



## Capitalism as Revenge :: Revenge Against Capitalism

An Interview with Max Haiven

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# *Capitalism as Revenge :: Revenge Against Capitalism An Interview with Max Haiven*

C. S. Soong and Max Haiven

Is it productive to talk about revenge in the context of capitalism? As Max Haiven reveals in his new book *Revenge Capitalism*,<sup>1</sup> elites have in many times and places answered that question in the affirmative; they have used the language and rhetoric of revenge to disparage and vilify those struggling to confront capitalist and other forms of oppression and marginalization. This interview examines the uses and abuses of revenge rhetorics, and considers whether there's a productive or generative kind of revenge – or, as Haiven calls it, *avenging* – that could be carried out by the oppressed on their oppressors.<sup>2</sup>

Much of Haiven's work has focused on the radical imagination – what it is, what's been done to it by processes of financialization and neoliberalization, and how to create the conditions for its emergence and flourishing. Haiven is Canada Research Chair in Culture, Media and Social Justice at Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada, and director of the ReImagining Value Action Lab (RiVAL).

**C. S. Soong:** Revenge in the context of capitalism has been on your mind a lot lately. Why?

**Max Haiven:** I think what we're seeing around the globe is the rise of a certain kind of revenge politics. As the capitalist system hovers on the brink of collapse, it unleashes forms of cruelty and irrational behavior that have catastrophic impacts on people's lives. In response, we are

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1. Max Haiven, *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling of Unpayable Debts* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).
  2. This is the edited and annotated transcript of an interview recorded via Skype on March 27, 2019.

beginning to see whole polities and populations develop repertoires of political action that, at least from certain perspectives, appear as if they are largely motivated by revenge. I think this is probably easiest to see in reactionary movements that now stalk the political landscape, from the far right to various fundamentalist religious movements to the kinds of ethno-nationalism and muscular proto-fascism that we're seeing in many countries around the world.

But I think there is a danger in simply identifying the tendency toward political revenge or revanchism as purely a right-wing and reactionary movement. If we're honest with ourselves, many of us – even those who yearn for justice, peace, and human solidarity – have felt a kind of burning desire for revenge for what is being done to our fellow human beings and to the earth. What I've taken up is what I think is a very dangerous task: to really dwell with the spirit of vengeance, a spirit we deny at our peril. I want to excavate its histories and try to understand revenge not as something that has surprised us by coming from the margins of society to the center, but as something that in some ways has always been with us. Revenge is, of course, an eternal human passion, but I'm interested in revenge as a political tendency that, while quite active in the present moment, has pervaded the history of both capitalism and colonialism.

**Soong:** How do or should we feel about actually taking revenge? In what ways might we be repelled by the prospect?

**Haiven:** It is a repugnant concept. I think part of that repugnancy is something we have been educated and habituated into. Many of the greatest works of human literature and culture across civilizations have warned us about the dangers of revenge, about the ways it creates self-perpetuating cycles of violence and retribution that have brought down human societies and civilizations.

I don't want to diminish the very real dangers of revenge, but I want to also identify something strange today, and arguably throughout the history of capitalism. It's something I date back as far as the 1500s, where the ruling class and the colonial oppressors deployed a narrative that blames and accuses the oppressed and exploited of the world of fanatically seeking revenge. This is a narrative that can only interpret our grassroots forms of resistance and rebellion as a kind of bestial reaction. As a result, we have developed a phobia toward revenge which, I think, doesn't ultimately serve us well.

**Soong:** What does our fear of revenge prevent us from doing? Why should we push back against a phobia that seems to me quite natural?

**Haiven:** Our phobia toward revenge leaves us bereft of a way of explaining two things. The first is the way that a *system* can take revenge on people without any one person wanting or intending it. Revenge is not just an individual human drama; it's also a systemic or structural pattern. Second, this dominant narrative precludes us from really grappling with what Frantz Fanon called the "legitimate desire for revenge,"<sup>3</sup> something that underscores the experience of many people who are oppressed and exploited. It seems to me that if we ignore this desire for revenge, its associated sentiment and affect can be picked up quite easily by reactionary forces.

**Soong:** When you say that elites fear revenge or perhaps fantasize that the masses wish to take revenge against them, are you saying that we in a sense internalize that and we begin to understand our desires for revenge against the system as being deplorable and contemptible?

**Haiven:** Indeed. I have traced this tendency back many centuries to the philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, the father of the scientific method. As Vandana Shiva and others have noted, Bacon's work, which continues to shape the dominant regimes of capitalist technoscience, is animated by the theme of patriarchal violence. You can see this in the way Bacon speaks about tearing the veil away from nature and calls for subjugating it to the human, and specifically masculine, will.

Late in his life Bacon made, in one of the first treatises on revenge written in English, a very strange distinction. In his 1625 essay "On Revenge," Bacon suggested that sometimes what he calls "public revenges" – that is, acts of revenge taken by a ruler or another elite member of society in the name of the public good – are legitimate. On the other hand, private revenges are demonic; they have a kind of cancerous presence within the political sphere. There's this insistence that revenge taken outside of the "legitimate" forms of state violence and coercion constitutes a bestial and subhuman act that can only lead to utter chaos and disorder. I think this constitutes a clear and influential example of the ruling class (as a kind of shorthand for all of those

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3. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963), 139.

who perpetuate and benefit from oppression and exploitation) defaming the vengeful actions of the oppressed. That defamation has in many ways been internalized so that, for instance, we come to a moment now where to even speak of revenge feels dangerous and bestial.

**Soong:** Francis Bacon's denigration of private revenge, of vengefulness from below, hinges, you've argued, on the figure of the witch. Make that connection for us.

**Haiven:** Bacon famously said that those who dedicate themselves to taking revenge lead the lives of witches, and that therefore their lives will end in misfortune. For Bacon, revenge has an unnatural or supernatural quality. In this he was likely influenced by many years of Christian scriptural interpretation, from which emerged the idea that a person should not take revenge. Instead, God will take revenge in the end times in His final judgment. As Jesus Christ advised his followers, the duty of humans was to turn the other cheek and to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, to allow the law of the land to prevail rather than to take vengeance for crimes and injustices done to oneself. It's a very conservative reading of Christian scripture.

So Bacon is referring to witches as figures possessed by the devil or by devilish desires to take revenge. But the irony is that, as Carolyn Merchant and other feminist scholars have demonstrated,<sup>4</sup> Bacon himself was at the very least a supporter of King James I's passion for witch hunting, and of the associated use of torture to extract confessions. Indeed, there's evidence to suggest that Bacon imported this notion of violent gendered interrogation into his conceptualisation of the scientific method. Silvia Federici notes that the witch hunts were pivotal to the introduction of forms of ruling-class power that would eventually emerge under capitalism.<sup>5</sup> The witch hunts were a key means by which the power of commoners and their communities was broken, by the specific targeting of women as politicians, knowledge holders, and healers. Communities of commoners were reduced to a state of vulnerability whereby they could be transformed into a waged working class to be exploited. So it's ironic that Bacon would name as witches those

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4. Carolyn Merchant, "The Scientific Revolution and *The Death of Nature*," *Isis* 97 (2006): 513-533. <https://doi.org/0021-1753/2006/9703-0008>

5. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, Capitalism and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2005).

who were possessed by a desire for revenge, when in fact he was involved in or at least complicit with development of methods for labeling women (and men as well) as witches who could then be, and were, the targets of revenge by the state. All of this points to the ways that power frames its opponents as supernaturally fixated on a kind of vengeance.

**Soong:** You've spent a lot of time engaging with the writings and ideas of Karl Marx. Did Marx write a lot about revenge?

**Haiven:** No, although it is a theme that runs throughout his work. Marx sought to delineate a scientific way of understanding history, politics, and political economy. He worked on identifying the underlying currents of capitalist development so that workers could rise up against the capitalist class. So he wasn't that interested in what would probably have been considered, in his era, a humanist theme like revenge. However, there are a few moments in his work, as a young scholar and an older thinker, in which he represents revenge not as something that the working class will seek to exact on the ruling class but as something enacted by the ruling class, for seemingly no reason, on the working class and on oppressed peoples around the world.

For instance, Marx speaks of the British reprisals against the First Indian War of Independence of the late 1850s, which the British called the Sepoy Mutiny, as being unexceptional in the history of colonialism. The British brutally killed hundreds of thousands of people in response to an uprising of Indian soldiers against the East India Company. Marx points out that this form of revenge, and the revenge that was taken by Indian soldiers against British colonial officials, was the natural offspring of the forms of revenge that had been essentially baked into British colonial rule. To paraphrase Marx: revenge was an organic part of British rule; it was integral to the cruel and sadistic behavior that always stands as the hallmark of colonialism and of the rule over colonized populations.

Marx also wrote about the kinds of sadistic revenge taken on what we might now call the surplussed population of unemployed working-class folk in England, people who were consigned to poorhouses established by the state or by ruling-class charities. But of course these poorhouses were essentially torture chambers for the working class; they were places where adults and children were subjected to forced labor, people's medical needs were not met, and humanity was degraded to its lowest possible state. Marx perceives these facilities as institutions of revenge, where the ruling class

essentially takes vengeance (disguised as charity) on the very people upon whom it is parasitically feeding.<sup>6</sup>

**Soong:** If Marx believed that vengeance is practiced more by the oppressor than by the oppressed, did he say anything about whether revenge taken by the oppressed and the exploited is justified – or can, in certain instances, be justifiable?

**Haiven:** I have not found statements to that effect, although I think Marx would agree that revenge is sometimes justified. Marx would probably agree with the great Marxist historian and theorist C. L. R. James: to paraphrase James, when the records of history are written as they truly should be written, we will marvel at both the restraint exercised by the oppressed in their uprisings, and the routinized cruelty of the oppressors in their systems of power.<sup>7</sup>

I think Marx – and Engels perhaps expresses this, in various letters, more clearly than Marx – believed that through a scientific understanding of capitalist society, and through the establishment of communist parties that could organize the working class to transform the world rather than simply to take vengeance for their particular conditions, working-class people could rise above their desire for revenge. They could become a world-historical force that would not just annihilate the individual capitalists who exploited them or allowed their children to die of starvation or disease but take what I would call an *avenging* stance toward capitalism as a system.

**Soong:** One historical figure who had a lot to say about revenge was the leader of the Haitian revolution, Toussaint Louverture. What did Louverture say about revenge and its importance?

**Haiven:** The language Louverture used to marshal the enslaved Africans in Haiti and propel them toward revolutionary action was often filled with promises of revenge. It cannot be denied that revolutionary struggles, including the Haitian Revolution, are extremely bloody and vengeful against those who are perceived to be the agents of oppression. But I want to turn our attention away from the spectacular violence of revolutionary moments, especially revolutionary moments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

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6. See, for example, Karl Marx, "The Indian Revolt," *New York Tribune*, September 16, 1857, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/09/16.htm> or Karl Marx. "A Bourgeois Document," *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, January 4, 1849, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1849/01/04.htm>.

7. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd edition (New York: Vintage, 1989), 88-89.

because they can distract us from underlying systems and structures. Instead, I want to focus on how revenge was used by Louverture as a means to mobilize a revolutionary constituency. Louverture, as many people have pointed out, was attempting to bring together a revolutionary movement in Haiti that would take the French revolutionary sentiments of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* at their word and extend them to all citizens. In Louverture's eyes, avenging the enslavement of African people and the horrific forms of vengeance that the slave owners enacted upon their slaves (for no reason other than their own sadistic pleasure and their fear of uprisings) became a moral task that bound together the revolutionaries in an enterprise that involved and required much more than revenge or revolutionary bloodlust. It was about claiming a measure of justice that couldn't exist within the imagination of the colonizer and slaveholder.

So there's something here about revenge that breaks us out of the moral and religious and philosophical framework developed by the oppressor. It allows for a new reckoning of justice to emerge that could be the foundation of a different social order – not simply a reversal of fortunes, where the oppressor becomes the oppressed and the oppressed becomes the oppressor, but actually a new moral universe where the underlying causes of the original oppression are abolished.

**Soong:** In thinking about what a sort of productive or generative revenge might look like, I understand you've been drawn to a poster produced in the wake of the 1886 Haymarket massacre in Chicago. What does that poster exhort workers to do, and how is rebellion or resistance framed?

**Haiven:** Yes, there's a famous poster published by the German anarchist August Spies in response to the Haymarket Massacre. The poster exhorts Spies's fellow workers to rise up and take revenge against the ruling class, which has sent their agents, the police, and armed gangs to murder striking workers. In the poster Spies likens the kind of revenge the state has taken on these striking workers and protesters to the kind of everyday revenge that the system is taking on the families of working people, especially migrant workers in Chicago.

But more generally, that poster—and many other cultural works from that famous period of labor unrest—asks workers to see or recall themselves as the inheritors of a long line of injustices. The poster calls upon workers to avenge not only the crimes and cruelties done



**REVENGE!**

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**Workingmen, to Arms!!!**

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Your masters sent out their bloodhounds — the police —; they killed six of your brothers at McCormicks this afternoon. They killed the poor wretches, because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses. They killed them, because they dared ask for the shortening of the hours of toil. They killed them to show you, 'Free American Citizens!', that you must be satisfied and contented with whatever your bosses condescend to allow you, or you will get killed!

You have for years endured the most abject humiliations; you have for years suffered unmeasurable iniquities; you have worked yourself to death; you have endured the pangs of want and hunger; your children you have sacrificed to the factory-lords — in short: You have been miserable and obedient slave all these years: Why? To satisfy the insatiable greed, to fill the coffers of your lazy thieving master? When you ask them now to lessen your burden, he sends his bloodhounds out to shoot you, kill you!

If you are men, if you are the sons of your grand sires, who have shed their blood to free you, then you will rise in your might, Hercules, and destroy the hideous monster that seeks to destroy you. To arms we call you, to arms!

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Your Brothers.

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**Rache! Rache!**

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**Arbeiter, zu den Waffen!**

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Arbeitendes Volk, heute Nachmittag mordeten die Bluthunde Eurer Ausbeuter 6 Eurer Brüder trocken bei McCormick's. Warum mordeten sie dieselben? Weil sie den Muth hatten, mit dem Volk unzufrieden zu sein, welches Eure Ausbeuter Ihnen beschreiben haben. Sie fordereten Brod, man antwortete ihnen mit Blei, zingedenk der Thatsache, daß man damit das Volk am wirksamsten zum Schweigen bringen kann! Viele, viele Jahre habt Ihr alle Demüthigungen ohne Widerspruch ertragen, habt Euch vom frühen Morgen bis zum späten Abend geschunden, habt Entbehrungen jeder Art ertragen, habt Eure Kinder selbst geopfert — Alles, um die Schopstommen Eurer Herren, zu fällen, Alles für He! Und jetzt, wo Ihr vor sie hintrittet, und sie erucht, Eure Würde, etwas zu erleichtern, da heißen sie zum Dank für Eure Opfer ihre Bluthunde, die Polizei, auf Euch, um Euch mit Bleikugeln von der Unzufriedenheit zu räumen. Slaven, wir fragen und bekämpfen Euch bei Allem, was Euch heilig und werth ist, rächt diesen schrecklichen Mord, den man heute an Euren Brüdern beging, und vielleicht morgen schon an Euch begehen wird. Arbeitendes Volk, Hercules, Du bist am Scheideweg angelangt. Wofür entscheidest Du Dich? Für Sklaverei und Hunger, oder für Freiheit und Brod? Entscheidest Du Dich für das Letztere, dann schaume keinen Augenblick; dann, Volk, zu den Waffen! Vernichtung den menschlichen Bestien, die sich Deine Herrscher nennen! Rücksichtslose Vernichtung ihnen — das muß Deine Lösung sein! Denn! der Helden, deren Blut den Weg zum Fortschritt, zur Freiheit und zur Menschlichkeit gebildet — und werde, ihre würdig zu werden!

**Eure Brüder.**

THE FAMOUS "REVENGE" CIRCULAR.

Engraved from the Original by direct Photographic Process.

Revenge! Workingmen, to Arms!!!, August Spies, 1889. Courtesy of the University of Illinois.

to them and their families but also the injustices perpetrated over the course of decades and even centuries. I think this is most poetically expressed in Walter Benjamin's enigmatic and haunting reflections in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" where, to paraphrase, Benjamin says that the problem with German Weimar Social Democracy in the leadup to the Nazi period was its excessive focus on making an appeal to the working classes on the basis of the promise of liberated grandchildren.<sup>8</sup> The claim was that through socialism, the future would be redeemed as a place where one's descendants could live in peace and abundance. Benjamin wrote that this rhetorical approach severs the sinews of the working class's greatest strength – namely, its spirit of vengeance and its spirit of sacrifice. These spirits are tied to the idea of avenging one's ancestors rather than focusing on one's grandchildren.

Benjamin's argument, I think, is that social democracy offered this triumphalist vision where if you simply join the party, and you subscribe to its vision of a future we're all marching toward together, that would be sufficient. But in Benjamin's view what was needed was a sense that we have to overcome a long history of oppression and exploitation together, and that the future-focused vision of social change put forward by the Social Democrats for very instrumental purposes neglected the deep-seated resentment, anger, and antipathy that is at the core of the experience of being oppressed and exploited. In the absence of dealing with those sentiments in a productive way, in a way that generates solidarity and a vision for a future in which the past will be redeemed, this emotional territory, Benjamin believed, was left open to appropriation by reactionary forces – notably the Nazis. The Nazis were able to offer a very different way for working-class people to get a kind of revenge against the system, one that was ultimately catastrophic and that in fact deepened and worsened their oppression and exploitation.

**Soong:** What you've learned about the former White House strategist Steve Bannon and his career trajectory may help deepen our understanding of the rhetorics and realities of revenge politics. At one point, Bannon worked in the arenas of finance and financialization. He later became a Hollywood producer and co-produced a film called *Titus*, released in 1999. This was an adaptation of Shakespeare's play?

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8. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 253–64. (New York: Schocken, 1969).

**Haiven:** Yes, the film was based on *Titus Andronicus*, written very early in Shakespeare's career. That play is about a Roman general who, after fighting the Goths for many years, returns to Rome, a city corrupted by greed and by internecine struggles waged by and among various political factions. Titus, the general, is represented in the play – and there are parallels here to the first season of the TV series *Game of Thrones* – as a noble soldier who finds himself in the corrupt, backstabbing world of politics. Titus and his whole family become the target of various political machinations that lead several people to be murdered, after which Titus swears an oath of vengeance that he then exacts, in sadistic fashion, on all of his enemies. At some point in the play the Goth queen, who is working in a kind of conspiracy with the racialized figure of Aaron the Moor, is forced to eat her own adult children. And one of Titus's daughters has her limbs cut off. It's an incredibly bloody play that most critics agree is a bit of a discredit to Shakespeare. Nonetheless, it was extremely appealing to Steve Bannon.

**Soong:** What did Bannon find so appealing about the play, and how was the theme or metanarrative of *Titus Andronicus* expressed or interpreted in Bannon's film *Titus* – and perhaps as Bannon moved over to Breitbart News?

**Haiven:** I want to begin by saying that I'm not one of those who believe that Steve Bannon is some sort of evil genius. He's just a bully and a scumbag who happened to be in the right place at the right time. So I don't want to contribute to the cult of personality around Bannon. But I do find him a useful index for deeper shifts in our age.

I think Bannon liked *Titus Andronicus* because it's a kind of hyper-masculine martial drama, where the individual who's willing to break the norms and conventions of society effects a cataclysmic social transformation. We know from Bannon's own interviews and discussions that he has a very apocalyptic imagination. He believes there will be a global race war that will culminate in a new global agenda and a reorganization of human life on the planet. I think the *Titus Andronicus* narrative appealed to Bannon precisely because it is so utterly nihilistic in many respects.

I think Bannon also sees in Shakespeare's play an allegory for an America that's like Rome when it was an empire in decline – beset by decadence and corruption and overseen by self-serving elites who used their hegemony over art, culture, media, and politics to rule as a very small minority over a very large majority. The figure of Titus is a

kind of elite figure who comes into that world and destroys it from within. So in some sense I think the film *Titus* can be seen, in retrospect, as an allegory for how Bannon came to view Trump: as a thuggish general of capital who could come in and disrupt and destroy the system from within. That system, Bannon believed, had been corrupted by self-serving elites who had marshaled the language of liberalism to perpetuate their power.

**Soong:** Let's widen the scope, as I know you are inclined to do, from figures like Bannon and Trump to capitalism as a system and a structure. You've written extensively about the phenomenon of financialization. How would you define financialization, and what has it done to workers that might be characterized as revenge?

**Haiven:** Financialization, in a limited sense of the term, refers to the increased power and influence of the financial sector of the capitalist economy. That sector comprises institutions like hedge funds, investment banks, and bond-rating agencies that many of us became familiar with during the 2008 financial crisis. Their influence is, of course, economic, in the sense that they have immense power over other capitalist firms, but it's also political, in the sense that most governments around the world (with the exception of oil-exporting countries) are extremely indebted and need to borrow more money every year to make ends meet. This is largely because these governments have chosen not to tax the richest members of society but instead have borrowed the money they need – from, often, these very same wealthy elites. So financialization has had profound and wide-ranging economic and political effects. But I and others have argued that there are also deep sociological and cultural consequences. Sociologically speaking, as the financial sector grows and as public spending diminishes, we begin to see almost every institution of society transformed into a kind of financialized asset.

**Soong:** What concretely do you mean by this? Give us an example.

**Haiven:** One that I often point to is the university. Once upon a time we imagined that the university existed to produce research in the public interest and to educate a new generation of citizens to take their place in society. We now understand the university to be something quite different: a place where young people go tens of thousands of dollars into debt to purchase a credential that they can then use to try to sell their labor power in the context of an extremely hostile labor market.

Education has thus become an individualized investment rather than a social responsibility.

On a deeper level, financialization has transformed each of us into a kind of miniature investor. We're being constantly instructed and exhorted to see everything of value in our lives, from our education to our relationships to our housing to our community, as assets that can be leveraged toward our own personal, competitive gain. This has had a massive and catastrophic impact on individuals and communities, as people reconfigure their imaginations to see society as a hostile and competitive environment. And this, I think, has a lot to tell us about the forms of revanchism that have emerged politically in this moment of capitalism. Because if you are unable to see yourself as part of a society nurtured by what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called bonds of mutuality, and if you see everyone else as a competitor, then you have a very difficult time understanding that a society might need to redistribute wealth or address systemic and structural issues. You see attempts to redistribute wealth or address systemic and structural issues only as impositions on your own competitiveness, especially if you don't see yourself as a beneficiary of that redistribution.

So, for instance, we've seen in the last forty years of financialization and neoliberalism a visceral antagonism toward anyone perceived – and often the perception is incorrect – to be gaining some sort of benefit from a redistributive state. And this vitriol is almost always racially coded. It presumes that some sort of racially normative white majority is being taken for a ride by opportunistic, racialized people who are claiming unfair advantages or benefits from the state. The narrative that Bannon was able to spin at Breitbart and in the Trump campaign was one of making America great again: we need to “return” to a moment where we could all be our competitive best, and where there are no advantages accruing to any particular group. All of this is based on a completely skewed notion of how society actually works, and it draws on a reservoir of deep racist sentiment within American culture and politics.

So financialization is part and parcel of this political transformation in the imagination that is deeply tied to the culture of racialized fear and resentment that has been so acutely marshaled by revanchist political movements on the right.

**Soong:** How do attitudes toward women and feminism play into this? To what extent are many of the men who've lined up behind Bannon and Trump driven by an understanding of feminism as a threat to

their way of life? And what parallels do you see between the condemnation of women's movements and their agendas and the witch hunts you spoke about earlier?

**Haiven:** As a number of feminist scholars have pointed out, one of the most successful rhetorical strategies of the far right in recent years – and one that's been embraced by the revanchist Republican agenda – involves accusing a nebulous alliance of feminists, queer people, and "liberals" of conducting witch hunts against well-meaning and even heroic white men who, for instance, dare to speak their mind about issues of inequality or oppression in our society. The far right has effectively framed university campuses as the sites of these so-called witch hunts against courageous men who are prevented by some sort of conspiracy from sharing their brilliance with the rest of us.

This language of the witch hunt, which has been mobilized so effectively, clearly delineates in my view the kind of patriarchal and misogynistic logic at work. The idea is, and has been since Francis Bacon's time, that women are irrationally dedicated to a certain kind of revenge that, if allowed to blossom (i.e., if it's not suppressed by men), will undermine or even destroy the body politic. This is a very clear theme in Bacon's essay and in the writings of many other Western male elite philosophers since his time: the oppressed can't be trusted to manage their own affairs and their own lives because they have some sort of pathological tendency toward vengefulness.

We see, then, various forms of revenge being orchestrated and taken by reactionary forces upon women and people of color and others, justified in the name of preventing a revenge that those forces assume will come from the oppressed. So you have, for instance, the rise of what's called "revenge pornography," which has become a huge problem. Here you have mostly men who have been jilted, or who are not allowed to be in relationships with women they find attractive, circulating on the web pornographic images of those women that may have been shared in confidence or may be completely fabricated, all as a means to undermine and discredit that individual. Revenge pornography is an example of the kind of preemptive forms of vengeance that oppressors take in order to shore up and buttress their power at a moment when it feels under threat. They see revenge as being necessary in order to prevent the oppressed – in this case, women within a patriarchal society – from themselves taking revenge, which in the right-wing imagination would be the replacement of men by women and the eradication of "traditional" masculinity.

**Soong:** You referred earlier to an avenging stance toward capitalism as a system. “Living well is our best revenge”: that message, those words, have been spray-painted on many walls and structures in southern Europe since the advent of austerity measures in 2010. Does that suggest to you a fruitful way of thinking about revenge?

**Haiven:** It does, as long as it’s separated from a consumerist and individualist notion of what it means to live well. There’s a long history of movements and philosophers thinking about what a good life would mean and demanding a transcendence of the conditions of the present. There is a danger of saying that living well *within* the system is enough; that sentiment is deeply problematic because, under capitalism, the ability of any one of us to live well is predicated on the oppression and injustice done to others, whether they are the people who build our digital technology in sweatshops or the people around the world – mostly from formerly colonized countries – who extract the raw materials that become the material of our lives.

But I do think that the phrase “living well is our best revenge” offers an avenue for envisioning revenge in a more generative light. I call this “avenging.” To imagine a world in which we can *all* live well is, I think, a step toward the kind of avenging that Walter Benjamin had in mind – not simply the kind of bloody retribution enacted upon the individual agent of oppression or exploitation, but rather an overturning of the whole system that allowed that oppression to arise in the first place.

**Soong:** Many people who want to change the status quo are enacting alternatives to the system. It sounds like you’re not necessarily completely aligned with such people, and I say this because an important part of your focus is doing something about what’s been hurting us this entire time.

**Haiven:** Yes, quite so. The underlying philosophical claim of this project is that the powerful dominate the discourse and institutions of “justice.” As financialized and other systems fall into a state of decrepitude, the insistence that capitalism and the state are the only arenas in which we can get justice shrinks the space in which we can locate and pursue the justice we deserve: the good life or the “living well” that is our fundamental birthright as humans on this planet. In those moments, the demands for justice articulated by oppressed and exploited and alienated people are increasingly heard by the system and by the agents of power merely as demands for revenge. And thus it has always been: the demands of the colonized for decolonization

have been misinterpreted by the colonizer as brutal and animalistic cries for revenge. Working-class demands for the radical redistribution of wealth and the re-imagining of value have always been framed by the ruling class and the capitalists as inchoate, stupid, and unthinking demands for revenge.

So ultimately my argument is that we need to dream dangerously about what we deserve as compassionate, interconnected human beings on a finite but beautiful planet. And we need not to be afraid that those demands will be reframed by the rulers simply as vengeance. Perhaps underneath this word that carries so much weight and so much terror there lies another potential to overturn that system.

**Soong:** What on a concrete, material level might what you've called the "militant collective refusal," which seems integral to this "avenging" that you speak of, look like?

**Haiven:** I couldn't exhaustively catalogue it because I think people are refusing and resisting all the time. Sometimes it takes extremely small and subtle forms – for example, somebody simply being lazy at work, or somebody committing small acts of sabotage, or people choosing to identify themselves through the hegemonic discourse of mental illness as a means to exit the demands imposed upon them by capitalist society.

Many small refusals are occurring, and there are forms of great mass refusal as well, which are often ambivalent and ambiguous, complicated and contradictory. For instance, the major forms of social movement uprisings we've seen over the last decade, from the Yellow Vest movement in France with all its weirdness and ambiguity and fluctuations, to the Occupy Movement with the accusations that it had no focal point of demand, to the Movement for Black Lives that came up with concrete demands but also pushes for radical transformations of society. I think these things are going on all the time; we just need to train ourselves to look for them.

**Soong:** If vengeance represents a radical break from what's come before, do you have any worries that actions taken in the spirit of revenge or avenging could run counter to the Left project?

**Haiven:** Yes, absolutely. Once you open the Pandora's box of revenge, you can't close it, as many great thinkers have counselled. But I think the important thing about thinking through revenge in the way I've framed it is that, by radically challenging the paradigm of philosophy, morality,



and justice that's been imposed upon us by the oppressors and exploiters, it creates the radical horizon of something truly new.

I think some of the greatest warnings about revenge carry this seed within them. Confucius famously said that before you set out on a journey of revenge, dig two graves. I'm haunted by that vision. I wonder what it would mean to recognize that we live in a political situation where those graves lie open: one for the system we seek to abolish, one for the thing or things we have become within that system in order to survive. In a strange way I think this echoes a vital lesson for struggle that we can take from Marx's dialectic: the struggle is not just for one class to take revenge on another and elevate itself to power; it is to abolish class altogether in the name of universal liberation.

In the great films about revenge, there's often this moment where the avenging hero rides off into the sunset, his or her task completed. But we never see what happens afterwards. There's a great poem by Seamus Heaney that asks us to "hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge," and my interpretation is that the voyage of revenge that Confucius talks about does have a far shore. It's not just a voyage into the infinite darkness of the maelstrom. There is something on the other side, but it's something that we will never be able to imagine or predict from where we stand now.

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