

Book Review

John McMurtry
The Cancer Stage of Capitalism, 2nd edition
London, UK: Pluto Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

1.

Unless we are prepared to grant either that innovation is a matter of accident, of random cultural mutation destined to live or die by its “fitness” to an indifferent universe, or that it is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed according to some fleshless, emotionless, purposeless set of determinative laws of history, then human agency matters. And, if human agency matters at least to the extent that we can make a difference, that things can be otherwise and that we can make them so, then it behooves us to figure out where and what we are, where we came from, and where we are headed. Only when we can identify the statics (things that stay the same) and the dynamics (things that change) about ourselves, our societies and the biosphere we inhabit, can we make authentic choices about where we, individually and collectively, shall go.

So, with all the respect I can muster for Henry Ford, the only American praised in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, I must differ with his assessment that “history is more or less bunk.” Rather than the casual dismissal of knowledge about our origins and evolution, I much prefer the modest comment of Lord Buckley (1960) in his delightful account of the lost Spanish explorer, Alvar Nunez Cabeza De Vaca (ca. 1490-ca. 1557) and his explanation of why he accepted an offer of assistance from a compassionate aboriginal shaman: “We might not find out where we is, but we might find out who we is, and that’d help a little bit.” (No doubt the affable Amerindian later regretted his kindness, but that’s another story.)

For a belief system to qualify as reasonable rather than mere dogma, it must be open to question.

Contemporary generations, alas, are not much bitten by the “history bug.” It is, after all, rarely taught and poorly taught in our schools. It cannot be fully appreciated if our exclusive source is Wikipedia and, of course, there is no great interest among the authorities for educating us either about the traditional values and virtues idealized by the few authentic “conservatives” among us, or about the radical alternatives proposed by the few coherent dissenters lurking in the margins. Instead, most of us live in the specious present and resign ourselves to our material, technological fate, commonly marketed as “progress.” Meanwhile every effort is made to flush personal social and institutional knowledge down the most convenient memory hole (Giroux, 2014).

The reasons for our disdain for history are plentiful. We are told that history is “irrelevant,” that its stories are “unreliable,” and that (thanks to any number of variations on a terrible pedagogical theme), it is unremittingly dull. This is a shame, bordering on a crime against humanity, for our history is all we have upon which to build an identity and an awareness of all the hideous mistakes we’ve made in the past—necessary knowledge if we are to nimbly avoid Santayana’s admonition (1905) to the effect that those who don’t remember their past are condemned to repeat it or, perhaps worse, yield to Marx’s observation (1978), following Hegel and correcting him on a vital point, “that all the events and personalities of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice . . . the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Innovation, that is to say, is destined either to fraudulence or to failure, if its practitioners and promoters are ignorant both of who and where they are, to say nothing of why they are.

2.

Merely because their readers are largely cloistered in what remain of our institutions of higher learning, there is no reason to consciously betray what some regard as our venerable heritage and others treat as the key to understanding contemporary follies. Moreover, there is a rather vast number of authoritative inquiries into our respective pasts that lose none of their quality and significance for being mostly ignored not only by the unschooled and unskilled, but also by people whose positions of power and persuasion put upon them the obligation at least occasionally to know what they are talking about.

Today’s media . . . pervasively describe all of significance that occurs as accountable to the market, which is itself accountable to nothing. – John McMurtry

This is especially true with regard to global affairs. It is no chore to root out any number of volumes on the many facets of “globalization.” Whether from the perspective of a technological determinist eager to chronicle the evolution and influence of the Internet, social media and aspirant American presidents’ “damned emails,” or from those preoccupied with political or, more rightly, anti-political movements given either to terrorism or terrifying anti-terrorism, current events give us much to think about. Only now, when the presumed inevitability of life in a “global village,” or at least a global supermarket or social media network, seems set to crumble at the behest of environmental and social justice protesters, populist nationalists and xenophobes, Islamic *jihadists* and a grand assortment of irate or otherwise desperate people, do we begin to ask the questions: Who are we, where are we, how did we get here and is it possible to get out of here alive? These questions cannot be answered by attending to yesterday’s newspapers and blogs.

To understand the rudiments of the social formations shaping our lives today requires at least a passing awareness of patterns of change—technological, ideological, political and structural. Analyzing the transformative modes of production and distribution of material goods and services as well as the reproduction and dissemination of ideology and the biological reproduction of our species—is essential to understanding what is happening today. At a minimum, we should be able to comprehend the importance of mercantilism versus industrialism, the material causes of the changes in family and kinship patterns, and what—if anything—words such as conservatism, liberalism and socialism actually mean.

3.

One book that can help us catch our breath and take our bearings is John McMurtry's *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*. Now, before attentive (or obsessive) readers jump to the conclusion that I may have been swallowed by my own memory hole, let me assure you that I *know* what you may be thinking. And, yes, I have reviewed this book before and in these pages (or pixels) —but not quite. Seven years ago, I reviewed the first edition of this splendid book. It is now out in a second edition that is so fully transformed, expanded, extended and improved that it merits a whole new treatment.

The first version was a complete work. It provided a tightly written diagnosis of an ailing economic system seen through the lens of a social pathologist engaged in the analysis of a sick and perhaps dying set of economic arrangements. Using a multi-disciplinary approach and applying uncommon knowledge and sensitivity, McMurtry went straight to the core of the problems affecting pre-millennium global relations. At that time, of course, the World Trade Center was still standing, Kim Jong-un was a well-hidden teenager and the second son of North Korea's supreme leader, Vladimir Putin had not yet been catapulted into the Russian presidency by his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Osama bin Laden had barely made the FBI's "most wanted list," Bill Clinton was closing out his superficially successful but somewhat shaky presidency of the United States, Donald J. Trump had just inherited his share of his father's estate, and Isis was just the ancient Egyptian goddess of health, marriage and wisdom.

The second edition is much more ambitious and equally successful. The first took a clinical history, so to speak, offered a clear assessment of the symptoms, and named the root cause of the malaise affecting the (post)modern world. According to one astute reader, it was also "prophetic," by which might be meant that McMurtry gave an accurate prognosis, with the evidence he had in hand. In the new volume, he continues to pull no punches, but his blows pack a bigger wallop. No sensible person (which, I am sorry to say, is not the same as saying "no one," nor even "no one in high office") can deny extent and the source of the global degradation—economic, environmental and ethical—that confronts us. McMurtry offers a preliminary inventory:

The air, soil and water cumulatively degrade; the climates and oceans destabilize; species become extinct at a spasm rate across continents; pollution cycles and volumes increase to endanger life-systems at all levels in cascade effects; a rising half of the world is destitute as inequality multiplies; the global food system produces more and more disabling and contaminated junk food without nutritional value; non-contagious diseases multiply to the world's biggest killer with only symptom cures; the vocational future of the next generation collapses across the world while their bank debts rise; the global financial system has ceased to function for productive investment in life-goods; collective-interest agencies of governments and unions are stripped while for-profit state subsidies multiply; police state laws and methods advance while belligerent wars for corporate resources increase; the media are corporate ad vehicles and the academy is increasingly reduced to corporate functions; public sectors and services are non-stop defunded and privatized as tax

evasion and transnational corporate funding and service by governments rise at the same time at every level.

I wish I could call this hyperbolic. It is not. McMurtry's matter-of-fact delivery is nothing less than a dispassionate evaluation, which no caviling or bumptious bluster can wish or shout away. What's more, McMurtry dispenses with the illusion of objectivity that has defined the social sciences at least since Durkheim and Weber, if not exactly Comte, Spencer and Marx. Instead, he connects his compelling empirical science with a clearly articulated normative argument that is no less morally persuasive than Immanuel Kant at his best. Although his treatise borrows a good deal from traditional Marxist themes and concepts, as Giorgio Baruchello (2013) makes plain, this is not a neo-Marxian work. It leaves behind Marx's progeny, whether in traditional forms of "dialectical materialism" (whatever that may be said to mean) and even the domesticated Marxism of "critical theory" and the complexities of Jürgen Habermas; instead, McMurtry has taken the medical metaphor more seriously, opens up his analysis to "life-based" thought and action.

Marxists ... have not yet confronted nor surpassed his absolute human chauvinism ... his Euro-supremacism, and his conception of ever more social centralization and machine technology as laws of development not subject to choice. – John McMurtry
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The carcinogenic component of capitalism is not exploitation of the working class; oppression exists and has existed in many forms. It is rather that the contemporary corporation dominates all else—from health care and education to up-to-date iterations of bread and circuses, and ultimately to instruments of ecological degradation and weapons of war. The necessity of expansion under capitalism exacerbates the problem, demanding increasing production and profit and allowing uncontrolled economic development to trump (so to speak) any consideration of the quality of human life and, ultimately, the possibility of life itself. Finally, any attempt to still the runaway system is obstructed by the corruption or destruction of life-affirming institutions: primary and secondary education, journalism, print, broadcast and social media, colleges, universities and independent research institutions and, apart from private sector profit-seekers, political parties, government departments, and any others among the parasitic enablers—indeed, all the compromised elements that Chris Hedges identified in *The Death of the Liberal Class* (2010), but now taken the necessary further step and inextricably linked to the brutalized biosphere.

McMurtry does not stop at clinical description, diagnosis, prognosis and an invoice for services rendered, for if the metaphor of cancer is apt, then he is as good an oncologist as we are likely to find, and he is therefore not satisfied to assess the medical matter correctly. John McMurtry understands more than most of us, not only what is wrong, but also what needs to be prescribed and what sort of therapy will restore health to our rather wretched species and others that we have put at risk or exterminated already.

The needed restorative actions are both deceptively simple to describe and notoriously difficult to achieve. They lie more than anything in monetary and economic policies, but regardless of the specific domain, what McMurtry explains plainly and forcefully is the *sine qua non* of grounding innovation is a restorative ethic. This requires the reclamation of public space

and the insistence on nothing more revolutionary than the establishment of all those tools that have been the litany of “progressives” and fit more or less comfortably within the liberal ideal—but taken seriously for perhaps the first time: clean air and water, open science, improved wages and working conditions, public transit and broadcasting and the rejection of “for profit” institutions (including “public-private partnerships”) ... and so on.

The symptoms of systematic disorder have already been recognized ... around the world. The world has gone awry. – John McMurtry
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This, of course, is not as easy as it seems. The “free market” and the “common good” are inherently adversarial. Nothing less than a “democratic revolution” will do. Critical policy shifts, moreover, cannot be left to capital or the corporate state. What is called “life capital” in the interest of sustainable production is critical. Wherever possible, the “public option” must be embraced. This, and nothing else, is essential to any innovation worthy of the name.

Most readers will not agree, I suspect, but it turns out that there is *nothing radical* in McMurtry’s epic tome. No concrete proposal he makes (and there are many of them) is utopian. There is nothing that hasn’t been explored, tested and sometimes adopted—and adopted successfully (when not successfully sabotaged)—at some time or some place. If nothing else, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism* is a public sector manifesto, carrying the provision that the public sector must be transparent, responsive and absolutely democratic if it (and we) are to succeed.

The obstacles, in the end, are not the products of the essential recipe for social restoration and redemption, but the absolute objection to systemic innovation among the authorities. Sceptics may examine McMurtry’s commitment to the commons, to authentic innovation and to an ethic of democratic sustainability and judge it unachievable. Then again, so did people who read Marx’s manifesto and scoffed at the irrationality of the demands: universal franchise, a free press, independent trade unions ... clearly none of *that* could come about.

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