

20. Thirteen Theses Toward a Materialist Theory of Revenge Capitalism

Max Haiven

I. Revenge Capital

Beginning perhaps with Francis Bacon's (1625) treatise on the subject, colonial "Western" political philosophy has, by and large, dedicated itself to castigating and defaming the vengeance of the exploited. It has largely served to justify the perpetual revenge of the powerful upon the oppressed, the endless normalized cruelties of enclosure, colonialism, exploitation, and the control of people and populations (Federici 2005; Newsinger 2006). Whereas Christian doctrine stresses turning the other cheek and surrendering vengeance to God's will on Judgment Day, dominant European political thinkers, including Thomas Hobbes (1651) and Adam Smith (1776), have legitimated the state as the monopolist of vengeance. This monopoly is supposed to ensure the "rule of law" based on the unassailable virtue of private property. But the history of state violence, from the witch trials to imperialism to slavery to settler colonialism, indicates that modern forms of sovereign power can be seen as one-way revenge systems.

My argument is that today's capitalism is the evolution of this tendency. I intend to sketch this argument on three levels. First, like all systems of domination, the hegemonic institutions of capitalism frame the actions of its opponents as meaningless, nihilistic revenge precisely because the economies of justice these opponents insist upon are unintelligible in the moral algebra of the system. Second, revenge should not be understood

as simply a transhistorical individual human passion (and certainly not only as a personal emotion), but rather as something manifested by and through the reproduction of systems-in-crisis. I want to argue that today's particularly crisis-ridden, highly financialized, carceral, and neocolonial mode of global capitalism can be fruitfully interpreted as a system of revenge. In this way, I am echoing some of the insights emphasized across this section by Terry Maley, William S. Jacques, and A.T. Kingsmith, who all posit that political affects are in fact deeply structural. Third, I suggest many of the political and cultural pathologies of our moment, including the recent global rise of far-right and neo-fascist tendencies, can be seen as produced by and reproductive of the underlying system of vengeance.

Alongside AK Thompson, who argues that an augmenting left must dare to learn from the dispiriting success of reactionary responses to our current crisis, I want to close by suggesting that we are ill-served by the normative aversion to revenge of our times; perhaps it is time to reclaim some sort of bottom-up form of "avenging"? Here I agree with Jacques's insistence that "the use of aesthetic forms of embodied consciousness raising aimed at actualizing more robustly visceral affections is a valuable tactic for projects of augmentation aimed at widespread mobilization for social transformations within late-stage capitalist regions."

II. Vengeful Accumulation

The transformation of capitalism into a revenge system has roots in the slave trade and colonial adventure, the literal origins of many of its key institutions and technologies, including joint stock corporations, insurance regimes, promissory notes, and fiat currencies (Baucom 2005; Robinson 2000). Already we can observe how, at what are presumed to be the "margins" of capitalism, "free trade" and the transformation of people and the planet into commodities fundamentally rely on the exercise of excessive surplus cruelty and abuse. This excess was not accidental; it represented a kind of unwarranted, unearned vengeance on subjugated populations, aiming not only to extract value and labour, but to break down non-capitalist social and economic structures through extreme violence. Vengeance is reflected in capitalism's beginning and its end, and it flows through, and deepens, the channels of white supremacy, cis/heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and other systems of oppression.

III. Torture as Economic Policy

Marx almost never mentioned revenge in his work, except to signal that history itself will bring about the vindication of the proletariat. He and Engels (1874) argued that individual acts of vengeance, which they associate with working-class militants like Auguste Blanqui, were not only foolhardy, but threatened to set the proletarian struggle back because they were not strategic. At the same time, Marx (1849) was keen to show that “legitimate” forms of capitalist exploitation and population management, like England’s horrific poorhouses, represented the vengeance of parasitic capital against its own source of wealth: the proletariat. In crises, capitalism turns to a kind of frantic systemic sadism, such as the gory reprisals against the Paris Communards of 1871 (Marx 1871). Another example is the army of retribution whipped up by the British to avenge the 1857 “Sepoy Mutiny” in India, which saw the British destroy and loot huge territories, killing some ten million people (Newsinger 2006). For Marx (1857), the alleged sexual revenge-crimes of the Sepoys that justified expedition were in fact a reflection of Britain’s own vengeful colonial occupation of India, where “torture formed an organic institution of financial policy.”

IV. Collective Revenge Fantasies

Revenge has regularly been a key theme in the struggles of the oppressed and exploited. This vengeance is not the irrational, bestial hatred of the mob, but a method for countering the vengeance that capitalism and colonialism wreak on communities. In working-class songs and speeches throughout the history of capitalism, workers have exhorted themselves to a collective recognition of how their own energies and inherent value have been stripped by the inherent irrational vengefulness of the capitalist system itself (Kornbluh 2011). Singing or rallying together in the name of expropriating the expropriators is a ritual for defining and reclaiming a sense of collective value and power. While there is certainly a risk that vengefulness might be reduced to the kind of “one-dimensional” affective politics stressed by Maley, I believe even more is at stake. We would do better to frame vengefulness in Kingsmith’s terms, as a kind of public secret “which everyone experiences yet nobody acknowledges.”

V. Revenge and Reaction

The recent rise in revenge politics on the far right in the US, the UK, and elsewhere must be understood as integral to broader currents in *revenge capitalism*, not as an anomaly. The “new normal” of neoliberal precariousness, indebtedness, and mass surveillance and incarceration represents the vengeance of the ruling class against those who fought in or were the beneficiaries of the radical struggles that resulted in the unhappy postwar compromise. The unequal existential, economic, and social collapse wrought by revenge capitalism on our bodies and communities has prompted revanchist dreams of “returning” to some fabled bygone era of hierarchical dignity and ethnonational integrity. This revanchism is possessed by a kind of tragic and apocalyptic romanticism that projects the relatively privileged subject as the victim of his own tolerance, patience, and largess.¹ The result of this “betrayal” is that hegemonic cis-hetero, white masculinity has its “back against the wall,” closed in on from all sides, conspired against, the victim of a revenge plot now brought to terrible fruition. The only option left is an apocalyptic nightmare to reset the scene, to return things to their rightful order.

VI. Witch Hunt

As much as this revanchist dream is about whiteness, it is also about masculinity, and the victories of far-right, reactionary, and white-supremacist forces, though their ranks include many women. The precursors to the figure of aggrieved, betrayed, and “cuckolded” masculinity included a decade of techno-patriarchal doxing, the rise of men’s rights cults, and the explosion of “revenge porn” (Nagle 2017). The all-too-common argument that men who “speak out” against the norms and conventions of “political correctness” are subject to vindictive “witch hunts” makes for a pornographic display of wounded white masculinity. Indeed, the complaint that he is the target of a “witch hunt” is among Trump’s favourite deflections.

But the appropriation of this term also disguises the ways that today’s press gangs of online revanchist masculinity are themselves the echo of history’s real witch trials, which were integral to the birth of capitalism and colonialism and the destruction of the cultures and economies of the commons (Federici 2005). In these trials, the social agony of the birth of

capitalism and its destruction of social life was marshalled by reactionary religious forces and redirected against women (and some men) accused of witchcraft. Witchcraft was associated with, among other things, surplus female vengefulness, and the witch trials were orchestrated as public spectacles by the state to “prove” that social misery and discord were the result of occult conspiracies masterminded by women taking vengeance against the natural Christian order.

Today’s far-right accusations of “witch hunts” targeting outspoken or powerful men rely on and reproduce the same logics, to the same general effect: women and gender non-binary people (and some men) are targeted both as irrational, vengeful spirits who will destroy civilization and as diabolical conspirators striving to take over that order and leave men bereft. Revenge porn, the abuse of intimate images to threaten, humiliate, or blackmail women online, is only one manifestation of this trend.

VII. AVENGED ANCESTORS

Walter Benjamin (1969) was interested in revenge, too. In “Theses on the Concept of History,” written as he fled the Nazis, Benjamin meditated not on the betrayal of socialism by the German working class, but the opposite: the betrayal of the working class by the social democrats. In tethering their notion of emancipation to gradual, technologically driven nationalist progress, the social democrats had severed what Benjamin saw as the “sins” of the proletariat’s greatest strengths: “hatred and spirit of sacrifice.” This strength was generated not only by the utopian dreams of “liberated grandchildren,” but also by the proletariat claiming their collective role as “avengers that complete the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden” (Benjamin 1969: 260). Benjamin’s Marxist analysis led him to believe that capitalism had produced a historically unique proletariat that could finally throw off the shackles of oppression and exploitation and build a truly egalitarian, communist world.

We may or may not hold fast to Benjamin’s faith that the proletariat are destined to liberate not only themselves but the oppressed of history itself. In any case, we would do well to dwell on the ghosts of vengeance he invokes and on his condemnation of social democracy. Then and now, social democrats have sought to banish “hatred and the spirit of sacrifice” from politics, insisting that participation in conventional institutions is

sufficient to liberate ourselves and our futures. This is due to the strongly technocratic and elitist orientation of many social democrats, who, as Maley notes in his chapter, presume people are unable to overcome nihilistic violence. Today's social democrats have fatally misjudged the cultural politics of resentment and anger brewing underneath modern technological progress, "spirits of the past" that Thompson's chapter contends could be mobilized as "wish images" toward a common good. In this way, they fail to organize the "downtrodden" as avenging angels who can collect on debts owed for the generations of systemic trauma and vengeance that have built the current order.

VIII. Revanchist Cities

Readers might be tempted to see revenge as merely a contingent affect or emotive by-product of capitalist domination, a kind of regrettable cultural side effect of everyday economic torture. My curiosity, however, is drawn to revenge as a useful description of a structural tendency emerging from capitalism's crises and contradictions.

Late Marxist geographer Neil Smith (1996) recuperated the language of revanchism to help describe the financialized structural transformation of American urban space in the 1980s. Smith catalogues the ways in which property developers, far-right politicians, agents of speculative capital, media, and law enforcement orchestrated a "whitelash" campaign constituting an "all-out attack on the social policy structure that emanated from the New Deal and immediate post-war era." "Revenge" Smith continues (1996: 42–43), "against minorities, the working class, women, environmental legislation, gays and lesbians, immigrants became the increasingly common denominator of public discourse." This enabled a massive wave of urban enclosures, allowing wealthy, overwhelmingly white capitalists to reclaim areas of inner cities once abandoned by postwar urban planning and white flight.

Smith provides a framework for understanding the structural and systemic forces at work in gentrification beyond the knee-jerk moralism of hipster-bashing. Capitalist urban revanchism, then and now, relies both on the rekindling of a reactionary wealthy white-supremacist loathing of those racialized, poor subjects seen to be "ruining" the city with crime and squalor and also on the broader financialized tendencies within capitalism

as a whole. In this process, it recalls and renovates earlier moments when capitalism has called up the spirits of white vengeance to restore order (Wang 2018).

IX. Prison: Revenge Factory

The prison-industrial complex in the US — that unprecedented “golden gulag,” as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) dubs it, where lives (disproportionately Black, Latinx, and Indigenous lives) are transmuted into vessels for both speculative capital and an almost inexplicable kind of socialized, retributive vengeance — is a key site of this noxious combination of white-supremacist revanchism and “revenge capitalism” (Wang 2018). Loïc Wacquant (2014) sees “hyper-incarceration” as the extension and expansion of Smith’s logic of revanchism. Here, extreme financialized neoliberalism reacts to the crises of accumulation and of care (that in themselves have fomented) through the proliferation of prisons, the production of prisoners, and the expansion of the prison’s austere, vengeful, and brutalizing logic throughout what remains of state institutions and into the fabric of social life. Financialized neoliberalism, like the forms of colonialism and capitalist exploitation that gave rise to it, not only uses new forms of social vengeance to punish those who rebel or refuse or simply get in the way of its already vengeful operations; it also renders whole populations “surplus,” no longer worthy even of exploitation, and must discover methods and institutions of containment, control, and liquidation (Gilmore 2007; Wang 2018).

It’s not only that the common narrative of the prisoner is of a bestial character who must pay a “debt to society” for the infraction of having taken vengeance into their own hands by breaking the laws of the state. It is also that, fittingly, the society within the prison, as it is projected in the media, utilizes torture as “an organic institution of financial policy” (Marx 1857). Thus, the prison operates through an economy of revenge: a lawless state of nature where the ability to avoid premature death is dependent entirely on one’s ability to threaten vengeance against others who might enact abuse. Regardless of the complex reality of prisoner solidarity (Berger 2014; Davis 2005), the prison is transformed into a monument to the unspoken capitalist revenge economy that exists no less on the “outside” as it does on the “inside.”

X. Cultural Illogic

Fredric Jameson (1984) famously called postmodernism the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” signalling that, today, the realms of “culture” and “economics” can no longer be separated. Borrowing this framing, I am tempted to call revenge the “cultural illogic of belated capitalism.”

The structural phenomena I associate with revenge capitalism seem to have accelerated the system’s inherent propensity for crises beyond any measure of sustainability: ecological, sociological, or economic. We are in a moment of unpredictable extremism now, where even the world’s most powerful capitalists are scared, frustrated, and lost as to what to do about the demons they have unleashed. Of course, capitalism’s illogics have always operated beyond the control of any single capitalist or conspiracy of capitalists, being driven precisely and inexorably toward crisis by the competition of capitalists within and between different sectors or nation-states (Harvey 2006). But today, under what I have termed a “belated capitalism,” that competition, and the crises it generates, seems to have accelerated into a kind of suicidal structural absurdity. In such circumstances, as Rosa Luxemburg (2003) taught us, capital often opts to place itself in escrow, calling up the spectres of fascism and authoritarianism or, horrifically, inviting total war and accelerated imperialism with increasingly destructive power and fury.

XI. The Means and Ends of History

This all follows the so-called end of history, in which, we were told, the global rule of free markets would bring about unprecedented peace and tranquility, allowing different people and cultures to sublimate their otherwise destructive rivalries and vendettas into the neutral arena of the competitive market (Fukuyama 1993). The sovereign market was supposed to be the final evolution of Leviathan, the great suppressor of revenge. (Trust the sovereign to provide justice, or else.)

Identifying financialized, neoliberal capitalism instead as a revenge system places it in a genealogy of colonial modes of power that enact vengeance on those whom they oppress and exploit while claiming to bring the benevolent rule of law, to save the oppressed and exploited from their own vengeful nature.

Frantz Fanon's (1963) work identifies ways that colonialism gaslights its victims, hiding its own vengeful nature while instilling in the colonized subject an idea that they need to be rescued from their own irrational, subhuman, untimely prehistory of endless vengeance. Thus, for Fanon and others, anti-colonial thought relies in part on a kind of revenge against the colonists' thought-world, a refusal of "recognition" within their oppressive and exploitative order (Coulthard 2014).

Of course, anti-colonial action was inevitably interpreted and framed as the irrational revenge of ungrateful "savages." White fears of the possible revenge of enslaved or formerly enslaved Africans, Asians, and Indigenous Peoples, as well as other exploited and marginalized non-white workers, have defined the colonial imagination and continue to animate white-supremacist worldviews today.

Fanon (1963: 139), however, is clear that "racialism and hatred, a 'legitimate desire for revenge,' cannot sustain a war of liberation" and that "hatred alone cannot draw up a program." Anti-colonial thought and action rests on and reveals the legitimacy of the revenge of the oppressed precisely by identifying the inherent vengeful illogic of the colonial regime. However, a simple form of vengeance cannot overcome it.

XII. Profits of Forgiveness

The insufficiency of revenge for creating deep, meaningful, and revolutionary change has, however, recently become a dreary, sanctimonious, and saccharine theme among liberals. Today, the horrifically reanimated corpses of three radical leaders have been summoned to justify a stifling culture of bleached reconcilophilia. Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. were all complex and savvy political actors whose choice to employ non-violence and advocate forgiveness was arguably less moralistic than strategic in their circumstances (Gelderloos 2007). But today the complexities and contradictions of their particular decisions and words have been lost to an individualizing fetishization of their personalities to the extent they can justify the moral cowardice and inaction of would-be moderates. What is lost is that, in all three cases, forgiveness was tied to a broader notion of avenging the crimes and cruelties of the colonial or oppressive regime through its abolition. Forgiveness was not proposed for its own sake, but rather as a means to

catalyze a strategic, revolutionary kind of patience or to set the stage for what was supposed to be a new post-colonial order.

XIII. Dig Two Graves

In *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin (2011), in a meditation on race, film, and revenge in America, makes the important point that “revenge is a human dream” that can sustain all sorts of subjects and systems in its suspension, much the same way that Hamlet is a dreamlike narrative of suspended vengeance. When the dream comes true, as it does at the end of that famous play, the world is turned upside down and we are forever changed. As Baldwin (2011: 44–45) puts it, once vengeance is executed, “you have no way of conveying to the corpse why you made him one. You have the corpse and are thereafter at the mercy of a fact which missed the truth, which means that the corpse has you.”

The fantasy moment of Hollywood melodrama, when the righteous avenger reveals their motivations before pulling the trigger, never really arrives for most of us, in spite of our individual and collective revenge fantasies. Moreover, what is never pictured is what comes *after* the satiated avenger rides away into the sunset. The all-consuming revenge fantasy can only be sustained, and can only sustain the obsessive fantasist, in the suspension of its own execution. Those who swear an oath to vengeance sign away their life and soul to be suspended in vengeance. They become the walking dead, dedicated to an act of death that is also an act of self-annihilation. To actually take vengeance is to abolish that all-consuming part of yourself that the oath created.

For this reason, the Confucian adage that “if you set out for revenge, first dig two graves” is indeed apt. But what if the broader system of vengeance has already dug those graves and the victims and would-be avengers of this primary systemic vengeance simply seek to fill them and end the cycle? Marx proposes an answer: Capital is itself an undead beast, a vampire sucking on our own productive energies. Capital is reanimated dead labour, the encrypted form of the living labour, the cooperative potential of the proletariat, which now takes command of and feeds off its original progenitors. Capital’s grave stands agape, but so too does “ours,” its gravediggers, for we, too, are made into the walking dead by it.

What, then, does it mean to avenge oneself and one’s proverbial

ancestors against such a system of revenge? The negation of the negation not only means the abolition of capitalism and its aligned systems of racial and gendered power and violence; it also means the abolition of the avenging, revolutionary subject as well.

XIV. Conclusion

The takeaways for left augmentation are not readily intuitive. I am not so much suggesting that we cultivate vengeful narratives and sentiment as much as acknowledge that they are already at work throughout and across the political landscape. If I were to boil things down to a single concentrated frustration it would be the near constant demand from many that organizing must be “positive,” “constructive,” “propose solutions,” and avoid appearing “angry” for fear of alienating possible adherents. I would suggest, contrariwise, that (along with other authors in this section and across this volume) the movements that can be successful in the years to come will be those that dare to work on the terrain of depression, hopelessness, resentment, anxiety, anger, and heartbreak. They might cultivate a common platform to avenge what has been done not only to our lives, our bodies, our humanity, and the planet, but also to link this to the eerie call to, in Benjamin’s (1974: 2) terms, acknowledge the debt we owe to past generations — whose struggles and oppression we inherit, a debt that “cannot be settled cheaply.”

Note

1. Revanchism is the political manifestation of the will to reverse territorial losses incurred by a country, often following a war or social movement. It draws its strength from patriotic and retributionist ways of thinking that are often motivated by economic or geopolitical factors. As a term, *revanchism* originated in 1870s France, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, among nationalists who wanted to avenge the French defeat and reclaim the lost territories of Alsace-Lorraine.

References

- Bacon, Francis. 1625. “On Revenge.” *CommonLit*. <commonlit.org/texts/on-revenge>.
- Baldwin, James. 2011. *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay*. New York: Vintage International.
- Baucom, Ian. 2005. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1969. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken.

242 Challenging the Right, Augmenting the Left

- _____. 1974. "On the Concept of History." <sfu.ca/~andrewf/books/Concept_History_Benjamin.pdf>
- Berger, Dan. 2014. *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Coulthard, Glen. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Davis, Angela. 2005. *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons and Torture*. New York: Seven Stories.
- Engels, Friedrich. 1874. "The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Paris Commune." *Der Volksstaat*, June 26. <marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/06/26.htm>.
- Fanon, Franz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove.
- Federici, Silvia. 2005. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, Capitalism and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1993. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Perennial.
- Gelderloos, Peter. 2007. *How Nonviolence Protects the State*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Harvey, David. 2006. *The Limits to Capital*, 2nd edition. New York: Verso.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1985. *Leviathan*. London: Penguin.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*, 146.
- Kornbluh, Joyce L. (ed.). 2011. *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. 2003. *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild. London: Routledge.
- Marx, Karl. 1849. "A Bourgeois Document." *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, January 4. <marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1849/01/04.htm>.
- _____. 1857. "The Indian Revolt." *New York Tribune*, September 16. <marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/09/16.htm>.
- _____. 1871. *The Civil War in France*. The Marx/Engels Internet Archive. <marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/index.htm>.
- Nagle, Angela. 2017. *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*. London: Zero Books.
- Newsinger, John. 2006. *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire*. London: Bookmarks.
- Robinson, Cedric J. 2000. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd edition. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Smith, Adam. 1759. "The Theory of Moral Sentiments." *Marxists.Org*. <marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-adam/works/moral/index.htm>.
- Smith, Neil. 1996. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London: Routledge.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2014. "Class, Race and Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America." *Socialism and Democracy*, 28, 3.
- Wang, Jackie. 2018. *Carceral Capitalism*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).