# After Capital: Towards Alternative Worlds

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## Abstract

This brief text is the script of a presentation made on the occasion of a memorial and celebration of the work of Professor Couze Venn held at Goldsmiths, University of London, on 22 May 2019. The presentation took as its focus Venn's last monograph, *After Capital* (London: Sage, 2018).

## Keywords

Couze Venn, mourning, "end of world," environmental crisis, postcolonialism, postcapitalism, transcolonial genealogy, neoliberalism

"The world is gone, I must carry you."

Such is the enigmatic line by poet Paul Celan (1995, p. 223). In the reading of Jacques Derrida, to whose work Couze often returned across his writings (including in *After Capital*), on the occasion of the other's death, each time, it is the end of the world. *The* world, not *a* world, has gone. The death of the other, to quote Derrida, is "[n]ot *only one* end among others, the end of someone or of something *in the world* […]. Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of […] the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any unique living being, be it human or not" (Derrida 2005, p. 140).[1] And hence the impossible work of carrying the other inside oneself (Freudian introjection, the interiorization of memory, or idealization), and the necessity of a certain failure of mourning—the necessity of melancholy—in order to maintain the other's alterity, their singularity.[2]

While the work of mourning, as an ethical and political project, is something that Couze himself noted the importance of—for instance in his book on Occidentalism and a discussion therein of Derridean "hauntology" and what Couze names "alternative projects of the becoming of being" (see Venn 2000, p. 191; see also 1998, p. 87)—in his last book, *After Capital* (2018), the end of the world takes on a different, albeit not unrelated, dimension. In the context of our contemporary climate emergency, many have noted that everything hinges upon the seemingly small linguistic slip between "*the* world" and "*a* world". In speaking of "*the* end of *the* world," of *which* world and *whose* world are we speaking?[3] And who is the "we" that proclaims this? For many, the current ecological "emergency" and experience of "living in ruins" in fact began long ago and the event of colonialism, from 1492 onwards, already marked the end of the world—of innumerable, each-time-singular, life-worlds (see, for instance, Danowski and Castro 2017, esp. p. 104; Cadena and Blaser 2018; and Tsing 2015). As we read in an open letter to Extinction Rebellion penned by The Wretched of the Earth bloc and associated grassroots collectives for indigenous, black, brown and diaspora groups demanding climate justice

(2019), "[f]or many of us, the house has been on fire for a long time: whenever the tide of ecological violence rises, our communities, especially in the Global South, are always first hit."

And herein lies the urgency of *After Capital*, which I cannot help but think of each time I read such statements, and which silently carries the subtitle of Couze's 2006 book, *The Postcolonial Challenge: Towards Alternative Worlds*. (Couze already writes here of postcolonial critique as being "about redrawing the diagrams of possible worlds," p. 3.) Couze's analysis forms a powerful counter to those who would proclaim that we must "rebel for life" in the face of climate crisis but that this crisis is "beyond politics" (see Josette 2019). Across the chapters, he spells out the manners in which our current predicaments are the result of neoliberal capitalism and a global system of extraction, dispossession, indebtedness and oppression. For many this comes as no surprise, but few of us could match the breadth, rigour and clarity of his diagnosis and synthesis—an invaluable tool for teaching—that is the product of a lifetime's work (the book repeatedly refers back to earlier writings) and part and parcel of his incessant rebellion. (Regarding this rebellion, the book is infused with the revolutionary spirit and the dream of an emancipatory politics and a cosmopolitical future that, as Couze related, he tried to keep in mind whenever writing anything.)[4]

Moreover, what *After Capital* stresses repeatedly and narrates expansively is the constitutive role of colonialism in the history of capitalism up to the present.[5] Emphasising the connection between colonialism and unequal distribution, Couze foregrounds the legacies of colonialism, which he diagnoses as having been made invisible in many accounts of connected crises (Venn 2018, pp. 69, 75). This allows for a wider vista in his patient relocating of the genealogy of power from classical sovereignty to governmentality and biopolitics.

In Couze's words, in order for there to be radical change in the way "we" inhabit the world, what is at stake is to find new foundations, "ones which dethrone the narratives that throughout history have authorised systems of exploitation and forms of violence, or that have failed to provide clear enough principles for opposing systemic inequalities and the mindless plunder of the earth" (2018, p. 125). In other words, to put it telegraphically, the book consists of two key moves. The first is would be to carry out what Couze names a "transcolonial genealogy" (see also Venn 2009). This gesture, in a Foucauldian vein, is one of counter-history or counter-narrative: a "critical genealogy of the present" that disrupts the conventional narrative of "progress" and is in alliance with the politics of resistance and history from below (see Venn 2018, p. 87).[6] The second move would be to seek alternative worlds, present and future. This is most legible in the last two chapters, "Towards a World in Common" and "New Foundations for Postcapitalist Worlds". This involves, among other things, "an ontology grounded in the idea of being as being-with and being alongside extended to all life, an ethics of co-responsibility for the other consistent with such an ontology, an epistemology that departs from assumptions of mastery over others and over nature, and that rejects anthropocentrism, self-centredness and scientisms such as geneticism and biologisms" (p. 140). Imagining postcapitalist worlds would entail moving beyond attempts to simply "fix" or "improve" capitalism (p. 140); instead, it involves "the rejection of any understanding of the worlding of a world that neglects its essentially co-implicate character", as well as a radical decentering of the subject—one that works through but also moves beyond critical theory, structuralism and poststructuralism, supplementing these with research from across a diversity of sciences that emphasises "relationality, co-

emergence, co-constitution, complexity, cooperation, that is, […] the co-implication of all beings in a world in common" (p. 127).

What, practically speaking, would such worlds look like? Couze gives us a few indicative pointers, all coupled with a healthy dose of caution. For instance: the establishment of property regimes that prioritise commons and common pool resources; democratic decision-making processes that might take the form of radical democracy, federalism even, and decentralised networks; the establishment of alternative technologies away from fossil fuels and through open-access data; and, vitally, "the 'liberation' of knowledges that have been captured by the appropriative machine to […] constitute cognitive commons" (p. 142).

So, the world is gone, I must carry you. Or, rather, worlds are gone, and countless "I"s must carry countless "you"s. On the very last page of the book is an endnote that reads as follows: "I had originally envisaged discussing the practical dimension of postcapitalist transformation in an eventual Part 2 of *After Capital*. For health reasons, I cannot now do this" (p. 143, n.1). Unreadable for many of us, this brief note is, and indeed should be, incalculable for anyone. It is a powerful injunction, premised upon a seemingly limitless generosity of spirit and mind—a gift that demands that, with *After Capital* to help us, we continue to re-invent means through which to create and to carry, and be carried by, alternative worlds.

## Notes

[1] See also Derrida (2011, pp. 259–60). For a list of references for Derrida's numerous discussions of this line from Celan's poem, see Saghafi (2017, pp. 274–75, n. 3).

[2] To elucidate, Derrida's point here is as follows: for Freud, mourning consists in carrying the other (and their world) within oneself. In other words, introjection, interiorization of remembrance and idealization. Whereas melancholy is premised upon the failure or pathology of—or rather, a certain protest against—the interiorization of mourning. For Derrida, keeping the other within the self, reducing the other to the self, is to already forget the other. Hence the necessity of a failure of mourning. See Derrida (2005, p. 160).

[3] At stake here is the use of language: many "end of world" narratives employ the word "world" in the sense of "globe," i.e., referring to the entire planet in its universal context. As Oliver (2015, pp. 30–31) writes, whereas "world" can also more narrowly connote "the world of human beings, or perhaps the worlds of particular species of beings, and maybe even the unique world of each singular living being. Indeed, *world* allows for multiple worlds constituted by cultural and historical differences (among others)."

[4] Personal email correspondence, 5 February 2019.

[5] Here, in particular, the book draws from an earlier, invaluable article (Venn 2009).

[6] This also resonates with decolonial counter-histories (see Venn 2018, p. 71).

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