

THE BARBARISM OF CAPITALISM

In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism

By Isabelle Stengers (Open Humanities Press, 2015)

Reviewed by Herman Greene

I have had my foot in two worlds for most of my professional career. I have worked on social justice and ecological issues since 1967, and I have practiced as a finance lawyer since 1979. I have both followed the logic of markets and worked with those who decry the tyranny of markets.

Their complaint is often with “capitalism.” For example, Naomi Klein wrote in *This Changes Everything*, that “climate change is a battle between capitalism and the planet.” I haven’t known what to make of this criticism of capitalism, not that I am unaware of the harm that our current economic system is doing. My question has been whether there are any choices on a broad scale other than capitalism and socialism, and whether socialism is better. I’ve considered local subsistence economies as a third alternative but have not seen how this can be an alternative absent global collapse.

Still I have known in economic history there are names given to different periods. Mercantilism preceded capitalism in the West and I have felt there must be some next step, that isn’t mercantilism (no matter how much Trump might try), or capitalism (either of the classical *laissez-faire* or neo-liberal type), or classical socialism. What would the ecozoic economy be named?

I was attracted to Isabelle Stengers book *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, which is available in print and also is freely downloadable [here](#), because I fear that we have entered a new period of barbarism. The Trump administration has a barbaric disregard for civil conventions and pursues a destructive course, gated communities spring up to protect the wealthy, gun violence and addictions are sharply increasing, and, in other countries, authoritarian right wing governments are rising, failed states with no effective governance are increasing, and radical, racist, ideological, and terrorists groups are growing. I have long respected Isabelle Stengers and wanted to know how to resist this coming barbarism.

I was surprised to find that for Stengers, the primary threat of barbarism comes from the logic of the capitalistic system. This is not because there are not good capitalists or that capitalism is not innovative, but because the logic of the system will always drive some capitalists to profit from anything, even the destruction of Earth’s life systems. Capitalism, she wrote, “demands that we accept the ineluctable character of the sacrifices imposed by global economic competition—growth or death.” Progress requires that the state yield to “cutting-edge” science and technology and the necessary risks of the entrepreneur and allow only the market to judge the consequences. She argues that the greatest barbarism would occur if capitalism becomes really responsive to the Anthropocene and conducts a “World War II mobilization to “save the Earth. Then aglow with their own optimistic belief that humans are the masters of their own fate, capitalists would call on a credulous public to unleash the full technological power of

industry on Earth—an Earth now awakened, indifferent to their designs, and more than equal to their assault.

Something clicked for me in reading this book. Could it be that the logic of capitalism is the greatest threat of barbarism? And if so, is the answer the regulatory state, or is something other than that needed? Stengers would say that regulation is not enough if the fundamental commitment is first to capitalism and then secondarily to regulation of it because the way this approach has turned out, especially in alliance with science, is that the regulatory state's role has become the promotion of markets and growth and thus regulation has become subservient to them . . . the goodness of regulation is tested by whether it promotes markets and growth.

The underlying issue, according to Stengers, is the mythos of capitalism as it developed in the 19th century. Science, technology, capitalism, markets—these were modes of transcendence. Humans were emancipated from their past. The epic myth of progress arose, that humans through their labor could conquer nature. The means chosen was blind to its consequences.

Capitalism must be understood as a mode of functioning which fabricates its own necessity, its own actors, in every conjuncture, and destroys those who haven't been able to saddle up for the new opportunities. . . . Capitalism's mode of transcendence is . . . incapable of answering for anything. . . . [Capitalism offers] "infernal alternatives." . . . "You refuse to accept a reduction in living standards and are calling for a raise? Then business will locate elsewhere." . . . The intrusion of Gaia will not make capitalism think or hesitate, because capitalism doesn't think or hesitate. (Pp. 52-55)

The "intrusion of Gaia" is implacable. It cannot be reduced to a "bad moment that will pass." "Naming Gaia is . . . to abandon the link between emancipation and epic conquest. . . . *We will always have to reckon with Gaia*, to learn, like peoples of old, not to offend her" (p. 55). We must give up the "right not to pay attention."

In thinking about the state of American democracy, in thinking about Latour and Stengers and Clive Hamilton, I have come to the conclusion that capitalism, whether of the private or state-sponsored kind, is the problem and something new is needed, something different from classical *laissez-faire* capitalism, neo-liberalism, and, also, classical socialism. What is needed is a neo-eco-democratic socialism, or "ecodemic socialism" for short. This is something that we will discuss in future issues of *The Ecozoic Review* and in the work of CES in general.

I will close this review by saying this book is well worth reading, but it is no easier to read than Latour's book reviewed in this issue. Further, my feeling is that the translation from the French could have been better as at times something seems to be missing in a sentence that would make it coherent. Still one can follow along. The book is only 156 small pages.