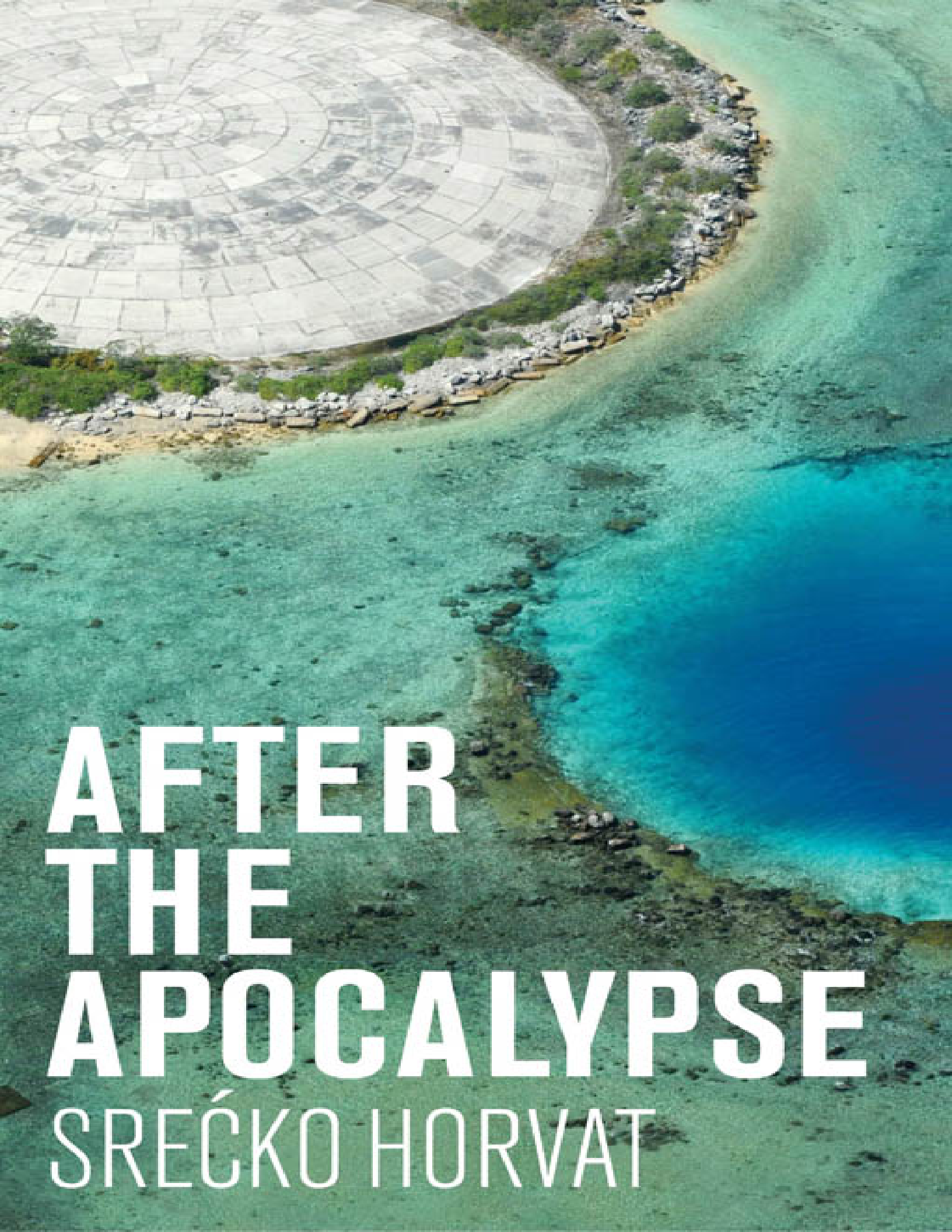




AFTER THE APOCALYPSE

SREĆKO HORVAT

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After the Apocalypse

Srećko Horvat

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First published in 2021 by Polity Press

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press

101 Station Landing

Suite 300

Medford, MA 02155, USA

The author wishes to thank KTH Centre for the Future of Places (CFP) and Director Dr. Tigran Haas for the research grant for the project.



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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4007-5

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4008-2 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Horvat, Srećko, author.

Title: After the apocalypse / Srećko Horvat.

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "A rollercoaster ride through the world

after the Apocalypse with a simple message: either we change course or we face mass extinction"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020039921 (print) | LCCN 2020039922 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509540075 | ISBN 9781509540082 (pb) | ISBN 9781509540099 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Civilization, Modern--21st century. | Regression (Civilization)

Classification: LCC D862.3 .H67 2021 (print) | LCC D862.3 (ebook) | DDC 909.83/2--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020039921>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020039922>

by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL

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Acknowledgements

To write a book about the Apocalypse even as it is in the process of unfolding makes an already difficult task even harder. We are all living through it, deeply entangled and personally shaken by its 'revelations', engulfed by its warnings and, yet, the attempt to imagine the unimaginable, to grasp the 'supraliminal', needs to be taken if we are to understand what is at stake, namely extinction. This book is not only an attempt to bridge these two tensions – overwhelming reality and the reality that is to come – it is, like every book, also a product of these times. I started to write it on the island of Vis, as a sort of continuation of my previous book *Poetry from the Future* (2019) and its chapter 'It's the End of the World (as We Know It)', and, after various travels to the 'future of places' (including Chernobyl), I sent the manuscript to my publisher in late January 2020. As I was awaiting feedback, I heard about a virus in China that would soon change the course of history not only as a dark 'real existing' dystopia, but also as a sort of rupture to open new – perhaps emancipatory – possibilities for a world 'after the Apocalypse'. In the meantime, I was stuck in Vienna during the COVID-19 lockdown until late May 2020 and received a message from my publisher John Thompson and two anonymous reviews of the first draft that easily convinced me, as hard as it was, to rewrite the whole book and to include the ongoing pandemic as an inherent part of the 'eschatological tipping points' that are being explored in this book. My deep gratitude goes to John, who published my first book written in English, *The Radicality of Love*, and who was immediately interested in publishing *After the Apocalypse*. Thanks to his never-ending patience, valuable comments and a few disagreements, the manuscript turned

into its current form. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers who forced me to carefully rework some crucial parts of it; Sarah Dancy for the diligent copy-editing; and Julia Davies for her editorial support throughout the whole process.

This book started its life long before the current COVID-19 pandemic and the acceleration of catastrophes throughout the world, including climate crisis, civil wars and the enduring nuclear threat that are turning extinction not into a future event that is yet to come, but into something that might already become history once this book is published. If one day in March 2018 I hadn't met Tigran Haas in Stockholm, this book would perhaps never be written. I was invited by Tigran to deliver a lecture at the Center for the Future of Places at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology and immediately afterwards he told me I must write a book that would explore the 'future of places' in relation to the Apocalypse. Thanks to him and the generous support of the Center for the Future of Places, I decided to dive into this abyss and examine both the spatial and temporal implications of the Apocalypse. Only through numerous thoughts, dreams and fears shared with my fellow travellers, my *suputnik(s)* or *sputnik(s)*, did this book take its current shape. Perhaps a more precise term would be *supatnik* ('fellow sufferer'), as they had to endure my endless obsession with the 'end' and the 'after'. First and foremost, my thanks goes, as always, to Saša Savanović, not only for her critical comments and numerous readings, but also for making the world 'after the Apocalypse' a more joyful and hopeful place. Among my fellow travellers, whose list is long and always incomplete, those who especially helped in this endeavour are Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Yanis Varoufakis, Darko Suvin, Boris Buden, Renata Ávila, Judith Meyer, Maja Kantar, Andrej Nikolaidis, Marko Pogačar, Valerio Baćak and Filip Balunović. This

book was finished in the midst of a pandemic which, once again, proved that 'politics of friendship' is always connected to survival – and resistance.

Epigraph

**Please note:
the post-apocalyptic
fiction section
has been moved to
Current Affairs.***

Note

* A sign in front of a bookstore in Massachusetts, November 2016, shortly after Donald Trump was elected President of the United States; sign at the window of a bookstore in Fowey, Cornwall, UK, January 2019, during the Brexit negotiations; sign in front of a bookstore in the fire-ravaged village of Cobargo, New South Wales, Australia, January 2020.

Introduction: Nine Theses on Apocalypse

A fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to warn the public; they thought it was a joke and applauded. He repeated it; the acclaim was even greater. I think that's just how the world will come to an end: to general applause from wits who believe it's a joke.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, 1843

Empty streets and ghostly cities, curfew and quarantine; closed shops, restaurants, schools and theatres; closed borders between most countries in the world; around three billion people in lockdown or in some sort of isolation; thermal scanners, geolocation tracking and mass surveillance; hundreds of millions of workers unemployed; clear skies above us, a state of exception beneath; hundreds of billions of locusts swarming through parts of Africa and Asia, fuelled by climate change; the biggest wildfires ever recorded in the Chernobyl 'Exclusion Zone', coinciding with the anniversary of the nuclear accident and an ongoing pandemic; earthquakes and floods; authoritarian capitalism and ecofascism on the rise across the world. Before the year 2020, this would have sounded like a bad post-apocalyptic fiction movie that would probably get very poor reviews for an unconvincing script, or, as a friend of mine commented when, in March 2020, the Croatian capital Zagreb, already under lockdown due to the pandemic, was hit by the strongest earthquake in the last 140 years: 'If this was a movie at IMDb about a pandemic and then suddenly an earthquake happens, it wouldn't get even a 3/10 rating.' In other words, only a few months before 2020 officially started, this sort of scenario

would have been regarded and dismissed as a bad joke by some version of Kierkegaard's clown.

Some people, influenced by the turning point presented by the 1917 October Revolution, were tempted to label the COVID-19 pandemic of spring 2020 'the hundred days that shook the world'. But what really happened in 2020 was not just a sudden and unexpected 'Apocalypse': it was a process that had been boiling beneath the surface of so-called 'normality' for decades. Whether the current situation will lead to a planetary revolution, or to a new form of destructive and authoritarian capitalism (or postcapitalism) and consequently to mass extinction, still remains uncertain. What is certain is that it was not just 'one hundred days' that shook the world: this was the result of a long process, of decades of neoliberalism and centuries of capitalism as the dominant world system based on extraction, exploitation and expansion, the effects of which suddenly surfaced in the year 2020 and, literally, infected our bodies and minds.

If some future historians, under the assumption that history will still exist after the demise of the human species, were to rediscover 'cave drawings' of contemporary humanity, what they would perhaps find among the ruins of late *Homo sapiens* would be a protective face mask, the true symbol of our contemporary times. Even if exact records about the surely mind-blowing number of face masks in circulation today could not be found, if future historians were lucky enough only to find newspaper 'remains' or social media data banks, they might well conclude that never before in the history of the world did so many people wear face masks as in the year 2020. All sorts of safety masks could have been seen in images already back in 2019, from all the continents of the world – from Belgrade and Santiago to Sydney and Hong Kong – whether they were used as protection against tear gas, severe air

pollution or disastrous bushfires. Then, as if all this wasn't enough, a virus broke out in the midst of this already dystopian reality of impending climate crisis and authoritarian politics, and the face mask soon became the 'new normal' across the planet, an inevitable protective object of the late *Homo sapiens*.

When the first news of a highly contagious virus in Wuhan started to spread across the world in early January 2020, many believed – or wanted to believe – it was an epidemic that would not extend beyond China. But the virus had other intentions. As it was already, unbeknown to us, spreading across the world through the hyperconnected networks of global capitalism (its logistics and infrastructure: airlines, trains, cruisers, subways) and through the very sociability of humans (touches, hugs and kisses), we were following in real time how, just ahead of the Chinese New Year, the most important festivity in the country when hundreds of millions of Chinese temporarily migrate, the Chinese government imposed a travel ban and literally locked down 17 cities with almost 56 million people suddenly finding themselves in quarantine zones, prohibited from leaving them.¹ The epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak was the city of Wuhan, with a population of 11 million inhabitants. Suddenly, the streets of the so-called 'Chicago of China' were empty, like a ghost town. This was the future of places that would soon become the 'new normal' across the world. Yet, in early January 2020 it was as if the majority of the world's population was still living in a present that was already past, while China was already in the future.

In an attempt to stop the virus from spreading, the Chinese government prohibited any sort of transport inside the city of Wuhan as well as between other areas that had previously been connected to the Hubei region. Suddenly, there were no more flights, no cars or taxis; public

transportation, including regional buses, was shut down and a ban on ships and ferries was imposed in other major cities. While the Chinese government delayed in letting the world know about coronavirus, the World Health Organization, instead of quickly warning the rest of the world and preparing them for something that was obviously not an epidemic confined just to China, but that presented a major global threat, described such a quarantine as 'unprecedented'.² However, even this unprecedented lockdown, which would in just a few weeks – in different forms – become the 'new normal' across the world, wasn't enough to contain the spread of the virus.

Even before it reached Europe and other parts of the world, it had already spread through the semiosphere (the realm of production and interpretation of signs) via social networks and history recordings made by 'smart phones' (often produced by a cheap labour force precisely in the sweatshops of China). From the seeming safety of our homes, we could have seen images of people fleeing Wuhan, and we were still watching it as a sort of post-apocalyptic movie that was not happening to us. Soon we would find out that, despite the lockdown, more than 5 million people had already left the city.³ At the same time, local villages in the Hubei region took quarantine measures into their own hands: citizens self-organized and created 'protected bubbles' inside the contaminated areas by not letting in any strangers. Despite the fact that the Chinese government was trying hard to contain the spread of the virus, it was too late – the virus already started to fan out across the world.

While some governments reacted quickly and contained the spread of the virus better than others, dangerous clowns in power – from Donald Trump to Boris Johnson and Jair Bolsonaro – were still thinking that the age of the pandemic was a joke, and instead applauded the new opportunities

for disaster capitalism. Some governments, like that of Turkmenistan, even banned the word 'coronavirus', while others, like Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary, swiftly used the crisis in order to suspend parliamentary democracy and basically install a full-blown dictatorship within Europe. It seems that the virus appeared as a good 'excuse' to many regimes, which, instead of treating the virus as a serious health risk, used it to legitimize and finally fulfil their authoritarian wet dreams. As China was using its already dystopian surveillance system in order to trace infected bodies and manage their movements and behaviour, Silicon Valley companies were penetrating ever deeper into public infrastructure – for instance, through so-called 'smart cities' – and into crucial public services, such as healthcare systems around the world.⁴ Those who were privileged enough not to be among the 'frontline' workers, but were confined to their homes, slowly woke up to a nightmare that was best captured by Naomi Klein, who called it the 'Screen New Deal'⁵ – namely, a future where almost everything is 'shared' through the screen on a mediated platform. It is, as Klein points out, a future that employs fewer teachers, doctors and drivers, claiming to be running on 'artificial intelligence', but is 'actually held together by tens of millions of anonymous workers tucked away in warehouses, data centers, content moderation mills, electronic sweatshops, lithium mines, industrial farms, meat-processing plants, and prisons, where they are left unprotected from disease and hyperexploitation'.⁶

Even if this year – while I am writing these pages – still didn't come to its end, it can already be said that during 2020 world history accelerated to such a degree that we suddenly found ourselves in the future of an unprecedented planetary 'state of exception' and, at the same time, in a phase of imminent system crisis that would have effects not only on the future of humanity, but also on the future of the

planet itself. Millions of flights were grounded, cruise lines suspended and cars parked for weeks, pushing the oil price below zero for the first time in history and leading to full oil tankers anchored with nowhere to unload. For a short moment, it looked like another world could still be possible. But before long, hundreds of millions of workers were left without an income, without a future, while it was precisely those very same big polluters – the car industry, airlines and oil companies – that were bailed out.⁷ Everything had to change, so that everything could stay the same. Or even worse.

Even if, for a short dream-like moment, the skies above our cities were finally clear again, climate crisis continued to accelerate and deepen regardless of the perception that time had ‘slowed down’. If 2019 was the year of global protest, from Fridays for Future to Extinction Rebellion, the massive and determined climate movement that was spreading across the world, then early 2020 was, to paraphrase the title of a good old science fiction movie, the year when ‘the Earth stood still’.⁸ Instead of the year of public protest, it was the year of quarantine. Instead of being on the streets, suddenly the majority of the world’s population was confined to their homes. If you were lucky enough to have something called ‘home’. This would, of course, change very soon. As the pandemic continued to rage in many corners of the world, when faced with new austerity, authoritarianism and structural racism, people took to the streets again, from Los Angeles to Sao Paulo, Minneapolis to London, to protest decades of austerity, rising authoritarianism, racism and structural violence. They were united by the words ‘I can’t breathe’, protesting the suffocation caused by the structural violence of global capitalism.

Just before the global lockdown of early 2020, at a time when the post-apocalyptic fiction section had already been

moved to current affairs, I was returning to a place I call 'home'. It is a remote island in the midst of the Adriatic Sea, where the first chapter of this book, 'Climate Crisis: Back to the Future Mediterranean', is taking place. It leads us to a reflection on the effects of climate crisis in a place that has not yet experienced the disastrous changes that so many other places in the world are already coping with: powerful hurricanes, rapidly rising sea levels and devastating droughts. But what if the year 2019 were a glance into the future of places where this would become the 'new normal' – even in the seemingly peaceful region of the Mediterranean? What if the hottest summers on record, stronger storms and recurring floods have to be understood as a warning – or rather 'revelation' – of the summers, winds and floods to come? The central concepts that are explored in this chapter on the changing Mediterranean are climate grief and 'solastalgia', but also, more broadly, 'post-apocalyptic melancholy' and the 'normalization' of the Apocalypse.

In the second chapter 'The Nuclear Age: 'Enjoy Chernobyl, Die Later' – the result of a trip to the so-called 'Exclusion Zone' just a few months before global air traffic and global tourism would literally be stopped – we move from the seemingly peaceful Mediterranean to somewhere that is already located 'after the Apocalypse', both as a place, and in time. What we encounter in this ghostly place of the future is not just the 'normalization' of disaster, but something that could be called the 'commodification' of the Apocalypse. This process of turning the Apocalypse into a consumerist product or experience takes various forms today, from cinema (the popular HBO *Chernobyl* series) and 'post-apocalyptic tourism' (not just to Chernobyl) to a wide range of products that reflect or materialize our current post-apocalyptic *Zeitgeist*. Besides looking at Chernobyl as an example of the 'commodification' of the Apocalypse, this

chapter reminds us of the looming danger of nuclear catastrophe and introduces the thesis on the 'supraliminal' character of the nuclear age.

The third chapter, 'The Collision: Marshall Islands are Everywhere', starts with a speculative trip to the Marshall Islands, the most nuked place in the world as well as threatened by rapidly rising sea levels, in order to understand what happens when climate crisis and the nuclear age collide. What kind of consequences are there, not only on the future of places but on time itself? How do we transmit a message about nuclear waste, these 'pyramids of the twenty-first century', into the distant and uncertain future? Here, the term 'eschatological tipping points' is introduced in order to warn of the interconnectivity of eschatological threats that are not only all present at the same time, but are reaching 'tipping points' leading to an irreversible change in the Earth system. This is the final chapter in which the cover image of this book will be 'unveiled', something the Marshallese simply call the 'Tomb', but which could as well be the perfect illustration of what it means to be living 'after the Apocalypse'.

From the midst of the Pacific Ocean we come back to the year 2020 when, along with the nuclear age and climate crisis, the eschatological threat of a pandemic materialized and became 'normalized'. The coronavirus crisis hasn't ushered in the end of the world yet; it has been, rather, a 'revelation' in the original sense of the word 'Apocalypse'. A sort of an apocalyptic X-ray that has unveiled not only what the scientists were persistently warning of for decades (the destruction of wildlife and habitat loss creates the perfect conditions for spill-over of viruses from animals to humans). It also unmasked a global system based on a vicious circle of extraction, exploitation and expansion, which is leading not just to the 'ends of the world', but to

an end of the ends of the world. The 'revelation' of COVID-19 is the following: the alternative is no longer socialism or barbarism, our only horizon today is a profound reinvention of the world or ... extinction.

What follows, before we begin on the journey into the world 'after the Apocalypse', are the main theses that will be further elaborated and recurring in the chapters of the book.

The Apocalypse already happened

Thesis 1: Extinction already happened if we continue with the current barbarism. We are living in the 'naked Apocalypse' without a kingdom to come.

'How can I save you? It already happened!' says James Cole (Bruce Willis) in the movie *12 Monkeys*, when a psychiatrist in a mental institution in 1990 asks him: 'Are you going to save us?' He's been considered crazy for claiming to be coming from the year 2035, a future in which almost the entire population of the world was annihilated by a deadly virus. To think of our present period as the time 'after the Apocalypse' requires, first and foremost, a similar shift in temporality. Not only did the Apocalypse as 'revelation' (see thesis 2) already happen, it is the end itself – the destruction of the biosphere and mass extinction – that happened in the future if we are unable to understand the 'revelation' of the rapidly unfolding planetary events and if we are not capable of radically reinventing the world in the time that remains. In order to come closer to an understanding of our contemporary 'revelation', we have to embark on a post-apocalyptic journey that follows an understanding of time that is opposite to the still prevailing conception of time as *chronos*. Namely, the idea – or rather ideology – of time as something 'linear', based on clocks, calendars and time zones, for centuries grounded in the

capitalist notion of 'progress' and its myth that humanity is 'progressing' in a chronological order towards something meaningful, towards a 'higher' stage of civilization.

When we speak about 'progress' and Apocalypse, we should never forget that, as Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro warned us in their timely book *The Ends of The World* (2016), the end(s) of the world already happened – for someone, somewhere, and usually for those who were less privileged to benefit from what is usually called 'progress' (gunpowder, paper, religion, colonialism, capitalism).⁹ However, the difference between our epoch and all the previous ones is that we are not just confronted with the 'ends of the world' that are simultaneously always happening. We are, and this is what makes our epoch the truly last epoch, faced with a possibility of an end that might end all other possible 'ends of the world', including epochality as such. What if there is nothing coming after the 'End-Time' – no new epoch, no new start, no promised kingdom?

Unlike the rather optimistic thesis of the 'kingdom without Apocalypse', present both in Judaeo-Christian eschatology and in the secularized versions of revolutionary movements, the seemingly counterintuitive thesis that the 'Apocalypse already happened' is closest to the philosophy of Günther Anders, an important but still overlooked philosopher of the twentieth century who spoke about a 'naked Apocalypse'.¹⁰ According to Anders, it is 'naked' because there is nothing but a mere downfall awaiting us. There is no kingdom to come, only an 'Apocalypse without kingdom', which is in opposition both to Ezekielian eschatology and the capitalist faith in 'progress'. Or as Anders, whose thoughts and writings on the Apocalypse will crop up throughout this book, put it: