

# Hope Dialectics

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## Abstract

Ours is a time of accelerating social, political, economic and environmental crises. In this conjuncture, dread, despair and resignation dominate the affective terrain; hope is urgently necessary, but in short supply. This article draws upon a utopian current of Marxism, especially the work of ‘philosopher of hope’ Ernst Bloch, to offer a theoretical optic for the maintenance of hope in hopeless times. As Bloch draws out, the dialectical core of historical materialism offers a utopian structure of thought, attentive to the open multivalence of the world, how that that is destructive holds creative potential, how the future is in emergence in the present. Bringing the immanence of utopian possibility into view, this is an orientation capable of sustaining hope in otherwise hopeless times. Finally, I put this optic to work to offer some gestural reflections on the utopian valences of our current conjuncture, of the hopeful prospects of ‘the end of the world’.

**Keywords:** hope; crisis; dialectic, Ernst Bloch, utopian Marxism

## Introduction

Hope, today, does not come easily. We live in an era of accelerating polycrisis, civilisational dissolution looming on the horizon at the intersection of economic instability, social fragmentation, heightening political and geopolitical conflict, escalating violence and environmental collapse. This is a conjuncture that tends to evoke dread, or worse, resignation, but that urgently requires an orientation that the ‘philosopher of hope’ Ernst Bloch termed *militant optimism*: hope insistent that a future other than catastrophe is available to us. Drawing upon Bloch, and upon the broader utopian tradition within Marxist thought that Bloch makes explicit, I wish to offer here a theoretical optic for grounding such an orientation today—a theoretical infrastructure for hope.

Against the twentieth-century totalitarian rendering of Marxism as a utopian project and mode of thought bound up with dystopia, characterised by rigidity and closure, I emphasise the open utopian structure and ontology of historical materialism as a dialectical orientation. Critically attuned to contradiction, contingency and emergence—to the simultaneity of positive and negative, creative and destructive tendencies, and to the porous boundaries between past, present and future—this is an understanding of the world as open and multivalent, containing always already the seeds of its own transcendence.

A key strength of this dialectical utopian orientation is its insistence on holding together, at once, the positive and the negative—to lose sight of neither the urgency and severity of the political challenges of a given conjuncture, nor the emergent traces of other possible futures persisting through, or indeed brought into being by, those conditions. This is a necessary orientation, then, for maintaining hope today, when a sense of the end of the world has become a dominant structure of feeling. In the final section, I put this optic to work to gesture towards the hopeful prospects of ‘the end of the world,’ the clarity it offers and the openings it creates—demonstrating that, when we know how to look, the evidence of utopian immanence and emergence comes firmly into view. Insisting that utopia is available to us, this orientation

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thus offers a critical and imaginative infrastructure capable of sustaining hope even, perhaps especially, in hopeless times.

## Utopia/dystopia

Marxism is a utopian tradition in a double sense. As Fredric Jameson summarises, Marxism offers both a utopian *project*, a political vision of a transformed future, and a utopian *ontology*, “a conception of historical dynamics in which it is posited that the whole new world is also objectively in emergence all around us” (Jameson, 2009, p. 416). Our focus here is on the latter, how the ontology of historical materialism offers an optic attentive to the seeds of the future in the present, the “allegorical stirrings of a different state of things ... the subliminal and subcutaneous eruptions of whole new forms of life and social relations” (p. 416)—a utopian orientation rooted in notions of potentiality, emergence, openness.

However, it is necessary first to note that this particular dimension of Marxist utopianism, this open utopian optic, sits uncomfortably with a certain anti-Marxist common sense, in which the Marxist utopian impulse is synonymous with rigidity, closure, a fixed teleology; that it leads inevitably to dystopia. This common sense is a product of the twentieth century, bound up with the trajectory of the Marxist political project into the communist regimes, with the ideological battles of the Cold War, with the ascendance of neoliberalism, and finally with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, symbolising as it did the collapse of Marxist aspiration as such and, in Fukuyama’s infamous thesis, ushering in the “end of history”. And it is a distinctly twentieth-century concept that condenses the complexity of this history into a simple ‘truth’ about the inevitably dystopian implications of Marxist utopianism: the concept of totalitarianism.

The historical development of the idea of totalitarianism, its conceptual problems, the ways it has functioned ideologically, is terrain that has been well-traversed elsewhere (see, for example, Christofferson, 2004; Fleron, 1968; Losurdo, 2004; Suny, 2006; Traverso, 2017; and Žižek, 2001), but is worth briefly canvassing here. First emerging from the antifascist politics of the 1920s and 1930s, as a “tentative and suggestive” term intuiting a new kind of authoritarianism in the regimes of fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia (Christofferson, 2004, pp. 4–5), “totalitarianism” took on much greater significance later, as a key concept, or rather “fighting word”, of Cold War anti-communism (Traverso, 2017). Two ideas were central to the conceptual elaboration and then ideological power of the concept through the second half of the twentieth century. The first was a running comparison between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, asserting an inherent likeness between national socialism (self-evidently evil) and communism (rendered equivalently evil in the parallel). The second was that at the core of totalitarianism, the originating cause of its dystopian outcomes, was a utopian, salvational ideology. In the concept of totalitarianism, then, Marxism is rendered as a totalitarian *structure of thought*.

These ideas are expressed consistently from early proto-neoliberal texts like Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* and Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies*; to the defining texts of totalitarianism scholarship in the 1950s—Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski’s *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*— and carrying all the way through to the end of the century, as the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted much post-mortem work on the failures and atrocities of communism—most famously in the bestselling *Black Book of Communism* (see Arendt, 1958; Courtois et al., 1999; Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956; Furet, 1999; Hayek, 1945; Malia, 1994; and Popper, 2002). These texts are far from uniform, but cumulatively they insist that a key characteristic of totalitarianism as such, and of the communist totalitarianism of the Soviet Union specifically, was a utopian, messianic, chiliastic ideology, a totalising worldview—here, Marxism—claiming to have unlocked the secret of history (class struggle) and prophesising the ultimate teleological destiny of humanity (communism). Blind, prophetic faith in this utopian vision not only produced a closure and rigidity of thought but also, the logic went, functioned to justify hideous violence and oppression, as totalitarian regimes attempted to

force their vision into being—invariably inverting utopia to dystopia. Thus, in the theory and common sense of totalitarianism, the dreams of Marxism were directly responsible for, and thereafter irrevocably tainted by, the nightmares of Stalinism.

The history of Marxism, central to emancipatory history for a century, is much bigger and more multifaceted than its reduction to the Soviet experiment (just as the history of the Soviet Union itself is of course much more complex than its reduction to Stalinist totalitarianism). But this broader history was effectively buried from social consciousness as the totalitarian theory of communism developed into a more diffuse common sense by the end of the twentieth century, accepted, eventually, even on the left. Thus central to the postmodern, post-Marxist turn in left thought in the 1970s and 1980s—to the theoretical work of Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, Laclau and Mouffe, for example, emphasising ontological, epistemological and political pluralism, horizontality and contingency, ‘waging war on totality’—was a rejection of the ‘totalising’ impulse of Marxist thought (see Jameson, 1989; Sim, 2000; Tormey and Townshend, 2006; and Žižek, 2001). Marxism’s total critique of capitalism, here, was stigmatised as rigid, dogmatic class essentialism and economic determinism, blind to other vectors of oppression; Marxism’s aspiration to a world beyond capitalism understood as a fixed utopian teleology antithetical to democratic openness and plurality, the outcome of which was necessarily terror. Turning anti-communist logic into left common sense, the “general feeling”, in the post-Marxist turn, was that “the revolutionary, Utopian, or totalising impulse [was] somehow tainted from the outset and doomed to blood by the very structure of its thoughts” (Jameson, 1989, p. 35). The result was a broad repudiation of Marxism on the left, “extinguish[ing] Marxist memory” (Traverso, 2016), shrouding socialist history in shame and disillusionment, and containing what remained of left aspiration within the imaginative limits of liberal (capitalist) democracy.

This was a deep rupture in emancipatory history, giving rise to an affective atmosphere Wendy Brown labelled “left melancholy”, a left culture “most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in... marginality and failure” (Brown, 1999). The left, once sustained by faith in the real possibility of a different world, now suffered “an overwhelming heaviness paralysing the utopic imagination” (Traverso, 2016, p. 4). These imaginative conditions were only heightened as neoliberalism, an ideology and politics built on “demolish[ing] non-capitalist avenues of hope” in service of market fundamentalism (Davies, 2016, p. 126), completed its ascendance to hegemony, now effectively unopposed—“the most successful ideology in world history” in Perry Anderson’s assessment at the turn of millennium (Anderson, 2000). The power of this hegemony, of course, has been to naturalise an ever-more totalising and totalitarian capitalism.

This history, of the discourse of totalitarianism and its diffuse ideological afterlife, is relevant to our purposes for two reasons. First, it is critical background to the broad closure of the utopian imagination, of the ability to envisage and aspire to a different world, by the end of the twentieth century and carrying into the twenty-first. For a generation, with emancipatory alternatives discredited, capitalism occupied the entire terrain of the possible—captured in Mark Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009), or the cliché, attributed variously to Jameson and Žižek, that it had become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. There was no outside, there was no beyond, there was no challenge. This imaginative closure has ongoing implications for the problem of hope today. In these especially hopeless times, the common sense of the turn of the millennium no longer holds; incapable of addressing the mounting social, political, economic and environmental crises of our time, which cannot be solved by the invisible hand of the market, neoliberal hegemony has become increasingly unstable (Babic, 2020; Stahl, 2019; Therborn, 2022). But while this opens up new imaginative space, as we will return to below, the generational break in the transmission of left culture, critique and aspiration has ongoing impacts for the utopian imagination, which remains weak from disuse.

Second, it is necessary to set out this history, to address the common sense it brought into being, in order to emphasise just how starkly at odds this common sense is with the utopian dimension of Marxist

thought that I wish to draw out here. Far from the dystopian proto-totalitarian image of rigidity, domination and closure, this is a utopian orientation grounded in notions of possibility and openness, oriented to discovering the glimpses of another world prefigured and emergent in this one. In the past, this utopian orientation has offered critical imaginative and indeed spiritual resources for the sustenance of emancipatory hope in the bleakest of social and political conditions. These hopeless times call for its rediscovery.

## The utopian dialectic: An optic for hope

The utopian core of the Marxist tradition is, as indicated earlier, ontological, rooted in the dialectical ontology of historical materialism. While this utopian dimension is implicit in Marx's own thought, as we will return to shortly, it received its most explicit and expansive expression in the work of the philosopher of hope Ernst Bloch. A heterodox and singular thinker, Bloch was a contemporary of the Frankfurt School. But unlike Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin, for example, for whom the experience of fascism embedded within their thought a deep and enduring pessimism (captured in the oft-quoted Adorno-ism that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz, or Benjamin's articulation of history as "a single catastrophe ... piling wreckage upon wreckage"), the experience of fascism only reinforced Bloch's commitment to an understanding of the world as remaining always open to the good, to the possibility of an emancipated future, even in the darkest of times. Thus, it was while exiled from Nazi Germany that Bloch wrote his magnum opus *The Principle of Hope*, a three-volume encyclopaedic exploration of the utopian prefiguration and anticipation to be found in the archives of civilisation, discerning desires and impulses toward a richer, freer, more human existence everywhere from art and religion, science and architecture, fairy tales and folklore, and even through to commodity culture itself. Enabling this investigation—this orientation to "find[ing] a red path weaving through history, revolting against alienation, exploitation, and oppression, struggling for a better world" (Kellner & O'Hara, 1976, p. 16)—is a dialectical utopian ontology.

Bloch's "speculative materialism" (Moir, 2019), or Left Aristotelianism, in his own terms, is rooted in an understanding of the nature of being as essentially open and incomplete—an ontological prioritisation of possibility and latency "over actuality and necessity" (Kellner & O'Hara, 1976). From the subject to society and history, to matter itself, existence is not static or fixed, but radically unfinished, containing within itself, and partially constituted by, the latent traces of the future (Bloch, 1983, 1986). From this ontological foundation emerges a theory of utopia as a dialectic between the subjective and the objective: the relationship between subjective human impulses or desires for a richer mode of being, and the objective possibilities for their fulfilment in "the properties of reality which are themselves utopian, i.e. contain future" (Bloch, 1986, p. 145). Operating in the tension between the actual and the possible—what was and what could have been, what is and what is Not-Yet—it is with this insistence on the objective openness of the world to a richer mode of being, to freer, more egalitarian, more expansive social relations, that Bloch places his theory of utopia on materialist footing. Utopianism, here, is not fanciful or idealistic, politically impotent or compensatory.<sup>1</sup> It is, rather, a (politically indispensable) orientation attentive to the material, concrete possibilities for an emancipatory future already latent in the world. This is the "intelligence of hope", "transcendent without transcendence" (Bloch, 1986, p. 146).

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<sup>1</sup> This was Marx and Engels' critique of what they called "utopian socialism"—the fanciful visions of, for example, Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, seeking to change the world through the power of ideas, but totally disconnected from real political struggle. For Marx and Engels, the visions of utopian socialists, of harmonious societies achieved peaceably, were little more than compensatory fantasies, distracting from the necessarily conflictual work of politics, of class struggle (Ollman, 2005). Against this, Marx and Engels distinguished their own project of "scientific socialism", or socialist politics grounded in concrete analysis of real, objective possibilities for social transformation. Of course, in their own expansive desires for social transformation, Marx and Engels were undeniably utopian—their critique of the 'utopian' socialists engages the term pejoratively. Their distinction between 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialism might more accurately be rendered as a distinction between idealist and materialist socialism—or, indeed, idealist and materialist utopianism, the latter being Bloch's central focus.

Bloch's thought was asynchronous with his own time. His integration of theological and romantic influences, the often mystical, dreamy quality of his analysis, his devotion to hope, sat uncomfortably with not just the pessimism of Western Marxism, but also the anti-dialectical vulgarisation of Marxist political thought under Stalinism (for which hope was superfluous to the unfolding of the future through the iron laws of history). In Bloch's own conception, however, these ideas were firmly rooted in the Marxist project. For Bloch, "the very power and truth of Marxism consists in the fact that it has driven the cloud in our dreams further forward, but has not extinguished the pillar of fire in those dreams, rather strengthened it with concreteness" (Bloch, 1986, p. 146). Historical materialism itself, he insisted, was a dialectical synthesis between "two ways of being red": the "cold stream of Marxism", its insistence on rigorous, critical analysis of concrete objective conditions, mutually reinforced by the "warm stream", the dreams and desires of an emancipated future that were the very purpose and driving force of socialist praxis (Bloch, 1986, pp. 208–210). Indeed, behind the temporally heterodox features of Bloch's project lies a more fundamental orthodoxy: a fidelity to dialectical thought. It is in this fidelity that Bloch simply renders explicit the utopian dimension or structure implicit in historical materialism as a dialectical orientation.

The notion that the traces of the future can be found in the present, for example, is not an idea peculiar to Bloch. It is common sense to a dialectical orientation, in which the world is understood not in terms of static, independent *things*, but as a dynamic totality made up of *processes* and *relations*, whereby any particular 'thing' can only be understood as part of the larger whole, constituted by its relations to other parts of the totality, and, crucially, by its own "history and possible futures" (Ollman, 2003). Dialectical thought is thus particularly attuned to social complexity, and especially contradiction: able to hold together, at once, what is both positive and negative in a given development, dynamic, conjuncture; able to see how that which is negative may hold positive possibility, "can also be imagined positive in that immense changing of the valences which is the Utopian future" (Jameson, 2009, p. 423). And it is particularly attuned to social change: to the traces of the past in the present, and by extension, the traces of possible futures; an awareness that social conditions appearing fixed and closed in fact already contain emergent possibilities for their own transcendence (Bloch, 1983; Jameson, 2009; Ollman, 2003, 2008).

From this perspective, Marx's own utopian orientation can be understood as primarily methodological, rather than prescriptive. Although motivated by specific utopian *desires*—for a world beyond alienation, dehumanisation, exploitation, towards community, equality, solidarity—Marx was perpetually reluctant to "write recipes for the cookshops of the future" (Marx, 1876/1990), to offer any prescriptive visions for a socialist world,<sup>2</sup> which would only emerge through collective self-emancipatory struggle and could not, therefore, be determined in advance or from on high. The concern of historical materialism, he reflected, was not "with the construction of the future or with organising it for all time". Rather, its task was to "attempt to discover the new world through the critique of the old", through "the *ruthless criticism of the existing order*" (Marx, 1843), grounding political struggle for a better world always in the world as it really is, in its historical specificity.

This synthesis of critique and anticipation (or the cold and warm impulses identified by Bloch) underpin Marx's analysis of capitalist society, attentive to its dynamic dialectic contradictions, its simultaneous destructive and creative tendencies. Thus, for example, just as the dynamics of proletarianisation, industrialisation and technological development dissolved traditional social bonds, damaged the natural environment, and intensified the exploitation of labour, so too did these dynamics bring together masses of people with shared class interests, capitalism creating its own potential gravediggers in the industrial working class; and so too did these dynamics increase production to unprecedented levels, capable, if put to work by a different set of social relations, of creating collective

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<sup>2</sup> He did, of course, offer some fragmentary speculations on what a socialist future might look like, what it might offer. For analysis of these, see Beilharz (1992), Manuel and Manuel (1979), and Ollman (1979).

abundance in the place of artificial scarcity. The key insight, here, is that the sources of misery under capitalism are the very same sources of emancipatory promise, offering objective, concrete possibilities for a different future. This is how the new world is discovered in the ruthless critique of the old, and how, as Bloch argued, Marx strengthened and enhanced the ‘fire’ of socialist desire by grounding it in concreteness.

These are, critically, utopian ways of seeing: historical materialism *is*, as the ideology of totalitarianism insisted, a utopian *structure of thought*, and this *is* connected to its attention to totality. But it is precisely these features of Marxist thought that give it an *open* utopian structure, a sense of the world itself as open and multivalent, characterised by contradiction, contingency and possibility; precisely the features that reject the dogmatism and closure of thought attributed to Marxism by the ideology of totalitarianism. It is in this context, as well, that the redemptive or salvational sense of history attributed to Marxism must be understood: not as a teleological certainty in the inevitability of the socialist future,<sup>3</sup> but rather a form of political faith in its real, concrete possibility, in a world remaining open to its own transcendence.

This dialectical utopian orientation offers immense critical, imaginative and spiritual resources for hope, especially in times, such as ours, of crisis and catastrophe. To understand the world in these terms is to take up “a more receptive and interpretive stance in which ... we may detect the allegorical stirrings of a different state of things” (Jameson, 2009, p. 416), possibilities for different futures in a present that might otherwise feel unassailably, fixedly bleak. In Bloch’s work especially, and in turn developed by Jameson, this is expressed as a utopian hermeneutic, through which the social and cultural terrain comes into view not only as a site of calamity but also as a repository of “untapped emancipatory potential” (Kellner & O’Hara, 1976, p. 15). To take up this optic is thus to find, “little by little, wherever we look”, a “vital presence” of utopian desire and latency—anticipating a fuller, richer, freer existence—which, “behind whatever distortions, beneath whatever layers of repression, may always be detected, no matter how faintly, by the instruments and apparatus of hope itself” (Jameson, 1971, p. 120). The utopian hermeneutic thus engages a “conversion mechanism”, a “changing of the valences”, uncovering and deciphering the “figures of hope” (Jameson, 1971, p. 120), the good and hopeful core concealed in conditions that otherwise appear hopeless.

Critically, however, this is not an exercise in “facile optimism”, as Jameson highlights (Jameson, 1971, 1981). Although this is an optic oriented to discovering latent traces of utopia, the good and the hopeful, this does not mean losing sight of the negative, that which stands in the way of emancipatory promise. It is, rather, a matter of holding them together, as contradictions in a dialectical unity. This, for Jameson, is the necessary mode of Marxist cultural analysis, joining together in a unified perspective both the negative hermeneutic of critique (Marx’s “ruthless criticism of the existing order”) and the positive hermeneutic of utopian discovery (Jameson, 1981).

It is precisely by this holding together of positive and negative that this approach offers a theoretical optic for hope adequate to the challenges of the present, including the challenge of dread and despair, in what I will describe in the following section as our conjuncture’s end-of-the-world structure of feeling. This dialectical or unified perspective insists, both, that it is only with a very clear and sober understanding of the realities of our conjuncture that hope is to mean anything at all, and also, by the very same gesture, that hopelessness itself rests on a certain blindness, an inability to see the utopian immanence or latency that persists through, or indeed is brought into being by, ‘the end of the world’. It is by holding these impulses together that a position of militant optimism, insistent on the availability of a future other than catastrophe, becomes available, allowing us to read the present with hope. In the remaining discussion, I put this optic to work to offer some gestural reflections on the utopian valences of the end of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> As Jameson highlights, “It was never socialism that was inevitable, but the implosion of the contradictions of capitalism”, which could just as well lead, in Marx’s words, to the “mutual ruin of contending classes” (Jameson, 2009, p. 286).

## Hope in the ruins

Something has shifted in the last decade: we have grown accustomed to crisis. Here are some highlights.

Since 2016, populist and far-right currents have become a consistent feature of political life in the West and beyond. A major flashpoint, signaling the emergence of this new right-wing constellation, igniting the dystopian imaginary, was the 2016 American presidential election: the shock win of a crude, irreverently racist, misogynistic billionaire and former reality television host, darling of the most vitriolic currents of American right-wing culture. Trump's tenure saw, among other things, a Muslim travel ban, White supremacist terrorism (e.g., Charlottesville 2017), armed militias forming in backlash to the George Floyd uprising, and the storming of the Capitol in January 2021—events that all, as they unfolded, began to feel bleakly predictable. The cultural and political success of new far-right currents, in the United States and elsewhere, fractured for many the fantasy of a rational, liberal status quo grounding a shared and coherent social life, bringing to the surface social, cultural and economic conflict repressed in the era of consensual neoliberalism. But while these developments have brought a new sense of dread to political life, they have also often been attended by a certain kind of surrealism or absurdity. Was Trump, for example, inaugurating the fall of American Empire because he'd gotten bored of hosting *The Apprentice*?

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) set a 12-year deadline for avoiding climate catastrophe: emissions would need to be halved by 2030, through “rapid and far-reaching transitions” in global energy systems and infrastructure, “unprecedented in terms of scale”, to have any prospect of limiting warming to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and preventing irreversible climate catastrophe (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018). We are now halfway towards this deadline and such measures have not been implemented, nor do they appear to be a genuine or urgent priority for most governments. In February 2024, climate monitors reported that the 1.5 °C warming limit had been exceeded over a 12-month period for the first time. Meanwhile, reports of record-breaking temperatures, heatwaves, wildfires, floods and droughts have become a regular feature of the news cycle. Climate change is no longer a future prospect: we are living in it. Moreover, with aggressive mitigation and adaptation measures absent, we are on a path to its worst possible outcomes—and, absurdly, helplessly, we go on with our day-to-day lives as normal.

In 2020, the first global pandemic in a century emerged suddenly and viciously. Its immediate effects included mass illness and death, mandated lockdowns, overrun health systems, and unprecedented border closures. The experience of absolute rupture in those surreal, panicked early months soon gave way to, and was rendered mundane by, a duller kind of drudgery as the pandemic dragged from months into years, its diffuse effects rippling out to every corner of social life to produce a kind of combined and uneven misery, including, but not limited to, long-term disability, social isolation, mental ill-health, economic uncertainty, emboldened conspiracy milieus, and a heightening of social fragmentation and mistrust. Much more suddenly than the climate crisis, the pandemic highlighted our immense vulnerability to the natural world, underscoring how ill-equipped our societies are—after decades of neoliberal rule cementing the supremacy of the market and the interests of capital over all else, including basic human well-being and care—to address the unique and urgent challenges of this century.

Crisis, then, has become ubiquitous in the last decade. But it has also become much more immediate, every new bleak or bizarre development appearing instantaneously and relentlessly before our eyes, “horror find[ing] us wherever we are” (Greenfield, 2017, ch. 1). Unique to our conjuncture, current affairs are mediated, today, less by the dependable rhythms of broadcast television or newsprint than by the endless, overflowing streams of news websites and social media feeds, a product of the internet's now near-total penetration into everyday life. The experience is of an overstimulating deluge of information, some consumed intentionally, much absorbed via osmosis, as horrifying headlines, images and videos—from devastating storms and wildfires to police brutality and now literal genocide—sit alongside, formally

undifferentiated from, targeted advertisements, celebrity gossip, images of the day-to-day lives of friends, acquaintances, influencers, and memes attempting to sublimate the doom into humour. All of this occupies the same boundaryless, endlessly clickable and scrollable space, an over-proximate and undifferentiated excess in which meaning itself becomes increasingly fragmented and unstable, while horror closes in.

So, we have grown accustomed to crisis and horror—it is rarely, any longer, shocking. The tropes of dystopian science fiction (pandemics, extreme weather events, resurgent fascism, technological domination) have become, for us, simply mundane realities. This is the structure of feeling of our time:<sup>4</sup> the end of the world, rendered banal. Psychically onerous, frequently surreal, and increasingly impossible to repress, the end of the world is nevertheless a utopian opportunity.

Of course, we are not the first to anticipate the end of the world: it was not long ago that the social imaginary rippled with fears of nuclear annihilation, to take just one recent example. But in distinction from the nuclear imaginary, the end of the world we anticipate today is not the rupture of sudden, total apocalypse, nor does it appear as an external threat. It is, instead, a slower, cumulative, more creeping sense of endogenous disintegration. Each of these key coordinates in the consolidation of our end of the world sensibility—the resurgent far-right, the climate crisis, the pandemic, the semiotic instability of digital hypermediation—are bound up with the contradictions of our contemporary world-system, the social, environmental and economic ramifications, or “Frankensteinian creations” (Brown, 2019), of the systemic prioritisation of capital over all else. They are not external to our mode of life, but rather its ultimate consequences, appearing before us as unambiguous signals of the absolute unsustainability of the status quo, marking the end of the world, of *this* world, this mode of life, not as a possibility but as an inevitability, a process already in motion.

As Gramscian scholars have identified, neoliberal capitalism is in a state of hegemonic crisis. Although still structurally dominant, neoliberal ideology is no longer capable of exercising intellectual and moral leadership, of capturing and guiding the social imaginary—a decline that began with the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) and ensuing austerity measures, but has been amplified in our end-of-the-world conditions (Babic, 2020; Foster & el-Ojeili, 2021; Stahl, 2019). The legitimacy and coherence of neoliberal common sense, the notion that the market is the best and only basis for social, economic and political organisation, singularly capable of ensuring freedom, democracy and prosperity, is no longer tenable in the face of accumulating crisis and shrinking aspiration, democratic unresponsiveness and extreme wealth inequality. Offering no real solutions to any of the urgent challenges of present, capitalism today is “a system that no longer seeks credibility in the way hegemonies used to do” (Davies, 2016), rarely, any longer, even pretending to offer prospects for the good life. And having given up its utopian coordinates, capitalism today, “fragile, volatile, violent capitalism” (Holloway, 2022, p. 185), takes on increasingly totalitarian signification, the ‘end of the world’ making clear that our societies are being run into social, economic and environmental oblivion for little more than the supremacy of shareholder value.

This disintegrative moment is a critical opportunity. With the clarity that this world is ending, for better or worse, a much more open horizon comes into view; the imaginative closure of the ‘end of history’, the limits placed on emancipatory desire by capitalist realism, no longer holds. These vectors of crisis have thus also seen the emergence of new, and newly militant, progressive and emancipatory movements and horizons, often anti- and post-capitalist in aspiration, desiring beyond the limits of the present.

The 2018 IPCC report, for example, released amidst one of the hottest Northern Hemisphere summers on record, had a galvanising effect, crystallising a qualitative shift in climate imaginaries (Hickel,

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams’s (1977) concept of the structure of feeling involves a “cultural hypothesis” much more fluid and contradictory, drawing out the “emerging sentiments, feelings, attitudes” (Wayne, 2021, p. 45, footnote 17) of a given period, while being lived than the systematisations we construct in retrospect. ‘Structure’ specifies the social nature of such formations, collective and connected to broader social, political and economic currents, while ‘feeling’ recognises their emergent, informal qualities, their location “at the very edge of semantic availability” (Williams, 1977).



2020; Stuart et al., 2020). The same month the report was released, Greta Thunberg staged her first, solo ‘school strike for climate’; a year later, the youth movement she inspired led the biggest globally coordinated climate protest in history, with millions taking to the streets in solidarity with the young for a livable climate future. As the climate has, finally, become a central political concern, climate movements are growing increasingly militant. Escalating tactics—from Extinction Rebellion’s repertoire of civil disobedience, to calls, as in Andreas Malm’s *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, that the time has come for the direct sabotage of fossil fuel infrastructure—are bound up with a newly militant systemic critique at the core of climate politics, an increasing willingness to identify unfettered global capitalism, and the capitalist class specifically, as both responsible for, and a barrier to ameliorating, the climate crisis (Stuart et al., 2020; Therborn, 2022). Just as importantly, new horizons of militant optimism have also emerged. Consolidating around visions, for example, of green social democracy, or the more radical prospect of degrowth, the proximity of the climate crisis has clarified how the urgent transformation of the human–nature relationship, necessitated by the end of this world, might in fact be a utopian prospect, a crucial opportunity for far-reaching, transformative change to the structure and values of our societies (see, for example, Hickel, 2020; Pollin, 2018; Soper, 2020).

Older emancipatory horizons have also been rediscovered. The language of socialism, culturally prohibited since the end of the twentieth century, has become articulable again at the end of the world. Class consciousness, anti-capitalist critique and post-capitalist desire have unfurled memetically through the social imaginary in recent years, brought into the political mainstream by the social democratic electoral wave, especially the movements behind Bernie Sanders in the USA and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK since 2016, but tapping into a much broader and diffuse disenchantment with contemporary capitalism, a dynamic of generational intellectual and moral reform and shifting common sense, the seeds of which were planted as far back as the 2008 GFC (Milburn, 2019; Stahl, 2019). As Hochuli et al. (2021, pp. 12–13) observe, it was as if, almost overnight, “everyone was suddenly a socialist”, an astonishing shift from just a decade earlier, when “calling oneself a ‘socialist’ ... was like being a model plane enthusiast, a stamp collector, a big fan of ragtime: legible from the outside only as an irrelevant but vaguely embarrassing anachronism” (Adler-Bell, 2020, p. 115).

This re-emergent socialist imaginary is a distinctly twenty-first century formation. Carried predominantly by those too young to remember the Cold War, but who instead came of age in the atmosphere of contracting aspiration in the aftermath of the GFC—for whom capitalism’s claims to utopia make little sense in our disintegrative present, while socialism returns less as a defunct or dystopian tradition than an intuitive optic for making sense of the contemporary world—socialism is being rediscovered today with fresh eyes, oriented not by the concerns and debates of the twentieth century but by the urgent and multifaceted challenges of the present. Here, socialist history and tradition appear not as baggage to be overcome, but as a repository of emancipatory hope and courage available to an emergent left constellation characteristically forward-oriented, pragmatic, non-sectarian and dynamic (Milburn, 2019; Therborn, 2022; Traverso, 2021). Thus, while the social-democratic moment may have dissolved, the more diffuse return of socialist critique, imagination and desire, buried for a generation, remains—a key imaginative opening that will continue to shape the political terrain of this century, the longer historical sequence instituted by the end of the world.

The disintegrative texture of the end of the world, all these signals of social breakdown, are thus the very same set of conditions enabling the clarity and freedom for new and more expansive political and emancipatory horizons to come into view, for the first time in a generation. If this world is ending, and it seems that it is, the future can be, and is being, imagined anew. Hope, then, emerges through the ruins.

## Conclusion

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an interview for the *New Yorker*, the late great utopian Marxist Mike Davis offered reflections capturing the position of militant optimism, the perpetual insistence on hope even, indeed especially, when the world feels doomful (Goodyear, 2020):

This seems an age of catastrophe, but it's also an age equipped, in an abstract sense, with all the tools it needs. Utopia is available to us. If, like me, you've lived through the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, you can never discard hope. I've seen social miracles in my life, ones that have stunned me—the courageousness of ordinary people in a struggle.

Davis, like Bloch, reminds us that despair rests on a certain blindness. When we know how to look, the evidence of utopian immanence and latency, the availability of utopia in a world remaining open to its own transcendence, is brought suddenly and clearly into view. This is the strength of a dialectical utopian orientation, providing a theoretical optic for sustaining hope in conditions of hopelessness, insisting that a future other than catastrophe is available to us yet.

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