.<sup>21</sup> Dismissing apocalyptic utopian thinking or any utopianism disconnected from political cause, he productively promotes a ‘strong form’ of utopian thought based on ‘what is theoretically impossible within capitalism’.<sup>22</sup>

15 Cremin, *Totalled*, p. 89.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 68-76.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Here, moving from Žižek's argument<sup>23</sup> that

the situation becomes politicised when this particular demand starts to function as a metaphoric condensation of the global opposition against Them, those in power, so that the protest is no longer actually just about that demand but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand

Cremin poses a series of demands which he claims that, whilst reasonable in themselves ('Full and Secure Employment'), cannot be implemented within the realms of capital. These minimum demands become 'maximal' because of the ultimate impossibility of enacting them within capital, a state of impracticality that exposes 'the limits of current politics' and stimulates a utopian demand for alternatives.<sup>24</sup> The minimal and maximal must work together in any revolutionary politics; the maximal utopian idea is politicised in minimal demands and these demands become mere social reforms if they do not evoke a utopian urge.<sup>25</sup> Vitaly, Cremin argues that 'weak utopian' thought is trapped in reformism framed by the possibilities within the current horizon, whereas the 'strong utopian form' is 'no longer delimited by the current state of affairs' and 'is politicised when translated into political programmes and demands'.<sup>26</sup>

This is where Cremin's politicised utopian idea produces its own limitpoint, however. In producing concrete political programmes, the utopian desire that propels 'maximal demands' risks being lost in both the details and fantasy driving these programmes. A minimal demand to end mass unemployment could productively be fuelled by the utopian impulse that emerges once the political subject is convinced that this minimal demand cannot be fulfilled without a maximal demand for overcoming private property. By 'articulating concrete propositions on alternatives to existing relations...'<sup>27</sup> in relation to a communist utopia in which

23 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London 1999, p. 204.

24 Cremin, *Totalled*, p. 132.

25 *Ibid.*, 147.

26 *Ibid.*, 147.

27 *Ibid.*, 124.

scarcity would be overcome,<sup>28</sup> however, a risk emerges; the tension caused by the gap between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’ is transferred to the latter, without space necessarily opening for that normative impulse within existing politics.

That is, Cremin’s fantasmatic utopian communism appears to be one without antagonism and without politics. The danger here is two-fold: abolishing private property and ending mass unemployment does not come easy and any attempt to articulate this kind of post-communist politics would surely lead to widespread debate about how this might be achieved amongst believers. In returning to this debate – surely the response to ‘let’s end incarnation’ is:<sup>29</sup> How? What is to be done with existing prisoners? What are the ‘new means’ of controlling and punishing sex offenders? – the utopian urge risks being lost in reformist practicalities of a society yet to come. Moreover, the anxiety of Real impossibilities within capitalism that propels the desire to go beyond it is sated by the fantasy of the *jouissance* of a future communism. Much as in Cremin’s critique of apocalyptic fantasies, rather than being disrupted and propelled by the Real impossibilities within capitalism, we are able to wallow in the fantasy of the utopia-to-come, so that the anxiety of Real impossibilities within capitalism which propels the desire to go beyond it is sated by the fantasy of the *jouissance* of a future communism.

These complications of the future are similarly elided in Cremin’s applied analysis of the present. In the introduction to *Totalled*, Cremin suggests that he will use ‘theory as a tool, a weapon even...’.<sup>30</sup> There is much to be admired about this approach. Any radical reimagining of the limitations of global capitalism needs to think beyond the thoughts it provides, a task for which critical theory is uniquely positioned. Nonetheless, theoretical abstraction in itself is unlikely to attract an audience beyond those who already accept all but the strategic details of Cremin’s argument. Indeed, there is a definite contrast between Cremin’s patient explanation of the complexities of a wide range of theoretical positions from Adorno to Žižek (although the reader is still required to be familiar

28 Ibid., 127.

29 Ibid., 169.

30 Ibid., p. 6.

with these characters) and his sometimes glib socio-political analysis. Exemplifying the former, Cremin informs with regard to the machinations of libidinal force:

As a relationship to an extimate or non-existent cause, *jouissance* does not obey a moral authority in the traditional sense of the word. Pleasure lies in the little transgressions by which the subject affirms their independence and disconnection from society. In place of a morally certain and self-righteous big Other, we have a more ambiguous big Other that invites us to make an ersatz choice to do as we please in a society in which choices are circumscribed by material conditions<sup>31</sup>

Conversely, he also notes of the same dynamic in substantially less considered terms: ‘The many blows to self-esteem that those earning a wage suffer resurface in the home where emotions are strained to breaking point and the burden of alienated labour is felt by all’;<sup>32</sup> and in a similarly underdeveloped vein: ‘Social media can be thought of as an idiot-making machine, a machine for the production of narcissistic individual fetishised by the same alienated narcissist’.<sup>33</sup> Here Cremin risks being part of Ernesto Laclau’s rather despairing assertion that ‘Žižek’s thought is not organised around a truly political reflection but is, rather, a *psychoanalytic* discourse which draws its examples from the politico-ideological field’.<sup>34</sup>

It would be unfair to Cremin to suggest that such a politically orientated book is simply a philosophical discourse and he openly states in the introduction that ‘this 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’.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, those not immediately convinced by the parade of theoretical characters he evokes may demand more

31 Ibid., p. 65.

32 Ibid., p. 52.

33 Ibid., p. 109.

34 Ernesto Laclau, ‘Constructing Universality’, in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, & Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, London 2000, p. 289. Original emphasis.

35 Cremin, *Totalled*, p. 7.

rigorous analysis before they sign up to Cremin's revolutionary demands.<sup>36</sup> I do not wish to suggest that the mere articulation of the symptoms of capitalism has any transformational value in itself, and I recognise that the entry point to Cremin's work is an acceptance of the evils of capitalism, but a more patient unravelling of these evils would lend further authority to his utopian demands. Indeed, Cremin is at his best in his analysis of employability where his analysis is informed by a close reading of employment websites, a task that particularly informed *Capitalism's New Clothes*.

*Totalled* is certainly a book for our time, although it might not be 'a compass allowing us to orient ourselves in our obscure and confused time' (as Žižek is quoted on the front cover), for anyone but those who already share Cremin's map. There is considerable value in Cremin's reading of apocalyptic despair, and his insistence on the primacy of production and employability has value. Nonetheless, whilst Cremin might be able to identify demands for the post-capitalist world, we are no closer to imagining the means through which we might be able to end the grip of capitalism. Ultimately, whilst *Totalled* is a valuable contribution to the discussion, it is neither the final word on the wreckage of capitalism nor the future that lies within it. That word, as with that future, lies instead with the oeuvre to which *Totalled* productively contributes.

36 I concede that my own book, *Žižek and Communist Strategy*, along with much of the critical theoretical field, could be subject to the same critique.

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