

IN SEARCH OF BENEVOLENT CAPITAL: PART I

GAVIN KEENEY

This two-part, semi-gothic literary essay seeks a provisional definition of “benevolent capital” and a working description of types of artistic and scholarly work that have no value for Capital as such. The paradox observed is that such works may actually appeal to a certain aspect of Capital, insofar as present-day capitalism has within it forms of pre-modern political economy that may actually save Capital from its mad rush toward self-immolation.

PART I



I. No Works For/Before Capital

Benevolent capital is not benevolent capitalism, the latter a contradiction in terms or an apparent oxymoron. Benevolent capitalism would seem to not exist, as such, even under the auspices of patronage and classical philanthropy, insofar as the latter operates as exception to capitalism while the former has suffered across centuries, if not millennia, the distortions induced in systems held in thrall to Capital – pre-modern forms included. As apparent oxymoron, “benevolent capitalism” invokes all of the latent and overt games of capture Capital plays with cultural production and labour (both material and immaterial). In the case of cultural production in the age of neo-liberal capitalism, those games include the production of platforms and networks of privilege that are constantly in pursuit of “content” or “data,” arguably what neo-liberal capitalism has reduced cultural production to.

Works that resist assimilation to Capital do not necessarily need to refuse all forms of capitalization. Non-monetary forms of capital are first-order representations of benevolent capital, whereas monetizing works *for works* versus for exploitation and expropriation suggests the representational field where capital may take innumerable inappropriable forms – “inappropriable” signalling the presence of an older order of cultural production that has, in most cases, long since been assimilated to Capital. “No works for/before Capital” then suggests forms of cultural production that either resist assimilation and appropriation to markets as “content” or utilize those markets and “delivery systems” toward entirely use-less ends for Capital per se. To invoke benevolent capital is, therefore, to secure *for works* semi-archaic and immemorial forms of capitalization that do not enter into the self-serving

games of Capital. Yet given the present state of hyper-capitalist exploitation, it is highly possible that all future forms of benevolent capital are to be found through the chinks in the armour of Capital.

Such then is the potential for cryptocurrency and blockchain or distributed-ledger technologies *as applied to works*. Works developed in this manner may draw on the latency of forms of semi-archaic benevolent capital buried within the neo-liberal capitalist machinery of the world while never being able to fully exit the circuit of Capital.

It is this paradox that introduces the necessity of a full accounting for authors and artists of the vagaries and smokescreens of ecosystems associated with publication and exhibition systems within the twin worlds of the Arts and Humanities (e.g., the art world, the literary world, and the academic world). Both worlds suffer the same indignities today, mined by Capital for value, with the author and artist orphaned in the process, or de-funded by Capital, as judgment visited upon their otherwise use-less wares. Vague promises delivered to aspiring authors and artists by both worlds suggest that half the game is the promise of privilege of the order of the privileged (the vectorial class), yet endlessly deferred, privilege always offered, by definition, at the expense of the orphaned (the artistic precariat). The invitation and temptation, then, is to join the privileged and abandon the abandoned.

Any attempt at a correction to this stilted version of mining cultural production for inherent value (with explicit value hardly the game when the vast majority of works will never produce anything resembling “return on investment” and implicit value relevant only to exploiting works across platforms) requires a singular re-definition of terms of engagement in the form of the allocation of rights – author rights transferred *to works*, and works transformed to life-work (*works for works*). *Works for works*, as complex, opens onto collective rights. The necessary and hoped-for transformation of rights is stalled today due only to the fact that the vectorial class (and it must be clarified that the privileged include those who are in high positions within the art and academic worlds functioning as self-anointed or self-appointed gatekeepers to platforms) refuses a key article in the history of author rights – moral rights. It is the transfer of moral rights *to works* by/from authors that might correct present-day imbalances, yet only if that elective renunciation of rights by authors is followed by a system that prevents the presumption of such abandoned or transferred rights to exploitation by Capital. The *point of transfer* is the key; for the point of transfer is where the crimes of centuries have historically taken place. This “place” is the “place of taking-place” of/for Capital, with all of the attendant, twisted Greek-Mallarméan-Heideggerean etymologies and/or lexical mystifications one might wish to muster. It is the theft of “coming into presence” or “birth to presence” (*aletheia, parousia*, etc.) – of the “gift of the world” and the Gnostic “sacrifice of aeons.”

In such a scenario, where and when benevolent capital steps forth, parasitical or malevolent capital will step back and away – wary of the interloper, and no doubt perplexed in the process. This is far more than mere wishful thinking because, historically, avant-garde or radical works have often had avant-garde or radical patrons, whether individuals or institutions. But this is not an instance of the re-justification or reification of the non-profit sector of civil society or anarchistic processes of barter. Nor is it indicative of a black market or the dark web. The necessary measures require an entirely new methodology for exchange, for production, and for re-naturalizing works of an otherwise abstract, universalizing, and often-abstruse kind. The key terms in this abstruse political economy become “immemoriality” and “eschatology” (the “beginning” and the “end” of/for works that have no “home” address at the time of their “incarnation” as works). This de-personalization of the work *for the life-work* (the life of the work) brings with it half-forgotten maneuvers and measures buried within capitalist exploitation and partly the presumption of, or basis for, so-called non-profits or confraternal orders (c.f., Polanyi, Veblen et al.). The overriding figure of privilege returns – yet privilege as rights *for works*. Privilege as *privilegio* ... De-personalization leads toward transpersonalization (c.f., Tzara, Simondon); and, notably, the latter term opens up whole new prospects for works to be developed as autonomous subjects – a re-subjectivization process that will also only work for certain kinds of works.

II. Symbolic Capital as Working Capital

The cryptic terms of engagement for *work as life-work* can only be developed existentially – *en passant* and *in extremis*. The abstruse call to works “of a certain kind” is also a call to works that counter practices associated with neo-liberalized finance capitalism. These practices function on the side of massive indeterminacy, and they take post-modern incommensurability to new heights. The irony and the pain are telltale. It is often also a neo-gothic repertoire of vampirism and sadism.

Therefore, all discursive games fall apart and the pragmatics of neo-realism collapse. There is no realism in the lower circles of Hell. Consigning souls to Hell is a fool's errand – and such is the game of finance capitalism. Yet there is an inverse relation involved.

From Bourdieu we much launch ships to the proverbial elsewhere. Reciting and re-reciting the authorities of left critique will only favour the propagation of reputations and rhetoric. Rhetoric that is not lived rhetoric is idle and/or gratuitous. What is to be done? The Leninist question returns. Underfunded fellowships for scholars rise and fall like the seas. Revolutionary creditors hover, awaiting the crown jewels in return for financing the latest revolution to fail. Whether it takes ten years or one hundred years to fail is of no concern to creditors. Capitalism has presumed the rights of souls, and then transferred those rights to corporate fiat, which outlives mere subjects anyway, a spectral stamp with congealed blood for wax. Corporate fiat is piracy writ large – transition to enslavement for all. The *work as life-work* is pariah to edict, fiat, and law. This law.

The odd thing about parasitical capital is that it does not know how to produce works – it needs to cannibalize those works it can set its claws into. This is the role of the vectorial class, previously the managerial class. The odd thing about benevolent capital is that it only exists today as embedded in parasitical capitalism or as a result of parasitical capitalism – as nascent *other state and/or address* for works. Thus, the foremost game for works “of a certain kind” is to redeem forms of parasitical capitalism by converting them to forms of benevolent capital. What else is possible? This can only proceed incrementally, inexorably in some parallel trans-historical dimension, where the Arts and Humanities hit a primordial re-set button and everything turns golden, not unlike the evening in Venice, Italy – otherwise known as “Titian's Hour.”

Valorous souls drop one by one, seduced by privilege. One by one becomes the thousands and the tens of thousands. Academia eats souls alive, consigning them to pits where they are enslaved in service to Research or Teaching. A few escape to alt-academia – as librarians. The art world devours works, one by one. The author or artist is left as a few bones on the desert of what used to be called the Real. Most are never heard from again, after assimilation to the carnivorous machine. Biennale, bespoke exhibition, art book, catalogue, festival – it matters not. The refuse pile at the end of the affair is almost always human refuse. Publishers devour souls, inhaling works across myriad platforms to extract data and rent, the book hardly mattering, the meta-data extremely valuable. Writing becomes a contract, the contract dictates terms, the terms are salubrious for the vectorial class. Physical book becomes electronic data, publicity machine manufactures reputations, vertical integration extrapolates maximum value across media, and celebrity status beckons or vanishes. Book returns to dust, dust breeds phantom regrets, and authors dust themselves off and rise again – reborn in another place, in another time, and in another work looking for a publisher.

To be continued ...

Image credit: “Seeing and Hearing Things Again” (three-screen presentation/performance of “Library of Tears,” “Will It Cry?,” “Emptiness within Emptiness,” and “The End of CEPT as Viewed by Archangel St. Michael”), w/ C'est la CEPT Troupe, GIDC Bhavan, CEPT University, Ahmedabad, India, April 12, 2017. Photo: Harsh Bhavsar.

<https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/in-search-of-benevolent-capital-part-i/2018/02/14>