

## Revenge Capitalism

**Ross:** Welcome to Renegade Inc. We often hear the words capitalism has failed. But when you really think about it, capitalism has worked perfectly according to the rules it was created upon. Within the rules and DNA, is a system that uses oppression and revenge to maintain control. And until we understand that mechanism and begin telling a different story, the retribution will continue unabated.

**Ross:** Welcome to Renegade Inc. I'm joined here in the studio by Dr Max Haiven. Max, welcome to the show.

**Max Haiven:** Thank you very much.

**Ross:** Revenge capitalism. Describe it. What is it?

**Max Haiven:** Well, it's a book I wrote.

**Ross:** Don't you love that, you know, when you ask an author, just tell us one thing...

**Max Haiven:** The basic argument is that the system of capitalism under which we live is taking needless warrantless revenge on humanity, and that's giving rise to all sorts of revenge politics, revenge culture and other forms of economic revenge that are messing up the world.

**Ross:** What's the mechanism? What's the revenge mechanism? How does this work? Unpack it for us.

**Max Haiven:** Well, part of the argument of the book is that we have to rethink what we mean by revenge. So we've been trained, habituated to think about revenge as something individuals take, and we've been trained by that by Hollywood narratives and also thousands of years of human culture where we have literature and stories from around the world of revenge.

**Ross:** So there's an act. You then go to redress that act. And the Hollywood model is that if you remove one bad apple from the system, then the system is purged and it goes on perfectly.

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, everything. Everything goes back to normal.

**Ross:** It's a bit simplistic, isn't it?

**Max Haiven:** It's very simplistic. And so the argument of the book is that we need to also rethink what we mean by revenge. And my experiment to the book is to say, well, can we talk about capitalism this system, not a person, but a system, taking a kind of revenge on humanity? And we can see that in the form of climate change, for instance. Nobody seems to want it to be happening, and yet it continues to happen. World leaders seem helpless, or at least proclaim themselves to be helpless in the face of it. You can look at what's happening to

refugees around the world who are simply left to die as a kind of weird revenge that the system takes without humanity having ever really done anything to deserve it.

**Ross:** How can that be so much cognitive dissonance? Because obviously there's action and reaction. The systems that we've put in place are the very reason why this revenge is occurring. And I constantly hear this thing about, Oh, capitalism has failed. No, it hasn't. It's worked perfectly, according to the rules that it's been set upon.

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, yeah. I think we've been miseducated so that we don't see systems and structures. It's partly because of those sort of Hollywood narratives, but also the way that those narratives are reiterated in mainstream media news, etc. that make us just focus on the individual. So we're always looking for a kind of cartoon Dr. Evil style villain, but that's just not the way systems work. Systems work by conscripting all of us to participate in a certain way. They emerge from everything that's happening within them. And that doesn't mean that we're all equally culpable for climate change or refugees dying. There are people with names and addresses who are much more culpable than you and me. But it does mean that to understand a system, we have to look at how humans work and act together.

**Ross:** Is it very difficult for the man or woman on the street to get enough perspective because they're in the system, right? And then when you hear about education and the way we've been lied to, you know, people will get rid of an argument by saying, Well, that's Marxist or that's communist or whatever. And capitalism is the best of a bad bunch and we've got to work with it.

**Max Haiven:** Right.

**Ross:** Is it the case that man, woman on the street can't get enough perspective from the system that we're in?

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think we're caught up in a workaday world where we're constantly being exploited or if we're not being directly exploited, we're extremely alienated and it's very hard to think outside of that and to think anything different. We've also been taught that to survive and thrive in this world, we need to compete with one another for the few scraps that are left over. And I think in the middle of that hustle and business, it's very, very difficult to try and imagine that another world is possible, but more important than ever.

**Ross:** Dog, eat dog.

**Max Haiven:** Yeah.

**Ross:** So that's all you hear isn't it and certainly in business schools is dog eat dog. And then you say to the professor or whoever is saying it, OK, but when did you last see a dog eating a dog?

**Max Haiven:** Right?

**Ross:** Again, it's one of these total misconceptions. They're pack animals and actually, as we humans are, they want to collaborate and work together.

**Max Haiven:** Yes, exactly. And what we humans have, the dogs don't appear to have is stories and our ability to tell stories about who we are, what we're capable of, what the world could be. It's an it's a magical power for a species to have and one that unfortunately we leave in the hands of extremely powerful forces. But we have this power to tell a very different story about who we are and what we could do

**Ross:** Within the book, what is the story that you're telling? What's the central narrative?

**Max Haiven:** The central narrative is that if we look back to the history of capitalism with its origins and colonialism was sort of white supremacy, the slave trade, we see that consistently those in power have taken revenge on those that they've oppressed for no reason, simply to maintain and extend their power. And that kind of revenge has now translated itself into the very operations of the system. Let's take climate change, for example. You could even get together with all of the CEOs of the big oil companies and say, which amongst you wants climate change? And some of them might have invested in their emergency shelter or they might have invested in a waterfront property on a hill somewhere right now, but most of them would say, No, we really don't want this.

**Ross:** Let's look at them in the best possible light.

**Max Haiven:** I always try and look at them in the best possible light.

**Ross:** So they don't want it?

**Max Haiven:** They're not monsters. They all think they're doing good in the world. Most humans have to in order to..

**Ross:** They make the most dangerous by the way. Totally delusional. OK. But let's say that they don't want climate change.

**Max Haiven:** They don't want climate change. But they would all say, Look, if I didn't act the way I act, they would replace me tomorrow with a new CEO who would be more ruthless than I am. You're lucky I'm here, right? You're lucky I'm in charge because my vice president down here is even worse than I am. So there's something here about the way that capitalism organises companies and individuals into this kind of competitive hierarchy that means that even though no individual is attempting to take revenge on humanity through climate change, yet it still happens. Yet it still unfolds through this kind of economic logic of the system. It's something that was identified two hundred years ago by political economists who were starting to think through - and this is before someone like Karl Marx even - that the system begins to move, not because of the will of a particular individual or a particular conspiracy, but because if we leave the world up to the competition of the rich, they will run it into the ground competing with one another.

**Ross:** Wow. So because we, by the way, hear all the time with bankers, if I didn't do it, someone else would come and do it.

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, we heard that with Nazis, too. Not to make too fine a point, but I mean, it's a very old and terrible excuse.

**Ross:** Right, and also it's fear of their shadow, isn't it? You say, you know, leave me in post because I'm the best of all these options. It's a terrible dynamic. How did you get rid of it?

**Max Haiven:** Well, I think people need to reimagine what the responsibility is to themselves and other people are and to their responsibilities to the world. So I understand if you've been struggling tooth and nail to climb up a corporate hierarchy, by the time you get to the top, you feel like you've earned your place there, that you're a decent person trying to do good. If I had a dollar for every person who thought that they could change the system from the inside, we could buy a revolution. But that's just not how it works, unfortunately. We need to kind of reorganise social life together and rethink what it means to be human on a finite planet.

**Ross:** Yeah. And where does that begin? Because ultimately, what you're saying is it starts with personal responsibility because I meet a lot of people who are going to change the world and they've got very elaborate just giving campaigns and all this stuff. But actually, once they've talked to you about how they're going to change the world, they then go back to their banking or finance job or whatever it is. So how do they get out of that death loop? Because the other thing that they say is this. When I've made my money and I'm comfortable, then I'll concentrate on making other people's life a bit better.

**Max Haiven:** Right. It just never gets to that point, and by the time you've made your money, someone else has made their money and they're making their money means investing in terrible things. Look, I mean, there's an element of it that I think is about taking personal responsibility in the sense that we all have the responsibility to learn and to think about what it means to be human and what it means to work with others. But there's another level where we have to build different kinds of community. Because ultimately, what changes people's behaviour is what their friends think, what their family think, what the people around them think, and the reinforcement that they get from interacting with people.

**Ross:** Right. Talk more about that then, because ultimately there's that fantastic African proverb and I'm going to ruin it, but I'll give it a go anyway. You know, it's the child who doesn't feel the warmth of the community burns the village down to feel the heat. I told you I'd ruin it, but you get the general idea. Because what we're seeing now in the West or developed economies are so many people ostracised. Guy Standing calls it the precariat, you know, this neoliberal slag heap of people who are just disposable. So how do you then re-imagine that community?

**Max Haiven:** Yeah. Well, I think people are doing it all the time, all over the place. I think people are coming back together, especially in the pandemic. I think we saw a lot of this and saying, you know what, this life of just being an individualised risk taker of going into debt, to try and get an education, to try and get a job, to try and live life, then dying, that's not that's not going to work for us. So I think we've seen a lot of people come back together, starting

new co-living situations, community gardens, different forms of living and working together. But I think we've also seen, especially amongst young people, incredible social movement activity where people are coming together around, for instance, the Movement for Black Lives, the movements against the kind of disposability of refugees, movements for climate justice. And in those movements, I think people discover that they can work together in different ways that in fact, we are a cooperative species and that our birth right is to work together and figure out how to work together as we go along in some ways.

**Ross:** Dismissing that dog eat dog narrative, which it predominantly comes out of. I think it was originally Herbert Spencer, the economist, who first coined the term survival of the fittest, always attributed to Darwin. So are we starting to move from that narrative? Are we starting to say actually, that's caused so much damage? We've been so atomised, antidepressants and mental health, that all these indicators going in the wrong direction. Is the penny starting to drop?

**Max Haiven:** I think it is. I think it is, and I think it is, especially amongst a younger generation who realised that most of them, their investments are never going to come to fruition and most of them don't have money to invest. We're talking about investments in education, investments in a certain idea of a lifestyle or how to have a life under a system of capitalism. They realise it's the end game that we're dealing with - catastrophic climate change - and they're saying enough. If we're going to deal with these things, we need to deal with them together and we need to become somehow new kinds of people. We can't just be that kind of dog eat dog capitalist miniature Donald Trump that we've been told to be.

**Ross:** The American dream is truly over. So then what are the stories that start to inform that different way of living? Because, ultimately, we are human beings - and you mentioned before we started filming this - that the brilliance is that if we change the story, we change the narrative and we change the course.

**Max Haiven:** And we change ourselves too.

**Ross:** Right. And you have to, right? You can't do this half heartedly. You have to commit to that. So what are those stories that need to start to change? What's the central story that needs to start to change?

**Max Haiven:** I think it's a story about what it even means to be human. And here I think a lot about the writings of a brilliant Jamaican theorist, Sylvia Winter, who talks about the way that over five hundred years of capitalism's history, we've been instructed to emulate this thing called Homo Economicus, Economic Man, the dog eat dog rational man. And that this was always based on a erasing other ways of being human that were being practised by non-Western civilisations, by indigenous people, even by Europeans before the kind of enclosures and the birth of capitalism and the separation of people from their land. So underneath that, I think there's incredible stories that not only we can learn from history and learn from what people are doing now, but that are underneath the fabric of reality if we just choose to lift the rug, so to speak. I mean, ultimately, most of the most sort of profound experiences in our lives have nothing to do with the capitalist economy. They have to do with friends and family. They have to do with art and literature, sport, all the sorts of things that people do that

don't necessarily have an economic motivation, but that are the real fabric of life. So it's sort of right there hidden in plain sight. But perhaps more pragmatically, I think that we can look to a variety of struggles around the world that are quite impressive to look at how people organise together in new ways. I mean, just last week, we realised that the Modi government has had to step away from their plans to basically, with catastrophic effects, transform the farming sector in India. Massive mobilisation of Indian farmers against this. Incredible forms of organising where people came together, despite incredible differences that have been sown through years of colonialism, years of neoliberalism, to work together to try and change things. Or in my home country of Canada, we have incredible uprisings of indigenous people against extractive industries where they're not only figuring out how to work between many different nations, but drawing on pre-colonial traditions of how to treat one another, of how to have respect for the Earth, how to work together with things that aren't human, and also forming alliances between indigenous people and non-Indigenous people. We have examples of that across Latin America, too. So in a certain way, the way I like to see it, I mean, we can, of course, focus on how bad neoliberal capitalism is and the system of revenge and it's terrible. But also we're in a world of uprisings, and those uprisings are rooted in the way that people are reinventing what it means to live together and to be human.

**Ross:** Welcome back, Renegade. Doctor Max Haiven in that first half, we covered an awful lot of ground. Before we come to solutions in the second half, what I want you to do is pitch your book *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital and the Settling of Unpayable Debts*. It's our book of the week. Tell us why we should read it.

**Max Haiven:** I think it's an interesting book. I think it explains something about the rise of reactionary politics in this moment. It explains something about how capitalism has come to act so irrationally, in spite of the fact that we've been told it's a perfectly rational system. And then there's also sections in there about Joker, about Hamlet, about Merchant of Venice. There's a little section in there about Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian. There's something for everyone.

**Ross:** Perfect. *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghost of Empire, the Demons of Capital and the Settling of Unpayable Debts*. It's our book of the week. Max, first half we set out the problem, pretty much. But something strikes me that we have generations now coming through this capitalist system who understand intuitively that they're not going to live as well as the generations that have gone before them. And the second thing that they've, I think, understood is that the mindless consumerism that we've seen over the last 40 years hasn't brought fulfilment. In fact, quite the opposite. Do you think that that is a hopeful moment where generations coming through have shunned or are beginning to shun that consumerism and started to say, actually, we're going to re-engage on our terms and we're not going to be told by, I don't know whatever brand that you're worth it. So therefore you should go and buy a bit of shampoo or whatever it is. Do you think they're wise to that now?

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, I think so. I think they realise that, you know, this life of just like work and consume and die and obey is over and that, you know, that brought previous generations to a situation where we've basically come to the brink of making the world uninhabitable for a large number of humans and other species. So, yeah, I think it is very hopeful and I think we can see it in a number of ways. I mean, I think we're seeing around the

world young people rise up for climate justice. We're seeing them rise up for racial justice and say, you know what? This is the end. This is the end of a system of five hundred years of colonialism, slavery and racism that brought us to this. We're done with it. I think we're also seeing really interesting activism happening around mental health, where people are saying, in fact, it's OK to be vulnerable, it's OK to not feel like a tiger a hundred percent of the time. I think we're seeing amazing resistance from queer and trans youth around thinking through gender differently, thinking through sexuality, differently, thinking through the body differently and thinking through interdependency differently. So I don't want to say I'm necessarily hopeful, but I see so much promise in this generation.

**Ross:** So going back to Guy Standing's work when he talks about the precariat and he terms it a very dangerous class rising because in short, beware of the man with nothing to lose because you'll do anything, right? But this is also a problem, isn't it, because you're hollowing out the middle class, so the capitalist system now has turned on itself?

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, I think that's that makes for a very dangerous moment. This kind of newly proletarianised middle class, especially as it transitions between generations like we were talking about before, where, you know, young people are leaving home and looking backwards and saying, we'll never have that again. You know that home is literally going to be owned by a bank somewhere, some international financial conglomerate that's going to rent it back to you for a price that increases every year, which your wages aren't going to keep up with. But, and that's why I'm so impressed, I think that young people are actually quite wise to this in a lot of ways.

**Ross:** You think they're across it?

**Max Haiven:** Yeah. I mean, always, I mean, age and youth is not a great indicator of politics all the time. So we have also, and we should we shouldn't dismiss it, there's a lot of young people who are very reactionary and who are kind of dedicated to this kind of revenge politics and are returning again to these what we thought were dead and buried notions of masculinity or, you know, white nationalism or all of this nonsense. So it's not all young people are doing great. And of course, there's also we've seen huge numbers of older folks participating in things like Extinction Rebellion, in the racial justice movements. So it's not all about age, but I think there is definitely a generational tension that's emerging here.

**Ross:** Has the pandemic exacerbated this?

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, I think absolutely. I think the rich get richer and the poor get poorer in the pandemic, almost universally in almost every country. A whole generation had to watch, basically, the rich countries decide that the poorer countries of the world can have COVID for the next 10 years, basically because they're going to hoard vaccines. And we made a whole generation watch that. We made them watch during that a climate summit that went nowhere. Meanwhile, young people are being sort of bullied and cajoled to go back to work and put themselves on the front line in the service sector with very few protections for what amounts to, in fact, less money because inflation is also increasing. So essentially, I think anyone who was watching saw that everything that happened in the pandemic was just the

extension and elaboration of what had happened before, now just sort of hidden in plain sight.

**Ross:** The vindictive normal you called it. And in the postscript saying, you know, look, the pandemic's gone, pretty much.

**Max Haiven:** I might have been a little wrong about that.

**Ross:** They'll be trillions of new variants, don't you worry. Against the vindictive normal. Why the vindictive normal? What's at the heart of that? What is the vindictive normal?

**Max Haiven:** Well, I think it's the sense that we should go back to what we had before, even if what we had before was murderous. I mean, it's interesting. One of the things that I looked at in the book was the way that colonial regimes used revenge as a means to police those over whom they had power so that the British Empire, for instance, had all of these punitive expeditions to go and punish people and take revenge on them for affronts to British honour. You know, the Opium Wars started this way, or the invasion and destruction of many different kingdoms in Africa. And here I think what got mystified in the British sort of press and tabloids when they were whipping up the drums of war was that in fact, what had been going on before the uprising that now made the British go and put down the uprising etc, was that the whole policy of colonialism was vengeful. That there was this kind of pre-existing revenge that got mystified or swept under the rug. You know, Marx famously called the rule of the East India Company in India, sort of vengeance was policy. They didn't even talk about it as vengeance by the fact that millions of Indian people, peasants, were starved to death or would die from whatever, that just got erased. And so that's what I'm thinking about in terms of a vindictive normal. This normalised revenge that then nobody talks about and yet was the bedrock of what was going on before. And in today's world, I think the vindictive normal is simply the continuation of a neoliberal capitalist system that we know is destroying the planet, making most people miserable, making some people very rich. But it turns out even the rich people are pretty miserable.

**Ross:** Absolutely. That's the irony isn't it? First principles then? You know, you hear all the time, Build Back Better and the New Normal. If we're going to talk about a real New Normal - we started in the negative by saying that the old normal was vindictive - then what does this new one look like and what are the first principles for us to get there? What are the handful of principles so we can visualise this and tell a new story and see a new world?

**Max Haiven:** Well, I think there's a number of places to look. I mean, I think for about 20 years in various ways, global civil society organisations have been meeting at things like the World Social Forum, and they've come up with incredible documents that if we were to implement, half of them would make completely change the world. I'm not a huge fan of the institution of the United Nations. It has tons of problems. But if we actually abided by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Women, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Children, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people, if we actually forced governments to abide by them, we'd live in a pretty good world because those provisions actually do include a lot of guarantees for health, for education, for personal freedom, for bodily freedom. I think they could go further in suggesting that this requires a restructuring of the global economy, which

is something the United Nations has never dared to do. But there are templates that we have that we've already created over the last 50 to 75 years that I think offer useful resources for that. But more than that, I think it's going to be worked out in practice. I mean, we are now at a space where I think - as I was mentioning before - we kind of need to reinvent and rethink what it means to be humans as a global species on a global planet. So we need to work that out in practice. And I think the place where that's getting worked out is really on the front lines. It's when people work in solidarity with each other - when, you know, university students come out in solidarity with nurses, when the nurses come out in solidarity with the indigenous struggles, when the indigenous struggles coming out in solidarity with Black Lives Matter demonstrators. In these moments, we begin to see what it might be to have a kind of common humanity that could demand that all of the wealth that we're producing actually sustain the Earth and its people, rather than a very small handful of jerks at the top.

**Ross:** It's amazing, though, isn't it, that we haven't been able to keep that divide between money and wealth. And true wealth is friendships, health, relationships, community. But we've been so sort of side-tracked by the financialization which started Reaganomics and Thatcher and really put it on steroids. How do you start rowing back from that? Is it now that people ask more fundamental questions because they get that nagging sense of doubt because actually, this is really nihilistic?

**Max Haiven:** I think that's part of it. I think that part of it is the self-questioning and the discussions and the the work of imagining differently. But a lot of my work in the past has been about saying that, you know, to imagine the world differently, you have to practice the world differently.

**Ross:** Right. How do we do that? So this isn't theory. I'm only telling you to change the world in a TV programme. So that's all I'm asking..

**Max Haiven:** I wish I knew the golden road to that.

**Ross:** But how do we practice differently?

**Max Haiven:** I think it begins by seeing how we can support one another in withdrawing our participation in the market. So that happens in a whole variety of ways.

**Ross:** Tell me.

**Max Haiven:** So I think one of them is we need to think and work together to provision ourselves differently. We need to find different ways of provisioning housing, different ways of provisioning food, entertainment, education. And I think this is happening now. So we have people forming community gardens, going back and starting ecological communities. We have people taking over housing, squatting housing or forming collective houses and learning how to live together in different ways. I think we have people who are working on different democratic collective processes. So how do you make a decision as a group when you need to and in a quick way? How do you form a worker co-op? How do you form a trade union so that the workers have a shared interest rather than just being pitted one against each other or against the boss? I think in all of these different ways, people are learning to

withdraw their participation in the market collectively. I can be like, I'm not going to buy anything. I'm going to.... I don't know what I would do exactly. It's very difficult that we live in a world that's been saturated by capitalism and capitalist relations. So if we want to be able to withdraw from the market in some way and say, no, we won't participate in this, that's a matter of building a different economy within, against and beyond, the capitalist economy that we're forced to participate in.

**Ross:** Optimistic?

**Max Haiven:** Yeah, I have to be optimistic. What's the other option?

**Ross:** You've got to be more sincere than that.

**Max Haiven:** No, I'm I'm serious. I think, you know, optimism is deeply problematic, but it's better than the alternative.

**Ross:** Of course it is. Max Haiven, wonderful to have you, actually in the studio, not down the zoom thing with people around us. Fantastic. Thank you so much for coming by.

**Max Haiven:** Thanks for having me.

**Ross:** Congratulations on the book.

**Max Haiven:** Thank you very much.

**Ross:** That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail - [studio@renegadeinc.com](mailto:studio@renegadeinc.com). Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.