

READING SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

<https://medium.com/@agencecx/reading-symbolic-capital-e9ccbb695b04>

<https://medium.com/@agencecx/reading-symbolic-capital-e9ccbb695b04?sk=6db3876000f2e669e184741feb57087>



Image – Plastic owl guarding Canaan fir trees. Photo: Gavin Keeney.

I. SYMBOLIC CAPITALISM

Roughly speaking, and according to terms set out by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s and 1980s, “symbolic capital” (co-extensive but not equivalent to “social capital”) is work (labor) that is leveraged for gaining traction or other tangible and intangible benefits in an increasingly inscrutable knowledge commons that is, ultimately, a capitalist ecosystem that privileges “use value” for intellectual property. “Use value,” in this case, means how works (e.g., literary or artistic works) are positioned in the prevailing ecosystem of any particular episteme (with “episteme” reducible to a minor epoch within the greater trajectory of what once was called a “zeitgeist”). These terms are generally intractable (or slippery), insofar as they denote a reductive positivist philosophy of cultural production aligned with the shifting fortunes of capitalist production. It was Michel Foucault who famously demoted the zeitgeist to episteme, in a somewhat cynical attempt to also trouble or question how subjects are generally enslaved by systems associated with punishing subjects on behalf of overlords. Both Bourdieu and Foucault, however, could be accused of a type of high-handed or feigned anomie, at least in terms of how they positioned their arguments in the then-fashionable takedown of authorized culture and what has been called authorial presence since the Enlightenment. Both might also be said to have leveraged their own symbolic capital, as academics often do, toward privileging their own voices at the expense of the truly oppressed. Did they wish to free subjects? Certainly that was part and parcel of their intellectual stances. Yet, as prestigious soothsayers operating within French academia (with global influence through their publications), the presence of a certain sleight-of-hand in their prognostications (shifting across decades) suggests that however well-meaning their readings of symbolic capital and cultural production may have been, they were also, ultimately, flawed.

This brings in, then, current prognostications by various celebrity authors, such as Yanis Varoufakis, concerning what lies just over the horizon for subjects beholden to vectoral capitalism or *techno-feudalism* (Varoufakis' term). Sitting at the edge of a precipice, if the reading is negative, or sitting at the dawn of a new renaissance, if the reading is positive, those subjects engaged in cultural production today have various versions of reality to contend with. These go by the names of Web 3.0, Education 4.0, Industry 4.0, etc., while all versions converge under the general rubric of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is just the tip of an iceberg. It will upend numerous apple carts, as Silicon Valley hopes it will. The largest conundrum is what happens to intellectual property rights (IPR) across the arc of the AI revolution. AI vacuums up enormous "prior art," and mixes, re-mixes, and transforms that prior art to works that ultimately have no real authorial privileges, given that they are machine-generated. Current efforts to reign in the worst ravages of this harvesting of prior art have thus far produced only the curious instance of the dog not barking in the night. This (in reference to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, 1902) signals that the interloper is already known.

Intellectual property rights law has long contained ellipses or aporia that favor industry over authors. The entire 500-600-year history of IPR is reducible to the loss of authorial privileges to industry. The interloper here is Capital. It is no coincidence that capitalism and copyright (*privilegio*) emerged at more or less the exact same historical moment – i.e., the Early Renaissance. Thus, "reading" symbolic capital today is not all that different than "reading" Capital was in Louis Althusser's day (i.e., ca.1965). Henry Snow's objections to Varoufakis' projections for techno-feudalism (in *Jacobin*, October 27, 2023) are thus quite telling. Snow wishes to place techno-feudalism squarely within the contours of the evolution of Capitalism, not as the end of Capitalism. Snow sees the writing on the wall in entirely different terms than Varoufakis. Whereas Varoufakis (as celebrity author) is playing with the generally empty gestures of post-capitalist critique (for obvious reasons, including self-promotion), Snow is refusing to drink the Kool-Aid. Varoufakis is leveraging his symbolic capital as soothsayer, while Snow is dismissing the shift in capitalist exploitation to cloud-based exploitation as anything portending a new feudalism.

II. COGNITIVE CAPITALISM

The critique of cognitive capitalism has been around for quite some time. For example, see Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (2004). Varoufakis' thought-experiment is only partly right, whereas Snow's deconstruction of that thought-experiment appears *entirely right*. Varoufakis' critique, however flawed, is only "correct" if it fits into (or can be subsumed by) Snow's, which is less influenced by fashionable stances that quite obviously serve a hidden master. That hidden master is Varoufakis' celebrity status, which is driven by the very mechanisms he seeks to critique. The cultural commons is a highly laced affair, and therefore toxic, in part due to the production of celebrity intellectuals. It is often quite difficult to understand where someone is coming from when they speak righteously from a mostly unrighteous position in the cultural commons – e.g., spouting revolution while taking the King's shilling. To be fair, Varoufakis is not a "revolutionist." His position is much closer to that of a social-democrat. He is an evolutionist, however alarming his reading of symbolic capital is. This is reducible, then, to a type of Social Darwinism that is, in part, a result of his Marxist-Hegelian rhetoric – a rhetoric not that dissimilar to Slavoj Žižek's. Both are, perhaps, laughing all the way to the bank.

What all of this adds up to is that, yes, we are sitting at the edge of an approaching tsunami of one sort or another, especially in terms of the *cultural* implications, while we are mostly blind to what is actually transpiring because of the blind spot known as "presentism" (i.e., the reduction of everything to the present moment and the obliteration of perspective and unique instances of absolute resistance). "Presentism," here and now, *in this case*, ironically engages multiple time frames and multiple possible outcomes. While Varoufakis attempts this (partly through transcribing his economic reading to novelistic form), his critique is flawed by *how* he deploys his symbolic capital.

Stealing a line from Bob Geldof's song "Pale White Girls" (*Sex, Age, and Death*, 2001), it is possible to say, "Your permissions to bleed have been guaranteed by the [ones] whose approval you seek." Geldof, true savant, always had his eye on one thing, even as he negotiated his own battle with symbolic capital. That one thing was absolute resistance.

Authors (as subjects) now have one thing to deal with – succumb to the ongoing slaughter of subjects by states (and Capital is its own “statist” religion) or participate in the hoped-for renaissance. Authors and subjects must now find ways to disrupt the disruptors.

Given the practices of so-called influencers such as Varoufakis and Žižek, how are authors to negotiate the current ravages of the cultural commons if they wish to disrupt the disruptors? The main answer seems to be to engage in collectively produced works and sidestep the last vestiges of authorial privileges, foremost because such privileges always come with a highly questionable price tag. That “price tag” is a secret alliance with Capital. Best then to eschew IPR and venture out into the wild blue yonder – with the “wild blue yonder” signaling an elective abolition of IPR and the freeing of the serfs. Notably, progenitors in this quest include “Tolstoy” and “Gandhi.”

OUTTAKES

An interview with Yanis Varoufakis, “Are We Transitioning From Capitalism to Silicon Serfdom?” *Jacobin*, February 18, 2024

<https://jacobin.com/2024/02/yanis-varoufakis-techno-feudalism-capitalism-interview>

Henry Snow, “We’re Still Living Under Capitalism, Not ‘Techno-Feudalism,’” *Jacobin*, October 27, 2023

<https://jacobin.com/2023/10/cloud-capitalism-technofeudalism-serfs-cloud-big-data-yanis-varoufakis>