Book Review

John McMurtry
The Cancer Stage of Capitalism
London: Pluto Press, 1999

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

It is now commonplace to say that politics increasingly resembles show business. Style trumps substance. Generating an attractive "brand" is more important than proposing sound policies. Leadership is testimony more to successful marketing than good governance.

So, for example, although the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama appear to represent a stylistic yin and yang, they nevertheless display a disappointing similarity in terms of policies and procedures. "Change," it seems, is a slogan in which we either believe or disbelieve and, no matter how heated political arguments become, there is something eerily vacant in terms of the substance of the debates.

This is not to say that public issues are not genuinely important. They are, and often deadly so. Nevertheless, from the ecological to the economic and on down to the ethical domains of public affairs, our daily diet of crises often take the form of melodramas for which have no background, little depth and few enduring consequences as out attention is rapidly diverted from one hot spot to another, and we find our concerns to be almost instantaneously reoriented and reorganized as soon as the dust settles, the shooting stops or the tsunami waters recede.

Caught in a sequence of disasters—natural and artificial—we are encouraged to cheer for the blue states or the red states (whatever those symbols might betoken), to endorse those who give us hope or feed our fears, all the while craving charismatic leadership, a steadying influence who can preserve us from panic, hold us in balance and guide us in some clear direction irrespective of the compass point toward which we might be led.

Enabling the devaluation and trivialization of politics and governance is the decline in concern for (and awareness of) history. If, therefore, young people appear alienated from the political process, it is not *entirely* their fault. In the school curricula from kindergarten to college graduation, the importance of history or even of cursive writing seem increasingly passé. Accordingly, anyone who seriously seeks to pick up, much less to attempt to review a book about politics that is a decade old is taking a risk. In fact, it sometimes seems that picking up any book at all is evidence of cultural atrophy if not early-onset senility. So, in choosing to examine John McMurtry's book, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism* at this moment in what is conveniently called "real time" might be judged a futile gesture in the apparent twilight of literacy; it might be deemed a last quixotic gesture before the heirs of popular television's "Madmen" gain complete control. And yet…

… my imagination couldn't be stopped as I envisioned a tonic scene: the four McMurtry boys sitting around a table—perhaps over the breakfast special at a local diner, perhaps over drinks at a posh club, perhaps at a family celebration. This image puts the book under consideration in a human context. Let me explain.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have no idea if the McMurtry lads ate or drank together or even spoke to one another at all. About such matters, I can only speculate. Still, the concept is fascinating, and I'd have loved to be invited to join in, or at least to have sat within listening range. I am, of course, talking about the sons of Roy McMurtry Sr., a successful lawyer whose children were born in Toronto, Canada during the Great Depression. Their father instilled in them both ambition and a concern for the disadvantaged. They took quite different paths, but in their own ways, each one fulfilled their father's dream.

The sons cannot be united now. Bill McMurtry passed away early in 2007. While he lived, he became a named partner in the firm of Blaney McMurtry. He practiced law and was a passionate champion of social justice. Whether bringing attention to violence in ice hockey, advocating the reform of the criminal justice system, fighting urban sprawl or working for aboriginal rights and ethnic diversity, he saw (as the late Edward Kennedy said of the late Robert Kennedy) wrongs and sought to right them. He also found time to be a director of the St. Lawrence Centre for the arts and a founder of the Toronto International Film Festival. He loved rugby.

One of his brothers is Robert McMurtry. Since graduating with an MD from the University of Toronto in 1965, he has spent time in Africa, founded and directed Canada's first trauma unit and its first multidisciplinary hand surgery program. Formerly a professor of medicine at the University of Calgary, he also served as the Dean of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Western Ontario, where he remains a teacher and a researcher, while conducting a private practice and taking on increasingly influential roles as a health care policy advisor to government.

Brother Roy McMurtry Jr. is the most widely recognized of the clan. His current position as Chancellor of York University follows his tenure as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Ontario, time served as the province's Attorney-General and Solicitor-General and success as a skillful architect of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party's "Big Blue Machine," which kept the Tories in control of provincial politics for well over a decade. In less partisan moments, he played a crucial role in the negotiations leading to the patriation of the Canadian Constitution in 1982. And, yes, he was also a formidable college football player and one-time Chairman and CEO of the professional Canadian Football League.

Then, there is John. Like his siblings, he has been a tough, competitive, dedicated and principled (over)achiever. Arguably the best athlete of the four, he was a linebacker for the CFL's Calgary Stampeders. While a pro, he played through a broken nose, a broken jaw (dismissed by his coach as a bad wisdom tooth), several fractured ribs, plenty of broken and dislocated fingers and toes, numerous ligament tears, cartilage damage and a separated shoulder. Doped up on morphine, he persevered through the pain. He was and remains a manly man, to be sure. But that's where the story gets complicated.

For a start, he is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Guelph, which boasts among its alumni the late economist John Kenneth Galbraith, but which is not otherwise considered a top-ranked institution by Canada's pre-eminent academic elite, much less upon the global register of superior intellectual sites. This does not at all distract from its considerable charm and local excellence, and John McMurtry might be forgiven his decision to settle down in this rural area a little west of Toronto, because he has independently achieved high academic honours. He has been widely published, and he was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2001, a notable achievement in itself. But, there is more.

After football, John McMurtry took to journalism, travelled the world, studied Indian and Chinese philosophy and wound up with a doctorate in philosophy from University College, London in 1975. His early publications included *Monogamy: A Critique* and *The Structure of Marx's World View*—not the sort of topics that might have been expected from the scion of an esteemed, prosperous and well-connected family in what might be called the progressive wing of the Canadian establishment. In time, moreover, John McMurtry's thought would become more focused, and ever more critical.

In the 1990s, he would write books such as *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System* and *Value Wars: The Global Market versus the Life Economy*. Somewhat to the surprise of my colleagues and students alike, I assigned *Value Wars* to successive sections of a course that I taught on "American Hegemony" in the MA-level program in Diplomacy and Military Studies at Hawai'i Pacific University. It was a course that was, somewhat counter-intuitively, accepted for credit at the US Navy War College. The assembled captains and majors and so on did not like what the book said, but they engaged with it and found themselves forced to confront McMurtry's compelling arguments, never mind that he struck at the heart of their ideologies. Some even found him persuasive … up to a point. What more could be asked?

In *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, McMurtry went further. He sought to challenge the entire intellectual and practical framework of contemporary capitalist society—both domestic and global. Unlike some who examine the international political economy from a perspective that assumes almost total control of human life by a set number of multinational enterprises that are intertwined with agencies of enforcement from the International Monetary Fund to the US Marine Corps, McMurtry was more interested in the processes of *disorder* and the increasingly dangerous threat posed by corporate globalization not only to our conventional way of life, but ultimately to human life itself.

Whether we drown in pollutants, unleash a devastating pandemic, decline into bottomless decadence, blow ourselves up with bombs, run out of food or just give up the human project as a bad idea from the start is not really the point. What matters for McMurtry is the recognition that our species is at risk, and that we have no very good idea about how severe our problems are, nor what to do about them.

John McMurtry, however, does understand the depth of the hazards we face; and he has some ideas about how best to confront them. Perhaps borrowing the cancer metaphor from his brother Robert, adopting a stance in support of social justice like his brother Bill and staying completely within the realities of today's politics (somewhat like his brother Roy), he presents a case study

of a global society that is morbidly diseased, untreated and apparently out of control. He approaches what used to be called "the human condition" with the rigor of a logician, the evidence of an economist, the wisdom of an ecologist and the political will of a professor of ethics who takes his discipline to be more than a genteel comparison of antique viewpoints or, worse, the calculations of contemporary game theorists who try to sort out the most rational answers to deeply irrational questions. He is not satisfied with the cheesy rhetoric of thinking outside (while still chained to) the tawdry little box. Instead, John McMurtry develops a set of related ideas that constitute what was once called, without embarrassment, a "holistic" approach. This is a display both of courage and of authentically innovative thought. He is not without admirers.

The world-renowned peace activist, environmentalist, anti-globalization activist, author and political economist Susan George calls John McMurtry "a dangerous man." Not to her, of course, or to us (or at least some of us), but to the structures of irresponsible power which have long seemed to run the world, and which now seem to be running it into ruin. Her back-page tribute says that *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism* is "relentlessly logical and corrosively liberating." It may scream, but it is no mere screed.

A century-and-a-half ago, Karl Marx groused that philosophers have only tried to understand the world, while the point was to change it. If Ms. George's almost breathless enthusiasm is to be credited, John McMurtry may embody a retort to Marx's complaint. She tells us that he is "an unconventional, idol-smashing philosopher imbued with passion and urgency." Every word he writes, she declares, "resonates." She also insists that his title is not a metaphor at all; it's the real deal, and John McMurtry is just the diagnostician needed to analyze the pathology *and* to point to a cure.

Phew! Some task! But, Susan George and McMurtry's cluster of loyal supporters are right. What's more, he is not alone is seeking a credible alternative to nihilism, apocalyptic thinking and despair.

Despite the puerile triumphalism of neoliberalism and its intellectual apologists following the implosion of the Soviet Union, there has been no dearth of critical analyses of the new world disorder. Harsh and angry words were spit out by radical feminists, postcolonialists, environmentalists and postmodernists of every hue and cry. Marxism, as well, has not died the death predicted by Daniel Bell in 1960 (*The End of Ideology*) and solemnly reiterated by Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History*, 1992). Even the blowback from an overstretched American Empire and the smoke from the ruins of the World Trade Center have not completely obscured an embattled but still vibrant Marxist literature.

So, why pay particular attention to *this* particular author and *this* specific book? It is not that we want for "class traitors," who are eager to put down the society that gave them enormous advantages, yet who write gracefully yet caustically and, above all, amusingly about the decline of democracy and the death of the American Dream. Men such as Lewis Lapham and Gore Vidal do that splendidly. Why, then, turn to the "ideological black sheep" of the McMurtry family?

The answer, of course, is to be found in his writing, not just his appealing familial origins. He is sometimes compared to occasionally glib but far more salable scribblers with similarly hefty kinship connections on the political left. Naomi Klein and John Ralston Saul come prominently to mind. When he is thus compared, however, he comes out on top—though not, of course, on top of the best-seller list. What does he offer that makes him special?

Among other things, he presents an argument with a nourishing historical and philosophical dimension to sustain the sort of contemporary political and economic analyses that are not uncommon on the political left, but that usually do without a serious consideration of civilization conceived on a deeper level than the pop culture preoccupations of most contemporary social critics.

In examining, for instance, the transition of classic liberal economic theory to the contemporary neoliberal market-driven global economy, he is acutely aware that Adam Smith, the hero of the ideological Friedmanites and of the philosophical Straussians emanating from the University of Chicago, was a professor of moral philosophy well before he published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. He understands what Smith understood, but the likes of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman chose to ignore—that the limited liability company is to free enterprise and the free market what cancer is to the human body. He appreciates what Edmund Burke in the 18th century, Karl Marx in the 19th century and Joseph A. Schumpeter in the 20th century all knew in their bones—that capitalism is an aggressively revolutionary force. It sweeps away tradition, and traditional values. Under its influence, "all that is solid melts into air; all that is holy is profaned." He grasps what Schumpeter identified as the capitalist dynamic: an engine, not of material progress, but of unrestricted "creative destruction." He knows that the application of the word "conservative" to cancer capitalists from Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to Stephen Harper and George W. Bush is a cruel joke.

John McMurtry, like Adam Smith, is something of a moral philosopher—though, in our time, the term "ethicist" might be more congenial. This is not to say that he discounts political economy and the ultimately determining nature of the mode of production on human consciousness and human affairs. Quite the reverse, he is expert in applying the insights of Marxist theory to our current condition. His primary attraction, however, is that he goes beyond the material domain of exploring the structure and dynamics of the means and relations of production. Moreover, he links these concerns to the even more ambitious project of describing and explaining them in connection to the human lifeworld in the broader ecological context. He seeks an elemental concept of health—personal, social and environmental—both as a theoretical construct and as a practical guide to tonic social transformation. His "most basic axiom" is this:

Life → Means of Life → More Life

The affirmation of life emerges as the vital moral imperative. As sentient life forms, we are endowed with the capacity to move, feel and think. We can, do and must provide for our own survival, and we must do so "intentionally." And, just as human labour is the source of economic value, so this elegantly simple relationship is the ground of all value—economic, social, psychological and moral.

For those inclined to consider the words attributed to Jesus Christ and the actions of his apostles, two *New Testament* sources link McMurtry to other moral teachings. In *The Gospel According to St. John* 10:10, Jesus explains his mission to humanity thus: "I am come that they might have life, and live it more abundantly." Then, in *The Acts of the Apostles* 4:34-35, it is written that "neither was there any among them that lacked; for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every many according as he had need." Now, Marx and Engels may be accused of many things, but surely the most easily proven case against them is plagiarism, for the rousing conclusion of *The Communist Manifesto* could not be more clearly shown to have had its roots in early Christian beliefs and behaviour.

I do not, of course, want to imply that John McMurtry and the Christian heritage have more than a passing relationship (though, for all I know, they may). I do want, however, to stress that, in addition to a coherent and compelling account of how capitalism arose, how it works, and how it will affect our species' future, *Cancer Capitalism* goes well and meaningfully beyond most critical thinking and writing on the subject.

While never quite slipping into what logicians call the "naturalistic fallacy" which, broadly interpreted, means that nature is a trustworthy key to the development of extensive moral beliefs (an "is" implies an "ought"), McMurtry skillfully uses the language of the medical arts and sciences to provide the foundation for social description, analysis and therapy. There is no call here for a return to some form of idyllic pre-capitalist existence; there are, however, abundant insights into how capitalism might evolve into something else, as it will, of course, for nothing lasts forever. For McMurtry, the way to a liveable future turns on the "great vehicle of the civil commons."

Capitalism has distorted human nature and the human lifeworld in numerous ways. One is by overemphasizing individualism, and then shrinking it to concerns about private life. Pericles warned the ancient Greeks about those "idiots," who cared only for their personal fortunes and were therefore useless to the polis. The great Canadian political thinker, C. B. McPherson, affixed an addendum to Pericles by explaining the nature and limits of "the political theory of possessive individualism," which is Athenian idiocy brought up-to-date. McMurtry takes the essence of those ideas and relates them to the struggle, not so much for social justice (though he certainly does not ignore it), but for human survival in the face of the imminent and cataclysmic ecological and social consequences of capitalism's deforming overdevelopment. In doing so, he lays the path open for traditional moralism, environmentalism and the Marxist tradition not merely to coexist, but to inform one another's "discourse," as all three of these important contributors to human emancipation and to some sort of "salvation" have tried to do from time to time.

So, the question must obviously be asked: If John McMurtry's so smart, why have people not flocked to him and touted him as a new revolutionary guru? Why hasn't some newsmagazine or television show named him one of the most influential men of the year, or the decade or the century—as people such as Bill Gates or, for that matter, the aforementioned Naomi Klein, have been recognized. And why is his reputation only a distant second or third or maybe tenth to Klein's even in terms of Canadian-born radicals? After all, Ms. Klein is well-connected, mainly through the Lewis family but also through her own; but, so is John McMurtry.

The answer, of course, is that in today's celebrity-besotted world, the cunning manipulation of the media and clever marketing is essential to fame and infamy alike. Official recognition by Oprah Winfrey is the only sure way to being s global persona, and Oprah is not about to take anyone seriously whose ideas pose even a marginal risk to corporate capitalism. Nonetheless, sufficiently attractive and entertaining voices from the margins can win some attention. *The Times* of London, for instance, once called Naomi Klein the most influential person under thirty-five in the world. Not bad marketing success for an avowed leftist!

What John McMurtry understands better than most is that social change does not come trickling from the top down. Slogans and logos, no matter how attractive, are no substitute for collective action and, although collective action may be temporarily galvanized around an individual or an issue, it is not the same sort of thing as a successful marketing campaign. Social change does not happen that way, as even a quick perusal of *Cancer Capitalism* will more than adequately suggest, and as many disenchanted fans of President Obama have painfully learned.

Indeed, it is arguable that we (at least in the West) are not at an historical juncture where transformative social change is likely unless, of course, it is change for the worse. *Pace* Barack Obama's already discounted politics of hope, the fact remains that, as Marx said somewhere (briefly mixing metaphors), revolution is nothing other than the kicking in of a rotten door, and capitalism's entryway is not yet sufficiently decomposed to be easily kicked in.

When, perhaps assisted by global environmental degradation, the time does come and, perhaps, comes sooner than many people expect, we could do worse than have a copy of *Cancer Capitalism* near to hand, to see what principles should be in place as we seek to cure the disease and restore the body politic to wellness. If ameliorative action is not taken in time, however, McMurtry's text may still be useful as a guide for what to do with the remains.

In the meantime, it is important to attend to his writing. And it is also important to link the man and his words. Too often, under the influence of critics such as Derrida and methods such as deconstruction, we immerse ourselves in a text and absent ourselves from the author. While it is true, for example, that Heidegger may be gainfully studied without necessarily reading his relationship to National Socialism into every page, it is also true that Darwin can be usefully imagined puttering in his garden in search of earthworms, Marx can better be read with his habit of reading Shakespeare to his children firmly in mind, Weber in connection to his psychological breakdown and even Nietzsche in the context of his affection for Lou Salomé. None of this is to say that John McMurtry is necessarily a man of equal genius to those who have so clearly helped define modernity, but it is to remind ourselves that writers of importance are people like ourselves, only more so. And, in this case, at least imagining the author in a plausible life circumstance may serve as a useful, human complement to the text itself. His biography? That might come later.

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