

Review of Colin Cremin, *Totalled: Salvaging the Future from the Wreckage of Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2015.

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While this book of critical theory is not expressly on the Bible, it intriguingly mobilizes the thematic of the apocalyptic in its diagnosis of capitalism, which today “encompasses the totality of societal relations, weaving ever more intricately into the fabric of all that it means to be human” (2). In doing so, Colin Cremin observes that fantasies of the end of the world, whether in popular culture, political and economic discourse, or academic literature, point to the symbolic representation of political struggle: “Apocalyptic fantasies flourish in times when the prospects for political transformation appear limited” (4). Evoking Karl Marx’s famous metaphor on the function of religion, Cremin even suggests that “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” (3). Another quality of apocalyptic literature is its call to an ethical imperative. Accordingly, Cremin promises to identify the utopian ideas, impulses, and practices that are of central importance to a salvaging project.

Cremin constructs a methodological apparatus informed by various theorists, including Marx, Marcuse, Deleuze, and Žižek. As one initially schooled in biblical studies, I am reminded of Tina Pippin’s *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (1999), which employs a number of critical perspectives including the category of fantasy in the analysis of apocalyptic texts, both biblical and in the contemporary USA. Cremin’s work is more manifesto than is Pippin’s. It ends, no less, than with a list of demands which should inform the global leftist struggle of today, including, for example, explicit calls to decommodify services, tax the rich, end incarceration, and liberate the commons (167-70).

The book begins by examining the varieties of apocalypse so as to determine how our own “end times” threat is distinct from those of the past. For Cremin, the capitalist apocalypse involves “lifting the veil” to reveal the concrete realities beneath the abstract totality of exchange relations. While biblical apocalypses offer the possibility of redemption, the capitalist apocalypse offers no comfort to the righteous. The only chance of redemption comes not from the intervention of God, but from the revolt of the proletariat. As Cremin puts it, “[n]ot by the hand of God or the market will this happen...but rather by the collective action of angry, disenfranchised and indebted masses” (12). Randall W. Reed (2010) has developed a similar argument in his analysis of the contradictions between Marxism and Liberation Theology with respect to readings of New Testament apocalypses. Put crudely, the basic presuppositions of these three ideological systems (Marxism, Liberation Theology, and apocalypse) are ultimately incompatible. Whereas Liberation Theology and Marxism require the oppressed people to do the work of revolution, in apocalyptic literature it is God who overturns the existing social order. This contradiction, while certainly on the radar for Cremin, is left largely unresolved. While admitting that a capitalist apocalypse is unlikely to give rise to a common egalitarian purpose, Cremin still throws the category of revolution into

the mix. It is implied that the left ought to seize upon the capitalist apocalypse, for without collective action, capitalism is unlikely to die a natural death.

More could have been said about the relationship between the capitalist apocalypse and class, for class does re-emerge as an important category in the rest of the book. Reed characterizes apocalypse as a reactionary form of political protest; a view of revolution from the upper social-strata who have recently lost their social standing and so appeal to God who (from their perspective) had previously secured their privilege (Reed 2010, 56-57). Cremin does not entertain such notions and does not tie apocalyptic imagery to one particular class location. He does note, however, that whereas in biblical apocalypses, the persecuted had God to avenge them, “[o]ur avenging Gods are Nature and the Market.” These gods are indiscriminate; “[t]hey are unable to discern the persecutor from the persecuted, the exploiter from the exploited” (22).

In Chapter 2, Cremin maps the “three orders of Apocalypse” drawing on the tripartite structure of subjectivity systematized by Jacques Lacan: first, the Real refers to the materiality of the apocalypse in everyday life; second, the Symbolic to the ideological framing of reality in visions of destruction; third, the Imaginary to what might be called the apocalyptic subjectivity. The symbolic order overcodes and draws substance from the Real material order of apocalypse. The apocalyptic imaginary projects through a big Other the phantasmagoria of bourgeois culture that sustains class relations under the capitalist mode of production. Cremin appreciates that this grafting of the capitalist apocalypse onto the order of fantasy is an approximation.

The next three chapters (chs. 3-5) trace the interlocking spirals of work and consumption, or, what Cremin labels, “a double helix of dissatisfaction” (43). This begins with a discussion of Karl Marx’s concept of alienation, and draws on Slavoj Žižek’s underlining of the symmetries between psychoanalysis and Marx’s theory of surplus value to highlight *lack* as a libidinal basis to the economy of the subject of capitalism. Following this, Cremin takes a closer look at the subject, demystifying its libidinal investments in production and consumption. This involves unmasking the various relations of economy and identity. In his analysis of the consumption helix, Cremin emphasizes Theodor Adorno’s thesis of the culture industry, although reconceptualises it in light of the expanded role of the consumer in adapting/refining products and virtual tools. The idea is that the culture industry is (now) biopolitical. The subject produces their own commodity-like thing (e.g. a Facebook page) that is both simulacrum of an ideal-type and also a neoliberal subject. This creates new opportunities for capital to extract further surplus value.

Chapter 6, “Banquets of Worlds,” stresses the importance of utopian thinking and practice. This is where Cremin largely drops Žižek (and/or Lacan via Žižek), who has underpinned so much of the discussion so far. Now the more spatially oriented Marxists Jameson, Harvey, and Bloch come to dominate. The frequency of lengthy block quotes increases noticeably in these final chapters and at times is distracting from the developing argument. Utopia is essential, Cremin posits, if we are to think beyond the confines of capitalist realism. Indeed, for Cremin, ending capitalism is the only viable solution to the diagnosis that has been mapped in previous chapters. The fantasy that must be traversed is “the belief that the interests of capital can be accommodated in a way that is socially, economically and ecologically sustainable” (148). Accordingly, the final chapter outlines a

programme of practical vanishing mediators between the “Clash of Axioms” of surplus value under capitalism and the abolition of private property under communism.

Cremin’s book makes a solid contribution to the ongoing project of revitalizing Marxist analysis. When things start to look their bleakest, he offers us a glimpse of hope. Despite being reliant upon Žižek, Cremin arguably presents a much more nuanced understanding of apocalyptic than does Žižek in *Living in the End Times* (2010). In this book, Žižek basically invokes apocalypse as a loose container providing thematic gloss to his “four horsemen” (climate change, digitisation, biological manipulation, and slums). But Cremin develops and expands the thematic significantly, utilizing the genre to its full potential to uncover both the destructive and utopian moments that saturate our contemporary “end times” context. In this sense, Cremin is more true to the genre, and for this reason his book is both an enjoyable and largely convincing read.

Bibliography

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