



**THE TRAGEDY  
OF HUMAN  
DEVELOPMENT**

A GENEALOGY OF CAPITAL AS POWER

**TIM DI MUZIO**

# The Tragedy of Human Development



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**A Genealogy of Capital as Power**

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*For Amanda, Michaela, Vince, Ryann, and Mitch.  
May your minds be wide open and your hearts lead you on.*



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## Foreword

No book is easy. The present work was largely inspired by my last study on the rise of a global petro-market civilization and what I called “carbon capitalism.” Therein I explored the transition to fossil fuels as an historical exception, tracing it through Britain, the United States, and capitalist world order more broadly. Given the nonrenewable nature of fossil fuels and the elite penchant for building more energy-soaked built environments, I argued that we are headed toward a general crisis of social reproduction where energy-intensive lifestyles will no longer be reproducible. I concluded the book with the following phrase: “After all it would be the ultimate tragedy of human development ‘if the history of the human race proved to be nothing more noble than the story of an ape playing with a box of matches on a petrol dump’” (Di Muzio 2015b: 171). The phrase “tragedy of human development” seemed to flow naturally from my analysis, and I barely gave it a second thought until the book arrived in hard copy months after those words were written. Upon rereading the book, the phrase jumped out at me in bolder reliefs: what would it mean to conceive of human development—indeed our history as a species—as a tragedy? It seemed an open and interesting question, particularly given other renderings of human history as progress or catastrophe. The philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) had already declared human history one giant catastrophe, a radical statement if there ever was one and a somber philosophy of human affairs given our many achievements. The other extreme is the liberal, progressive view of history as a stadial exercise in human betterment finally realized in a commercial society. Our liberal friends do not always deny the atrocities of the stadial history they recount, but they are heavily discounted. It always seemed to me that

this reading of history was far too optimistic and far too injudicious. Too optimistic in the sense that there is a liberal tendency to believe that capitalism and the price mechanism of the market will come to our rescue at every turn, if only in the long run for some. Too injudicious in the sense that our liberal friends are happy to somewhat acknowledge the horrible events of our history but like good capitalists are happy to “write off” or “write down” these events because it stops them from looking forward. Between these two extremes—catastrophe and progress—I believe we find tragedy. I will explain what I mean in greater detail later but for now allow me a few words about the subtitle of this book: a genealogy of capital as power. What I want to demonstrate in this book—if only in outline—is the emergence of a historical contradiction between the logic of differential accumulation, which aims for the greater inequality of power, income, and wealth and the logic of livelihood that is mostly concerned with acquiring those things most closely associated with a decent life. While they overlap, I will argue that these logics are fundamentally at odds and the crux of the tragedy of human development. In a word, the tragedy results because the logic of differential accumulation operates in the interests of the very few and supersedes the logic of livelihood. The weapons of differential accumulation are monetization, commodification, ownership and exclusion, and, ultimately, capitalization and war. We are so used to these weapons that few of us stop to question their historical emergence. They are taken as “self-evident,” a part of the “natural” world, as though things have always been this way. But things have not always been this way. In this light, the task I have set for myself in this study is to then, if not fully trace their emergence in all their geographical and historical complexity, at least provide somewhat of a guideline for future study. The task has not been easy given the scale of human history covered in this book and the still mounting array of literature scattered across disciplines. As the reader will be able to tell from the references, this book has been built on the shoulders of giants but it has also no less been constructed on the back of those whose work is lesser known but without which, we would know far, far less about ourselves and our world. I owe a great deal of intellectual debt to their work. But while this book has engaged literature across disciplines, at base it is wholly a work of critical political economy, that master social science that refuses to believe that politics and power can be separated from capitalist accumulation, the price mechanism of the market, and the increasing concentration of wealth and power so prevalent today. This book will have silences, gaps, and disappointments, but I hope these are at least matched by new discoveries, novel arguments, and new questions in need of answers. Ultimately, and whatever the shortcomings of this

book, I think we must ask ourselves if it is possible for the logic of livelihood to triumph over the logic of differential accumulation. I will take up this question toward the end of this work when I discuss the biopolitics of global capitalism. But for now it is time to end this foreword and get to the task at hand. For after all, the hurricane of our history cannot roar in opening words alone.

Tim Di Muzio  
Sydney, Toronto, Brussels, Paris