

Book Review

Max Haiven

Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power

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Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

There is no absence of innovation in modern liberal democracies. Novel means of voter suppression, prosecution of whistle-blowers and vast intrusive electronic surveillance of citizens are just some of the clever techniques being used to subvert the seemingly traditional rights and freedoms of citizens, especially in the Anglo-American and some Western but definitely not Northern European democracies. Citizens of many others countries, of course, have learned to take such matters for granted, at least within the technological limits of their governments.

Thanks especially to the initiatives taken by the Obama administration, the USA has fallen to 46th place in the domain of “press freedom,” an issue that many people regard as central to the functioning of a proper democracy. Canada, incidentally, occupies the 16th position after Jamaica; the United Kingdom is in 31st place behind countries such as Ghana and Belize; and the United States of America trails Botswana, Papua New Guinea and Romania. Nine of the top ten, however, are European countries with the only exception being New Zealand; Finland ranks # 1.

What is going on?

Haiven comes brazenly to grips with one of the greatest ideological shibboleths currently deployed ... The myth ...that capitalism ...harnesses human imagination and creativity ...successfully.

In *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power*, Max Haiven offers a disturbing analysis of the fate of imperial powers—present and past—such as the USA, the UK and France (39th on the press freedom scale) in terms of their own quality of political life. The blame for a democratic deficit is placed squarely on the economic system of capitalism.

Haiven opens with a blast:

You, dear reader, are on the front lines of a war. It is a war between money and the earth, between capital and people, between the blunt stupidity of greed and the resilient creativity of humanity.

He goes on to highlight issues from alienated labour to marriage breakdown. He places the blame for everything from individual *ennui* to “Third World” starvation at the foot of capitalist economic arrangements in an era of technological ascendancy and global corporatism.

I can almost hear former US president Ronald W. Reagan whispering from beyond the grave: “There they go again.” It is no news that the leftist press is fond of publishing yet another tome castigating neoliberal ideology and practice for any and all real and perceived evils currently and seemingly forever burdening humanity. The aims of the European Enlightenment, including liberation from ignorance, disease, poverty, tyranny and war, have not been completely fulfilled; nonetheless, we are assured by internationally known political and economic leaders that the human standard of living has never been higher, many formerly impoverished countries are well on their way to apparent economic success. China and India are transforming themselves into modern economic powerhouses using (what else?) capitalist methods, regardless of the leaders of the People’s Republic’s continuing ruse that they are actually “communists.”

In fact, even the decline in freedom within the borders of the self-proclaimed and rarely disputed “leader of the free world” can be explained. George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama, for example, speak as one when they argue that the United States has been forced to trade off some of its precious liberties in order to secure the homeland and to continue to lead the worldwide “war on terror.” So, the fact that a number of European countries—notably in Scandinavia—can not only boast a very free press, but also lead in public educational achievement and health care and, by many standards, enjoy the highest quality of life on the planet can be seen as a direct result of two factors: (a) they have mixed-capitalist economies, and (b) they have been and continue to be protected by the primacy of the United States as the unparalleled military power on Earth.

Haiven, however, offers something different here. Rather than repeat the well-known arguments about structural inequality, inverted totalitarianism and the “friendly fascism” that (post)modern citizen-customers have come to accept, Haiven comes brazenly to grips with one of the greatest ideological shibboleths currently deployed to make the contemporary political economy seem necessary if we are to overcome our civilizational “challenges.” The myth is that capitalism, organizational innovation and technological invention are mutually supportive to the extent that no other set of economic arrangements could conceivably harness human imagination and creativity as successfully. So, it is widely held that our Hobbesian/Spenserian universe of endless avarice and ruthless competition demands ingenuity and resourcefulness if individuals are to succeed and societies to thrive. Indeed, the only impediments to growth are the obstructions thrown up by governments that would risk prosperity by imposing unnecessary environmental controls on industry and engaging in wasteful, dysfunctional social engineering projects that reward sloth and punish entrepreneurship.

Haiven argues the contrary. “According to free-market ideologues,” he says:

capitalism is the ultimate system for assigning value to the world’s wealth. By bringing people’s wants, needs and desires together into an open market,

capitalism will accurately and efficiently price things as diverse as the cost of an hour of shoemaker’s time, a loaf of bread, the value of a river, or the price of a song on iTunes. These utopian dreamers, whose thinking has become associated with the term ‘neoliberalism’, believe that by mobilizing people’s competitiveness and inherently acquisitive human nature, capitalism is, ultimately, value-neutral—markets are simply egalitarian areas of exchange. The truth, of course, is quite different.

Haiven proceeds to describe and explain how human values, when commodified, commercialized and monetized, become distorted. He manages to turn our attention away from the common statistics about unemployment, incarceration and suicide rates—all empirical measures of societies in distress or decline—and toward the sort of subjective considerations that too seldom find their way into assessments of contemporary life. He is especially quick to show that capitalism not only contributes materially to the failures of the Enlightenment ambitions, but also precludes effective and authoritative solutions to any of the many issues confronting humanity today—potentially calamitous climate change, catastrophic international conflict and multiple domestic ills from declining education, health and prosperity.

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Haiven describes capitalism not only in terms of the legacy of slavery abroad and William Blake's evocative "dark, satanic mills" at home, but also in the universalization of the market mentality which allows the "invisible hand" to guide rational production and distribution of goods and services and to give an occasional smack in the face to those who refuse to play or to subvert the game. The value of individuals has long been calibrated in the wage economy as wage rates multiplied by hours worked with the result being a serviceable definition of the moral market worth of any human being. Now, however, we are calculating not merely production costs and commodity prices, but everything from education and recreation to air and water. Indeed, he says, "we are told that the value of the atmosphere is best imagined through 'carbon credits' ..."

This is not only the stuff of a profoundly humanistic critique of capitalism, which could apply equally to the forms of state socialism that we witnessed in the USSR and its satellite states until recently. It is also the basis of a qualitatively different approach to the problem of what is at the root of our problems—economic, ecological, ethical and otherwise.

Haiven, as his title makes clear, sees the "crises of capitalism" (all of them interlinked) as related to "crises of the imagination." Unlike formulaic economic reductionists, historical materialist and technological determinists, he accepts the independence of an imaginative dimension and independent human agency. He is open to free will. His goal is to present a diagnosis in order to help design a course of therapy. He wants to promote a radicalized human capacity for insight and creativity will that will permit a prognosis more optimistic than those offered by delusional free marketers on the one side and neo-Spenglerian pessimists on the other.

A key term is the "constriction of imagination." It is the process of persuading all of us to think wholly in a manner that defers to what merely is and excludes what might be. It encourages us to believe that everything—not least corporate economic models and relentlessly changing technology—is ordained and that nothing could be otherwise. True, we are constantly being pressured to "think outside the box," to be "innovative," to exercise "critical thinking," and so on. This, however, is a sham—both in our schools and in our places of employment—for it does not permit us to be creative with the questions, only with the answers. Innovation is severely curtailed, marginalized or suppressed when it deviates from corporate culture and corporate goals. We give kudos to people who come up with ideas about how to make organizations—both public and private—leaner and (not always but mostly) meaner, who can find "efficiencies" and who can be

“proactive” in designing tactics and strategies to succeed in an inevitably pitiless global economy; but, we do not reward those who question the wisdom of economic anorexia. This failure of the imaginative is captured in Haiven’s splendid neologism, “necroneoliberalism.”

Haivens addresses the emptiness and the loneliness we experience and the frenzied efforts we made to participate in artificial communities. ... He then offers intimations of humanity: ... a space or time in which we create value together.

One example of the inability to rethink the fundamentals was provided by Bob Rae, the Canadian “silver-spoon socialist.” After suffering a decisive and humiliating defeat as the mildly reformist New Democratic Party provincial premier in Ontario, Rae sought the leadership of the federal Liberal Party and (as though as a matter of right) the position of Prime Minister of Canada. He failed. On the path from defeat to defeat, Mr. Rae paused part way to write a rather slender “philosophical” tome entitled *The Three Questions* (1999). In it, he sought up-to-date answers to questions posed by the much revered Rabbi Hillel. In the end, Rae conflated them into a single political conclusion. Said Rae: “the issue in the modern world is not between capitalism and socialism. It is about what kind of capitalism we want to have.” The boundaries were set. No changes in the rules could apply. The retreat was complete.

Haiven’s view is more commodious. Subtle nuances and minor discrete differences in policy are not especially important when compared to the possibilities of something close to redemption or, at least, a modicum of social justice. People who think like Mr. Rae may promise a minor increase in the minimum wage and imagine that they are making the world incrementally better (at least in societies which enforce a minimum wage). Haiven encourages a more expansive manner of thought.

Sequentially, Haiven treats the most important aspects of our personal and collective lives. He addresses the emptiness and the loneliness we experience and the frenzied efforts we made to participate in artificial communities. He reveals our political alienation as chronically disconnected taxpayers and not as engaged citizens. He discloses the emptiness we feel as compliant customers in the competition to acquire unsatisfying consumer goods. He is especially concerned with the abolition of public space and the imposition of closure on public discourse. He demonstrates how we are entrapped in the many spheres of life by the imposed “values of competition, accumulation, hierarchy, coercive power, exploitative labour and imagined differences.” He then offers intimations of humanity: community-based activities, co-operative opportunities for production and distribution of goods and services, and opportunities for social sharing and the possibilities of making “a space or time in which we create value together.”

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Like Reagan’s dismissal of the diagnosis, I can also hear “realists” contemptuously rejecting the therapies. Yet, by alerting us to openings for public perception and public action, by promoting what I will call (with no undue sarcasm) “the audacity of hope,” and by restoring the notion that the limits to our possibilities can be expanded by probing the periphery, testing the

boundaries and daring to find and build alternatives, Haiven shows not just that capitalism holds a temporary monopoly on thought and action, but that it is actually going bankrupt in ways that no predatory or parasitical practices can redeem.

Contemporary institutions from banks to universities come in for devastating and deserved criticism. Past sources of inspiration are rescued from what Edward Thompson called the “enormous condescension of posterity.” New prospects for confident transition are opened. In the end, Haiven calls upon us to “reimagine the imagination itself,” taking control and removing it from the constrained space and narrow interests of corporate money making and transforming it into a collective enterprise in support of the common weal.

It’s been done before. Resurrecting the concept of the “commons” is not only a option but, Haiven insists, a necessity. He is not far wrong.

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