

HOUSE ORGAN

Facing End-Time

The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

—*Revelation 16:12-16, New International Version*

One passes Megiddo on the road from Jenin to Haifa, and absent the marker, would pass by. Today just a mound with assorted low ruins, the celebrated and once strategic spot, continuously inhabited from 7000-500 BCE, is where Pharaoh Thumose III defeated the Canaanites in 1478 BCE, Egyptian general Necho II defeated Judah under King Josiah in 700 BCE, and Allenby defeated the Ottomans and Germans under General Otto Liman von Sanders in 1918, crushing the Turkish armies, securing Palestine for the British Empire, and enabling Britain to make good on the promise made by Lord Balfour the year before to turn the land over to the Zionists. The victorious general took the title of First Viscount Allenby of Megiddo, and the Zionists seized their opportunity and have never let go.

When John of Patmos wrote the *Book of Revelation* in 90 CE, he used the name of Megiddo (in Hebrew, Har-Megeddo, or Mount Megiddo) to designate the place where the final battle between the forces of Christ and Anti-Christ was to be fought. The latter referred of course to Rome, though named Babylon in John's text and eponymously called the great whore as the center of all iniquity and fornication. The Emperor Domitian had just sharpened tension with the emerging Christian church by demanding that all his subjects call him "Lord and God" and worship his image. John was one of the resisters, and escaped death by entering upon exile. Once safe on the Aegean island Patmos, he experienced his visions and wrote them down in what was to become the last book of the Bible.

Like Megiddo, *Revelation* has seen better days, although not ones of obscurity. Actually, the text did not become famous until the French Revolution, when its tone of ecstasy became suitable to represent the emotional overtones of the destruction of an old, corrupt world in the name of a bright future. It was the one book of the Bible most capable of rendering history as a universal process (under the auspices of Christ, needless to add), and, because it was the Bible's final statement, it became a reflection on the whole, weaving together the Old and New Testaments. Once the notion of revolution entered history as a possibility, *Revelation* became the ur-text of radical transformation. Reverberations appear in the anti-slavery struggle (recall The Battle Hymn of the Republic), of Communism (think of the Internationale as one of its chapters), and of Zionism itself.

Revelation's Old Testament roots derive from the prophetic tradition, which was a reaction to the corruptions of the first Israeli state. The prophet was fundamentally critical of established authority, which he dissected from outside the gates of the city with poetic insight and moral grandeur. In the spirit of those times the prophetic tradition was

messianic, for the arrival of a messiah signified the overcoming of the burden of iniquity and a path to a better future. There was in this, however, a profound tension. Prophecy was an uncovering, an indictment, a mythopoetic revealing, and because of this, an *opening* to a new and better world. It could not depict the future itself, nor could it be a literalism, lest it lose poetic power. That is, prophecy should not be confused with *prediction*. To the extent prophecy becomes predictive, it descends into magical thinking and superstition.

Which of course is just what happened to *Revelation* as the revolutionary traditions to which it was an ancillary became themselves corrupted. As prediction, the emotive tones of the text no longer turn inward. They become signposts upon which an external authority can lay out a schema in which myth and symbol return as actuality. The active encounter with the text required by prophecy turns into a passive relation to authority who assume the right to utter the Word of God. Literalist interpretation of the Bible is to some degree, immemorial, and largely informal and spontaneous. In the modern era, however, the rise of scientifically based skepticism forced literalism into the rigid ideological forms we know under the name of Fundamentalism.

In the 19th century this was formalized in England and the United States as the doctrine of “Dispensationalism,” which rendered the Bible into a coherent account of world history extending into the future. This ugly word stands for a great many morbid tendencies. Zionism falls under its rubric, inasmuch as Dispensationalism authorizes the otherwise risible notion that God promised Palestine to the Jews. Zionism can be Christian as well as Jewish, a fact that spreads its grim net over a lot of United States Middle East policy. Dispensationalism is the organizing principle of Christian fundamentalism of the sort that Karl Rove gathered for the benefit of George W. Bush. In novels such as the *Left Behind* series (which claims sales of 40,000,000 copies), by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Revelation* is turned into a paean to genocide and the survival of the Master Race. Dispensationalist fundamentalism today supplies the Christian Right with millennial predictions of the “rapture,” along with its barbarous notions about gender and sexuality, as well as the firm belief, which locks together the Jewish and Christian Zionist movements, that God gave Israel the right to Palestine in order to prepare the way for the final battle of Armageddon, following which the faithful would be raptured to sit beside Christ for a thousand years. Approximately a third of the population of the United States believes this to be true.

These strange developments arise from deep lesions within bourgeois society, which millennialism attempts to heal. Neverending anxiety, alienation, helplessness, and dislocation has marked capitalism from the first days and grows with the accumulation process as it breaks through all boundaries. This is the source, and fundamentalism is the twisted response that brings more discord in its wake. So it is no mystery as to why these movements develop in places like the United States, where a wide-open field of belief characterizes religious history and terrible loneliness seeps throughout society. We should heed Marx, then, and seek to overcome the roots of angst and meaninglessness in capitalist society rather than brood on the preachers who exploit the misery of the masses.

Since 1945 millennialism has become radically aggravated by the real possibility that society is not only alienating but potentially doomed. This has taken shape in two phases, first, with the realization that the state has the power to annihilate humanity and much of nature with nuclear weaponry; and later with an awareness that the ecological crisis may put

an end to things thanks to the disintegration of society's natural foundation. Thus the notion of an "end-time" which is central to the narrative of *Revelation* acquires a permanent, foreboding reality: end-time becomes the end of life. Where the nuclear era couched this in terms of a single cataclysm (the threat of which is if anything worse today), we now contend with yet another layer: growing awareness of ecological breakdown that reproduces the process in a more extended way, more uncertain in the details of its unfolding, yet more inexorable, too, in that its dynamics are in place and moving along independently of whether a mad general or President pushes a button. The button, so to speak, has already been activated, and the dynamic is manifest in a fitful disintegration of socio/nature, loomed over by prospects such as that global warming may soon—perhaps in as short an interval as ten years according to some climate scientists—enter upon a "breakaway" period of exponentially chaotic positive feedback. This could conceivably, in the worst, yet still scientifically arguable, case, leave Earth as uninhabitable as Venus. The issue is not whether such an outcome is plausible; it is scarcely so. The problem is that such scenarios are thinkable, and enter the *Zeitgeist*. A weird kind of dialectical shadow-play ensues in which the corruptions of end-time literalism are replaced by a scientifically respectable possibility.

Contending with this awareness, neither minimizing its gravity nor succumbing to irrational panic, is the great challenge of our era. How can we become strong enough to recognize the truth of the end-time that looms over us, and bear its implications? One way—necessary but not sufficient—would be the time-honored means of art. Indeed, the conjuncture has already generated one great film: Alphonso Cuarón's *The Children of Men* (2006), in which the entire planet twenty years on resembles Baghdad today, migrations of hundreds of millions of "fugees" (a certain implication of advancing global warming) take place in context of fascism, and human life itself is about to be extinguished by generalized infertility. In contrast to the great film of the first, nuclear phase of contemporary end-time anxiety, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove, or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb*, Cuarón cannot use the tropes of black comedy. Instead he brings forth a babe, a little girl born to a young black woman who is saved by the film's protagonist (played by Clive Owen), and sets this tiny life redemptively against universal ruin. It is impossible to avoid the idea that Cuarón is reintroducing the figure of Jesus, and re-entering the eschatology of *Revelation*. But how is this idea to be developed?

The *Book of Revelation* as a whole, and the events portrayed therein, are often rendered in terms of an "Apocalypse." Thus the notion of end-time, and all the strangeness entailed by this, is also called an apocalypse. In the contemporary understanding, the notion of apocalypse and that of Armageddon are understood to be identical. But this was neither the original meaning of apocalypse, nor, if *Revelation* be read intently, the meaning of John of Patmos; it is rather a sign of the corruption of *Revelation* in our discourse, its descent into literalism. The word apocalypse in Greek means an *unveiling*, it is precisely therefore the "revelation" of an inner, imaginative truth, essential given the visionary character of the events depicted in the Bible and certainly its last book. To make these into signs of actual events to come is to deaden the mind and render it susceptible to tyranny, as dispensationalist tradition amply reveals.

Looking at the text of *Revelation* 16 above, we can see how John develops the theme. He sees "evil spirits" coming out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet, and in a profound phrase, recognizes that they "perform" "miraculous signs" in

order to lure the Kings into Armageddon. If this is so, then we must learn to read the performance and truly interpret the signs, we must awaken, and we must do so to *prevent* the kings of the world from going to Armageddon; in other words, we stop the war by seeing through them. Awakening, which is the true meaning of apocalypse, is for Christians the coming to being of Jesus. And so *Revelation* is a poem of resistance to empire, whose wars it counters with a liberated spirit.

It is not difficult to read in these lines an allegory of the current state of things, with Babylon/Rome as the United States, its rulers headed for Armageddon, (even on the banks of the Euphrates) and the great whore enthroned in the entertainment industry (the reader may select his or her favorite star for the role). But that is not the point. The true significance of apocalypse is its capacity to strengthen the spirit to bear the burden of the ecological crisis and to creatively respond to it—in other words, to awaken. We justly turn away from the kind of thinking that infests the Christian right and drives it toward violent Armageddon. But unless we can rescue the notion of apocalypse as emancipated vision, we cannot recognize our predicament, and fall back upon the ways of thinking that have led into the ecological crisis in the first place.

To the contemporary sensibility *The Book of Revelation* seems empty of significance, a remnant of a past in which the mind was dominated by magic and superstition. But it can also be said that certain imaginative senses have withered within the modern mind, and that this has deprived us of dimensions of significance, left us feeling alone in the universe, and because we cannot comprehend a notion like the end-time, unable to bear the insights required of us by the ecological crisis. This is especially a problem for the Left, whose politics enables the recognition of capital as the driving force of the crisis, but whose congenital hostility to the ways of spirit prevents a full appropriation of what needs to be done. Thus many astute and well-intentioned comrades either minimize the end-time implications of the crisis and/or fail to recognize that a radically different kind of society will need to be created if the crisis is to be overcome. They fail to see that although capital drives the present crisis, capital itself is the product of thousands of years of estrangement. And they fail to critically distinguish between two senses of “end-time”—that it can mean either the end of life or the end of our way of life, and that everything hangs in the balance of this judgment. What Einstein said with respect to nuclear weaponry, that everything has changed but our way of thinking, remains true for the ecological crisis and is just as ominous.

The mentality of intellectuals, including those of the Left, has been shaped by industrial capitalism, with its rule of quantity, its mantras of efficiency and productivity, its philosophy of pragmatism according to which truth is measured by immediate results, and therefore its reduction of the world to what Whitehead called the endless scurrying of dead matter. This world-view sees nature as an “environment” outside us, a realm of resources rather than a manifold to which we belong and whose ruination we bring about as we lose our way.

It has not been the religious world-view, even in its perverted fundamentalist form, that has ruined nature, but that of the technocratically advanced, reasonable and modernizing elites. Capital has seized a reason deprived of the radical, apocalyptic imagination, which it clears away like other aspects of the Commons, and has put itself on

the spiritual throne. Its economy and state administer the destruction of nature, but would not do so unless capital also sets itself up as the god of this world. That is its fetishistic side, brilliantly revealed by Marx. Abstract value gives to commodities a “mystical character,” in which we do not recognize our own estranged soul. And so the modern sensibility worships commodities like the fatted calf and gives reason over to the priests of capital and its false prophets. How else to explain the monstrous idiocy that would turn over the reduction of atmospheric carbon to the emissions trading and neo-colonialism signified by the Kyoto protocols, in other words, that would ensure that the bandits continue to run their syndicate even as the world goes to hell? And how can the changes ahead that will preserve and even enhance life be conceived unless we recover the imaginative power of apocalypse?

—Joel Kovel

A New Motto for *Capitalism Nature Socialism*

With this issue *Capitalism Nature Socialism* no longer calls itself an “international red-green journal of theory and politics,” but a “journal of ecosocialism.” We are not so foolish as to think this means that ecosocialism is substantially nearer than it was a few months ago, or even that the term is ready for definition. But the challenge of putting it into being seems more urgent with each piece of news about our planet’s disintegrating ecosystems, each manifestation of capital’s feckless power. The word comes up more and more in everyday discourse, and has even acquired a Wikipedia page, if not yet space in official dictionaries. It seems proper, then, for a journal to dedicate itself to its realization. Ecosocialism is a notion whose time must come if we are to save our species and innumerable others; it is a concept that needs a forum within which to take shape; and so *Capitalism Nature Socialism* is proud to offer itself as the servant of ecosocialist transformation.