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By Alejandro Pedregal
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Interview with David McNally, activist and professor at the University of Houston

"We need a Marxism that captures the horror that people experience in their lives"

Sources: The jump [Image: Professor David McNally, activist and professor of history and economics at the University of Houston.]

The Gothic Marxism of David McNally, activist and professor at the University of Houston, explores the invisible forces with which capital dominates social life, as well as the imaginaries that mobilize zombies and vampires to detect them. He is the author of the books 'Monsters of the Market' and 'Blood and Money'.

David McNally wrote *Market Monsters: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* in 2011, in the shadow of the great financial crisis that erupted in 2007 and the economic depression that continued, and from which we still suffer its consequences today. Published in Spanish by Levanta Fuego, with translation by José Luis Rodríguez, *Monstruos del mercado* projects a fascinating look at the monstrosities of capitalism and the different 'ghostly' forms it adopts, from its emergence in England to its colonial expansion in Africa or its contemporary global emergence. Through abundant references to literature and popular culture, McNally's Gothic Marxism explores the invisible forces with which capital dominates social life, as well as the imaginaries that mobilize zombies and vampires to detect them. In this way, it offers a raw but stimulating portrait of the links between culture and economy in today's global market. *Monsters of the Market*, which received the prestigious Deutscher Memorial Prize in 2012 for the most innovative Marxist work, is an intense and heartbreaking work, which also contributes to underlining the importance of literature and fiction for education and political criticism.

An activist and professor of history and economics at the University of Houston, McNally talks to us here about the motivations behind his work; of the monstrous forms of capital during its colonial expansion that it continues to adopt today; of the "transdisciplinary" richness of Marx's work and the role of literature in it; and the relationship between *Monsters of the Market* and his latest book, *Blood and Money*, where the hopeful vision of this Canadian author about the insurgents "monsters of the revolt" persists.

In many societies, separating people from their land has been seen as an evil and demonic act. However, in capitalist society we take this dispossession as something natural.

What was the context and what references inspired the writing of your book? Which monsters dominated that moment?

For many years he had researched the historical processes of commodification and the development of wage labor markets. He had regularly observed that people experienced the dispossession of their land and the need to sell their labor power as something strange and monstrous. In many societies, separating people from their land has been seen as an evil and demonic act. However, in capitalist society we take this dispossession as something natural. I had also been writing about Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht and

the idea that, to see this 'strangeness' of capitalism, people in 'developed' capitalist societies need to be distanced (or alienated) from our everyday ways of thinking. It struck me that, in the era of capitalist globalization, in some parts of the Global South people used images of monstrosity to represent the sudden changes taking place in their lives. I wanted to explore how people in those areas made use of images of zombie workers and vampire capitalists to make their lives meaningful. I had a hunch that these images could relate to other monstrous tropes—such as that of Frankenstein's creature—that emerged with the birth of industrial capitalism.

How has that context changed? How does your book relate to the differences and continuities between it and the current context in which we live? What ghosts haunt our world today and what would be the monstrosities that mark current bodies and experiences?

The most important recent shift in the context is the global economic depression of 2009-10 and the proliferation of protest movements—from Occupy Wall Street to the square movements and the Arab Spring—that emerged in the aftermath. I had finished writing most of *Market Monsters* when that crisis and the new wave of protests began. At that time, the monsters of our time appeared in new disguises, such as Wall Street bankers, troika leaders in Europe, or politicians like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Then, when central banks put corporations and private banks on life support with cheap money, the idea of "zombie companies" or "zombie firms" took hold. The most important thing for the anti-capitalists is that, for a brief period of time, the ruling classes were surprised by the emergence of new monsters of the revolt. Youth, women, people of color, and urban workers came together to take over city squares, launch general strikes, topple governments, and build movements in defense of black lives. That moment passed. But since we still live in the shadow of the 2009 global crisis, those monsters of revolt can re-emerge at any moment.

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How would you describe Gothic Marxism? How does the Gothic serve to understand the contributions of Marx and Marxism, and how can Marxism contribute to understanding the Gothic in its relationship with reality?

Central to Gothic Marxism is the idea that we need images and language with which to express the strangeness and monstrosity of capitalism and the invisibility of the forces that dominate us. It is not enough to say that capitalism is unjust and exploitative, even if that is true. We need a Marxism that captures the horror and fear that people experience in their daily lives. Marx understood that capitalism suffocates people, that it reduces them to mere instruments of labor at the service of capital. It even tells us that the living are dominated by "dead labor" (machines, factories, and instruments of production); insists that capital is a vampire. Moreover, he argues that the powers of capital are "ghostly" or "spectral." You can't see the laws of the world market, and yet they determine whether you have a job, whether you live in poverty and poor health, how long you will live, and so on. The invisible forces thus exert powers of life and death. All of this is deeply Gothic. But too often writers on the left assume that we simply need to explain with dispassionate, "scientific" discourse what is wrong with capitalism. Gothic Marxism insists that we have to give voice to the cries of horror that accompany life in this deadly and alienating society. And it urges us to develop images that capture something of the invisible powers that dominate us. Where Marxism can delve into the Gothic is by insisting that this world of mortal and ghostly creatures is not a world foreign to this, "another world." This is a crucial dimension of the world of everyday exploitation and inequality that is very palpable.

You expose that the figures of Frankenstein and the vampire serve to understand the traumas caused by the so-called primitive accumulation of capitalism. How did these imaginaries affect Marx's view of capitalism and its horrors?

Being separated from what sustains your life is traumatic. This applies not only to the separation of people. It is also valid for the separation of land, water, forests and other creatures. Thus, primitive accumulation is violent in the deepest sense. And some of that violence is psychic and affective. It comes from the disruption and destruction of livelihoods. When that destruction occurs, the people who have suffered mass dispossession—peasants, enslaved Africans, indigenous peoples—become pariahs and are

treated as less than entirely human. That is, of course, the story of Frankenstein's creature. He has been created by society, but is expelled, persecuted and treated as a dangerous monster. These are the key elements of the history of the primitive global accumulation of capital. The vampire, of course, represents the forces of capitalism that live on the vital energies—one's own flesh and blood—of others. It should come as no surprise then that Marx compares capital to a vampire and denounces his "werewolf hunger" for living labor.

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How do these depictions relate to European colonial expansion and its horrors, particularly as it relates to— to paraphrase Walter Rodney — "how Europe underdeveloped Africa"? How do they resonate today and what cultural forms do they take?

We must not forget the anger that runs through Marx's account of primitive accumulation. Denounces the extermination of indigenous peoples and the trade of enslaved Africans; he is enraged by the lashes inflicted on beggars and the poor. He urges us to remember that capital comes into the world "dripping blood and dirt." Marx understood the barbarities of colonialism, but he did not live through the era of "high imperialism" that began in the 1880s and erupted into conflict during the world wars of the twentieth century. Since then, we have needed new records of horror to describe the crimes of colonialism and fascism which, as Aimé Césaire insisted, are interconnected. This means that Marxism must today be even more in tune with the horrors of our world. And those horrors include the psychic pain of the colonized. This is one of the dimensions that Frantz Fanon grasped when he said that Marxism needs to be "stretched" towards colonial conditions. It was not a call to abandon Marxism, but to modify, amend and expand it so that it can grasp all dimensions of colonial horror.

You dedicate part of your book to exploring these aspects in the work of Nigerian writer Ben Okri, who wrote a powerful and moving poem to the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017. Victims of a "social crime" – to use Engels' words

– the people who lived in Grenfell, mostly racialized, had migrated from the Global South in search of "a better life" to end up dying in the Global North. What does this say about globalization and its monsters? Does Okri's work, for example, his strategies regarding the defamiliarization of the urban and the market, help us to understand tragedies like this, which in this case take place in the North?

Ben Okri has a unique power to imagine capitalism through the expressions of magic and monstrosity. He sees the interpersonal and social horrors of everyday life as manifestations of a system that people do not control or understand. Thus, tragedies appear as if they were discreet ruptures of normal life. But Okri wants to show the deep patterns that operate. It helps us imagine systemic forces that are neither seen nor understood. To do this, he uses supernatural and magical images to describe the dehumanizing forces that dominate people's lives. And it does not deprive itself of showing us that these are lethal forces that exert powers of life and death. His novels from the *Hungry Road* trilogy, set in Nigeria, intertwine the supernatural beliefs of West Africa with a critique of colonialism and capitalism. There is an immense solidarity with the oppressed that animates his work. And that was very present in his poem in memory of the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire.

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Marx was a devotee of literature, who made many references in his texts to literary works and planned to write some specific works on literature, and you have rescued some of those aspects in Marx to explore his contributions. How did literature affect Marx's writings and the development of his conceptions of the world?

Marx is a writer of immense imaginative power. One of the most surprising things about his writings is that they are what we would now call "transdisciplinary" works. For Marx, philosophy, literature, political economy, and history deal with the same fundamental problems about how to achieve freedom, truth, and human flourishing. Each of these ways of seeing the world brings unique ideas and perspectives to the task of understanding the

world in order to change it. In addition, Marx seeks images and concepts that allow us to understand the inner workings of this mysterious system called capitalism. And here he often resorts to literary imagery. Characters and expressions of Shakespeare, Goethe and Balzac dot his texts, even those most rigorous from the theoretical point of view. And he wants us to take all of them very seriously. He often uses these images with satirical and comic intent. Marx frequently ridicules those who hold the reins of power and shows us that they are conceited and vain buffoons, albeit dangerous. Marx would have given himself a banquet with people like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. When we read Marx, we have to remember that his texts are multidimensional, and that we can gain unique knowledge by reading them as philosophy, as political economy, as history, and as literature. But the sparks of enlightenment really jump when we read them in all these records simultaneously.

Has Marxism (after Marx) underestimated the role of literature in its efforts to "explain" the world?

Yes. There has been an unfortunate tendency of scholars to read Marx within narrow disciplinary traditions that he would not have accepted. He wrote works of human sciences that did not respect any of these disciplinary limits. And he highly valued literary modes of understanding. We all know that literature has immense imaginative force for educational purposes and Marx was especially aware of this. When reading a novel or watching a play, we relate to dramatic characters and situations in a way that is outside of our normalized everyday experiences. Through these imaginative experiences we can come to see and understand our world in a unique way. This is one of the reasons why the Marx house practiced a kind of "Shakespeare cult". These literary ways of imagining our world were never far from Marx's thought. We can better understand what he does in a book like *Capital* if we are receptive to his use of literary references and images, something that has too often been underestimated.

I'd like to ask you about the relationship between *Market Monsters* and your latest work, Blood and Money. What is the link between blood and the market in capitalism? How does money represent its monstrosities and what are the forms they currently take in our world?

Blood is, of course, a symbol of life. That is why it is very interesting that with the rise of capitalism it was said that money circulated like blood. It was suggested that money could replace blood, which could become a new means of sustaining human life. This, of course, is a dialectical contradiction. Money can only become a life force through death, through bloodshed. In fact, the expansion of monetized life forms was carried out through bloodshed on a massive scale. Marx tells this story in his account of the primitive accumulation of capital. So, when I wrote *Blood and Money*, I was thinking about the literal monstrosity of the rise of capitalism: the way it was linked to the deaths of tens of millions of indigenous peoples, the kidnapping and forced migration of millions of Africans, and the constant colonial wars. The fact that the founding governors of the Bank of England were investors in the slave trade sums up much of this. In addition, he wanted to show how the forced dispossession of millions of people made death inevitable—both the social death associated with slavery and the actual deaths of those who perished with the destruction of their previous ways of life. Today, much of this is done through the global extension of corporate power, 'free trade' agreements, and structural adjustment programs imposed by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The process does not seem as direct and immediately violent as it was during the rise of capitalism. But in reality, it's just as deadly. Blood continues to be shed for money and I wanted to show how this has become a dominant reality of our time. Finally, I wanted to show that the future could still belong to the monsters of the revolt; to insurgent movements that say "no to blood for money".

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