

# VAG ABO NDS

## TOWARDS A MATERIALIST THEORY OF REVENGE

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*This March is Shit  
The Future is Shit  
All I Want is Revenge*

*London protest sign, 2010*

*You have the corpse, and you are, thereafter,  
at the mercy of a fact which missed the  
truth, which means that the corpse has you.*

*James Baldwin*

I WANT REVENGE.<sup>[1]</sup> I THINK YOU do too. It's in the air. It is the signature of our moment. While the spirit of vengeance has been banished from "the Left" for quite some time it haunts us still. Can we deny the rage we feel with at the impunity of police? The vicious outright lies of reactionaries? The systemic murder and terror and everyday grinding injustice directed to women, trans folks, people of colour and Indigenous people? The arson attacks against mosques and refugee housing that goes largely unremarked? The entirely predictable terror attacks against civilians that only serve to re-entrench and embolden reactionaries on both "sides" of the alleged clash of civilizations? How else can we respond to a ruling class and a system of global capitalism that has led to the completely unnecessary deaths of millions upon millions of poor, overwhelmingly non-white people from starvation, lack of potable water or easily preventable disease? How else can we behave towards the naked collusion of capitalist interests to sabotage any meaningful action on climate change and other dimensions of wholesale ecological destruction while fully aware of the humanitarian consequences? What other sentiment is appropriate towards the progenitors of the evils of mass incarceration, the



wholesale destruction of the urban fabric euphemized as gentrification, or the obscene denial of care towards so many of us? How can we forgive and forget when our precious time on the earth with one another is being needlessly wasted by unpayable debts and useless work and endless, endless worry? And with our global imperialist warlords toying with the future of life on earth in their hypermasculine nuclear wargames, who would dare tell us that our desire for vengeance is illegitimate?

But then why does talk of vengeance shake us to our cores? When and where did we learn to fear the fantasies of political revenge that, despite our best efforts, still animate some part of us, individually and collectively? What do we make of living in an age when revenge politics is on the rise, though so far largely monopolized by the resurgent right? Can we fathom late?—?or, better, belated?—?capitalism as a system of revenge against those whom it exploits and abandons? And is there a radical theory of revenge worthy of us, whose rage for justice no doubt springs, ultimately, from some deep reservoir of compassion?

These questions are the subject of a book I am writing. Here I want to offer a few notes on how we might excavate the foundations of a materialist theory of revenge. Beyond moralism about the evils of vengeance, though without blithely ignoring the evils justified in the name of vengeance, I want to suggest that the type of revenge politics that are helping to bring right-wing authoritarians to power today have systemic and structural roots in the architecture of global capitalism. Indeed, while neoliberal intellectuals suggest that the state and the market have, hand in hand, banished vengeance to the margins of political life, I propose that vengeance is more at the core of the global capitalist system than ever. And if we are to respond to it well, we need to dwell with the power of a tender revolutionary avenging. Revenge, of course, has always walked beside us humans, and reliably offers to take us by the hand in our pain. It is the subject of great cultural works in perhaps all civilizations. But the question that animates my project is this: is there something about capitalism, especially our moment of neoliberal global

financialized capitalism, that elevates revenge to the level of a general symptom and a constitutive structure?

In this essay, I have started with an examination of the theme of revenge in a certain Marxist genealogy only to quite quickly seek to show the limits and often unrealized potentials of these resources, instead turning to feminist and anti-colonial thinkers for clues. I see this piece as more of an incomplete militant research dossier than a comprehensive argument. It was written between two significant and momentous weeks: the first marked by the massive protests that greeted the January 2017 inauguration of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States, the second the week in August of that year that began with a deadly neonazi terrorist attack in Charlottesville, Virginia that killed one anti-fascist demonstrator and ended with the dismissal of Trump's friend, chief ideologue and special advisor Steven Bannon from the White House. Bannon plays a key role in this essay.

I hasten to clarify that in thinking through the concept of "avenging" I do not simply mean the infamous vengeance of the guillotine or the firing squad: our forebears (especially our foremothers) have warned us well enough, and many of us (not me) have witnessed the violent terrors revenge can unleash. Nor am I advocating revenge as an all-consuming, singular fixation directed towards individuals. Rather, in contradistinction to revenge, I am interested in how swearing an oath to avenge the wrongs done by capitalism to our bodies, our communities, our ancestors, our children, our time and the-earth-of-which-we-are-a-part might manifest through a politics of generative refusals, of reclaiming the means of social reproduction, and of the radical imagination. In other words, I am interested less in revenge upon the architects and beneficiaries of this system than in a more holistic avenging of its crimes and cruelties. While the former might imply apocalyptic violence, the latter might imply a more generative passion.

I have here employed a range of theories and methodologies to seek to describe revenge as

at once a symptom and a structure, a maligned promise and an all-too present absence, a rallying cry and a lament. Whether this essay is a promissory note or a ransom note is yet to be determined.

VAG  
ABO  
NDS

## The lives and deaths of witches

*A man that studieth revenge, keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal, and do well. Public revenges are for the most part fortunate; as that for the death of Caesar... But in private revenges, it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches; who, as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate.*<sup>[2]</sup>

So ends Francis Bacon's 1625 treatise *On Revenge* which in many ways presents, in germinal form the conventional bourgeois modern political theory of revenge. It is notable that Bacon wrote these words while gravely in debt, having some years earlier, thanks to a conspiracy of his rivals, been stripped of the title of Chancellor to James I for corruption and sedition, barely escaping with his head. This came after years of public service in which Bacon had helped plan and facilitate England's nascent settler colonial adventures into Virginia and Newfoundland, had presided over the continued Tudor enclosure of the commons and the dispossession of peasants to help enrich the Crown, and had personally promoted and supervised the torture and murder of women accused of witchcraft. Silvia Federici and Maria Mies have both drawn key connections between colonialism, enclosure and the witch trials as central to the birth and rise of capitalism and have in so doing catalogued the public spectacles of vengeful vitriol that helped misdirect proto-proletarian anger along the lines of gender, setting the stage for the imbrications of capitalism and patriarchy to come.<sup>[3]</sup> Bacon was a key figure in this shift, as well as in the development of a prototypical modern theory of science that feminist thinkers have shown was based in the violent and sexualized subjugation of a passive and exploitable "nature," which is at the root of today's

violent forms of instrumental, corporate and scientific rationality, and also the pseudoscience of bourgeois political-economy.<sup>[4]</sup>

It is, I think, no accident that Bacon would also give us a prototypical theory of revenge, which is later echoed in the work of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Adam Smith. Here, revenge is seen as a base, animal instinct dangerous to the social order. It is presented as ultimately self-destructive, an urge that consumes the subject and does not allow psychic and social wounds to heal. Revenge appears as something supernatural and untimely, a suspension of the holy order. It's suppression is the basis of the legitimacy of the state: by nominating a Prince to adjudicate disputes and mete out punishment, man raises himself above an animalistic nature.

As such, for Bacon "public revenges," those undertaken by or for the sovereign or which, in retrospect can be said to be justified in the name of the commonwealth (as narrated by its victors), are legitimate, especially as they target those "witches", those unruly, uncanny, ungodly subjects who refuse to abandon their right to revenge outside of the state's vengeful law. Interestingly, there is practically no mention of Christian theology in Bacon's treatise or other modern philosophies of revenge: while no doubt inspired in part by the Christian Gospels' encouragement to turn the other cheek, to forgive and to trust to God the settling of scores on Judgment Day, these thinkers' antipathy to revenge is almost completely grounded in secular reason and, importantly, the legitimacy of the reigning political order. Hegel's influential notion of history, as centred around the modern nation state, likewise presumes a universal "pre-history" of endless cycles of meaningless vengeance only to be overcome by Western science and philosophy. For latter-day Hegelians like Francis Fukayama, neoliberal globalism is supposed to bring history to an end by conclusively harnessing the vengeful, rivalrous, recognition-seeking spirits to the dynamo of the capitalist market.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Mergers and acquisitions

IN THE LATE 1980S A LOWER middle-class Virginian man in his early 30s quit his job as special assistant to the chief of Naval operations at the Pentagon to go back to school; Harvard business school to be exact. Bright and ambitious but older, poorer and lacking the cultural and social capital of most of his colleagues, his chances were dim. One night he was a wallflower at a Goldman Sachs recruiting party and got into a conversation with two equally awkward men about baseball. They turned out to be two of the company's executives; he was hired shortly afterwards and, thanks to his maturity, cunning, ruthlessness and yen for the gruelling hours, he quickly rose to become one of the firm's vice-presidents (not as high and mighty a position as it sounds) in the burgeoning mergers and acquisitions department.

Thanks to Reagan-era deregulation, mergers and acquisitions had become one of the bank's key profit generators, facilitating the merciless takeover of smaller, local firms by large monopolies in sectors including retail, manufacturing, communications, infrastructure and banking itself. The resulting financial boom has given us the film- and tell-all memoir-inspired stereotypes of the coked-up, oversexed financier so desperate to make his commission he'll sell his own grandmother to his fellow wolves of Wall Street. But this stereotype individualizes a systemic and structural problem: financialization, driven by the crisis-prompted acceleration of capitalist competition for profit, was actively destroying the bedrock of the Keynesian capitalist economy on which it preyed, gutting jobs and benefits, specifically targeting for destruction firms with strong unions and low profit margins. Our financier, to whom we shall return, for now we know him well, was among those who aided and abetted a system of sick economic vengeance on American proletarians.

## The rule of historical retribution

MARX'S RELATIONSHIP TO REVENGE IS ambiguous, perhaps because he inherits and also struggles with a western tradition that understands revenge as a retrograde, atavistic dark force unworthy of a humanist let alone a materialist. As such, he practically never mentions it in his serious writing, in spite of, biographically speaking, being at times a deeply resentful person: Marx, let us never forget, was a "precarious" refugee intellectual banished from numerous homes who spent much of his life in poverty and sickness. For a man who sought, in Harry Cleaver's words, to put intellectual weapons in the hands of the oppressed, exploited and brutalized working class, it is somewhat surprising he almost never mentions vengeance.<sup>[6]</sup> We need, rather, to look to Engels' for clues.

Writing in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1845, Engels reassures bourgeois readers that

*it does not occur to any Communist to wish to revenge himself upon individuals, or to believe that, in general, the single bourgeois can act otherwise, under existing circumstances, than he does act... Communism, rests directly upon the irresponsibility of the individual. Thus the more... workers absorb communistic ideas, the more superfluous becomes their present bitterness, which, should it continue so violent as at present, could accomplish nothing; and the more their action against the bourgeoisie will lose its savage cruelty.<sup>[7]</sup>*

So a mature political approach is one that renounces or transcends individual acts of violence. According to what Engels would later identify as dialectical materialism, history itself will avenge the wrongs of capital. Elsewhere, Engels associates an immature socialism based on revenge with the followers of Auguste Blanqui, the towering professional revolutionary of the 19th century whose writings are full of trenchant fury and vengeful promises for the bourgeois oppressors, but contain no systematic analysis of

their power.<sup>[8]</sup> For Engels, mature communism is the antidote to vengeance, in part because it foresees a world without injustice, in part because, as a political movement, it sublimates vengeance into political organization and aims for a horizon of transformation, rather than retribution. Indeed, it sees this as necessary because to a very real extent, it is predicated on the irresponsibility of the individual, both the bourgeois and the proletarian: both, historically speaking, are motivated by systemic forces that mean their actions are not entirely their own.

Yet, importantly, the other place revenge appears is as a condemnation of sanctimonious and false bourgeois appeals to justice and necessity. For instance, the term appears in Marx's excoriating analysis of the bourgeois response to the Paris Commune of 1871: the murder of tens of thousands of communards in the streets, the show-trials and exile of tens of thousands more.<sup>[9]</sup>

Likewise, Marx comments with horror on the racist, revanchist vitriol whipped up in the bourgeois press for the punishment of what the British empire called the "Sepoy Mutiny" of 1857 (in actuality it was a much wider anti-colonial revolt). This hysteria justified the mobilization of an English army of retribution that unleashed sickening public executions and torture, mass rapes and looting, with a death toll of up to 10 million people, and ultimately led to the direct colonial administration of the British Raj.<sup>[10]</sup> Marx, who publicly decried the "fake news" propounded by the English press about the sexual crimes of Indians against white women and girls that justified the revanchist expedition, sagely offered the following:

*However infamous the conduct of the Sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule. To characterize that rule, it suffices to say that torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy. There is something in human history like retribution: and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself.<sup>[11]</sup>*

I think Marx means two things here. The first is that revenge and retribution enacted by the oppressed and exploited are forged in the normalized torture of the oppressor and exploiter's world, something thinkers like CLR James and Aimé Césaire echoed and expanded in their treatment of Caribbean anti-colonial revolts.<sup>[12]</sup> Second and related, the primary act of vengeance is always that of the oppressor against the oppressed, but this vengeance is presented by the oppressor as the legitimate, legal and even benevolent. Even more profoundly, this vengeance is endemic to the system itself, so normalized and routine that it becomes invisible, at least to the abusers. The economy of revenge only becomes visible when it's typically one-way flows are reversed. That "torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy" implies that, when it comes to systemic vengeance, the punishment always already exists before the crime.

Marx corroborates in an 1849 article on English bourgeois power in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*

*In England's workhouses- those public institutions where the redundant labor population is allowed to vegetate at the expense of bourgeois society?—?charity is cunningly combined with the revenge which the bourgeoisie wreaks on the wretches who are compelled to appeal to its charity... These unfortunate people have committed the crime of having ceased to be an object of exploitation yielding a profit to the bourgeoisie?—?as is the case in ordinary life?—?and having become instead an object of expenditure for those born to derive benefit from them.<sup>[13]</sup>*

Here we see the glimmer of a theory of systemic vengeance to which we shall shortly return: the notion that, far from the pompous and toady-like theories of establishmentarian philosophers like Bacon or Hobbes, vengeance is not banished to the witches at the borders of the State, but, rather, inherent, integral and immanent to the workings of power. Indeed, power works to conceal its fundamental reliance on unwarranted, non-retributive revenge precisely by defaming its antagonists and rebels as consumed by the demonic, base and animalistic passion of revenge. Beyond the sanctimony of The Law, which claims to save us from the endless cycles of primordial vengeance, there

is the secret law of power (capital, in this case) that punishes those who “committed the crime of having ceased to be an object of exploitation yielding a profit to the bourgeoisie.”

Revenge is the structural condition of the hot peace of capitalist accumulation.

VAG  
ABO  
NDS

## If blood be the price of your awful wealth...

... FOR ALL THAT DEFAMATION, PROLETARIANS and other oppressed and exploited people have consistently drawn on the thematic of revenge as a key means to mobilize themselves.

Consider the famous lines of Toussaint L'Ouverture, military and political leader of the Haitian Revolution, the first modern movement to establish truly equal rights and abolish slavery.

*Je suis Toussaint L'Ouverture; mon nom s'est peut-être fait connaître jusqu'à vous. J'ai entrepris la vengeance de ma race. Je veux que la liberté et l'égalité règnent à Saint-Domingue. Je travaille à les faire exister. Unissez-vous, frères, et combattez avec moi pour la même cause. Déracinez avec moi l'arbre de l'esclavage.*

*<Brothers and friends. I am Toussaint L'Ouverture; perhaps my name had made itself known to you. I have undertaken the vengeance of my race. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in Saint Domingue. I am working to make that happen. Unite yourself to us, brothers, and fight with us, for the same cause. Uproot with me the tree of slavery.>*

It is difficult to know where to begin with these incisive, explosive lines that catalyzed the imagination of tens of thousands of enslaved people with the conviction to liberate themselves and completely reinvent their reality. Here perhaps their first and most important act of vengeance was not the bloody reprisals against slaveowners and their functionaries but the act of hailing themselves as friends and a brothers, and the speaking aloud of the open-secret: revenge was owed them. As CLR

James makes clear in his landmark study of the Haitian revolution, the violence unleashed was neither (as the slavers claimed) an atavistic and animalistic bloodlust, nor simply a bloody negation of slavery's own horrific cruelties.<sup>[14]</sup> It was a calculated and necessary set of procedures to nullify and petrify the slave system in the colony and in the metropole. And it was a process by which those who were enslaved collectively gave themselves value, not as property but as agents of their own history, as the proper subjects of the reign of liberty and equality on their own terms.

Consider, another example: this bilingual poster produced in the wake of Chicago's 1886 Haymarket massacre, which exhorts workers:

*To arms! Your masters sent their blood-hounds?—?the police?—?to kill six of your brothers... because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses... and to show you... that you must be satisfied and contented with whatever your bosses condescend to allow you... if you are men, if you are the sons of your grand sires, who have shed blood to free you, then you will rise in your might, Hercules, and destroy the hideous monster that seeks to destroy you.<sup>[15]</sup>*

The highly gendered language here indicates, perhaps, the ways in which the largely migrant workers of Chicago's industrial boom felt emasculated by the racist and xenophobic system under which they laboured, which licensed itself to murder them and their families not only on the picket-line but daily in the factory or through the grinding cruelties of poverty. There was no recourse for them to the fabled rule of law when a child died of hunger or was crushed in the machines. We might productively take up this language to note the way that it creates a narrative of intergenerational strength and rebellion, and also, in a roundabout way, centres the right to social reproduction over the dignity of productive labour: rebellion here is framed as a debt to the past and a debt to the future as well.

Consider too, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) song *We have Fed you all for a Thousand Years*, itself a parody of Kipling's imperialist paean to the British Navy *The Song of the Dead*, which justifies England's empire with recourse to the

price paid for it in the blood of its stalwart mariners. Repurposed for more radical service, the IWW hymn insists:

*We have fed you all for a thousand years  
and you hail us still unfed,*

*Though there's never a dollar of all your  
wealth but marks the workers' dead.*

*We have yielded our best to give you rest  
and you lie on crimson wool.*

*Then if blood be the price of all your  
wealth, Good God! We have paid it in full!*

*There is never a mine blown skyward now  
but we're buried alive for you.*

*There's never a wreck drifts shoreward now  
but we are its ghastly crew.*

*Go reckon our dead by the forges red and  
the factories where we spin.*

*If blood be the price of your cursed wealth,  
good God! We have paid it in!*

*We have fed you all a thousand years for  
that was our doom, you know,*

*From the days when you chained us in your  
fields to the strike a week ago.*

*You have taken our lives, and our babies  
and wives and we're told it's your  
legal share,*

*But if blood be the price of your lawful  
wealth, good God! We bought it fair!<sup>[16]</sup>*

At stake in these dangerous expressions of proletarian vengeance is an implicit counter to the bourgeois condemnation of vengeance as an infantile, individualistic and emotive reaction: rather, revenge becomes a call to a collective action; indeed, an action that creates a new revolutionary collectivity. This collectivity not only binds together workers in the present, it also binds them to a lost or subjugated history. It makes them the collectors of a historical or ancestral debt and the redeemers of past generations of struggle.

## I, Titus

SO FAR WE HAVE DRAWN AT least two notions out. The first is that, while revenge is named by the powerful as a brute and animalistic urge that animates the downtrodden into supernatural evil, in actuality it might better describe the logic of systems of power that enact brutal and seemingly unnecessary cruelties in the name of economic or juridical necessity. The second is that the dreams of the revenge of the oppressed may not be simply infantile and violent but a means to craft new, powerful solidarities between people and between the past, present and future.

Certainly, if this is true, we are the last to discover it: it has been a key weapon in the arsenal of Hollywood and, more broadly, the corporate- and profit-driven media since the birth of capitalism. Revenge today is perhaps the most economically productive genre of popular culture. Consider the incredible success of the HBO serial *Game of Thrones*, which to date has swelled the profits of its parent company, Time Warner, largely thanks to a (absurdly anachronistic) narrative that is driven almost exclusively by violent, sexualized revenge. One estimate suggests that each episode of the show costs about \$6m to make and nets at least \$60m in revenue: a 10:1 ratio.<sup>[17]</sup> Revenge is also the key thematic of the incredibly popular films of Quentin Tarantino, and also the driving force behind the lucrative horror movie industry.

Yet this is not altogether new: one of Shakespeare's most popular plays during his lifetime was by far his worst: *Titus Andronicus*, an excruciatingly long racist bloodbath of a play that includes no less than "14 killings, 9 of them on stage, 6 severed members ... 3 rapes, 1 live burial, 1 case of insanity and 1 of cannibalism?—?an average of 5.2 atrocities per act, or one for every 97 lines."<sup>[18]</sup> TS Eliot called it "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written."<sup>[19]</sup> The play follows the vengeance and counter-vengeance of its eponymous tragic hero, a noble roman general returned from war against the Goths to find himself and

his whole family embroiled in the backstabbing, conniving capital of the empire. Francis Bacon almost certainly saw the play, probably multiple times, and also dozens and dozens more like it: revenge was one of the most popular genres in early modern England as well.

Without wishing to venture too comprehensive a hypothesis, I would suggest that a parallel between Shakespeare's age and ours is this: in moments when the powerful operate vengefully upon the oppressed with impunity, and when that impunity is disguised as necessary, unavoidable, natural and just, the revenge denied to the oppressed manifests in popular fantasy, and occasionally as "terrorism."

Such hypothesis could stand a great deal of deepening, but for now let us let it be shallow and return to the figure of our Wall Street man with whom I began, who, in the early 1990s, was sent by Goldman Sachs to Los Angeles to oversee the booming market in mergers and acquisitions in the entertainment industry. New analog and later digital technologies were ensuring that back catalogues of films and secondary rights to distribution of theatrical releases were big business, and our financier soon took his expertise to spin off his own boutique financial firm specializing in speculating on popular culture content. Eventually, our financier retired from finance to become an executive producer and producer of Hollywood films. Wall Street had made him wealthy, yes, but also bitter: in spite of his success he had never truly been included in the ranks of the elites and was disgusted by the crony-capitalism of the establishment that has so enriched him.

In 1999, he teamed up with Julie Taynor, who had made the bestselling Broadway Musical of Disney's *The Lion King*, itself a transformation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from a beautifully enigmatic revenge tragedy to a twee melodrama with racist, imperialist and homophobic characteristics (white lion, aided by ambiguously white-ethnic herbivore sidekicks and simianized African mentor, takes vengeance on gay English uncle and his hyena henchmen voiced by black women)<sup>[20]</sup>. Together, they produced *Titus*, a bombastic

and over-produced adaptation of the Shakespeare tragedy that in many ways predicted the hyper-masculine martial atavism of later blockbusters *300* or *Sparta*. These latter films are, today, cited by the militarist-cum-financier-cum-filmmaker in question as among his favourites, and the favourites of the legions of reactionaries to whom he caters, depicting as they do the heroic triumphs of unapologetic supermen undaunted by conventional morality or the craven cowardice of their would-be countrymen, banding together to defend the integrity of their embattled tribe against the invading barbarian hordes.<sup>[21]</sup>

In contrast, the 1999 *Titus* retains its tragic mode, depicting a noble Roman general, played by Anthony Hopkins, caught up in cycles of gory revenge with, on the one hand, his country's barbaric foreign enemies (the Goth's), and, far worse, with the "elites" of his own nation, Rome, who have betrayed Titus and his (also elite) family. Importantly, one of the key antagonists in the play is the figure of Aaron, the Moor, a racialized foreigner figure who is possessed of an irrational and dehumanizing lust for sexualized vengeance. It is strongly hinted that his acceptance within Roman civilization is in part to blame for triggering the endless cycles of revenge that give the play its motive force. Though Titus and his kin are almost all maimed or slaughtered by the end of the film, Titus depicts a man willing to bring about a violent revanchist apocalypse to cleanse the world of corruption.

The producer and financier's name is Steven Bannon.<sup>[22]</sup> Until a few days ago he was the Chief Strategist to Donald J. Trump and, as such, perhaps the one of the most powerful men in the world. While it is unclear what his ouster will mean for his own career, it does not diminish in any way the overarching revenge politics of which he is both a morbid symptom and a structural agent.

It should of course be pointed out that this narrative is very close indeed to the myth of German innocence and integrity propounded by the Nazis and their conservative allies in the 1920s and 30s, which suggested that Germany had lost the war

and been ripped off at Versailles thanks to corrupt, cosmopolitan and treasonous forces within the government, notably Jews. Still, it makes for a narcotic metanarrative, one that Bannon imported into the Breitbart media empire which he inherited from its founder in 2012. It is also a meta-narrative at the core of his transformation of the Trump campaign from a dumpster-fire of amusing narcissism into surgically precise smart-bomb of cultural politics.

Whatever else might be said about his victory, and much indeed might be said, I would hazard that, above all, what Bannon and Trump promised white voters was revenge. Revenge against the media, against the shadowy “elites,” against an out-of-touch left, indeed against the nihilism of life itself under neoliberal austerity. Writing in Jacobin days after the Trump’s election, Dan O’Sullivan glosses the affect:

*‘Vengeance is mine.’ So thought a lot of people last Tuesday {following Trump’s electoral victory}, consciously or not?—?a posture which poses an implied question that is never answered: Vengeance for what? Maybe they didn’t entirely know themselves; just a vague, painful throbbing at the base of their necks, a pregnant, silent anger, an inability to look at the mirror.<sup>[23]</sup>*

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## The pornographics of revenge

WHILE ALWAYS A REACTIONARY, BANNON’S life was fundamentally altered by the 9/11 attacks and the resulting War on Terror. While certainly not against the war, Bannon had and has a deep-seated contempt for the corrupt, self-serving neoconservatism of the Bush dynasty which used the War on Terror as a means to accelerate and entrench neoliberal globalization. For Bannon, such “establishment” conservatives were the worst of all traitors, continuing to sell out America to transnational finance and corporations and engage in muscular imperialism rather than focus on building a strong national economy and long-

term white American global hegemony. Bannon’s famed economic nationalism is heavy on isolationism, both political and economic. But it is also, fundamentally, based in revenge.

The vehicle for his Revenge politics came in the form of Breitbart news, named after its founder who died prematurely just as the site was about to launch in 2012. In the intervening decade, Bannon had leveraged his skills as a film producer, and his wealth, into creating far-right documentaries. Some purported to uncover vast conspiracies of liberal politicians to grease their pockets while stifling white working-class Americans. Others paid homage to reactionary politicians like Sarah Palin and Ronald Reagan, or movements like the Tea Party. Revenge here, figured as a means to cohere an imagined community around the myth of an absence, the fabled “America” which was once great, and which could be made great again.

In his work at Breitbart, and in his documentaries, Bannon channeled the spirit of Titus: America and normative-white, heartland Americans are presented as imperfect but noble, trusting and honourable at their core. Like Titus, such simple, battlefield virtues find themselves out of place in the decadent, cosmopolitan, effeminate and backstabbing world of career politicians and hangers-on. Noble American Titus is drawn into a cycle of endless, mutually destructive vengeance because of his loyalty to his country and family. And while he commits heinous acts, somehow they do not besmirch his victimhood. As Donald Trump so aptly put it following revelations about his misogynistic antics, (to paraphrase): I never said I was perfect. But together, we’re going to Make America Great Again. Or, as his and Bannon’s key funder, the free-market libertarian hedge-fund billionaire Robert Mercer and his far-right activist daughter Rebekah Mercer put it in their defence of their courageous embattled general:

*We are completely indifferent to Mr. Trump’s locker room braggadocio... America is finally fed up and disgusted with its political elite. Trump is channeling this disgust and those among the political elite who quake before the boombox of media blather do not appreciate the apocalyptic choice America faces on November 8th. We have a country to save and there is only one*

*person who can save it. We, and Americans across the country and around the world, stand steadfastly behind Donald J Trump.*  
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Towards a materialist theory of revenge

August 2017

Trump's victory was built in no small part on white-supremacism, a theme to which we shall shortly turn. It was also, evidently, built on misogyny. Breitbart has been the head chef in the preparation of a fulsome pornographic banquet of these neopatriarchal tropes, borrowing from and lending to a virulent online culture of anti-feminist backlash.

Rather than parsing the history of #gamergate and other festivals of revanchist white masculinity, I would recall our earlier discussions of Francis Bacon, the developer of one of the first theories legitimating the revenge of the powerful. Bacon's denigration of vengefulness from below, his distinction of legitimate "public revenge" in the name of the sovereign or social order from "private revenges," hinges upon the figure of the witch, whose "mischievous" life, he threatens, will end with "infortune." As noted above, Bacon helped superintend not only the earliest English invasions of the Americas but also the witch hunts that, as Silvia Federici and Maria Mies note, unleashed wave after wave of warrantless, socially transformative vengeance against women. This most public of revenges, as Federici points out, was not only overseen by agents of the state, it was also a profitable spectacle. It facilitated the imposition of a new form of patriarchy at the level of institutions (with, for instance, doctors replacing midwives and priests replacing wise-women), at the level of the economy (with the often women-led reciprocity of commoners giving way to male-dominated waged labour), at the level of politics (with women leaders routed and burned) and at the level of culture (with women and femininity in general becoming bearers of abjection and suspicion). Indeed, Federici makes clear that the European early modern witch trials were a modality of class warfare: women who bore the knowledge of their communities' abuse and exploitation at the hands of landlords and elites were especially targeted as witches. We may presume that this was in part because, under the

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emerging ideologies of modern gender binary, vengefulness was naturalized as masculine, thus women possessing it were evidently unnatural.

This redirection of social antagonisms and vengefulness away from (male) elites and towards (non-elite) women is a pattern we have seen repeated time and time again, and was indeed propounded as a method of colonialism. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty and other anti-imperialist feminists show, the reconfiguration of the gender system was key to the colonial methodologies of divide and conquer. Mohanty, for one, has shown how an imperialism dedicated to "saving" racialized women from racialized men both draws on and reproduces a long history of colonial patriarchy and also invites new forms of (allegedly) anti-imperialist patriarchy and misogyny as well.<sup>[25]</sup> Fanon notes the way that women of colonized populations become the target of colonizing and colonized men's fantasies and rage.<sup>[26]</sup> Andrea Smith has catalogued the numerous ways in which vengeful sexual violence against Indigenous women has been a key method of settler-colonialism to destroy the resistance of Indigenous communities, historically and in the present.<sup>[27]</sup> Ann Stoler has fruitfully unpacked the fear of the "revenge of the repressed" as a key discourse for interpreting colonial relations, with the repressed desires and crimes of colonists displaced onto a mythological colonial other whose fabled carnal vengefulness becomes a justification for violent domination in the first place.<sup>[28]</sup>

As Lisa Nakamura explains, these entanglements of race, gender and capital persist and are reproduced in new ways in the realm of digital and social media around both text and image, often accelerated and legitimated by a hyperbolic and revanchist fear of white, male persecution, oppression, impotence or irrelevance.<sup>[29]</sup> Today's epidemic of revenge pornography, where men horde images of women who have shared intimacy with them as a means to blackmail or humiliate their one-time lovers, is only the latest manifestation of this long trend and tendency. Male vengefulness is assumed to be natural and, if not rational, at least logical in its own right. Meanwhile, female vengefulness is pathologized or romanticized.

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The rape-revenge film (though perhaps recently recuperated by feminist film-makers and critics) <sup>[30]</sup> has ultimately been a male fantasy of revenge projected onto a (usually conventionally alluring) female puppet. The reality is that only a tiny handful of women who survive sexual assault report it, that even fewer press charges, that an even tinier fraction of these charges lead to convictions, and that even fewer women still take the law into their own hands and avenge the wrong done to them. This is an indication that the form of vengeance presented in the rape-revenge narrative is itself a vengeful fantasy. It is a fantasy where sexual assault essentially strips women of all value, transforming them from legitimate and complex human beings into little more than single-minded vehicles for a kind of narrative closure that is always still centred around the male rapist's original agency and fate.

It is precisely this omnipotent agency “men's rights” activists and other organized misogynists, such as those who made up a strong phalanx of Trump and Bannon's conquering army, feel they have been stripped of by a nebulous feminist conspiracy.<sup>[31]</sup> These perspectives are often fueled by some notion that modern men have been “cuckolded” by obedience to conventional norms of civility and morality, and that this is leading both to men's suffering and the breakdown of a naturally patriarchal society. The antidote is an Iconoclastic individualism marked by purposefully offensive speech and action, even by men who don't fit the conventional “alpha male” stereotype. But as Leigh Claire La Berge notes, this dream of a renegade, self-made masculinity that operates outside the laws and conventions of society because of a kind of meta-knowingness is the product of political-economic shifts, notably towards financialization, and has been lionized in films and literature that celebrate ruthless, violent financiers such as Brett Easton Ellis's novel (and the film) *American Psycho*, Martin Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* or, indeed, the *The Art of the Deal* by Donald Trump.<sup>[32]</sup>

The reactionary male hysteria that feminists control nearly every social institution and are coordinating the elimination of “traditional”

masculinity is the direct descendant of Bacon's witch hunts. Like those horrific events, “women” are endowed with secret supernatural powers to cause dangerous effects well beyond the limits of their individual words or bodies, are presumed to be meeting and conspiring, and are ultimately blamed for social and economic conditions that are, in fact, authored by capitalism and social elites. As with the witch hunts, the spectacle of a “public revenge” is legitimated in the name of avenging all the “private” revenges women have allegedly taken on men. As with the witch hunts, this spectacle takes place in the open, today on social media or in YouTube comments, or through doxxing (the making-public of private or personal information) or through revenge porn and the like.

These personal attacks on particular women are these pornographics of patriarchal revenge, whether they contain “erotic” images or not. They are merely one form of a kind of sadistic genre of media which, in another form, manifests in the dog-whistle, click-bait sensationalism of the right-wing outrage machine. Bannon perfected this necromatic genre during his time as editor of Breitbart and he lent to his tyrannical master in his run for the White House. In what is surely the height of irony, one of the favourite themes of such stories is the so-called witch-hunts allegedly orchestrated by feminists against courageous men who dare overcome “censorship” and exercise their “free speech” about gender or race relations.

## The radical spirits of hatred and sacrifice

TRUMP AND BANNON'S VICTORY CAN be attributed to many factors, notably and perhaps most importantly to the revanchist white-supremacist racism at the heart of the American Empire. Another factor, surely, has been the complete collapse of the Democrats thanks to that party's cynical manipulation of social-democratic rhetoric to hide and normalize the worst excesses and the acceleration of capitalist exploitation and social destruction.

Here, as ever, Walter Benjamin's fateful Theses on the Philosophy of History, his last major work before his tragic death, is instructive.

*In Marx the proletariat appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century. Social Democracy thought it fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.<sup>[33]</sup>*

Benjamin here aims at a properly materialist theory of revenge: for Marx, a transformative revenge is the task of a historically situated class. This class has the historically unique possibility of avenging not only the crimes enacted upon them, but the crimes of capitalist history. Their capacity to elevate revenge from isolated acts of violence to a transformative, truly revolutionary movement stems from their unique structural and systemic position as, we might say, the necessary victims of truly capitalist vengeance. Thus, the "sinews of their greatest strength" are not only strategy, organization and ideology, they are also hatred and a

spirit of sacrifice, which stem from taking up the task of avenging their enslaved ancestors. <sup>[34]</sup>

When, instead, social democrats insist the proletariat are the redeemers of future generations, they actually prepare them to adopt fascism. As Benjamin writes, elsewhere, the problem with the social democratic concept of progress is that it

*bypasses the question of how {the} products {of proletarian labour} might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal. It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; {as such} it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism.*

Here, the social democratic focus on a boundless, universal, technocratic future to be unfolded by a gradual, peaceful and harmonious evolution of society into socialism tragically but predictably handed fascism its torch. The fascist claim was two-fold: first that they, rather than the social democrats or communists, could bring about the real culmination of progress through racial supremacy; second, that they could do so by purging the body politic of racial and ideological contamination that were posed as the real cause of proletarian oppression.

In other words, for Benjamin, fascist revanchism thrived where socialism capitulated to bourgeois morality and, in their fashion, eschewed and defamed vengeance. The German Social Democrats had, in abolishing the legacy of Blanqui and literally ordering the murders of the Spartacist leadership, monopolized the discursive field and championed a notion of a peaceful, orderly and formal-democratic transition to socialism, banishing the spectre of vengeance to the margins where fascists found it, befriended it, and claimed its power.

Echoing Benjamin, Franco "Bifo" Berardi has written of our present moment of Trump, Brexit and the rise of revanchist fundamentalisms around the world, that, in the past:

*The workers' movement defended the existing composition and occupation of labour, so that technology appeared as an enemy of the workers. Capital took hold of technology in order to increase exploitation*

*and to submit the wellbeing of society to a now-useless labour. All the world's governments preached the need to work more, precisely when the moment was ripe to organise the break out of the regime of waged labour {and} transfer human time from the sphere of rendering service to the sphere of care for the self. The effect was an enormous stress overload, and an impoverishment of society. With workers no longer needed, labour was cheapened. It cost ever less, and became ever more precarious and wretched. Workers tried, by way of democracy, to stop the liberal laissez-faire offensive. But they only got a measure of the impotence of democracy... Ultimately the workers became enraged. The result was that the impotence took revenge, and is today overturning the liberal order. This is the revenge of those whom neo-liberalism has denied the joy of life. Of those who are compelled to work ever more and to earn ever less, deprived of the time to enjoy life and to know of the tenderness of other human beings in a non-competitive condition, deprived of access to knowledge, compelled to turn to the media agencies that propagate ignorance, and finally, convinced through ignorance that their enemy is the people who are even more impotent than they.<sup>[35]</sup>*

While the language of impotence here recalls the discussion of gender above, it also signals a broader crisis of power in general. If to some extent modern colonial forms of government elevates the state to the former role of God, the monopolist of the legitimate exercise of vengeance, what do we make of a moment when transnational capital seizes this power directly and submits the state itself, as well as workers and other people, to its needless, warrantless vengeance?

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## Financialized revanchism

BIFO, LIKE BENJAMIN, PROVIDES AN acute Marxian cultural and political analysis for how fascism seizes on and produces a revenge politics to sustain capitalist exploitation, even if it means the most heinous atrocities, even if it means the suspension or recalibration of capitalism away from free markets, globalization and competition and towards

corporatism, ultra-nationalism and monopoly. Even, indeed, if it means the practical nihilism of war, genocide and ecological catastrophe.

Then how could a theory of revenge become truly materialist, which is to say see revenge as both the product of and at the same time necessary to the contradictory structural economics of capitalism? To use a rightfully outmoded language, how can revenge be seen as the economic base of capitalism, not only the cultural and political superstructure?

I have no comprehensive answer, but only a few clues to present.

The first comes from the late Marxist geographer Neil Smith's recuperation of the notion of revanchism to describe the way:

*The 1990s witnessed the emergence of what we can think of as the revanchist city ... Severe economic crisis and governmental retraction were emulsified by a visceral reaction in the public discourse against the liberalism of the post-1960s period and an all-out attack on the social policy structure that emanated from the New Deal and the immediate postwar era... Revenge against minorities, the working class, women, environmental legislation, gays and lesbians, immigrants became the increasingly common denominator of public discourse.<sup>[36]</sup>*

Importantly, for Smith, revanchism named not only a vindictive political affect, but also a structural economic process

*By the 1970s gentrification was clearly becoming an integral residential thread in a much larger urban restructuring. As many urban economies in the advanced capitalist world experienced the dramatic loss of manufacturing jobs and a parallel increase in producer services, professional employment and the expansion of so-called "FIRE" employment (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate) their whole urban geography underwent a concomitant restructuring.*

It is a by-now familiar story: as profits dwindled in the post-war period due to the increased bargaining position of labour and due to higher tax rates levied in the name of public services, the appeal of speculation in the finance, insurance and real estate sectors soared. New York's racialized,

migrant, queer and working class culture was appropriated and weaponized by capital into a noxious tourist-oriented gimmick and a wide variety of legal and quasi-legal techniques were mobilized to accelerate a process of “urban renewal,” lately known as gentrification. Vast increases in the budget for punitive policing were justified through recourse to racialized invective that posed the “law-abiding” (read: white) citizens as victims of their own largess towards racialized others. This legitimated urban enclosures on a massive scale aimed at feeding a speculative real-estate bubble that still has not really burst. Lest we forget, it was from this toxic mess of smash-and-grab capitalism and white-supremacist fear and loathing that Donald Trump’s fortune and persona emerged.

So, for Smith, revanchism in a sense names both the spirit of reactionary urban planning and also the logic of what we can call financialized, neoliberal capital. In terms of that logic, we might say, drawing on the frames provided by Smith’s colleague David Harvey, a new combination of the alpha and the omega of capital: accumulation by dispossession and financial speculation.<sup>[37]</sup> In the first place, cities built—literally and figuratively, materially and culturally—by the collaborative, cooperative labours of citizens are now stripped of those them for speculative accumulation; on the other, this stripping is facilitated by, and helps reproduce, finance capital. Revanchism can describe a particular character or tenor of capitalist accumulation at the zenith of an accumulation cycle, a moment that Giovanni Arrighi has identified with “late capitalism,” when, as Fredric Jameson makes clear, culture is integrated and implicated directly in the reproduction of capitalism not merely as superstructure but as a central element.<sup>[38]</sup>

According to Costas Lapavistas, financialization names the process and period when the capitalist economy encounters accelerating paroxysms of crisis as the gap grows and grows between the production of actual surplus value (represented in the formula  $M-C-M'$ ) and the much more rapid growth of financial wealth (represented in the formula  $M-M'$ ).<sup>[39]</sup> David Harvey, elucidating Marx as well as Rosa Luxembour, illustrates that vari-

ous facets of capital desperately seek to close this gap, a gap I have elsewhere insisted is at least in part a gap in the imagination itself<sup>[40]</sup>: employers squeeze more from workers; resource-extractive corporations scour the earth for more wealth; non- or semi-capitalist communities are torn apart or thrown into the market; retailers seek to accelerate consumerism (often by expanding consumer debt); financiers seek to offload bad debts onto one another, dupes or the state; states themselves compete to see who will be made to pay.<sup>[41]</sup>

These and renewed tendencies towards imperialism, war, authoritarianism and untold human cruelty, are the structurally necessary forms of revenge wreaked by a stricken capitalism shot through with speculative adrenaline and merciless externalized contradictions.

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## The crypt

A MORE FULL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF revanchism must wait for another occasion because it is vital now to highlight how central race and racism are to the politics of revenge and the economics of revanchism. Smith is unequivocally clear that this tendency, as it was expressed in New York City and throughout the United States, both drew on and reinforced racist tropes and structures for its lifeblood. Urban revanchism was squarely aimed at racialized populations who were accused of exploiting and abusing white benevolence and ruining the city with lawlessness, laziness and barbarism. The financiers who drove this process forward were almost exclusively white, as were the politicians and judicial officials that superintended it. Thus, a new chapter of the long dark saga of the dispossession of people of colour under American capitalism was added, but this time with the victims cast as villains.

Yet this chapter echoed its predecessors. James Baldwin, among others, has pointed out that fantasies of black vengeance have defined the stunted political imagination of White America,<sup>[42]</sup> blos-

soming into an appetite for revanchist anti-Black violence whether enacted by police or lynch-mobs. Angela Davis, Ruth Gilmore and Michele Alexander have all traced the way the American system of mass incarceration?—?like the firearms industry, municipal police forces and white supremacist organizations?—?was built in the wake of Abolition in part to assuage the paranoia of Whites regarding black vengeance.<sup>[43]</sup> In reality, as Gilmore and Davis argue, the purpose of mass incarceration was also the continued devaluation of Black lives and Black labour necessary for the perpetuation of capitalist accumulation. Others, including David Roediger and Theodore Allen have understood these institutions as central to the psychic and material wages of whiteness that have conscripted white proletarians to a fidelity to white capital.<sup>[44]</sup>

For this reason, Loic Wacquant has drawn on Smith's notion of revanchism to frame what he calls hyper-incarceration, preferring the term for its ability to pinpoint that system's specific targeting of poor Black ghettoized men and for its ability to name a system that encompasses not only prisons but also the policing and court system, the parole and bond system and the massive prison-labour and para-punishment industries, all of which, he argues have been absolutely central to the financialized, neoliberal movement of capitalist accumulation in the post-Civil Rights era.<sup>[45]</sup> For Wacquant, we might say, revanchism here names a political affect and an economic structure: on the one hand it animates the racist antipathy that justifies the ruinous expansion of what he calls the penal-state, the self-destructive form of extreme neoliberalism that answers the crisis of care and social welfare it itself has created by spending more and more on prisons; on the other, revanchism names precisely this seemingly irrational, punitive and ultimately self-destructive urge within the logic of capitalist accumulation.

The prison here is the dark crypt of white-supremacist capitalism. Not only is it a means of encrypting speculative capital in the carceral institution. As the prison becomes a (perhaps the) central institution of racial capitalism, it also encrypts, at the centre of that system, a zone of endless

revenge. In prisons, absent the heroic solidarity of inmates, we are led to imagine that the monetary or moral economy is replaced by an economy of revenge wherein one's status and ability to avoid premature death as a captive becomes dependent on one's ability to threaten vengeance against potential abusers (guards and other inmates). The hyper exploitation of the image of the prison and prisoner in popular culture relies precisely on providing a racialized spectacle of vengeance that mirrors, in extreme form, the secret broader economy of revenge capitalism that imprisons us all. These dungeons of endless racialized, financialized vengeance, which obviously have nothing to do with public safety or rehabilitation, are the sacrificial altars of revenge capitalism and they burn bright in the public imagination, to some as warnings, to some as beacons.

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## The Cultural Illogic of Belated Capitalism

AND NOW VENGEANCE HAS COME CALLING with the absolute and systematic destruction of seemingly any and all social welfare provisions of the nation-state, with a near-complete deregulation of capital except for those regulations that serve the purposes of a radical economic nationalism and that punish and avenge themselves against already-oppressed people: the explosion of private prisons; the paramilitarization of policing against Black and racialized communities; mass deportations; attacks on reproductive rights; the list goes on and on.

Yet let us not lose sight of the structural dimensions here. Naomi Klein, for one, has noted that the corporate backers (and now many of the senior cabinet ministers) of the Trump administration rightly feared the growing global discontent that followed the 2008 financial crisis, as well as the growing climate justice movement.<sup>[46]</sup> While we should not downplay the deep and rancorous splits between capitalist actors today, we can also,

along with Yanis Varoufakis and others, note an emerging alliance between global ultranationalists, and a growing tolerance for their ideas by capitalists who, in spite of perhaps preferring the older globalist neoliberalism (and its more palatable debonaire Davos political class), aim to turn the situation to their advantage. Other capitalists, notably those associated with Silicon Valley, see Trump and his ilk as dark angels of disruptive innovation, willing to let the boys have their fun with artificial intelligence, cybernetics, automation and geoengineering without any meaningful public oversight.<sup>[47]</sup>

These are all the contradictions of capital come to a head. Without parsing them too deeply, I would offer the formulation that, at a certain climax in the accumulation cycle, capitalism's inherent vengefulness emerges naked and, as ever, "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."

Capitalism's vengefulness here is not merely an anthropomorphic metaphor. Capitalism's whole history has been a saga of vindictive acts perpetrated against those on whom it depends for its lifeblood: workers and the oppressed. It has constantly and persistently awakened and harnessed the revanchist dreams and fantasies of the oppressed and exploited to turn them against one another. And it has constantly defamed notions of proletarian and anti-colonial vengeance as sub-human, animalistic and degraded as a means to silence and quell righteous fury.

Yet now, at a moment of its own massive, unassuageable crisis not only does capital turn to revenge politics to save itself, it also reveals its true vengeful nature. It is not only on a metaphorical level that this undead thing, capital—this horrific manifestation of dead-labour that is ontologically dependent on the vitality of its adversary, living-labour—is driven by a Nietzschean resentment. It is also that late, financialized capitalism is so desperate to sustain itself through its manifold and fatal contradictions it turns to the worst forms of vindictive cruelty to support itself in its madness. Hyper-incarceration, gentrification, the debt crisis, the ecological crises: all of these are forms

of capitalist vengeance that are, in fact, cancerous to and unsustainable within capital itself. Yet they accelerate thanks to the inherent momentum of the system, driven as it is by no single rational conductor or conspiracy, but by a million individual acts of frantic capitalist competition. As ever, the only way for capitalism to save itself from itself in situations such as these, as Rosa Luxembourgh taught us, is to entrust itself to the care of authoritarianism or the cleansing fires of inter-imperialist warfare.

I am tempted to call revenge the cultural illogic of belated capitalism, echoing Fredric Jameson's famous essay on postmodernism.<sup>[48]</sup> Illogic because the politics and the economics of revenge emerge from a moment when the accelerating spiral of accumulation is so vertiginously fast that we can no longer ascribe it any sort of sustainable logic. Belated because "late" seems overly optimistic: we appear to be in an endless twilight now. The contradictions pile atop of themselves, the "fixes" (as David Harvey describes them) create new, greater crises. Perhaps this is always what capital looks like at the end or "late" phase of the accumulation cycle as Giovanni Arrighi theorized it. It is certainly how capitalism has always appeared from below, from the perspective of Indigenous people, racialized people and the poor. But in magnitude if not in structure, the crises and disastrous "fixes" we witness today seem beyond anything we've seen before: the cascading ecological and climate crisis; the sublimely horrific, churning necropolitics of populations made into surplus; the further weaponization of money into a proliferation of unpayable debts... these and other monumental systemic injustices seem to have no point?—?they at times even defy the logic of individual capitalists or the capitalist system as a whole.

## Fanon of the Whites?

FOR THIS REASON RIGHT-WING (THOUGH ANTI-TRUMP) New York Times commentator David Brooks might well have accidentally stumbled onto something worthwhile when he posited in a recent column that “Steve Bannon is the Franz Fanon of the Whites.”<sup>[49]</sup> Such statement goes well beyond Brooks’ lacklustre intent, which is to trod the well-worn ground of castigating campus intersectionalist privilege politics and bemoan a culture of exploitative victimhood. Offering Bannon as the Fanon of Whites might suggest that he is their theorist of revenge. Or more accurately, Bannon wishes to be the Fanon of whiteness.

Fanon, famously, provided a philosophical, moral and political rationale for anti-colonial revolt, and for violence as a means to achieve national liberation. This is all within a context, of course, where colonial regimes’ claims to legitimacy were often based on their “benevolent” gift of the so-called “rule of law” to Indigenous and colonized populations, which allegedly replaced what colonists imagined and instructed was a prehistory of endless, limitless vengeance. Not only did such an assumption erase the complex legal, juridical and diplomatic structures that predated their arrival, it also disguised and normalized the inherent, structural and extremely brutal vengefulness and impunity of individual colonists and the colonial systems as a whole.

These colonial notions operate still, even in allegedly post-colonial times, in for instance the way the mythscape of endless, limitless atavistic vengeance woven around the image of the racialized gang in the (highly profitable) American media. Another example is the fantasy of the “failed state” where, in absence of Western institutions, racialized populations regress into an economy of limitless and self-perpetuating vengeance. Such myths serve to disguise and normalize the inherent, structural and extremely brutal vengefulness of the police or neo-colonial systems as a whole. In a sense, colonialism was and is

always-already the “public revenge” of whiteness for a crime or infraction never committed but endlessly fantasized about. Bannon, then, is more Bacon than Fanon.

Fanon, for similar reasons to Marx and Engels, is distrustful of revenge. He offers the following: “Racialism and hatred and resentment?—?a ‘legitimate desire for revenge’?—?cannot sustain a war of liberation... hatred alone cannot draw up a program.”<sup>[50]</sup> Revenge here is legitimate, but not strategic?—?it is not morally wrong but rather insufficient for generating a movement of liberation that can sustain itself. For Fanon, revenge is generally presented as a base, reactionary emotion that motivates understandable but ultimately unstrategic actions. For instance, he speaks about the almost spiritual dimension of public anti-colonial violence, or about the sense of revenge germane to the sexual fantasies of race. But these alone cannot sustain a movement, and indeed imperil it.

On another level, Fanon’s whole oeuvre is a theory of revenge in the more systemic and structural fashion I have been aiming at here. Just as Marx wrote *Capital* to put a weapon of righteous, patient and slow vengeance in the hands of proletarians, so too is Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* a guide to how to take revenge on a system of colonialism that has been built around racist colonial revanchism and, as such, built to withstand and indeed incorporate small and petty individual acts of revenge.

Glen Coulthard, for one, has revisited both Fanon and Marx for clues as to how to think about Indigenous resistance and resurgence in North America in a moment when, on the one hand, settler colonies like Canada and Australia encourage a politics of reconciliation and, on the other, the conditions of genocidal colonial usurpation persist for Indigenous people, in deadly form.<sup>[51]</sup> For Coulthard, as for many anti-colonial thinkers before him, Fanon holds the seeds for a refusal of recognition, the power to collectively reject inclusion within a system of slow death and subjugation. At stake for Coulthard is not simply a revenge fantasy but a broader, wider notion of

revenge that is also an autonomous Indigenous resurgence.

Here we may be coming closer to a notion of vengeance worthy of our dreams, one that would surpass the castigation of revenge as a brutish, reactionary emotion that we inherit from Francis Bacon and a long line of ruling class white philosophers, whose secret work, we have seen, has been to hide the logic of vengeance at the very heart of the system that has privileged them.

The more radical, generative and strategic revenge I have in mind, along with Marx and Engels, Fanon and Coulthard?—?a truly structural theory of revenge?—?might be tritely summed up in the graffito that has appeared on many walls in Southern Europe since the dawn of the Eurozone debt crisis and punishing austerity regimes in 2010.

*Living well is our best revenge.*

Or, if you prefer Ireland's Bobbi Sands

*Our revenge will be the laughter of our children.*

But let me hasten to distinguish this from mere sentimentalism: to me these phrases imply much more than a sort of solipsistic retreat into a politics of personal contentedness, where one turns the other cheek to the vengeance of capitalism or colonialism or white supremacy. Rather, it means three things: militant collective refusal, seizing the means of social production and the radical imagination.

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## The profits of forgiveness

I WANT TO BRIEFLY DISTINGUISH THEM from a politics of anti-vengeance orchestrated by the powerful using the horrifically reanimated corpses of three revolutionary leaders: Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. I will not here go into detail regarding the way their

own thinking, writing and action in life, grounded in non-white and anti-colonial traditions, contradicts the way their likenesses have today become the puppets for a frankly disgusting spectacle of white-led reconcilophilia.

Rather, I want simply to note that these figures have been press-ganged into service as Disneyfied 'profits of forgiveness', trotted out to admonish those of us who dare dream dangerously. Each, of course, had a complex (and sometimes problematic) theory of revenge and, importantly, a strategic argument for forgiveness and nonviolence. Yet that strategic dimension has been paved over by a parking lot of cheap moralism that, until recently, served to once again reify and reinforce the dominant castigation of the revenge of the oppressed as subhuman and to, at the same time, disguise and naturalize the constant, unrelenting vengeance of the powerful.

This ideology of compulsory forgiveness has smothered the radical imagination, insisting on a saccharine, demobilizing affect that, to draw upon Benjamin, has cut the sinews of our greatest strength. As Jacques Derrida argues, the contemporary politics of forgiveness aims to restore and legitimize the neoliberal global order by assuming it represents a kind of "normal" or equilibrium to which we can and should return.<sup>[52]</sup> What it hides, he argues, is that this order, like all orders, is founded in and perpetuated by violence, what I have here been calling the systemic vengeance of racial capitalism.

To return to Fanon, the signature move of the oppressor has always been to blame the oppressed for the dissonance between the propounded ideology of normalcy and the actuality of constant oppressive violence, to insist that it is the oppressed who are responsible for the turmoil of their lives, and to render anti-colonial violence, rather than colonialism itself, barbaric. Perhaps it is only through a rekindling of a generative and revolutionary notion of revenge that this trap can be escaped.

In contrast to the gruesome spectacle where the corpses of the three profits of forgiveness are made to dance for the pleasure of the oppressor, what

Fanon teaches us is that vengeance means more than just acts of violence; it means a rejection of the oppressors' and exploiters' thought-world and stunted, narcissistic moral universe.

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## Avenging commons

THERE ARE A LOT OF paths to take from here. My own interest is in exploring what I think of as the avenging commons.<sup>[53]</sup> I use the term for three reasons. First, to leverage this concept of revenge out of the darkness of violence and brutality that, in spite of ourselves, we still associate with the term (maybe for some good reasons). Thinking about the commons and the active practices of commoning as forms of vengeance help us see that “living well” is a revolutionary collective and cooperative act of refusal and creation, fomenting the conditions for laughing children. Living well means more than just individualistic self-care and wholesome, caring habits: it would need to mean the difficult, fraught and collaborative practices of building and sustaining grassroots power and autonomy. Here I imply the Buen Vivir tendency and movement, especially those dimensions of it inspired by Indigenous communities in struggle, which advocates the rebuilding of a life in common and the use of alternative, non-capitalist measurements for health, development and growth.<sup>[54]</sup>

But by the same token, by bringing revenge and the commons into proximity I also want to chide my comrades who are perhaps a little too optimistic and positive about the promise of the commons.<sup>[55]</sup> Of the first level, as I have argued throughout, I think we are ill-served if we respond to the revenge politics of revenge capital with only relentless positivity and banish all negative or fearsome affect from our repertoires. Somehow the commons must be about more than just feeling good—we also need, crucially, to dwell with the affective and structural forces of negation. Second, while I hold fast to the idea of the commons and the building of radical autonomy, soli-

arity and institutions within, against and beyond capital, I think we need to be sanguine about the situation that faces us. It will not be enough to slowly exit or capsize capital from within because, as Marx and other have insisted, much of capital is our own stolen time and energy turned back against us. “We,” the alleged commoners, cannot simply autonomously generate certain key forms of capitalist infrastructure (hospitals, highways, roboticized factories, etc). “We” also have a right and a duty to take these back into our hands, somehow, to reclaim the wealth we collectively created in the name of our joy and abundance. In other words, we need to imagine not only exiting capitalist economic relations but also reclaiming our stolen wealth.

And it is a big somehow.<sup>[56]</sup> I am not sure what political or economic organization is appropriate to dispose capital of its ill-begotten wealth. But my signalling to the revenge commons is to say that we should not so easily give up on the promise of expropriating the expropriators, even as we build new and alternate forms of life within, against and beyond them. Further still, as Benjamin insists, there is the matter of our oppressed ancestors to think of. Their spirits cry out for more than merely our happiness, or call us to a higher form of happiness.

So this notion of the avenging commons might be said to have at least three dimensions.

First, a militant and unrelenting refusal of the terms of subjugation, both discursive and material. On the discursive front, refusal means recuperating abject and defamed concepts like vengeance, reversing the oppressive value system, pointing the finger back at the oppressor. It means a Fanonian break with the paradigm of oppressive social and cultural values not merely through acts of deviance and countercultural jouissance, but through the hard, collective work of thinking the world together anew. On the material front, militant collective refusal means strikes, riots, sabotage, theft and other acts that directly target the system's production of economic value and that manifest collective power to say no, to insist on other universes of value. Avenging in this sense

is the generative, open-ended power of radical negation as theorized by Fanon as well as John Holloway.<sup>[57]</sup>

Second, such a generative avenging takes the form of reclaiming the means of social reproduction: discovering ways to provide care and solidarity to one another within, against and beyond the institutions and structures of the oppressor.<sup>[58]</sup> On the one hand, this might mean the creation of new, radical, grassroots institutions like free-schools, community medical clinics, collective kitchens and cooperative housing—as groups like the Black Panthers and generation after generation of militant workers’ movements did—usually led by women.<sup>[59]</sup> On the other, it might take the form of thoughtful and militant engagements to steal back the means of social reproduction that are today enclosed by the state or capital, such as when we “steal” from universities to create autonomous and non-hierarchical forums for thought and action: What Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call the undercommons.<sup>[60]</sup> Avenging here takes the form of refusing to allow oppressive systems to conscript our bodies, minds and time therefore starving them of their lifeblood and building the infrastructures of dissent and self-sufficiency necessary for revolutionary transformation.

Finally, avenging means the thriving of the radical imagination. Elsewhere, Alex Khasnabish and I have theorized that this force emerges not from the individual mind but from collective practices of resistance.<sup>[61]</sup> We have offered that it is born of conflicts with power and from the active experience of building difficult, always already incomplete solidarities across difference. The radical imagination is vital because it allows us to envision different futures, even if only ever in partial, hazy and problematic ways. But envisioning a future together is, as Robin DG Kelley illustrates, key to sustaining movements over the long haul.<sup>[62]</sup> The radical imagination is a form of symbolic revenge because it refuses the consensus that the present is necessary or inevitable. But the radical imagination is also vital to help our avenging transcend reaction: the radical imagination gives us a notion of what the “living well” that will be the best revenge might actually mean, might actually look

and feel like.

I hasten to add that the radical imagination here is not averse to entertaining structural and systemic dreams, dreams which might become plans, plans which might become policies, policies may give rise to parties. The radical imagination offers messages from the beyond: from the ether of protean, magma-like human and more-than-human cooperative energies that is our only ontology and yet whose heat and light are beyond our sensory limits.<sup>[63]</sup> It is the realm of our proverbial ancestors whose vanquished hopes and twisted bodies Benjamin reminds us it is our duty to avenge. Like all dreams, we can only interpret them in the images, terms and structures of our waking and lived experience. As such, I do not doubt that our dreams today of a tender avenging will need to dwell with questions of government and state, not the least because the threats we face are so vast and so immediate it is hard to imagine any other vehicle to deal with them. Yet we should not imagine that these structures can ever contain or liquidate those dreams. The radical imagination is the child within and between us that always laughs last.

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## Dig two graves

WHEN I THINK ABOUT AN AVENGING COMMONS I am all-too worried about the way vengeance can become an all-consuming passion, one that hollows us out from the inside, leaving nothing but retaliatory momentum. The Confucian adage that “if you set out for revenge, first dig two graves” is apt. As James Baldwin poetically put it in a fascinating treatment of the cinematic interface of race and revenge, “Revenge is a human dream.” Upon its successful culmination “there is no way of conveying to the corpse the reasons you have made him one—you have the corpse, and you are, thereafter, at the mercy of a fact which missed the truth, which means that the corpse has you.”<sup>[64]</sup> To live for vengeance in this way is to be already dead, to be in the hands of the dead, or to

be in one's own dead hands.

Two graves, then, lie agape, their bodies missing, condemned to lead an endless, sleepless afterlife.

But as Baldwin equally makes clear, being compelled to constantly swallow one's revenge, to witness and endure the vengeance of a system upon you and those you love and be unable to answer the debt, is equally (if not more) catastrophic. It, too, rots one from the inside out. Revenge will find its expression whether we admit it or not; as the title of his meditation of the subject insists, *The Devil Finds Work*.

How then, might the Confucian adage be reinterpreted and how might a private vengeance be transmuted into a public avenging? Perhaps one digs two graves because revenge is the "negation of the negation:" and at its close both negations will be surpassed. In avenging the crimes and cruelties of a vengeful system, one aims at a form of radical transformation of both society and the subject. Are we not foretold as the system's grave-diggers? Today, capital keeps both graves empty: its own because it continues to lead its parasitic undeath; ours because we are its source of horrific nutrition and reproduction, kept alive only to feed its endless hunger.

Avenging in this sense is also a politically radical self-annihilation and overcoming, and what comes after is unknown; we cannot imagine what we will become after we walk into the sunset as the credits roll, our all-consuming, seemingly hopeless quest concluded. In this sense, avenging (in contrast to revenge) is not simply some dark, pathological base desire but, rather, an act of faith in ourselves, or more accurately what we might become together, after...

So it may be true that living well is the best revenge. But even the privileged among us cannot live well under capitalism, colonialism, white-supremacy and patriarchy. To live well, these revenge systems must necessarily be abolished. The practices of abolition, including land and resource reclamations, including protests and poets and so-called riots, including the salvage of new relationships and new bodies and old time, including singing

and ritual and food, will be castigated by the beneficiaries of those revenge systems and their mercenary intellectuals as mere revenge politics.

Yet against Bacon, Bannon and their ilk, and in the name of our enslaved ancestors and liberated grandchildren, we will lead the lives of witches, those sworn to that tender avenging: the most fortunate of all.

VAG  
ABO  
NDS

## Notes

- [1] This essay, or fever dream, is the result of many fruitful conversations and fraught engagements with comrades and colleagues too numerous to mention. I want to single out only a few, who may or may not recall their contributions or impacts and are certainly not responsible for the flaws of this piece: Phaniel Antwi, Franco Berardi, George Caffentzis, Francesca Coin, Joshua Clover, Glen Coulthard, Judy, Larry and Omri Haiven, Silvia Federici, Flo6x8 of Sevilla, Stefano Harney, Brian Holmes, Alex Khasnabish, Bertell Ollman, Nina Power, Robbie Richardson, AK Thompson, and Cassie Thornton.
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