

‘Beware! The end is nigh!’

Why global capitalism is tipping towards collapse, and how we can act for a decent future¹

by **GRANT MORGAN**²

PART 1: HISTORY LESSONS

The fable behind the stereotype

Global capitalism tipping towards collapse? “C’mon,” goes the standard response, “don’t you know that’s been predicted for ages and it’s never happened?”

That standard response is reinforced by the mass media’s visual cliché of some crazed guy, usually wearing a monk’s cassock, preaching the Apocalyptic message: “Beware! The end is nigh!”

Behind this sneering stereotype lurk denials that global capitalism could suffer the same fate as all past civilisations.

Early capitalism grew amidst the slow-motion collapse of medieval Europe³ which, after lasting for a millennium, was being overwhelmed by market forces. Feudalism’s forerunner, the ancient slave-based epoch, lasted 4,000 years until the Western Roman Empire⁴ fell quickly in 476 after several centuries of internal decay and border wars.

Before perishing, past civilisations spawned fables about their everlasting nature. Those fables gave popular legitimacy to societies divided by class, gender, ethnicity, nationality and religion.

The tradition of ages is continued by capitalism. According to its ideologues, “flexibility” is so embedded in capitalism that collapse becomes impossible. Yet such claims fly in the face of history. We need to do our own thinking so that our minds cannot be colonised by anyone’s fables.

Wild times of late feudalism

In the late Middle Ages, Europe’s land-based hierarchies were disintegrating under pressure from unstoppable market forces. Feudal society was collapsing before capitalism had solidified into a new type of civilisation.⁵

The dieback of half Europe’s population from famines, pandemics and wars⁶ gave life to the independence of landed serfs from their feudal masters. A swing from subsistence agriculture to farming for profit led to the enclosure of peasant commons. The growth of urban populations disconnected from feudal land relations was nurtured by industrial production and invention. An expansion of trade, money, credit and markets, fueled by colonisation of the New World, saw the rise of a capitalist class increasingly conscious of its own “manifest destiny”. A scientific, educational and cultural Renaissance⁷ fed into the Great Schism within Christianity, eroding Papal hegemony⁸. The rapid increase in the ranks of wage workers coincided with an explosion of popular uprisings across Europe⁹ and the rise of absolute monarchies, all diminishing feudalism’s nobility

and church.

From these wild times grew new productive forces which gave birth to new social forces, collapsing late feudalism's mode of production and hierarchy of privilege in the midst of chaos, wars and uprisings.

From our vantage point five centuries on, we know that medieval civilisation could never have survived these multiple crises as they converged into a perfect storm¹⁰.

Near the end of the Middle Ages, however, hardly anyone was calling for the creation of a capitalist world. It just happened out of a volatile mix of economic revolution, social combustion and historical accident.

Complex and random

Today, our ability to interpret world trends is exponentially greater than in the Middle Ages. So is our need to do so, given the potential for catastrophes like sea level rises, global hunger and war without end.

Despite our ability and our need to do serious forecasting, we must avoid the trap of downplaying the unknowable effects of random events and dynamic complexity.

"Events buck trends," says British historian Piers Brendon¹¹. "The past is a map, not a compass." Still, he admits, "history is our only guide"¹².

Random events, those happenings that nobody could foresee, always have a huge impact on historical outcomes. Let's be warned by a church in America whose electronic billboard declared: "[Our] class on prophecy has been cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances."¹³

Unstoppable forces leave large footprints whose direction we can see. Yet it is impossible to predict what historical outcomes might be produced by the infinite number of possible interactions of systemic crises and human actors and random events. This dynamic complexity would fool even a deterministic God.

Global capitalism is easily the most complex social system in history. This mega-complexity increases the likelihood of system failures, like the international financial implosion of 2008.¹⁴

But there's a flip side to complexity. It offers multiple layers of protection against a system failure leading onto system collapse. The financial implosion, therefore, sparked a multi-state mobilisation to ward off immediate world economic collapse.¹⁵

Convergence of five existential crises

Even the in-depth defence offered by layers of complexity could not protect capitalism from a convergence of existential crises¹⁶ which overwhelm multiple fronts of the world system.

Such a perfect storm is now gathering force.

Jorge Benstein, a Marxist economist in Argentina, points to the historic intersection of economic, food, energy and other "visible crises" which could strike the world system at any time. He concludes: "We are facing the convergence of numerous crises which in reality is one global gigantic crisis with different faces, never seen before in history."¹⁷

During the 20th century, capitalism was destabilised by occasional intersections of just two system-level social crises. Examples include the imperial and legitimacy crises flowing from both World Wars, and the Great Depression's profitability and legitimacy crises.

Today, for the first time since its birth 500 years ago, global capitalism is facing the convergence of five system-level crises embracing nature as well as society:

- Profitability crisis.
- Ecological crisis.
- Resource crisis.
- Imperial crisis.
- Legitimacy crisis.

As these five crises converge into a perfect storm they will tip global capitalism towards collapse amidst international revolutions and counter-revolutions.

We cannot foresee what type of new civilisation(s) will result from the unpredictably complex interactions of human actors with economic, ecological and imperial shifts.

But a perfect storm overwhelmed late feudalism, and there seems no reason to expect that late capitalism's fate will be any different. Given its global interconnectivity and the life-threatening scale of its problems, capitalism is likely to fall at speed compared to feudalism's slow-motion collapse.

So let's put the five existential crises of capitalism under the microscope.

PART 2: FOLLOW THE MONEY

Growth gene dominates capitalism's DNA

To understand the world system we need to see how capitalism arrived at where it is today.¹⁸

After finding solid form in the Italian city states of the late 15th century, capitalism's first great wave of geographical expansion had by 1650 rolled over most of Europe and some of the Americas. A second expansionary convulsion, from 1750 to 1850, incorporated the rest of the Americas, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, South Asia and parts of West Africa and South-East Asia. During the half-century up to 1900, an orgy of imperial conquest fueled capitalism's final wave of expansion into East Asia, Oceania and the rest of Africa and South-East Asia.

For the first time in human history, all societies on all continents were absorbed into a single world economy. On its economic foundations grew capitalist states juggling national sovereignty and international connectivity.

This relentless geosocial expansion points towards the system's key dynamic: capital, and thus capitalism, must grow to survive. The growth gene in capitalism's DNA was dominant from Day One, compelling an eternal accumulation of capital for its own sake.

The essence of capitalism, in the famous shorthand of Karl Marx¹⁹, is M-C-M'. Money capital (M) is exchanged for commodities (C) which are transformed into new commodities embodying the fruits of labour and then sold in the market for more money (M'). And so the cycle continues forever. Any interruption in the unending accumulation of capital throws the system into crisis.²⁰

Immanuel Wallerstein, pioneer of world-systems analysis, puts it this way: "In this system, past accumulations were 'capital' only to the extent they were used to accumulate more of the same."²¹

The interwoven worlds of work and nature were colonised by the market forces of rival capitalists and states. Ever more things were given a money value and turned into commodities. Ever more people became commodified wage workers. Wages were much lower in value than the surplus

produced by workers, but captured by capitalists and turned into profits through market exchanges. This “free lunch” for capitalists, bolstered by imperial pillage of the global South²², bankrolled the reinvestment of profits, fueling an endless cycle of capital accumulation. Overseeing that cycle were a colourful mix of politicians whose souls were all mortgaged to the Dictatorship of the Profitariat. The fusion of government and business went hand-in-hand with the conglomeration of capital into global oligarchies.

There were constant threats to capitalism’s accumulation cycle, including economic slumps, political crises, inter-state warfare, popular revolts, national liberation conflicts, Communist²³ revolutions and Karl Marx. While their impact was often significant, the world system always managed to claw back an adjusted equilibrium.

Three strands of neoliberalism

Alternating highs and lows in system profitability, with each phase typically lasting a decade or two, were a longtime feature of capitalist evolution.

After World War II ended in 1945 there were more than two decades of feverish economic growth and ultra-high profitability.²⁴ This global Long Boom bankrolled expansions of state services in rich countries and state capitalist industrial projects in poor countries.

In 1971 the collapse of the Bretton Woods international finance architecture²⁵ marked the onset of a stubborn decline in system profitability. Global capitalism spiralled into profit shock. The previously rare virus of stagflation migrated around the world.²⁶

Karl Marx was clear on the root cause of capitalism’s economic crises. He stated: “The ultimate reason for all real crises always remains the poverty and restricted consumption of the masses as opposed to the drive of capitalist production to develop the productive forces as though only the absolute consuming power of society constituted their limit.”²⁷

Yet global capitalism’s response to a crisis embedded in grassroots “poverty” was to make the masses even poorer, giving a temporary boost to profitability by feeding the demons of crises to come.

Led by US president Ronald Reagan²⁸, and promoted by big business everywhere, governments embraced the agenda of neoliberalism.²⁹ This agenda had three main strands:

- Privatisation.³⁰
- Globalisation.³¹
- Financialisation.³²

While none of these strands was new, the key difference was their elevation into strategic imperatives.

In rich states of the global North, grassroots outrage was mostly directed at the first strand, privatisation, which undercut the historic welfare state gains of social democratic parties.

In poor states of the global South, grassroots outrage was mostly directed at the second strand, globalisation, which undercut the historic economic development gains of national independence movements.

As time has passed, however, it seems that the greatest longrun impact on world trends is coming from neoliberalism’s third strand: financialisation.

A global Ponzi scheme

Government deregulation, starting in the rich economies and spreading outwards, stimulated a gigantic expansion of the financial sector. Its promise, in essence, was of bumper returns today from larger claims on tomorrow's income streams.

Fueling this promise were two things: first, income transfers from poor to rich, and second, upsurges of speculation in asset bubbles³³. Both flowed from the neoliberal agenda enforced by social democratic as well as conservative governments.

Despite rising productivity in America, the world's biggest economy, real hourly wages have fallen over the past generation. In 1973 US real hourly wages peaked at \$20.30, tumbling to \$16.39 in 2008.³⁴ A similar story can be told for most other countries since the onset of neoliberalism.

Capitalist capture of a greater portion of the surplus created by workers fed an accumulation cycle increasingly reliant on financial speculation to maximise profits.

At the same time, workers in America and other rich states offset their declining wages through increasing levels of home mortgage borrowing and credit card spending.

The combined result was a phenomenal rise in debt ratios, especially across rich economies. Total US debt as a percentage of gross domestic product soared from around 130% in 1950 to 370% in 2009.³⁵

International financial transactions climbed to 60 times the level of global gross domestic product.³⁶

Big banks grew ever more powerful within global capitalism. For instance, America's six largest banks now have assets in excess of 63% of gross domestic product. This is a significant increase from even 2006, when the same banks owned assets worth around 55% of GDP, and a complete transformation from just 15 years ago when the six largest banks held combined assets of only 17% of GDP.³⁷

As debt creation provided the security for further debt creation, the increasingly shaky edifice took on the look of a global Ponzi scam.³⁸ But the perpetuators of this international rort were shielded as never before by government laws, corporate politicians and state officials.³⁹

Feeding the unfinancial monster

On 18 September 2008, US Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke⁴⁰ and US Treasury secretary Henry Paulson⁴¹ made an emergency dash to Capitol Hill. There they told senior politicians that the United States and other major economies were just "days away from a complete meltdown of our financial system". Lawmakers at the heart of the world's most powerful empire were left stunned.⁴²

But central bankers knew what they had to do: bail out the financiers. Since September 2008, in the greatest orgy of debt creation in history, central bankers have pumped countless hundreds of billions of dollars into the financial sectors of America, China, Europe and elsewhere.⁴³

"The first rule of central banking," says US economist James K. Galbraith⁴⁴, is that "when the ship starts to sink, central bankers must bail like hell."⁴⁵

What the Great Bailout means is a global transfer of liabilities from private financiers to central banks on an unprecedented scale. A breathing space has been won by shifting the problem.

But the problem has not been solved. Just the opposite. Governments are feeding the unfinancial monster with such magnitudes of bailout money that bankruptcy is looming for many states, especially the United States, Britain and Europe's PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain).

Decades ago, the limits and risks of financialisation were indicated by two US socialists, Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy. At some point, they said, the rising mountain of debt would grow

beyond the capacity of governments to intervene effectively as lender of last resort. When that point was reached, capitalism faced the collapse of the entire financialised regime of accumulation.⁴⁶

Fallout from the 2008 financial implosion has compelled even some capitalists to start visualising that point.

Todd Harrison⁴⁷, a longtime Wall Street financier, aptly asks: “If sovereign lifeguards saved corporations when the financial crisis first hit, who is left to save the lifeguards?”⁴⁸

And Britain’s neoliberal journal *The Economist* points to growing dangers in shifting the problem from banks to states. The editor sounded a grim warning in February 2010: “Last year it was banks; this year it is countries. We, like the markets, are preoccupied with the growing dangers to the world economy. Sovereign risk in countries such as Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland is a large part of it, but there are also good reasons to worry about how governments are going to manage the difficult business of withdrawing the stimulus that has kept economies going.”⁴⁹

So temporary respite from world financial breakdown has been purchased at the price of greater system instability. That instability poses great risks to future profitability and the accumulation cycle upon which capitalism’s survival depends.

Marxists dispute why, not what

Can global capitalism stage an orderly retreat from its risky financialisation strategy? Can the world system be reformed so that profitability is more firmly anchored to the real economy?

That does not seem possible. The shift to financialisation occurred because the real economy could no longer generate sufficient profits to sate capitalism’s growth gene. This still holds true, say most Marxists. Where they disagree is over why.

Among different Marxist interpretations of the longrun profitability crisis in the real economy are these five strong contenders:

- Profitability is under siege from structural stagnation caused by the global growth of monopolies, forcing ever more investments into financial bubbles rather than the real economy.
- The industrialisation of China, India, Brazil and other formerly peripheral countries, funded in large part by investments from the global North, is trimming the inflated profits previously extracted by corporate monopolies in core states.
- The increasing ratio of capital inputs as compared with labour inputs in the global competition for higher unit productivity is hollowing out the extraction of surplus value from labour exploitation.
- The transformation of surplus value into actual profits through market exchanges is being blighted by unprecedented wealth polarisation and the consequent weakening of consumer purchasing power.
- Profits are being squeezed by longrun rises in wages, taxes and environmental costs which flow from the increasing social weight of workers on a world scale and the necessity to mitigate climate change and other ecological disasters.

Each of these five interpretations seem to have strengths in different areas. Perhaps this just highlights the complexity of global capitalism.

'Doomsday cycle' risks world 'collapse'

America is now immersed in a "doomsday cycle" where banks use borrowed money to take massive risks in a drive for big shareholder dividends and big management bonuses, and when the risks go wrong the banks receive taxpayer bailouts from the government.

So says a panel of economists, financiers and officials in a March 2010 report commissioned by the Roosevelt Institute, a mainstream US think tank.

"Risk-taking by banks," the report cautions, "will soon be larger than ever."

Despite calling on the Obama administration to make planned reforms of the US financial sector more stringent, the report admits: "Our government leaders have shown little capacity to fix the flaws in our market system."

The report declares: "In 2008-09, we came remarkably close to another Great Depression. Next time we may not be so 'lucky'. The threat of the doomsday cycle remains strong and growing."

The next financial shock may spark a "calamitous global collapse", warns the report.⁵⁰

State nationalises economic crisis

The 2008 financial implosion caused the same sort of "existential crisis" for neoliberal economists as 1970s stagflation caused for social democratic economists, says Larry Elliott, economics editor of Britain's *Guardian* newspaper. The "structural weaknesses" behind the crisis "remain untackled", leaving the economy "sick".⁵¹

With the accumulation cycle suffering from hardening of the arteries, capitalism becomes more dependent on financialisation. This risky stimulant, legalised by the state, increases the frequency and severity of economic seizures.

After each seizure, the government doctor is called in to prescribe more taxpayer-funded stimulants, a cure that soon worsens the disease. In effect, the state nationalises economic crisis, guaranteeing the bad habits of "too big to fail" corporations who drag the economy into chronic failure.

Propping up big business with government protection rackets is an inevitable outgrowth of capitalism. US liberal Barry Lynn notes: "Our political economy is run by a compact elite" who "fuse the power" of government and corporations in ways that allow members of the elite to decide "who wins, who loses and who pays".⁵²

Not surprisingly, over the history of capitalism, those hardest hit by economic crises have always been the grassroots of poor states and the workers of rich states. They have often taken to the streets, and sometimes the barricades, to resist job losses, income reductions and government austerity measures.

Since the 2008 financial implosion, and state bailouts of bankrupt corporations, grassroots anger in Europe and America has been focused as much on politicians as capitalists.

That's an early sign of how state nationalisation of economic crisis will change the nature of popular protest in times to come. Of necessity, protests over economic hardships will take on the look of uprisings against governments. The institutional subservience of politicians to capitalists will stir people to insurrections that cross national borders.

'Make the rich pay for the crisis!'

"Make the rich pay for the crisis!" That chant rang out from multitudes of Greek unionists in 70

cities on 24 February 2010. From a total workforce of five million, two million were striking against the PASOK social democratic government's austerity plan to fund the bailout of Greek financiers.

"People are outraged. Their blood is boiling! Now there's a mood to escalate the strikes. We shouldn't pay for the crisis, the ones who caused it should pay." So said Vagia Gouma, a public sector worker taking part in the mammoth march in Athens.⁵³

The day before, huge rallies took place across Spain's cities in opposition to the PSOE social democratic government's crisis measures on behalf of the rich elites.

A week later, half a million public sector unionists in Portugal went on strike against a pay freeze and other budget cutting by the PS social democratic government. "There's a huge amount of discontent," reported Manuel Carvalho da Silva, general secretary of the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers.⁵⁴

This cross-border wave of social unrest was bolstered by high-profile strikes of German and French unionists.

"Europe's workers are becoming increasingly restive," notes Sean O'Grady, economics editor of *The Independent* newspaper in Britain. He spoke of "the start of the greatest demonstration of public unrest seen on the continent since the revolutionary fervour of 1968".⁵⁵

On the other side of the globe, China's grassroots are growing more restive. According to Beijing's own figures, almost certainly understated, incidents of "mass unrest" grew from 8,709 in 1993 to over 90,000 in each of the past three years. And that's despite a harsh state ban on independent unions and parties.

"More and more evidence shows that the situation is getting more and more tense, more and more serious," reports Yu Jianrong, director of social issues research at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences⁵⁶, an affiliate of the State Council of China. He said the Communist Party's obsession with retaining state power through "violence" and "ideology" was taking China to the brink of "revolutionary turmoil".⁵⁷

Different political systems in Europe and China have produced different types of government, one parliamentary, the other authoritarian. Yet both forms of capitalist administration are now facing a similar challenge: popular uprisings. The obscenity of governments protecting the rich at great cost to the poor is stirring up a social contagion. What cannot be foreseen is how far and how fast the contagion will spread around the globe.

PART 3: INTO THE FIRE

'If the climate were a bank'

"If the climate were a bank, they would have saved it by now." So said Hugo Chavez, the socialist president of Venezuela⁵⁸, inside the recent Copenhagen climate summit⁵⁹, echoing a slogan chanted by 100,000 protesters outside.

The governments of America and Europe have spent 313 times more on the Great Bailout than on climate change programmes.⁶⁰ These corporate politicians well know that climate change threatens life on Earth, yet they put profits first.

According to professor Kevin Anderson, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research⁶¹, only around 10% of the planet's population will survive if global temperatures rise by 4C. The current UK Met Office projections are that 4C could be exceeded by 2060, and 6C by

century's end.

The prospects are “terrifying”, says Anderson. “For humanity it’s a matter of life or death.”⁶²

2,500 climate experts from 80 countries issued a statement in March 2009 saying that, without strong carbon reduction targets, “abrupt or irreversible” shifts in climate may occur which will be “very difficult” for societies to cope with. Their statement was delivered to a preparatory conference of the Copenhagen summit.⁶³

Nine months later the Copenhagen summit ended in failure, with no binding agreement to reduce carbon emissions. A cabal of rich states, led by US president Barack Obama⁶⁴, had sabotaged the proceedings.

“The governments of the elites have no solutions to offer,” observed the Climate Justice Now! coalition⁶⁵, an eyewitness to the summit.⁶⁶

Deep fracture inside world system

Copenhagen exposed a deep fracture inside the world system. Delegates from poor states chanted “We will not die quietly” as they staged walkouts in protest at the sabotage of rich states.⁶⁷

This system fracture reflects the geosocial inequality of climate change.

The rich states, which produced 75% of the carbon now in the atmosphere, sucked much of their wealth from poor states through a mix of market forces and military power. Now the poor states, mostly sited in geographical zones forecast to be hit first and worst by climate change, are being deserted by the rich states. In keeping with market traditions, the global North is disputing and devaluing its ecological debt to the global South.

80% of the planet's population reside in countries classed as “developing”. These 5.6 billion people live mostly in poverty and increasingly in urban slums. Now many are on the front line of climate catastrophe. Their survival will hinge on their struggle to “change the system, not the climate”, as protesters chanted at Copenhagen.

“The main historic agent and initiator of a new epoch of ecological revolution,” says US socialist John Bellamy Foster⁶⁸, could well be found in “the third world masses most directly in line to be hit first” by climate change. Like Marx's proletariat, they have “nothing to lose” from making the “radical changes” needed to avoid disaster. Foster points towards poor people in low-lying areas facing rising sea levels, such as India's Kerala state, China's Guangdong industrial region and Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. With many of them being wage workers, they potentially form the “global epicentre of a new environmental proletariat”.⁶⁹

The rights of Mother Earth

So who can inspire and mobilise the masses of the global South as the climate catastrophe lurches closer? Naturally, someone who looks and sounds and thinks like them.

Evo Morales, the first indigenous and socialist president of Bolivia⁷⁰, has stepped into the void left by Copenhagen's failure.

Morales is convening a People's World Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth's Rights in Bolivia in April 2010. Invited without strings are national governments, UN agencies, social movements and climate scientists.⁷¹

Key objectives of the People's World Conference are:

- Analyse the structural and systemic causes of climate change.
- Propose substantive measures for the well-being of humanity in harmony with nature.
- Decide on a draft Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth.
- Work towards a People’s World Referendum on Climate Change.
- Move towards the establishment of a Climate Justice Tribunal.
- Define strategies for mobilisation against climate change and for the rights of Mother Earth.⁷²

According to Pablo Solon, Bolivia’s UN ambassador, Morales has called the conference with the aim of altering the international balance of forces and so changing the agenda on climate and other eco-issues.⁷³

Will these aims be advanced by the People’s World Conference? Only time will tell. But times of change do call forward prophets of change who can mobilise the forces of change.

As Christophe Aguiton of the European Social Forum said in reference to the Bolivian president’s initiative: “In periods of uncertainty and transition, such as the times we are in, initiatives that could be seen as crazy or unrealistic are, from time to time, those that change the course of history.”⁷⁴

Profiteering from pollution

In the centres of world power, a very different story is unfolding. Washington, Berlin, London and other capitals of capitalism are promoting a market “solution” to climate change.

A global carbon market⁷⁵ is being pushed hard by the political and corporate elites of rich states. Their aim, in the words of a climate justice coalition, is to “create opportunities for profit rather than to reduce emissions”.⁷⁶

Carbon trading transforms the planet’s atmosphere into a commodity, opening it up to speculative bubbles. According to a 2009 report by Friends of the Earth⁷⁷, carbon trading could give rise to the world’s largest financial derivatives market.⁷⁸

Carbon markets should be popularly named pollution markets. They allow a polluter to buy the right to continue emitting carbon, and to sell the right to pollute to other emitters.

Pollution markets are, in effect, planned to fail, otherwise there would not be sufficient tradable emissions to keep the market profitable. It is the worst form of climate change denial. “Green capitalism”⁷⁹ is a dangerous mirage.

Government advisors who dispute official lies about carbon trading are being gagged and hounded. That was the experience of Clive Spash, an ecological economist in Australia,⁸⁰ who was muzzled and threatened by his boss at the Commonwealth Scientific Industrial Research Organisation. Spash had to resign from CSIRO in order to publish his research paper critical of carbon trading.

In this paper, Spash reveals how carbon permits have become “a serious financial instrument in markets turning over billions of dollars a year”. Yet the “reality” of carbon trading is “far removed from the assumptions of economic theory and the promise of saving resources”. Spash says “corporate power” has shaped carbon market design and operation, giving “the potential for manipulation to achieve financial gain, while showing little regard for environmental or social consequences”. His conclusion? “The focus on such markets is creating a distraction from the need for changing human behaviour, institutions and infrastructure.”⁸¹

In capitalist mythology, markets are the best way to find the “real” price of anything. This claim is proven false by the artificially low market price of fossil fuels, a result of capitalism’s looting of nature without factoring in real ecological and social costs.

Climate scientist James Hansen, director of Nasa's Goddard Institute for Space Studies,⁸² tells governments to face up to the truth: "As long as fossil fuels are the cheapest energy, their use will continue and even increase on a global basis. Fossil fuels are cheapest because they are not made to pay for their effects on human health, the environment and future climate."⁸³

'Now it's up to us all'

The huge banner held by young eco-activists as they blocked a coal train in Australia says it all: "Rich world greed wrecked Copenhagen. Now it's up to us all."⁸⁴

A just society would outlaw profiteering in the carbon emissions threatening life on Earth. That sense of morality is driving the swift rise of the youth-based climate justice movement in the rich states.

Speaking on behalf of 100,000 climate justice campaigners at Copenhagen, the Klimaforum09 declaration rejected the carbon market and other forms of "climate neocolonialism".⁸⁵

The deep fracture of the world system between rich and poor states is being replicated within rich states between ruling elites and radicalising youth. The ecological crisis is making allies of people who may not otherwise have felt a common bond.

You probably know the saying, "Those who the gods would destroy, they first make mad". It is mad for capitalism's elites to profiteer in carbon emissions that may doom them and their kind. They are ruling a system unable to save either itself, or its citizens, from destruction because capital accumulation is more urgent.

As that realisation sinks into the public mind, a popular cry will ring out: "We won't let you destroy us!" Then the climate crisis will also become a political crisis, a necessary tipping point being brought closer by the rapid growth of climate movements in poor states and among the youth of rich states.

Broad spectrum of ecological hazards

As the international climate movement blossoms, realisation will spread that global warming is just the most urgent threat among a broad spectrum of ecological hazards. Their common source is capitalism's destructive exploitation of nature without being held to account.

If the world's 3,000 biggest corporations were made to pay the cost of their environmental damage, says a United Nations report, in 2008 they would have faced a bill of \$2.2 trillion. That figure, larger than the national economies of all but seven countries in the world, would have gutted their profits by an average of one-third.⁸⁶

All operations of capitalism "violate" nature's laws of "restitution and metabolic restoration", notes John Bellamy Foster. While the most serious ecological threat is "widespread, multi-faceted" climate change, "the global environmental crisis involves manifold problems and cannot be reduced to global warming alone".

Foster includes these ecological "hazards":

- Species extinction.
- Loss of tropical forests.
- Destruction of ocean ecology.
- Disappearing supplies of fresh water.
- Despoilment of lakes and rivers.

- Detrimental effects of large dams.
- Desertification.
- Toxic wastes.
- Acid rain.
- Urban congestion.
- World hunger.
- Overpopulation.

Together with climate change, “these threats constitute the greatest challenge to the survival of humanity since its prehistory”, he states.

Since “fundamental” changes in capitalism are “off limits”, the system can only offer technological responses to ecological problems, concludes Foster. “But any technological gains in efficiency in the use of natural resources are overwhelmed by the extensive and ecologically disruptive pattern of growth that characterizes this rapacious system. Hence, capitalism is a failed system where ecological sustainability is concerned.”⁸⁷

PART 4: RUNNING ON EMPTY

Peak everything in the 21st century

US ecologist Richard Heinberg⁸⁸, a senior fellow at the Post Carbon Institute⁸⁹, captured a spreading mood of anxiety in the title of his 2007 book *Peak Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Declines*.

A deluge of research findings reveal that oil and gas,⁹⁰ fresh water,⁹¹ at least eleven minerals (including lead, mercury, phosphate rock, potash and selenium)⁹² and other resources essential to industrial capitalism have either peaked or are close to doing so. Global coal production could peak within two decades.⁹³

Capitalism’s growth gene has spurred a reckless looting and spoilage of nature, particularly since the invention of the oil well drill 150 years ago. The world system could not allow sensible conservation measures to impede its insane plunder of the planet.

Now the onset of a broad spectrum resource crisis is about to shove capitalist society hard up against the limits of capitalist growth. Probably the crunch will be first felt in soaring oil prices, triggering economic chaos and geopolitical shifts.

Over the past year, a barrel of crude oil has doubled in price to \$78. Two leading oil traders, Bank of America and Barclays Capital, have told their clients to brace for relentless escalations in crude prices over the decade.

“Oil has the potential to flirt with \$100 this year,” says Amrita Sen, an oil expert at Barclays. “We forecast an average price of \$137 by 2015.”

Driving these surging prices are falls in supply alongside longrun rises in world demand. Francisco Blanch, from Bank of America, reports that output from non-OPEC states is falling by 4.9% each year, despite Russia’s reserves. OPEC states can plug only a quarter of the gap.

“The oil spike brought the global economy to a shuddering halt in 2008,” notes British economic commentator Ambrose Evans-Pritchard. “This time the crunch may hit before the West has fully recovered. Whatever happens, the US, Europe and Japan will soon transfer a chunk of their wealth to the petro-powers. It is a new world order.”⁹⁴

Searching for a miracle

September 2009 saw the publication of Richard Heinberg's 80-page report on net energy levels and the fate of industrial society, significantly titled *Searching for a Miracle*. Here 18 known energy sources are analysed, factoring in their energy returned on energy invested (EROEI).⁹⁵

The world's current energy regime, mainly oil, gas and coal, is "unsustainable", Heinberg notes. It is a "commonly held assumption" that alternative energy sources will be readily available, so long as sufficient investments are made in them, allowing life to "go on essentially as it is".

But is this really the case? "Alas, we think not," he declares. "The fundamental disturbing conclusion of the report is that there is little likelihood that either conventional fossil fuels or alternative energy sources can reliably be counted on to provide the amount and quality of energy that will be needed to sustain economic growth – or even current levels of economic activity – during the remainder of the current century."

That being so, he says, "a sensible transition energy plan will have to emphasize energy conservation above all".⁹⁶

Heinberg's report offers detailed, believable and necessary research on net energy practicalities. That's the up side.

And here's the down side: it's a technocratic response to problems, so does not put social change alongside energy change. Thus Heinberg is left with his "disturbing conclusion" that existing society will face an energy deficit in the 21st century.

False hope of conservation

Heinberg's promotion of energy conservation is a false hope.

Nearly three decades ago Leonard Brookes, chief economist at the UK Atomic Energy Authority, showed how attempts to reduce energy consumption by increasing energy efficiency would simply raise demand for energy in the wider economy.⁹⁷

Brookes had confirmed the 1865 findings of William Jevons on British coal consumption, widely known as the Jevons Paradox.⁹⁸

Only heavy government taxation on corporate energy use will reduce energy consumption through depressing profit levels and economic growth.

Such a tax would require political restrictions on the accumulation cycle, a socialist proposal absent from Heinberg's conclusions.

We need to reinforce technocratic responses, like Heinberg's, with socialist proposals. We need to say something Bill Clinton would never say: "It's the system, stupid!"⁹⁹

Hooked on fossil energy

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen,¹⁰⁰ a trailblazer for ecological economics, is best known for his 1971 book *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*.¹⁰¹

In this book, Georgescu-Roegen says that humanity's existence ultimately depends on just "two resources of wealth". The first is "the finite stock of mineral resources in the earth's crust", such as oil, and the second is "a flow of solar radiation".¹⁰²

Capitalism's transition to industrialisation was a revolutionary break with the way human societies related to nature.

For the first time in history, the flow of solar radiation was no longer the main energy supply for the system of production and satisfaction of human needs. Instead, industrialisation was powered by concentrated (or mineralised) stocks of energy in the earth's crust, which we call fossil fuels.

Fossil energy perfectly suited the imperatives of capital accumulation. Locality lost meaning with global transport systems powered by fossil fuels. Ready access to energy resources meant business could (re)locate anywhere in the world. The constant intensity of fossil energy impelled a constant intensity of work rhythms.

The switch to fossil fuels allowed capitalism to break free from historical limitations of space and time. Elemental market forces penetrated every geographical zone. Previously unthinkable extremes of the exploitation of labour and nature became possible, and thus necessary.

Despite marginal forays into renewable energy projects, 21st century capitalism remains hooked on fossil energy.

Here are the current ratios of world primary energy production¹⁰³:

- Crude oil 34%.
- Coal 26.5%.
- Natural gas 20.9%.
- Combustible renewables (biomass) 9.8%.
- Nuclear 5.9%.
- Hydroelectric 2.2%.
- Other (mainly wind and solar) 0.7%.

So fossil fuels (oil, coal and natural gas) today produce over 80% of the planet's energy. And fossil fuels are not just essential to capitalism's industry, transport and urbanisation. Over the last generation or two, oil has also become the basis of market agriculture.¹⁰⁴

Leaving aside biomass¹⁰⁵, which in its present forms probably cause more ecological problems than solutions, under 3% of world energy is currently produced by true renewables, mainly hydropower. Of that tiny portion, less than 1% comes from wind and solar power.

Can capitalism switch to renewables?

Facing the rapid depletion of fossil fuels, could global capitalism make an emergency switch to renewable energy? Before answering that question we need an acquaintance with four energy factors: net energy, unit cost, potential scale and output consistency.

EROEI, energy returned on energy invested, measures net energy. For investment in an energy source to be worthwhile, EROEI needs to be more than 1:1, and the higher the ratio the better. Here is the EROEI of fossil fuels and true renewables:

- Coal 50:1.
- Oil 19:1.
- Natural gas 10:1.
- Hydropower 11:1 to 267:1.
- Wind 18:1.
- Solar photovoltaics 3.75:1 to 10:1.
- Concentrating solar thermal 1.6:1.

- Tidal ~6:1
- Wave 15:1

The unit cost (measured in cents per kWh) of existing power generation in America is:

- Coal 2 to 4
- Natural gas 4 to 7
- Hydropower 1
- Wind 4.5 to 10
- Solar photovoltaics 21 to 83
- Concentrating solar thermal 6 to 15
- Tidal 10
- Wave 12

Here is today's global annual electricity production from fossil fuels and true renewables, followed by their potential scale of electricity generation (measured in TWh):

- Fossil fuels (oil, coal and natural gas) 11,455 / at or near peak
- Hydropower 2,894 / 8,680
- Wind 160 / 83,000
- Solar photovoltaics 8 / 2,000
- Concentrating solar thermal 1 / 100,000
- Tidal 0.6 / 450
- Wave ~0 / 750

Integrating the three energy factors of net energy, unit cost and potential scale delivers a clear verdict on alternative energy. Wind and solar thermal are the only likely contenders against fossil fuels, going by known technologies.

With optimum geographical placement, wind and solar thermal can produce net energy returns nearing those of fossil fuels, although often there is a deficit. They can already generate power at prices approaching those of fossil fuels, although often there is a gap, sometimes largish. And they have the global potential to produce more energy than fossil fuels.

But what about the fourth energy factor, output consistency? That's where wind and solar thermal fall down. They suffer from intermittency. They cannot guarantee a consistent output of energy.

In the assessment of Richard Heinberg, no single energy source is capable of replacing fossil fuels "at least until the problem of intermittency can be overcome". The "daunting" core problem is successfully replacing the "concentrated store of solar energy" in fossil fuels with a "*flux* of solar energy" in such forms as sunlight and wind. (Emphasis in the original.)¹⁰⁶

While solar power and wind generation are expanding, sometimes rapidly as in China, nowhere do these energy sources get treated as anything more than useful auxiliaries to fossil fuels. None of the powerful states have plans to make true renewables their sole or main energy source in the foreseeable future. They are focused on cornering the world's dwindling supplies of oil and gas.

Global capitalism's response to the energy crunch is as logically insane as its reaction to climate change. A technically feasible emergency programme of wind and solar energy construction cannot take priority because it would reduce profitability throughout the world economy.

The accumulation cycle would be destabilised since net energy returns from these renewables are sometimes lower than fossil fuels, and unit costs often higher, while output consistency cannot be guaranteed.

So global capitalism is trapped in a resource crisis of its own making, placing most people on the

planet at serious risk.

War of all against all

World population rose from 791 million in 1750 to 6.7 billion in 2008.¹⁰⁷ This growth surge flowed from industrial and agricultural revolutions which remain massively dependent on fossil fuels.

As Richard Heinberg shows, an energy deficit in the 21st century is looming under capitalism.

If this energy crunch hits hard before capitalism has been replaced by a system of solidarity, then what? Then the outlook would be dire for billions of Earth's citizens, especially those without wealth or in poor countries.

Powerful states would squander finite resources in infinite wars to monopolise dwindling resources. Their war machines, powered by fossil fuels, would divert resources away from renewable energy projects. In the wake of military devastation and resource loss, famine and disease would stalk the planet. Under the slogan of saving "our way of life", economies and societies would be militarised, undermining living standards and traditional liberties. To divert internal dissent and seize external resources, mainstream politicians would scapegoat "barbaric hordes" from "uncivilised lands".

It would become, as Thomas Hobbes wrote in his 1651 royalist classic *Leviathan*, a "war of every man against every man" where most lives were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".¹⁰⁸

If you think that sounds too grim, think about this: the end times of feudalism were the breeding ground for the Hundred Years War. During this semi-continuous war which actually spanned 116 years (1337-1453) two-thirds of the French population perished, standing armies were introduced into Western Europe for the first time in eight centuries, and the exclusionary ideology of nationalism came into vogue across England and France.¹⁰⁹

No smooth transition

The first stages of a new Hundred Years War are already underway, this time global in scale.

The white Republican conservative George W. Bush invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, key states in the oil-rich Middle East region, and began talking about a "Long War"¹¹⁰. Both occupations are being continued by the black Democratic liberal Barack Obama, who is extending the Afghan war into Pakistan.

Bush prepared the ground for war against oil-rich Iran, a policy continued by his successor. Now Obama is surrounding oil-rich Venezuela with US troops and warships.

The common strategy of Bush and Obama expresses the commitment of US elites to a military-economic offensive to control the territories, logistics and pricing of oil. Parading in the name of "energy security"¹¹¹, this petro-imperialism makes life insecure for people across the planet.

There is no possibility of a smooth transition to a world of renewable energy while the planet is ruled by fossil capitalism. The path to an alternative energy system merges with the path to an alternative social system.

As Marxist eco-philosopher Elmar Altvater says: "A society based on renewable instead of fossil energy sources must develop adequate technologies and above all social forms beyond capitalism. The relation of society to nature cannot remain the same when the fuel driving capitalist dynamics is running out."¹¹²

Self-organising for social prosperity

Around the world, a host of community initiatives are pointing the way towards “social forms beyond capitalism” and a new “relation of society to nature”.

Some examples: transition towns, community housing, free public transport, bike sharing, cooperative businesses, indigenous collectivism, localised renewable energy, open source technologies, social networking, free universities, unofficial currencies, barter systems, seed banks, community gardens, urban farming, permaculture startups, farmers markets, food banks, social unionism, doctors without borders, community medicine, free legal aid, the list is endless.

These community initiatives reveal dissatisfaction with the old ways. Their common driver is an expansion of social wealth, not private profit, within the limits of nature, not exceeding them.

Through self-organisation, they are showing how to create the material possibilities for social prosperity despite the threats of economic crisis, energy deficits and climate change.

But something crucial to success is missing: the ability to apply the lessons of these community initiatives on a much bigger scale.

Our scale must be global

Our scale needs to be large enough to reshape world civilisation into a system of human solidarity and ecological responsibility. And that will require internationally coordinated political action.

Some may say this is not possible. Yet what is even less possible to imagine is a decent life for all Earth’s citizens while capitalism rules the world. The choice will be stark for most humans during capitalism’s end time: organise system change or be crushed.

Others may say that internationally coordinated political action is counter-productive. Their pessimism about politics is understandable, given the many historical negatives of social democratic¹¹³ and Communist¹¹⁴ parties and national liberation movements¹¹⁵.

Even so, our salvation depends on overcoming pessimism. Optimism must be organised.

Per capita fossil consumption and carbon emissions are miles above global averages in the rich nations. Way over half of their economic and state activities would be senseless in a global society of solidarity. Redundant would be much of the existing finance, advertising, retail, transport, manufacturing, real estate, chemical, auto, oil, coal, weapons and security industries, along with most of the police and all of the military agencies (army, navy, air force, spies).

Eliminating economic and state activities dedicated to capital accumulation, not social prosperity, would slash fossil consumption and carbon emissions while freeing up workers and resources for green jobs.

To move on this scale would clearly require internationally coordinated political action.

The real question is: how do we prevent our necessarily global scale of self-organisation from being subverted into serving sectional interests rather than the social good? That comes down to participatory democracy, itself a reason for the widest possible participation in political action.

‘We’re not wired for autonomy’

Even establishment thinkers are flagging the end of the road for capitalism as we know it.

“We’re nearing an endgame for the modern age,” says Jeremy Rifkin, a key advisor to the European Union. He points to “singular events” over recent times which “signal the end”: spiking oil prices in

July 2008, food riots in 30 countries, financial implosion in September 2008 and “the breakdown in Copenhagen”.

Rifkin crafted the Third Industrial Revolution plan, a response to the triple crisis of economy, climate and energy, which was endorsed by the European Parliament in 2007 and is now being actioned by European Commission agencies. He is founding chair of the Third Industrial Revolution Global CEO Business Roundtable which embraces over 100 of the world’s leading companies in the fields of energy, transport, construction, architecture, real estate and information technology. Rifkin has authored eighteen books about science and technology’s impact on the economy, society and environment.¹¹⁶

“Failure runs very deep,” notes Rifkin. Copenhagen failed because every world leader was “thinking geopolitics” and thus “looking out for their nation’s self-interest”, rather than “thinking biosphere”.

Moving towards “biosphere politics” will mean transformations in capitalism’s governance, economics and consciousness.

“Governing units are going to change,” he predicts. “There’s going to be a shift towards continentalization.” The European Union is a “first attempt at organising a new frame of reference across continents”. In their early stages are “the Asian Union, African Union and South American Union”.

Given the “extreme dangers” of climate change, it is vital to “make thermodynamics the basis of economic theory”. Rifkin advocates “peer-to-peer sharing of energy across an intelligent grid system” in order to distribute renewable energy sources to every building on the planet.

“Distributed energy requires distributed capitalism, and that relies on the opposite view of human nature than that of market capitalism,” he states. “We have to share across the world for it to work.” But this “collaborative commons” is not “socialism”, just a necessary shift from the current “top-down, centralized economic system”.

New scientific discoveries reveal human nature to be different from that suggested by capitalism’s Enlightenment¹¹⁷ philosophers. “We are not wired for autonomy or utility,” says Rifkin. “We are a social species” which is “wired for empathy and social engagement”.

A shift to continental governance and distributed energy will globalise the scope of human empathy, he forecasts. “When energy and communications revolutions converge it creates new economic eras and changes consciousness dramatically by shifting our temporal and spatial boundaries, causing empathy to expand.”¹¹⁸

Mixed messages in dying days

Looking at Rifkin gives us insights into the evolving ideology of an intelligent capitalist.

He sees the perfect storm coming. He knows emergency measures are needed if capitalism is to have any chance of survival. So he advocates radical reforms of capitalism’s market and governance, which he knows will also transform society’s consciousness.

Yet nowhere does Rifkin challenge the power and wealth of capitalism’s rulers. His contradictory strategy is: change the dynamics of capitalism while saving its old elites.

Such mixed messages were typical of establishment reformers in the dying days of past civilisations.

For instance, in a desperate bid to expand the social base of absolute monarchy, Czarist Russia sold land to freed serfs while also expanding the power of their oppressors, landlords and capitalists.

These contradictory moves hastened the collapse and overthrow of the imperial order.¹¹⁹

Our response to Rifkin is simple. We seize on his good ideas, like distributed energy and global empathy, while rejecting his bad ones, like distributed capitalism and competing continents. That way, his good ideas can be put to good use, not subverted by loyalty to capitalism's rulers.

PART 5: CHANGING THE GUARD

Capitalism's first hegemon

If you could time travel back to the early era of capitalism and ask 17th century citizens to name the system's first hegemonic power, their answer might take you by surprise.

And the answer? The United Provinces, as the Netherlands was called in those days.¹²⁰

During the 17th century the United Provinces founded the first modern share market, dominated world trade, ruled the ocean waves, conquered a vast colonial empire and subordinated rival states through a mix of wars and alliances.

The United Provinces was the imperial hegemon for around one century until fading in the early part of the 18th century. Its decline was due to a combination of internal dissensions and the pressures of commercial and military conflicts with rivals, especially England.

The United Provinces has now mostly slipped from our historical consciousness. Yet the Roman Empire, much more remote from us in historical time and social structure, remains universally known. Why? Because the scale of the United Provinces seems ridiculously small compared with what we see as necessary for today's hegemon. Size does matter.

Superiority of scale

As the United Provinces declined in relative strength, England became the hegemon-in-waiting.¹²¹

A combination of geography, population, technologies, coal, factories, farming, canals, trade, banks, navy and colonies gave England a growing superiority of scale over rivals during the 18th century.

By the mid 19th century its manufacturing strength had earned England the title of "workshop of the world".

The world hegemony enjoyed by England lasted around one century, similar to the time span of the United Provinces. And the causes of England's demise were also similar: internal dissensions and the pressures of commercial and military conflicts with rivals, especially Germany.

England came out of World War I (1914-18)¹²² in a much weakened condition, eclipsed economically by the United States, clearly the new hegemon-in-waiting.¹²³

Rise, dominance, decline, ouster

Now we start to see a repeat pattern. One country rises to world hegemony on the back of economic and military strength that is significantly greater in scale than rival powers.

Its period of global hegemonic dominance lasts a century or so. During this time the hegemon keeps relative order in a fractious world system, thus fostering the process of capital accumulation.

Then begins a period of relative decline caused by a combination of internal rot and external pressures.

Following a turbulent period of transition the old hegemon is ousted as Top Dog. Its place is taken by the hegemon-in-waiting.

A date with Uncle Sam

So when did “Uncle Sam” first become widely recognised as the global hegemon?

Maybe it was 1918, when the United States emerged as the big winner from World War I and was treated by other powers as deal maker at the Treaty of Versailles.¹²⁴

Or maybe it was 1929, when the US dollar eclipsed sterling as the world’s leading reserve currency.¹²⁵

Or maybe it was 1935, when European powers looked to United States leadership in standing up to Hitler, and when Washington wouldn’t, nobody else nipped Nazi expansionism in the bud.¹²⁶

Or maybe it was 1941, when America’s entry into World War II (1939-45)¹²⁷ was hailed as the beginning of the end for the fascist coalition of Germany, Italy and Japan.¹²⁸

1918, 1929, 1935, 1941. It’s a judgement call. The important point is that America’s global hegemony will be nearing an end if the same one century time frame holds as true as for the two previous Top Dogs. And if similar causes of decline are eroding US strength.

Poor performance in recent times

A key performance indicator for hegemonies is how well they rally the world system against challenges to their supremacy and strategies.

Facing serious crises of profitability, ecology and resources, the US hegemon has done poorly in recent years. Very poorly.

The international financial implosion of 2008 began in Wall Street, undermining US credibility as the arbitrator of neoliberalism.

The US-led bank bailouts bought a breathing space, but only at the cost of greater system instability, open splits with longtime allies (such as Germany) and an erosion of popular legitimacy.

China revved its growth engine in large measure by defying US pressure to revalue the yuan, yet Washington has not retaliated. Why? Beijing owns 10% of US public debt.¹²⁹ That’s enough currency leverage to bankrupt America if Communist China’s capitalist rulers so chose.¹³⁰

Since China’s economy would also suffer from any move by Beijing to dump greenbacks, it will remain an implicit threat unless Washington takes extreme action. There are parallels here with the Cold War nuclear standoff between Washington and Moscow. What message does that send?

One of Obama’s election pledges was to lead America out of the climate change denials of the Bush era.

Obama’s actions have shown what his pledge really meant: promote a global pollution market while continuing the Bush policy of protecting US production of coal, the biggest carbon pollutant.

Even to other rich states, this sounds like a mixed message which will be hard to sell, given public sourness with financiers who sucked up bailouts and now look to profit from carbon trading.

Meanwhile, most poor states are in revolt against Washington's climate strategy, a split with the potential to destabilise the world system.

Control over Middle East oil resources is the lynchpin of US petro-imperialism.

Following George W's proclamation of "victory" over Iraq in 2003, US troops were soon engulfed in the flames of people's resistance. Unsure how to respond, the Washington-Pentagon-corporate axis of evil tried three strategies. At first, use more firepower. When that failed, the US began to fund, arm and empower a minority of insurgents while terrorising the rest. After the failure of strategy 2.0 came 3.0: fund, arm and empower all groups of insurgents if they cease fire. Most of the guns went quiet, since effective power was ceded to the insurgents.¹³¹

Now, on Obama's orders, US forces in Afghanistan are acting in ways similar to what delivered humiliation in Iraq.¹³²

In Yemen, southern gateway to the Middle East, a Muslim insurgency in northern provinces and a national liberation uprising in southern provinces threaten the authoritarian rule of president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Washington's crony. Despite an influx of US money, arms and troops into Yemen, Saleh is on an "ejection seat", according to Mohamed Hassan, a specialist in geopolitics and the Arab world.¹³³

During February 2010 the leaders of Syria, Iran and Hezbollah convened a war council in Damascus to plan joint counterstrikes if Israel attacked any one of the three parties. The editor of *Al Quds al Arabi* newspaper says the war council expresses "an unprecedented sense of self-confidence and an unheard-of preparedness for retaliation" against Israel, America's ferocious ally in the Middle East.¹³⁴

The net result of these US setbacks is an erosion of Washington's power across the Middle East, allowing Turkey and Iran to gain ground.¹³⁵

Collapse of 'New American Century'

At the dawn of the new millennium, George W's neo-conservatives had been trumpeting the "New American Century" with a self-confidence matched only by their self-delusion.¹³⁶

World events have played out very differently. Today, many states are advocating a "multipolar" world where America becomes merely one voice among many.¹³⁷

Germany and Japan, who for decades hinged US strategy in Europe and East Asia, have effectively declared their independence from Washington.¹³⁸

The European Union is cuddling up to Putin's Russia which is clashing with America in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹³⁹

A growing number of African states are forging closer economic and diplomatic ties with China, edging out America.¹⁴⁰

Brazil, once the anchor of Yankee supremacy in South America, began siding with regional states breaking free of the old hegemon.¹⁴¹ Now Latin American and Caribbean states have formed a continental "Latin Bloc" excluding America and Canada.¹⁴²

Japan and South Korea are tilting towards an East Asia alliance with China which, once formalised, would dramatically tip the world power balance away from the United States.¹⁴³

Despite its best efforts, Washington has been unable to contain a spreading rebellion among states who until recently bowed to the old hegemon.

Now even the symbolism is changing. On 14 November 2009, Obama became the first US president to bow low before an Emperor of Japan, diplomatic choreography slated as “treasonous” by US right-wingers.¹⁴⁴

And unfolding revolutions in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and elsewhere in Latin America are throwing up socialist and popular challenges to neoliberal imperialism in the old hegemon’s “back yard”.

The New American Century has collapsed almost as quickly as the Fall of Communism. Even some right-wingers are calling it the end of an era. “A combination of fiscal deficits and military overstretch suggests that the United States may be the next empire on the precipice”, says ultra-conservative historian Niall Ferguson¹⁴⁵, with “imperial collapse” coming “much more suddenly” than many expect.¹⁴⁶

New American Dream: warbots on coal

In relative decline and facing growing revolts, what will the US state do? What all past hegemon have done: wave a bigger stick.

With the Pentagon’s budget representing two-fifths of world military spending¹⁴⁷, America remains dominant in conventional military power. But the Middle East debacle has taught the US state that conventional forces are not sufficient in some war zones, maybe most.

The Pentagon’s military doctrine, therefore, has swung towards creating unconventional forces, especially warbots.

Warbots are killer robots programmed to act autonomously on the battlefield, making their own decisions about who to slay and what to destroy, unlike drones which are controlled by humans.

The US Joint Forces Command¹⁴⁸ reports that warbots will be the norm on battlefields within 20 years.¹⁴⁹ Field testing of one warbot, the Autonomous Rotorcraft Sniper System, was due to start in late 2009.¹⁵⁰ In May 2010 the third Military Robotics Conference in London will look at “ways to integrate robots into the military framework beyond purely tactical applications”.¹⁵¹

The development of this futuristic robotic technology hangs on an outdated energy source: coal.

The labs and plants where the warbots are being brought to life are, of course, powered by electricity. Half of US electricity is generated by burning coal¹⁵², easily the worst carbon pollutant contributing to climate change.¹⁵³

So the birth of killer robots relies on a pollutant which may trigger the dieback of humanity.

It’s the New American Dream: warbots on coal. US killer robots will slaughter humans who resist Pax Americana¹⁵⁴, taking capitalist dehumanisation to its insane limits.

First Law of Social Domination

The Pentagon is excited by the prospect of military firepower being liberated from human warriors who may talk to their buddies and collectively decide to disobey orders, even mutiny as in Vietnam.

“Machines know no fear,” says Major Kenneth Rose of the US Army’s Training and Doctrine Command. “They don’t talk to their buddies.”¹⁵⁵

Deployment of a warbot army may give the US state a bigger stick. But relying on robotic mercenaries, rather than citizen soldiers, is an indicator of hegemonic decline. And it will spread the

rot.

Past hegemony facing tough times also turned to mercenaries.¹⁵⁶ That seemingly pragmatic decision, they soon discovered, changed everything. No longer was hegemony mainly based on fearful respect reinforced by the sporadic use of military force. Instead, hegemony became increasingly dependent on the projection of military force.

A shift of imperial gravity from fearful respect to military force violates the First Law of Social Domination.

Here it is stated: “The greater the number of people to be dominated, the more an elite must divide them rather than fight them, since excessive use of open force against those being dominated will tend to unite them into a power too great to remain dominated.”¹⁵⁷

That law operated against past hegemony when they resorted to mercenaries. Increasing use of force provoked widening ripples of resistance requiring increasing use of force, soon resulting in imperial overshoot. From then on, hegemonic decline speeded up.

The Pentagon’s deployment of robotic rather than human mercenaries is a minor matter.

Past hegemony employed different types of mercenaries with divergent results in terms of efficiency and loyalty, yet the conclusion was the same: faster decline. Why should we expect any other outcome this time round?

The rise of China

The rise of China¹⁵⁸ has been exhaustively documented. Here’s some pointers:

- China will overtake Japan in 2010 to become the second largest economy in the world (after America).¹⁵⁹
- China overtook Germany in 2009 as the world’s biggest exporter.¹⁶⁰
- China now has the biggest car market in the world.¹⁶¹
- China has leaped to second spot in global science (after America).¹⁶²
- China in 2008 became the world’s second highest military spender (after America).¹⁶³
- China is building the naval and missile capacity to project military power way beyond its borders.¹⁶⁴

“2009 has been a turning point” in China’s rise, says Feng Zhongping, a director at the China Institute of Contemporary Relations in Beijing.¹⁶⁵

Everyone knows that the rise of China comes at the expense of America’s global power. That’s as obvious as the headline in one English newspaper: “Dead man found in graveyard.”¹⁶⁶

Decline triggers escalating conflicts

The decline of past hegemony has triggered escalating conflicts among powerful states jostling for position. For instance, England’s decline was strongly linked with the two World Wars of the 20th century.

There seems every reason to expect that the decline of US global hegemony will likewise be the breeding ground for escalating conflicts among powerful states.

In this period America’s national security apparatus clearly sees China as its “ultimate target”, says Marxist philosopher Istvan Meszaros.¹⁶⁷ An avalanche of reports from the US state bear witness to Washington’s obsession with the rise of China.

And a new imperial brashness is coming from the Chinese state. Liu Mingfu, a senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army, writes in his new book *The China Dream*: "China's big goal in the 21st century is to become world number one, the top power." He says that China should build the world's strongest military and move swiftly to topple the United States as the global "champion".¹⁶⁸

Already it's commonplace to see media headlines like "Why America and China will clash"¹⁶⁹ and "WTO will try to manage predicted US-China trade friction".¹⁷⁰

Imperial wars pitting America, China and other powerful states against each other will surely give rise to serious crises inside losing countries, and maybe winners as well.

For instance, World War I fed into worker and soldier revolutions in Russia and Germany, who were losers. And soon after World War II a winner, Britain, was slung out of India by a grassroots uprising, while Communist revolution deposed the rulers of China, another winner.

Yet the World War crises wracking powerful states did not trigger world system collapse. That might change if nuclear or biological warfare devastates large parts of the planet, or if post-war revolutions sweep the Big Two, America and China.

But system collapse would not be a certainty even in the event of World War III.

A system-level imperial crisis does, however, look sure to come from another direction.

A lying sort of Big Truth

When Obama announced the deployment of an extra 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan, he spouted many official lies, such as: "Unlike the great powers of old, we have not sought world domination."

But he did speak one Big Truth, in a lying sort of way, when he declared: "More than any other nation, the United States of America has underwritten global security for over six decades."¹⁷¹

Let's translate. For a long time the US hegemon alone possessed the global power to provide "global security" for the accumulation cycle of global capitalism.

Naturally, this "global security" came at the cost of global poverty, ecological ruination and colonial slaughter, none of which Obama cared to mention.

The decline of US hegemony will trigger a period of escalating conflicts among powerful states which disrupt the accumulation cycle.

Global capitalism could probably survive that period of imperial conflict and accumulation disruption if another global hegemon arose to impose a new era of relative stability.

That poses a crucial question: what new hegemon could possibly amass a greater ratio of global power than the United States has wielded?

China can't rule the world

America is a continental-sized nation with secure borders facing the planet's two greatest oceans. The country has vast natural resources, uniquely navigable river systems and the world's third biggest population. US technologies, agriculture and transport outperform rivals, while the US army, navy and air force outgun them. Despite the financial implosion, Wall Street remains the financial hub of the world. The greenback is still the world reserve currency.

Even possessing all these advantages, US global hegemony is unravelling.

So what other power could take charge of the world within the next half-century? Not China, despite its rapid rise to number two slot.

With its infrastructural networks now close to maturity, China will be nearing the end of the breakneck economic growth which typically characterises newly industrialising states as they splurge on infrastructure.¹⁷²

China is dogged by enduring limitations, including:

- Unkind geography.
- Only moderate natural resources.
- Low agricultural productivity.
- Unbalanced economic development.
- General lack of purchasing power.
- Relative population decline.
- Contested political and bureaucratic structures.
- Chaotic legal and commercial frameworks.
- Restive ethnic minorities.
- Volatile urban majorities.
- Fierce North-South and East-West factionalism.

Such limitations, in combination, will certainly prevent China from securing greater relative superiority over other powerful states than that enjoyed by America at its hegemonic peak.

What about a world government?

The one possible candidate for global hegemony seems to be an alliance of powerful states who, in effect, form a world government.

Yet a world government would collapse the system of state sovereignty which has been a central pillar of capitalism from its birth.

A balance between state sovereignty and a global hegemon has provided essential conditions for capital accumulation.

The hegemon enforces the relative world order needed by capitalists. And state sovereignty allows capitalists to play each state off against others and so exercise maximum influence over governments.

For example, “big cross-border banks know how to play governments off against each other”, says financial sector expert Simon Johnson. That renders any hope of constraining banks through international financial regulation a “complete illusion”.¹⁷³

So a world government is an unworkable solution for big business, and anyhow would represent the end of capitalism as we have known it.

‘Doomed to systemic disintegration’

Minqi Li is a Chinese Marxist now residing in America. Here’s his take on the problem of hegemonic succession:

“The successive hegemonic powers have become progressively larger in territorial size and more powerful in organisational and military capacity. By the twentieth century, [only] continental-sized

states remained in the game for hegemonic power... No other state is in a position to replace the US and provide effective leadership for the system. China and every other potential hegemonic candidate all suffer from insurmountable contradictions and weaknesses. None has the ability to offer 'system-level solutions' to 'system-level problems'. Either the existing world-system has exhausted its historical space for potential new leadership and therefore is doomed to systemic disintegration, or the new leadership will have to assume the form of an alliance of multiple continental-sized states, which will then become a world-government and therefore bring the existing world-system to an end."¹⁷⁴

The throne will forever remain empty

An unsolvable imperial dilemma confronts world capitalism.

US global hegemony is doomed, although not yet dead and buried, but for the first time in capitalism's history there is no possibility of a hegemonic successor.

The world system will never, in effect, be able to declare: "The king is dead, long live the king." The throne will forever remain empty.

Capitalism will lack a global hegemon able to command system-level responses to the perfect storm.

Chaos will reign at a time when only hegemon-enforced discipline could offer some hope to a world system tipping towards collapse.

PART 6: THE TIDE TURNS

Back to the future of Marx

In 1859 an obscure middle-aged foreigner in the British Museum Library penned what would become the world's most influential synopsis of how societies change.

In one mind-blowing paragraph, Karl Marx summarised the complex interactions of every civilisation's economic foundation, its legal and political superstructure and its main streams of thought. Here is his famous passage in its entirety:

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness,

but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the conditions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production. No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation. In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution to this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.”¹⁷⁵

Marx's words clearly explain the fall of prior civilisations such as feudalism.

If his words also make sense of the perfect storm starting to engulf global capitalism, then it's back to the future of Marx.

So let's compare today's trends with what Big Beard wrote way back in 1859.

Outer limits and inner conflicts

What lies behind the convergence of existential crises? Capitalism is hitting the outer limits of the “productive forces” able to be developed within the system.

Production of useful goods and services is increasingly stunted by the profitability crisis which pushes capitalism towards extreme financialisation. Maximising profits from financial bubbles means maximising instability in the world economy. In consequence, capital accumulation in major economies now depends on unsustainable levels of government stimulus. Powerful states are being sucked into a debt vortex made larger by bailouts of bankrupt corporations. No longer can global capitalism guarantee its economic expansion through the exploitation of labour.

Nor can the world system sustain its parallel exploitation of nature. The ecological crisis, especially climate change, will compel global capitalism to pay ever higher mitigation costs for repeat rapes of Mother Earth, eating into profits. Meanwhile the resource crisis, especially oil depletion, will undermine the fossil economy which has inflated capital accumulation and population growth since industrialisation. In tandem, global warming and energy decline threaten human disaster on a planetary scale, conjuring up the spectre of social chaos. The abuse of nature, which underpins capitalism's perpetual economic expansion, is calling forth the revenge of nature.

To have any chance of weathering the perfect storm, capitalism will need a global enforcer like never before. Yet the world system faces an imperial crisis that is unprecedented and unsolvable. US global hegemony is ebbing away without the material possibility of a stronger hegemon being able to arise. There will be no hegemon able to command a universal restructuring of capital accumulation in reaction to multiple systemic crises. In consequence, ungovernable chaos will ripple through the world economy, killing off new growth and old markets.

The randomly profound crises of profitability, ecology, resources and imperialism will interact unpredictably with Earth's citizens. The prospect of human dieback will drive inner conflicts between the productive forces and the “existing relations of production”, feeding a legitimacy crisis of revolutionary proportions.

The grassroots will refuse to die quickly or early because of capitalism's need for profits before life. Seeing the choice between collapse and revolt, between death and insurgency, the global majority will tear down the old order.

What new order they build is an open question sure to be fiercely contested by opposing political forces. New strands of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary “consciousness” will be shaped by new conditions of “social existence”, or perhaps social extinction.

Scenario chimes with Marx

This scenario chimes with key themes of Marx’s 1859 synopsis on how system dynamics interact with human thought:

- “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”
- “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed.”
- “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production... Then begins an era of social revolution.”

Successful revolts since World War I

Have we entered the “era of social revolution” that Marx forecast would break out when capitalism hits the wall?

Since World War I, mass revolts have ousted many old regimes, however temporarily. Here are 50 examples (the dates mark final success):

- Russia: popular revolt shortly followed by Communist revolution (1917).
- Germany: popular revolt (1918).
- Egypt: national independence conflict (1922).
- Ireland: national independence conflict (1922).
- Spain: popular revolt (1935).
- Albania: Communist revolution (1944).
- Yugoslavia: Communist revolution (1945).
- India: national independence conflict (1947).
- Indonesia: national independence conflict (1949).
- China: Communist revolution (1949).
- Iran: popular revolt (1951).
- North Vietnam: national independence conflict (1954), later Communist revolution.
- Hungary: anti-Stalinist popular revolt (1956).
- Morocco: national independence conflict (1956).
- Tunisia: national independence conflict (1957).
- Cuba: popular revolt (1959), later Communist revolution.
- Algeria: national independence conflict (1963).
- Kenya: national independence conflict (1963).
- Congo: popular revolt (1963).
- South Yemen: national independence conflict (1967).
- Czechoslovakia: anti-Stalinist popular revolt (1968).
- Chile: popular revolt (1970).
- Portugal: popular revolt (1974).
- Guinea-Bissau: national independence conflict (1974).

- Mozambique: national independence conflict (1975).
- Angola: national independence conflict (1975).
- South Vietnam: Communist revolution (1975).
- Laos: Communist revolution (1975).
- Iran: Islamic popular revolt (1979).
- Nicaragua: popular revolt (1979).
- Grenada: popular revolt (1979).
- Zimbabwe: national independence conflict (1980).
- Philippines: popular revolt (1986).
- Poland: anti-Stalinist popular revolt (1989).
- East Germany: anti-Stalinist popular revolt (1989).
- Czechoslovakia: anti-Stalinist popular revolt (1989).
- Bulgaria: anti-Stalinist popular revolt (1989).
- Romania: anti-Stalinist popular revolt (1989).
- Namibia: national independence conflict (1991).
- Somalia: popular revolt (1991).
- Afghanistan: Islamic national independence conflict (1992).
- Eritrea: national independence conflict (1993).
- South Africa: popular revolt (1994).
- Indonesia: popular revolt (1998).
- East Timor: national independence conflict (1999).
- Venezuela: popular revolt (1999).
- Bolivia: popular revolt (2005).
- Ecuador: popular revolt (2006).
- Lebanon: Islamic popular revolt (2006).
- Nepal: Communist revolution (2008).

Overview of conflict dynamics

While not claiming to be a comprehensive list¹⁷⁶, these 50 examples give some idea of the location, type and rhythm of successful uprisings falling within the lifespan of our old people.

Let's sort these 50 examples into threads to get an overview of conflict dynamics, starting with location.

The only victorious revolt in a rich state was Germany, way back in 1918, when the Kaiser was forced to abdicate.¹⁷⁷ In sharp contrast, poor states were the site of 37 insurgencies which took power. And a dozen uprisings happened in what might be called "in between" states.

Thus three-quarters of all successful revolts occurred in what we now call the global South, the periphery of the world system, while all but one of the rest were in the semi-periphery. The dozen happening since the fall of Communism were all in the global South.

What about the type of revolt? Those classed as popular revolts total two dozen (including seven anti-Stalinist and two Islamic uprisings). There were 17 national independence conflicts (including one Islamic insurgency).

Around three-quarters of triumphant popular revolts and national independence conflicts expressed or incorporated broad socialist tendencies.

As well, there were nine Communist revolutions.

Long waves and short waves

Looking at the rhythms of these 50 revolts we can see three long waves.

In the two decades between the World Wars, five uprisings fed a long wave which began strongly with Russia's revolutions but peaked early.

The Cold War era (1945-89) saw a robust and sustained long wave of 33 rebellions.

Since the collapse of Communism, a dozen victorious revolts have flowed into a long wave which is still rising.

Commonly a successful uprising would feed into others of similar type and nearby location, generating short waves.

The most important short waves appear to be:

- **Anti-war insurgencies:** Driven by the horrors of World War I, Russia's revolts of workers and soldiers soon spread to Germany. Importantly, this short wave gave birth to Communist parties everywhere, throwing up a Communist International¹⁷⁸. While deformed by Joseph Stalin's rise to power in the Soviet Union¹⁷⁹, the idea and the organisation of Communist world revolution inspired countless millions of workers, peasants and intellectuals over several generations.
- **Communist revolutions:** After World War II had destabilised autocratic and colonial rulers, people's armies led by Communists took power in Albania (Enver Hoxha¹⁸⁰), Yugoslavia (Josip Tito¹⁸¹), China (Mao Zedong¹⁸²), North Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh¹⁸³) and Cuba (Fidel Castro¹⁸⁴). And the Soviet Red Army installed compliant Stalinist regimes in half-a-dozen East European states, while Communist parties grew strong in other regions. For a time it did seem to most leftists that "the spectre of communism" mentioned in the famous opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* really was "haunting" world capitalism.¹⁸⁵
- **Empire breakups:** Anti-colonial victories in India and Indonesia, along with China's Communist revolution, gave huge impetus to all national liberation movements. Their struggles triggered overlapping short waves of empire breakup. Despite sending troops into North Africa, France was overwhelmed by mass movements in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Kenya's Mau Mau rebellion exposed the futility of British colonial ambitions, sparking London's swift departure from most imperial possessions in Africa and elsewhere. A military mutiny in Portugal was intertwined with triumphant national liberation wars in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. When apartheid crumbled in the face of black resistance in South Africa, Namibia's anti-colonial resistance forces emerged supreme.
- **Vietnam Syndrome:** The humbling of America by Communist forces in South Vietnam fed into a cluster of popular uprisings in countries under US sway, including Chile, Iran, Nicaragua, Grenada and the Philippines.
- **Anti-Stalinist uprisings:** A first wave, aiming to replace Stalinist tyranny with democratic socialism, tasted brief successes in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), and also flowed in East Germany and Poland. A second wave knocked down the Berlin Wall in 1989 and emerged victorious across Eastern Europe, giving rise to market capitalism in the wake of public discontent with the command economy. Most of the region's Communist parties morphed into social democratic parties, often winning national and local elections.

- **Latino socialism:** Elected in 1999 as Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez has since raised the banner of "21st century socialism". Popular movements hoisted socialists into government office in Bolivia and Ecuador¹⁸⁶. The past few years have seen radical left presidents elected in Paraguay¹⁸⁷ and El Salvador¹⁸⁸. Garcia Linera, vice-president of Bolivia, says: "For the first time in the last hundred years of our continent there is a continental left turn."¹⁸⁹ In its wake, Nicaragua's president Daniel Ortega is moving leftwards, declaring capitalism to be in its "death throes"¹⁹⁰, while Cuba's Communist state¹⁹¹ is being enlivened. The ascendancy of Latino socialism gives legitimacy to Chavez's recent call for the formation of a Fifth Socialist International.¹⁹² While far from a sure bet, there now seems the chance to create a broad-based global socialist coalition for the first time since the Communist International was strangled by Stalin.

Historical pluses and minuses

In terms of moving beyond capitalism, what are the historical pluses and minuses of these 50 victorious revolts? That question has no simple answer.

A few of the triumphant revolts merely wanted to change masters, not classes or systems. Many others were overwhelmed by the backlash of local elites and foreign states. And many were gradually dragged from their orbit by the gravitational pull of the capitalist universe.

How many are today bringing some vision of socialism closer? If you could poll the global left right now, probably most would reply: Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Just four revolutions, all sited in Latin America, with three occurring in the last decade.

And Nicaragua and Nepal, both with unclear dynamics, might be seen as possibilities. So might the radical left election victories in Paraguay and El Salvador.

At first glance, therefore, the failure rate seems extremely high.

Yet think of what our world would be like without those 50 revolts.

Colonies would remain numerous. The global South would be voiceless. Dominant ideologies would be imperialism, racism and sexism. Aristocrats and autocrats would command an easy legitimacy. Democratic reforms would have been stunted. Competition would enjoy hegemonic sway over cooperation. Socialism would be just a theory. No pole of ecological socialism would exist in Latin America.

And no doubt you can name other calamities we would face today if those revolts had not succeeded.

Taking a long view, even revolutions that failed mostly made a net contribution to the democratic, socialist and ecological currents eroding the legitimacy of global capitalism.

An evolutionary rebalancing

So where does this leave the "era of social revolution" forecast by Marx?

With the possible but as yet unproven exception of Latino socialism, successful uprisings were unable to hold the line against capitalism's market forces and armed forces.

Nearly all the popular, national independence and Communist takeovers have been (re)absorbed into a world system driven by capital accumulation and guarded by an imperial hegemon.

Each wave of revolt was followed by capitalist clawbacks in an evolutionary rebalancing of the world system.

And the conclusion? Capitalism has never previously faced a perfect storm which tips the world system into collapse and thus makes world revolution both inevitable and necessary.

This conclusion appears consistent with Marx's view that "no social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed".

Materialist approach to history

Successful uprisings have certainly been plagued by errors, abuses and absurdities. A few examples: fatal divisions among Portugal's insurgents, the totalitarian impulses of Stalinism and the megalomania of Zimbabwe's dictator.

Such defects, however, are mainly the result of pressures from global capitalism, not the source of ultimate failure.

Brainy strategies, strong organising and humanistic morals can steer a mass uprising to lasting success only when "the material productive forces" of global capitalism begin to conflict with "the existing relations of production". That is a materialist approach to history¹⁹³, as distinct from an idealist "blame game" attitude¹⁹⁴.

Gaining a realistic view of system change demands that we avoid twin illusions. The first is "voluntarism", a belief that revolutionary change can be relatively independent of historical conditions. The second is "determinism", a belief that historical evolutions will eventually deliver revolutionary change with little human intervention.

In fact, historical conditions and revolutionary acts must coincide before a new civilisation can arise, as we can see from the lessons of history.

'I never was truly my own master'

Even the best heroes of socialist revolution, such as Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin¹⁹⁵, were compelled to organise within conditions not of their making. They acted as they must, only later judging the results.

"We have thrown off the yoke of capitalism," declared Lenin soon after the November 1917 revolution, and are set on "our headlong course towards Socialism".¹⁹⁶

Four years later, however, he was freely admitting the Russian Communist Party's "retreat" into a system of "state capitalism". Even though "the state is in our hands", Lenin told the party's leadership, "the machine refused to obey the hand that guided it".¹⁹⁷

What clearer expression could there be of the elemental power of historical conditions?

Similar dilemmas were faced by capitalist revolutionaries.

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)¹⁹⁸, the best general produced by the extermination of France's absolute monarchy, stated: "I never was truly my own master but was always ruled by circumstances."¹⁹⁹

Yet Napoleon was a strategic genius whose armies conquered much of Europe during the ascendancy of capitalism.

A two-way street

What's often forgotten is that the elemental power of historical conditions is a two-way street.

So long as conditions favour a continuation of the old civilisation, most revolutions will be isolated, subverted and crushed.

Yet when conditions demand the birth of a new civilisation, revolutions will ripple around the world regardless of elite counteractions.

The process is, to use a bit of Marxist jargon, dialectical²⁰⁰.

For the first time in 500 years, a perfect storm is descending on capitalism. Historical conditions will therefore be shifting in favour of world revolution.

Given this momentous shift, three other factors will become ever more important: popular legitimacy, political unity and human will. Let's look at these three factors in more detail.

Political instability was once about Iran

Even gung-ho ideologues of capitalism are having to concede that things are not going well for their system.

One such ideologue is *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, triple winner of journalism's Pulitzer Prize.²⁰¹

In 2009 he was described as a cheerleader of US and Israeli "state terror" by Noam Chomsky, America's much respected leftist philosopher-campaigner.²⁰² And Canadian author Linda McQuaig, in her 2001 book *All You Can Eat: Greed, Lust and the New Capitalism*, labelled Friedman an apologist for corporate globalisation.²⁰³

Recently Friedman filled his column with a tale of woe. At the 2010 World Economic Forum in Davos²⁰⁴ many of the global elite, especially Asians and Europeans, had told him of their worries about "political instability" in the United States. Shock horror!

"Political instability", Friedman remarked, "was a phrase normally reserved for countries like Russia or Iran or Honduras", but now even US business owners are using it about their own country.

Friedman summed up elite reactions to "political paralysis" in America: "We're making people nervous."

The neoliberal "Washington Consensus" of open markets, floating currencies and free elections is being rejected by developing countries, he moaned. These countries are leaning more towards a "Beijing Consensus" which embraces the "Confucian-Communist-Capitalist" mix of state economic guidance, strictly controlled capital markets and one-party government.²⁰⁵

Clearly, Friedman is alarmed by the interwoven crises of American politics, Washington Consensus and US hegemony.

His alarm cannot be seen as merely the default response of a "neoliberal patriot" to the rise of China. Why? Because if America goes down the toilet, so does the rest of the capitalist world, including China. As Beijing's rulers well know, and fear.

And their fear is shared by the elite Asians and Europeans who confided their worries about America's "political instability" to Friedman in Davos.

Colonisation of the public mind

Friedman's sob story is testimony to eroding self-confidence among the rulers of the world. Their attempts at corrective measures against multiple system threats seem inadequate, even to themselves.

And that brings us to the final existential crisis: legitimacy.

The exercise of power in capitalist society ultimately rests on popular legitimacy much more than state force. That goes for every type of capitalist nation, whether rich, poor or in-between, whether democratic, authoritarian or theocratic.

If the masses can no longer be convinced by an elite that their rule expresses common values and promotes common progress, then it is doomed to social corrosion and eventual overthrow.

Calling up state force to save a regime whose legitimacy is ebbing away merely worsens the crisis, as spelled out in the First Law of Social Domination.²⁰⁶

Only colonisation of the public mind can secure a broad social base for elite rule.²⁰⁷

'People are frightened and angry'

To retain mind control, the colonisers must express such self-confidence in their "civilising" mission, and control such formidable economic and state power, that the masses believe no alternative is possible.

That's not how things are going in our times, which are marked by chaos, cynicism and conflict.

In most areas of the globe, says world-systems analyst Immanuel Wallerstein, "ordinary people are frightened and angry but very unsure what to do" about the "chaotic situation" they face.²⁰⁸

That mood is flowing into a loss of social cohesion in core regions of global capitalism.

The United States Declaration of Independence declares that government powers flow "from the consent of the governed".²⁰⁹ Yet a nationwide poll in February 2010 revealed that just 21% of US voters believe their government enjoys the consent of the governed, while 61% say it doesn't.²¹⁰

So voters in the declining hegemon are, by a 3-to-1 margin, questioning the legitimacy of their government. The enormity of that margin must mean something.

Meanwhile, social trends in Europe are earning angry rebukes from Washington. In February 2010, US defence secretary Robert Gates publicly damned Europe's mood of "demilitarisation" for causing "systemic problems" in the NATO military pact²¹¹, including commitment to the Afghan war.

Gates flayed European states for failing to finance NATO equipment needed "for immediate use on the battlefield", including helicopters, cargo aircraft, refueling tankers and spy ware. Only five out of 28 NATO members have met their military spending commitment of 2% of gross domestic product. By comparison, America spends more than 4% of GDP on the military. Just two months into the year, he said, NATO was facing shortfalls of hundreds of millions of euros.

Dana Allin, a senior fellow at the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London, called the defence secretary's remarks a "very striking" display of the US state's "frustration".²¹² And no wonder. In effect, European states are quietly winding back their funding of America as world policeman for Western capitalism.

The negation of the negation

In the times we're in, the self-confidence of the rulers of the world is fading fast as they face an unprecedented combination of critical threats, including:

- Raging instability in the economic system alongside historic obstacles to the process of capital accumulation.
- Dwindling supplies of the fossil energy to which industrial capitalism is hopelessly addicted.
- Quickening pace of climate change which is eroding the natural foundations of life on Earth.
- Rapid onset of a global hegemonic void which no imperial power can accumulate sufficient power to fill.
- Weakening of elite mind control as crises spread fear among the masses, nourishing rebellious thoughts.

Rebellious thoughts are finding extremely varied forms of expression. These range from broad global support for a Fifth Socialist International to US voters electing a Republican senator in a safe Democratic seat as a protest against Obama not delivering on his promise of "change"²¹³.

The tempo of mass struggle, after the slowdown of recent decades, is again quickening. That's seen from Europe's union strikes to China's mass actions to Latin America's political revolts to the Middle East's liberation struggles to global climate mobilisations.

Most people on the planet are losing faith in the promise of progress. That promise was the great stabiliser of capitalism.

Seduced by the lure of progress, Communist and social democratic parties and national liberation movements shifted towards liberalism, the politics of living with capitalism.

And that shift made it easy for liberalism to be eclipsed by neoliberalism, the politics of dog eat dog, where all advantages are with the already rich and powerful.

Now we're seeing the negation of the negation. Neoliberalism, by worsening capitalism's crises in a mad panic to continue accumulating capital, is frightening the global grassroots into rebellious thoughts.

Those rebellious thoughts will be fanned by the talk of system collapse coming from a growing number of global trends forecasters.

Diverse diviners of capitalist collapse

Frederick Engels²¹⁴ was the lifelong political collaborator of Karl Marx.

A year after the author of *Capital* died in 1883, Engels noted how the "communist demands" of Marx were based upon "the inevitable collapse of the capitalist mode of production".²¹⁵

Today, four generations later, not only Marxists are talking about a looming collapse of the world system. Even intelligent capitalists are doing so, along with a rainbow cast of leftists, scientists, ecologists and others.

Among these diverse diviners of capitalist collapse there is debate over the most likely time frame.

Some say the perfect storm will trigger system collapse around 2030.²¹⁶ Some suggest earlier dates for crucial tipping points, such as financial and political breakdown²¹⁷, peak capital²¹⁸ and escalating food costs²¹⁹. Some steer away from time specific forecasts in favour of "the end is nigh" flexibility.²²⁰

Given the infinite number of possible interactions of unstoppable forces and human actors and random events, debate over the likely time frame of system collapse is very natural. Maybe this

debate just indicates that collapse is unpredictably close.

Growing weight of evidence

More important than time at this point in time is weight: the growing weight of international evidence pointing to probable or inevitable collapse.

Most research suggests that system collapse will bring catastrophic human dieback unless avoided by system change.

“The future will be a total disaster, with a collapse of our capitalistic system as we know it today, wars, massive government debt defaults and the impoverishment of large segments of Western society,” says Marc Faber, a Swiss fund manager and economic trends forecaster²²¹. Unless the system can be cleared of financial losses, “the way communism collapsed, capitalism will collapse”.²²²

“We’re in the midst of a structural crisis of our entire civilisation,” says US socialist John Bellamy Foster. The “simultaneous” crises of ecology, economy and empire are generating a “crisis of capitalism”. A mass movement towards a “new socialism” is needed to prevent the “failed system” of capitalism from destroying humanity.²²³

James Lovelock,²²⁴ pioneer of Gaia theory,²²⁵ predicts the dieback of four-fifths of world population within three decades due to irreversible climate change. “By 2040, parts of the Sahara desert will have moved into middle Europe”, reaching Paris and Berlin. “There will be almost no food grown in Europe,” he warns. “China will be uninhabitable.” Rising sea levels will swamp regions of high population density. Waves of mass migrations, like Europeans to Britain, Americans to Canada, Russians to Siberia, South Asians to Australia and Chinese to Africa, will provoke wars and civil strife.²²⁶

Early decline is expected for fossil fuels and most minerals, according to Ugo Bardi, Italian chemist and peak resource modeller²²⁷. “These are just subsystems of a vaster system that may collapse in the coming years.” Peak oil and “peak civilization” could well “coincide” in the first decades of the 21st century.²²⁸

The world is facing the “looming breakdown of major parts of the Earth system”, says a report from the Tallberg Foundation, a humanistic think tank in Sweden. Abundant reports of Arctic ice melts, rapid deforestation, overfishing, freshwater scarcity and the like should be giving rise to general “anxiety”.²²⁹

“Damage to the ecosystem may mean that a large-scale human presence on the planet cannot continue much longer,” says US radical Christian and communications expert Robert Jensen²³⁰. “None of this is crazy apocalypticism, but rather a sober assessment of the reality around us.”²³¹

Any climate change strategy driven by profit and competition will take civilisation “straight into the wall”, says Belgian agriculturalist and Marxist Daniel Tanuro²³². Global capitalism has exceeded its limits. “Its capacity for social and ecological destruction clearly exceeds its potential for progress.”²³³

Capitalism is heading for “collapse and rapid decline”, according to US financial analyst Paul Farrell²³⁴. Lying “dead ahead” is a second Great Depression. “Unfortunately, there’s absolutely nothing you can do to hide from this unfolding reality or prevent the rush of the historical imperative.”²³⁵

Perfect storm spells P-E-R-I-L

The first letters of Profitability, Ecology, Resources, Imperialism and Legitimacy spell P-E-R-I-L²³⁶.

That's an apt acronym for the five system-level crises merging into a perfect storm that will collapse capitalism, placing humanity in grave peril.

If catastrophe devastates an unprepared public, then we could all be pushed into the bleak society theorised by John Robinson, a global trends researcher in New Zealand.

In about two decades, Robinson predicts, a "perfect storm" will trigger "world-wide breakdown". A global population "collapse" will make "survival" the first aim. Probably a "strong leader will seize power and the masses will breathe a sigh of relief". Some sort of "fascism" will prioritise "property", ready to "drive down peoples and continue environmental destruction".²³⁷

'Great revolutions originate in fear'

To avoid this dark future, Earth's citizens must be honestly informed of the dangers ahead of them so they can organise for collective survival on the best terms possible.

Despite having access to relevant information not in the public arena, however, government ministers and state authorities are keeping quiet.

Our masters are shirking their duty of care because they know that informing the public will bring fear, then revolt.

As Napoleon Bonaparte famously remarked, "All great revolutions originate in fear".²³⁸

Already the global elite are voicing alarm at thunderous clouds of revolt appearing over the horizon of rich states as well as poor.

For instance, US corporate pundit Todd Harrison is pointing to "labor strikes and social strife" in Europe as "discontent continues to simmer". In the wake of further economic meltdowns spreading "contagion" through the world system, he warns of "populist uprising, the rejection of wealth and an emerging class war" on an international scale.²³⁹

The duty of informing the public about future dangers will fall to socialists, ecologists, unionists and other grassroots activists. This essay is part of that process.

Alongside goes the job of uniting the masses around internationally coordinated political action. Such united global action will bring the hope which must accompany fear if humanity is to transform civilisation and collectively create a decent future.

The Great Disunity

By throwing Earth's toilers into economic and national competition with each other, capitalism atomises humanity into rival units of self-interest.

As a result, disunity has been the usual experience of most people, despite their real interests being served by unity.

Often in the name of upholding the same cause, repeating splits on a world scale have happened among and between trade unionists, socialists, social democrats, anarchists, ecologists, social justice campaigners, anti-colonialists, guardians of the land, progressive intellectuals and the like.

For a whole epoch the Great Disunity has scarred the global grassroots.

A better way could be glimpsed in mass uprisings of the exploited and oppressed, but typically these united actions were limited in time and space.

Why could nothing permanently overcome the Great Disunity? Because the world system still had legs. It still had not reached the point where, as Marx said, the “material productive forces of society” came into conflict with the “existing relations of production”, sparking an “era of social revolution”.

Only the revolutionary era can call forth the Global Uniting.

The Global Uniting

The onrush of capitalist collapse will transform the quest for unity. A moral appeal (we “should” unite in our interests) will become a material necessity (we “must” unite or we perish).

For instance, consider what might happen to the historic contest between social democrats and Marxists.²⁴⁰

That contest, over reform or revolution, will become increasingly marginal as capitalist collapse shoves humanity towards catastrophic dieback. Why? A collapsing system cannot be reformed to restore its internal vitality.

Yet revolution, while necessary, would be less about overthrowing a collapsing system, and much more about leading society out of the Valley of Death through united global action.

The biggest struggle will likely happen when the old elites abandon futile efforts to save their collapsing system. Then they will move towards a “revolution from above” to restore their old powers through some new, and worse, system of oppressive division.

Marxists, social democrats and society’s majority would be compelled to unite against the “new revolutionaries” who bring division and death.

All that’s still in the future. What about now?

Capitalism is now falling sick from multiple cancers: bubble economy, global warming, energy crunch, imperial chaos. Futile top-down “cures” foster public cynicism, often hostility, puncturing the “born to rule” pretensions of our rulers. A mood of unrest is gripping Latin America, the Middle East and across the global South, mass protests are sweeping Europe and China, and climate change has put system change on the agenda of multitudes on every continent.

Although experiencing merely the first light winds of a perfect storm, already the world system is becoming somewhat unhinged. As the storm intensifies, capitalism will suffer escalating evolutions of entropy.

So the material conditions are forming for the revolutionary era and, in tandem, the Global Uniting.

Those conditions are not fully mature. But are they sufficiently mature to support some practical steps towards the Global Uniting?

The only way to find out is have a go. And that’s what Hugo Chavez’s call for a Fifth Socialist International is all about.

‘It will blow like a whirlwind’

“The first step has been taken. It has extraordinary strategic implications. It will shake up the left and right, the West and the East. It will blow like a whirlwind through every political organisation.”

That was the reaction of Luis Bilbao, a Marxist in Argentina, to Chavez’s call for a Fifth

International.²⁴¹

The Venezuelan president's call has been endorsed by notable parties in other countries, including:

- Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), Bolivia's governing party led by president Evo Morales.²⁴²
- Ecuador's majority party PAIS Alliance led by president Rafael Correa.²⁴³
- FMLN party in El Salvador which holds the presidency and 40% of National Assembly seats.²⁴⁴
- Sandinista National Liberation Front, Nicaragua's largest party in Congress, with Daniel Ortega as president.²⁴⁵
- Party of Socialism and Liberty, Brazil, with four representatives in the National Congress.²⁴⁶
- Labour Party of Pakistan.²⁴⁷
- Socialist Party of Malaysia, with one member in the Federal Parliament and another in a state legislature.²⁴⁸
- The Left (Die Linke), Germany, with 76 deputies in the Bundestag.²⁴⁹
- New Anti-Capitalist Party, France.²⁵⁰
- Fourth International, grouping around 70 Trotskyist organisations worldwide.²⁵¹
- Socialist Alliance, Australia.²⁵²

Other likely supporters include the Communist Party of Cuba²⁵³ and the Left Bloc in Portugal, with 16 MPs in the National Parliament²⁵⁴.

Many smaller groups around the world are backing the Fifth International, including two from New Zealand, Socialist Worker²⁵⁵ and the Workers Party²⁵⁶.

Think global, act global

Chavez's initiative has sparked conflict within his own party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).²⁵⁷

Opposing a new socialist international inside the PSUV are "the bureaucrats", as they are popularly known. They represent a layer of managerial privilege in state institutions, obstructing revolutionary moves beyond modest reforms towards people's power and international socialism.

Some of "the bureaucrats" hold influential positions inside the Chavista central government and regional administrations.²⁵⁸

"The dialectical relationship between Chavez and the masses has driven the process within Venezuela forward so far," says Michael Lebowitz, a founder of the Centro Internacional Miranda in Caracas. Whether the revolutionary process continues "will depend on the initiative of both sides".²⁵⁹

Chavez is speaking out about the need to tackle serious problems of reformism and bureaucracy which hamper the revolution. He says the "national bourgeoisie" oppose the process of change, at whose heart must be the "class struggle".

"We have to finish off demolishing the old structures of the bourgeois state and create the new structures of the proletarian state," insists Chavez. 184 Communes have been created across Venezuela, says the president, to act as "building blocks" of the new popular state.²⁶⁰

Venezuela's revolution needs to breach the barriers which, in Lenin's time, repelled the Bolshevik revolution backwards to state capitalism and stimulated the growth of Stalin's bureaucracy.

What does that require? Political power must shift to what Chavez calls a "proletarian state", a

process underway in Venezuela, but something not easily or quickly done.

Even harder is recoding the economic illogic of the world system.

The capitalist imperative of capital accumulation, which is pushing humanity towards Armageddon, must be replaced by the socialist imperative of social wealth and ecological health.²⁶¹

The magnitude of these interlinked political, economic and ecological tasks demands an international mobilisation. United actions by the global grassroots are needed to challenge the global hegemony of capitalism.

The revolutions in Venezuela and across Latin America will be bolstered by a Fifth International, which in turn will inspire united struggles against capitalism in the rest of the world.

Think global, act global. That's the consistent slogan our side needs.

The word in common

Chavez's call for a Fifth International could fill the "international vacuum", creating an alternative to "deep capitalist crisis" and a response to "imperialist policy". That's the opinion of Pedro Fuentes, international secretary of Brazil's Party of Socialism and Liberty.

Those groups rejecting the Fifth International in the name of programmatic "purity"²⁶² are slated by Fuentes. He points to the famous comment by Karl Marx: "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes."²⁶³

Fuentes believes the Fifth International must have a "united front" broadness able to attract a diversity of revolutionary and radical "currents".²⁶⁴

Francois Sabado from the Fourth International's executive says the Fifth International would constitute a "world front" against the "power of the ruling classes".

Any "divergencies" between revolutionary "currents" can be overcome on the basis of a "common understanding" of events and tasks, declares Sabado.²⁶⁵

Michael Albert, an editor of the world's most popular left website *ZNet*, believes the Fifth International would be a "huge and historic step forward".

"Much will have to be worked out in practice," he says. "Maybe there is a best position, but we don't know it yet." So the new international should be guided by a "minimalist" set of principles embracing social justice, people's power, international equity and sustainable ecology.

The inclusion of various "currents" will be a strength, "warding off sectarianism and guaranteeing constant growth", insists Albert. The concept of a "programmatic line" followed by everyone would be "foreign".²⁶⁶

Have you spotted the word in common? Currents. All three want to include diverse currents in a broad mobilisation for social justice and ecological sanity. That broadness would take us closer to the Global Uniting.

At the moment, the Fifth International is a call. A hope. A concept. Whether it assumes material form will hinge on the strength of human will.

'Free-will factor becomes central'

In 1997 the Propellerheads released their hit song *History Repeating*.²⁶⁷ Heard these lyrics?

*The word is about, there's something evolving,
whatever may come, the world keeps revolving.
They say the next big thing is here,
that the revolution is near,
but to me it seems quite clear
that it's all just a little bit of history repeating.*

Whatever its musical dynamics, the song's lyrics claim eternal stasis. Apparent change always means more of the same, say the Propellerheads.

During the "heroic" period of civilisations, when the historical conditions for revolutionary change are lacking, there must be a sense of history repeating. The system has the vitality to rebalance in answer to crises.

But every civilisation enters an end time of decline, then collapse, amidst wars and revolts. History does not show us any exceptions to this rule.

Times of terminal system crisis make nonsense of the history repeating theme. Inherited realities dissolve into misty legend, new realities arise that nobody imagined.

With everything up for grabs, transition periods maximise the power of human will (or agency).

Immanuel Wallerstein puts it this way: "When systems are functioning normally, structural determinism outweighs individual and group free will. But in times of crisis and transition, the free-will factor becomes central. The world of 2050 will be what we make it. This leaves full rein for our agency, for our commitment, and for our moral judgement. It also means that this period will be a time of terrible political struggle, because the stakes are much higher than in so-called normal times."²⁶⁸

Those who act decisively can guide the fierce winds of change generated by spontaneous combustions of the old order.

The first breezes are being felt by supporters of the Fifth International. Are they slightly ahead of the times? Or are they judging it about right? Nobody can say for sure until practice delivers results.

Either way, the Fifth International will be positioned to catch the leading edge of gusting winds. Then history will be carried along by those with the will to act.

So who will act decisively? Today's leaders of the left are split. An encouraging proportion around the world are backing the Fifth International.

Others, however, are putting narrow interests ahead of internationalist opportunities. Those leaders of the left, if they persist with their narrowness, are likely to be deserted by their followers as the perfect storm descends and calls forth the Global Uniting.

Then our side's slogan may become: "Prepare! The end is nigh! Our acts will count!"

PART 7: FUTURE ACTS

Educating the human actors

Outside of system breakdown, there is always a gulf between a revolutionary world view and our capacity to act in the here and now.

That gulf between the future and the present will narrow as capitalism's five systemic crises merge closer and bite deeper.

Educating the human actors for a decent future demands the holistic exposure of capitalism's looming collapse.

Such education would feed into practical acts in harmony with the Global Uniting. These acts would probably be a mix of global acts done locally and local acts done broadly.

Global acts done locally

Capitalism's abuses of people and nature in each community flow from a system that, for the first time in history, is global in its scale and operations.

Overcoming that global system before its collapse crushes us demands global acts done locally.

In my small corner of the world, New Zealand, maybe the three most vital global acts done locally would be these:

- Rally support for the Fifth International and, in the process, bring local leftists closer together.
- Local action around practical initiatives from the People's World Conference on Climate Change in Bolivia.
- Mobilise locally to defend international refugees fleeing horrors caused by the global system.

Local acts done broadly

Capitalism relies on competitive disunity among the grassroots which opens us up to elite control.

Overcoming that disunity demands local acts done broadly. Since those acts must be in tune with local conditions, they will vary widely from country to country.

For New Zealand, my top three local acts done broadly would be:

- Back the alternative economic strategy drafted by the NZ Council of Trade Unions as a broad platform against neoliberalism.
- Support popular campaigns that target neoliberalism, like GST off food, Bad Banks and \$15 minimum wage.
- Promote strategic unifications of the left which create a broader base for political challenges to capitalism in New Zealand.

- 1 This essay was completed on 5 March 2010. By prior arrangement, a first draft was sent for peer review to these leftists (in alphabetical order): Don Archer, Bronwen Beechey, Potaua Biasiny-Tule, Cordelia Black, Elliott Blade, Janet Bogle, Peter Boyle, Martyn “Bomber” Bradbury, Grant Brookes, David Colyer, Gary Cranston, Peter de Waal, Tom Dowie, Bruce Dyer, Bryce Edwards, Roger Fowler, Vaughan Gunson, Bernie Hornfeck, Peter Hughes, Robyn Hughes, Nick Kelly, Daphne Lawless, Paul Maunder, Pat O’Dea, Dean Parker, Len Parker, Len Richards, Bill Rosenberg, Warwick Taylor, Chris Trotter and Maurice Ward. Grateful thanks for the helpful comments of reviewers who, of course, may not share some or many of the author’s viewpoints. Responsibility for the final version rests solely with the author.
- 2 The author, Grant Morgan, has been a socialist campaigner in New Zealand for 35 years. A railworker from 1974 to 1987, he was a delegate and trustee for the National Union of Railway Workers. He joined the Communist Party of New Zealand in 1976, becoming general secretary in 1987 and, a year later, editor of the party’s paper. He initiated the de-Stalinisation of the CPNZ and, in 1994, the party’s evolution into Socialist Worker. From 1994 he was national secretary of Socialist Worker and an editor of its journal UNITY until retiring in February 2007. He was the central organiser of the broad left coalition Residents Action Movement from its birth in 2003 out of the Rates Revolt against corporate politicians until retiring as RAM chair in March 2009. In June 2009 he became international secretary of Socialist Worker, a post he holds today. Your feedback on this essay is invited. You can contact Grant at grantmorgan@paradise.net.nz.
- 3 See Wikipedia’s page on Middle Ages, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Ages. Throughout this essay, readers are directed to Wikipedia pages for more information on topics and definitions. While Wikipedia needs to be used with care, it usually provides a balance of views on any subject, and possibly more important, serves as a pointer towards other sources.
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- 5 Possibly the best detailed history of capitalism’s emergence from the late Middle Ages is Fernand Braudel’s three volume magnum opus *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century*, Harper & Row 1985. Also see Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, especially Part VIII, “The so-called primitive accumulation”.
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- 8 See Wikipedia’s page on Western Schism, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Schism_of_the_West. Also see Wikipedia’s page on East-West Schism, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Schism.
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- 246 See Party of Socialism and Liberty website (in Portuguese), <http://www.psol.org.br/nacional/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on Socialism and Freedom Party, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism_and_Freedom_Party.
- 247 See Labour Party of Pakistan website (in English) <http://www.laborpakistan.org/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on Labour Party of Pakistan, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_Party_of_Pakistan.
- 248 See Socialist Party of Malaysia website (multi-lingual, including English), <http://www.parti-sosialis.org/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on Socialist Party of Malaysia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Party_of_Malaysia.
- 249 See Die Linke website (in German), <http://www.die-linke.de/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on The Left (Germany),

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Left_\(Germany\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Left_(Germany)).
- 250 See New Anti-Capitalist Party website (in French), <http://www.npa2009.org/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on New Anticapitalist Party, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Anticapitalist_Party.
- 251 See Fourth International statement by Francois Sabado, "Chavez Calls for Fifth International: Decisive Lessons from Stalinism & Social Democracy", 27 November 2009, Venezuela Analysis website, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4956>. Also see International Viewpoint, English-language website of the Fourth International, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on Fourth International (Post-Reunification), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_International_\(Post-Reunification\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_International_(Post-Reunification)).
- 252 See Socialist Alliance website, <http://www.socialist-alliance.org/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on Socialist Alliance (Australia), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Alliance_\(Australia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Alliance_(Australia)).
- 253 See Communist Party of Cuba website (in Spanish), <http://www.pcc.cu/>.
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- 255 See Socialist Worker website, <http://www.unityblognz.com>.
- 256 See Workers Party website, <http://workersparty.org.nz/>.
- 257 See United Socialist Party of Venezuela website (in Spanish), <http://www.psu.org.ve/>. Also see Wikipedia's page on United Socialist Party of Venezuela, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Socialist_Party_of_Venezuela. Also see Venezuela Analysis, an excellent English-language website, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/>.
- 258 For more on "the bureaucrats", see "Alberto Muller Rojas on the dangers of bureaucracy", where the PSUV vice-president is interviewed by Vladimir Villegas, 24 November 2009, Indymedia Venezuela, later translated into English (by Sean Seymour-Jones and Tamara Pearson) and published by Venezuela Analysis website and LINKS e-journal, <http://links.org.au/node/1495>.
- 259 Michael Lebowitz, "Exploring the dialectic of the Bolivarian Revolution", *Monthly Review*, February 2010, <http://monthlyreview.org/100201lebowitz.php>.
- 260 Federico Fuentes, "Venezuela's revolution faces crucial battles ahead", 24 February 2010, *Green Left Weekly*.
- 261 See an excellent interview of US sociology professor William Robinson by Chronis Polychroniou, editor of Greek daily paper *Eleftherotypia*, "The challenges facing 21st century socialism in Venezuela", 1 February 2010, *ZNet*, <http://www.zcommunications.org/the-challenges-of-21st-century-socialism-in-venezuela-by-william-i-robinson>. Here Robinson concludes: "Venezuela is still a capitalist country in which the law of value, of capital accumulation, is operative. Efforts to establish a contrary logic – a logic of social need and social distribution – run up against the law of value. But in a capitalist society violating the law of value throws everything haywire, generating many problems and new disequilibria that the counter-revolution is able to take advantage of. This is the challenge for any socialist-oriented revolution within global capitalism."
- 262 One example of the "purity" rejectionists is the Communist Workers Group in New Zealand, an affiliate of the Internationalist Leninist/Trotskyist Fraction. CWG leader David Bedggood wrote: "It is clear that Chavez's '5th International' is actually a 'fifth column' in the workers movement... Chavez represents the class enemy... Any new workers international will have to be based on [the] whole revolutionary legacy from Marx to the Founding Program of the Fourth International of Trotsky in 1938... It is the proletariat that will make the socialist revolution, against the bourgeoisie whose class interests are aligned with imperialism against the workers. Chavez's call for a 5th International is a travesty of this revolutionary heritage and death trap for all workers and peasants around the world... FOR A FIFTH REVOLUTIONARY INTERNATIONAL BASED ON THE FOUNDING PROGRAM OF THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL OF 1938!" (capitals in the original). "Chavez International Fifth Column", 25 December 2009, CWG's RedRave website, <http://redrave.blogspot.com/2009/12/chavez-5th-column-international.html>.
- 263 Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1972 [1875], page 6.
- 264 Pedro Fuentes, "Chavez's Call to Form the Vth International and the World Situation", 10 January 2010, PSOL website, <http://internacionalpsol.wordpress.com/2010/01/10/chavez%E2%80%99s-call-to-form-the-vth-international-and-the-world-situation/>.
- 265 Francois Sabado, "Chavez Calls for Fifth International", 27 November 2009, International Viewpoint website, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1757/>.
- 266 Michael Albert, "Fifth International?!", 21 January 2010, *ZNet*, <http://www.zcommunications.org/fifth-international-by-michael-albert>.
- 267 See All The Lyrics website, http://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/propellerheads/history_repeating-lyrics-532727.html. Also see Wikipedia's page on History Repeating (song), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_Repeating_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_Repeating_(song)).
- 268 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics, Or Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century*, The New Press, 1998, page 64.