

Capital's Vengeful Utopia: Unpayable Debts from Above and Below

Part of Austerity and Utopia

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1.

Much can be gained from considering the current order of financialised, neoliberal, racial capitalism as a kind of utopia for capital. This is an inhuman utopianism, one where the world is reconfigured towards the horizon where capital enjoys immanent access to all aspects of human potential: the commodification, monetisation and financialisation of every process of life. The transformative imperative of neoliberalism and the structures of financialisation have the effect of encouraging, disciplining and enticing every social actor into using the logics, measurements and frameworks of capitalist markets, which will, in effect, recode, reorient and recast nearly every sphere of social activity to better resonate with and contribute to the increasingly digital network of capitalist circulation. ¹ We are, of course, resisting and refusing this necro-utopian drive in a variety of ways. But recognising this utopian drive within the system itself helps us better frame its catastrophic trajectory and its demonstrative moments of vengeful excess. I have previously meditated on the luxury free port (where the world's super-rich stash their art treasures) as an example of a utopian space of capital. ² Certainly these institutions market their services to the elite of the global capitalist class, those who are eager for such exclusive, bespoke hyperspaces, which cater to their whims and their vanity. But while such spaces may have a utopian flavour for their clients, they are more important to understand as the materialisation of capital's utopia. The free port transfigures 'art' (that bourgeois cipher for human creative freedom) into a pure speculative commodity: art and artefacts encrypted within the free port's vaults may not move in decades or even centuries, but the rights to their ownership are traded, hedged on, used as collateral, leveraged and securitised innumerable times. These artworks exist to all intents and purposes in a parallel universe where capital moves without inhibition or latency. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say, a universe in which latencies, borders, inhibitions, regulatory regimes and laws simply represent a variegated and mouldable terrain.

1. See my book, *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

2. See my recent book, *Art after Money, Money after Art: Creative Strategies against Financialization* (London: Pluto, 2018).

2.

It is by now well known that the intellectual architects of the neoliberal revolution were, at least in principle, motivated by a fear of utopianism. For economist Friedrich von Hayek and his acolytes and collaborators of the Mont Pelerin Society, capitalism was the only system that might allow human society to transcend the tyranny of particularistic moral value paradigms declared universal and imposed on society by force.³ Even when guided by the loftiest principles and the wisest rulers, any political ideology poses a totalitarian threat on the economy and society. This threat stems largely from the fact that society is too vast, too complex and too contradictory to be encompassed by any intellectual or moral framework. As the late theorist of financialisation Randy Martin illustrates, for Hayek and company it was ultimately a problem of knowledge and its limits: no one human mind could possibly know and therefore plan or manage the whole of social intercourse, and so would necessarily come to impose their utopian and authoritarian vision on the whole.⁴ Only a free market system – held in place by a minimum of laws to prevent fraud, theft and violence, and, as Melinda Cooper has recently shown, by the values of the patriarchal family⁵ – could transcend this contradiction. The unfettered market is (theoretically, at least) a pure reflection of the actuality of plurality and the diverse demands of social subjects, which it accommodates relatively fairly, sustainably and without coercion.

Four decades into the neoliberal revolution and we now know all too well that such an agenda leads to an almost universal dystopia. The theoretical suprahuman and the post-utopian neutrality of markets in practice create vast, coercive forms of inequality and financial authoritarianism – today on the scale of the planet itself. The age when nation states were susceptible to totalitarian leaders who sought to pivot the entire society and economy towards some utopian scheme is well gone. Current authoritarian leaders claim only to offer protection and competitiveness to their chosen (ethnic, religious, national) people against the ravages of the global capitalist market; a dire situation to which they and their policies also contribute. Authoritarianism today does not force society into a formation to fulfil perverse dreams of utopian potential. Rather, it offers austerity, purification and revanchism as means of survival in an ever more hostile world.

3.

I propose that it is fruitful and more so revealing to consider our moment of financialised, global, racial capitalism as so shot through with contradictions that it appears to be taking a needless, warrantless, reckless, and, ultimately, self-destructive vengeance on humanity.⁶ In this frame, austerity appears as a kind of economic sadism, which is not the intention but the result of systemic and structural forces. There are at least three aspects of revenge capitalism in operation today, though these are by no means exhaustive: the making surplus of whole populations who are dependent on capitalist markets for their reproduction, yet remain superfluous to the system's own reproduction and, thus, left to die; the rise of the 'hyper-enclosure', by which I mean the extension of capitalism's logics of primitive accumulation into the spaces of cognition, affect and sociality (for

3. Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

4. Randy Martin, *Knowledge LTD: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

5. Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017).

6. See my forthcoming book, *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling of Unpayable Debts* (London: Pluto, 2020).

instance, through digital platform technologies that harvest data and broker connection and attention); and unpayable debts, which I will focus on here. On the one hand, we have the kind of unpayable debts that are foisted onto whole nations, even though everyone knows that they cannot be repaid and, indeed, the austerity and privation they enforce means the conditions of repayment will never be approached. This imposition of unpayable debt has a long imperialist pedigree: a prime example is the way colonial powers imposed debt on the new Haitian nation in the wake of the revolution of the enslaved, a debt essentially to repay their former French 'owners' for the theft of their own bodies.⁷ More recently, we have witnessed the imposition on Greece and Puerto Rico of such ruinous forms of debt financing that even mainstream financial institutions admit it will prevent their economies from reaching a state where actual repayment may be possible[footnote:For a singularly excellent resource on these topics, from which I have also borrowed the term 'unpayable debts', I highly recommend the Caribbean Syllabus prepared by the Unpayable Debt Working Group, a project of the Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University: caribbeansyllabus.wordpress.com.]. This follows decades of similar forms of endless debt discipline wielded by the Global North (via financial institutions and intermediaries like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) on nations in the Global South, which to all intents and purposes appeared as a kind of financial vengeance for the successes of decolonisation. Yet, this empire of unpayable debts also affects individuals in a rapidly financialising world. Austerity politics see the regressive enclosure of former public services (including health, education, transportation) and the transfer of costs and fees of social reproduction onto populations, and disproportionately, as Verónica Gago shows, onto women.⁸ When combined with stagnating (inflation-adjusted) wages and a financial services industry eager to offer new forms of securitised (meaning: globally tradable) consumer debt, this shift can produce an explosion of unpayable debt on a personal level.⁹ In the US and in the UK, an increasing proportion of adults are expected to die in deep debt, and there is no respite for the younger generations who emerge with astronomical debts for improving their human capital ('getting an education') to take a chance on increasingly hostile, competitive and precarious labour markets.¹⁰

4.

There are many ways of framing such a situation. But revenge is not only evocative, it is highly suitable – it is as if the economic system itself (without any individual intending it or bearing any malice) is wreaking a strange vengeance on whole nations and populations. I propose the term 'revenge', because unlike crass sadism it implies a logic of retribution. Capitalism has always relied on regular incidents of vengeance of the powerful, or their laws to repress and punish workers and others who dare to rise up. The neoliberal revolution, from Pinochet's Chile to Thatcher's Britain and beyond, is a kind of reactionary political and economic vengeance against the social gains made by trade unions, students, women, minority groups and others, whose struggles in the 1960s and '70s so unsettled conservative social factions. Capitalism has never been without revenge. But what I am more interested in here is how a system at large can be vengeful as it spirals deeper and deeper into financialised crisis. Yet, vengeance for what?

7. **Éric Toussaint**, *The Debt System: A History of Sovereign Debts and Their Repudiation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019).

8. **Verónica Gago**, 'Is There a War "on" the Body of Women?: Finance, Territory, and Violence', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 7 March 2018, viewpointmag.com.

9. **Andrew Ross**, *Creditocracy and the Case for Debt Refusal* (New York: OR Books, 2014).

10. On debt and death, see **Annie McClanahan**, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

As always is the case with the vengeance of the powerful, no infraction or crime actually needs to have been committed: more often it is pre-emptive. Martin, again, has theorised that financialisation is key to how capitalism was reconfigured in order to control, contain and conscript the energies of decolonisation movements in the late twentieth century – literal decolonisation in the Global South, metaphorical decolonisation (of bodies, of social relations) in the Global North.¹¹ In both cases, unpayable debt operates as a means to discipline, control and extract value from social actors (individuals or whole nations), while still maintaining flexibility and adaptiveness. As both David Graeber and Maurizio Lazzarato have illustrated, unlike direct violent repression or colonial force, debt has the added benefit of making the debtor imagine their plight as being their own fault and moral failing.¹² Though, as Miranda Joseph and Jackie Wang state, the notion of the 'indebted man' needs to make way for a more nuanced account of how debt actually works on and through different gendered, racialised and classed bodies.¹³ Capitalism, obviously, doesn't have intentions and so it can't be vengeful per se; it is not human and much analytical and political grief will come from attributing human characteristics to it. Yet, metaphors are all we have. And so I propose that revenge is an oddly fitting way to describe a form of capitalism that, in its own utopian drive, creates conditions which appear not only exploitative and oppressive, but irrationally vindictive. Unpayable debt, debt that sabotages the debtor's ability to repay or even reproduce themselves, is one such moment of nihilistic capitalist vengeance. Underneath the unpayable debts 'from above' are the unpayable debts 'from below'. These are claimed (or ought to be claimed) by those whose stolen lands and labours built the racial capitalist world system, a system which now superintends a world of coercive unpayable debts from above. These include the unpaid, unacknowledged debts for slavery, for colonialism, for the generation after generation of exploited labour and its accompanying vengeful forms of enforcement. These silenced horrors are the midden on which today's economy is built.¹⁴ These debts are unpayable not only because those in power refuse to pay (or acknowledge them in the first place), but, arguably, because there is not enough money or resources in the world to repay them without bankrupting the capitalist economy that was built upon these debts. The crimes and harms are too monumental and too foundational to capitalism to be accounted for in its ledgers. More profoundly, there is a strong argument that even if there was enough capitalist money to pay, it would be the wrong form of compensation: the debt is unpayable because it is not financial, but ontological. Those vengeful systems that wrought colonial violence and whose operations continue to inflict structural violence must be abolished, such that the violence ends once and for all.

5.

Prior to their revolt, the enslaved people of Haiti were subject to constant, brutal and dehumanising vengeance from their enslavers, compelling historian C.L.R. James to muse in his magisterial *The Black Jacobins* that 'the cruelties of property and privilege are always more ferocious than the revenges of poverty and oppression. For the one aims at perpetuating resented injustice, the other is merely a momentary passion soon appeased'. He continues that, 'When history is written as it ought to be written, it is the moderation and long patience of the masses at

11. Martin, Knowledge LTD.

12. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011); Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).

13. Miranda Joseph, *Debt to Society: Accounting for Life under Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2018).

14. Robin D.G. Kelley, "A Day of Reckoning": Dreams of Reparations', in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2002), 110–34.

which men will wonder, not their ferocity'.¹⁵

It was, in fact, the fear of the potential vengeance of the enslaved that drove the slave-holding class and their agents to perpetuate the normalised atrocities of their rule.¹⁶ Perhaps it is always thus with the powerful: they mask their own sadistic and vengeful character, necessary to enforcing their exploitative rule, by projecting onto the subjugated the bestial (yet all-too-human) thirst for vengeance. In the name of taming, averting and suppressing that vengeance, all pre-emptive vengeance is justified. Vengeance functions in the imagination of the powerful in tandem with the logic of sub-humanisation. In the same way that they imagine those whom they enslave or oppress as just barely human (or barely not inhuman), vengeance is understood to be uniquely human, but abjectly so.¹⁷ Animals may react to harm or fear, but do not appear to plot revenge, nurse vendettas, or dream of poetic ways to reclaim a blood debt – only humans do. But what kind of human? Only the worst. As Nietzsche observed, those who would elevate themselves as the legitimate masters of the world and their fellow human beings would declare themselves above petty vengeance and as subjects of the law – even when vengeance is deemed honourable, it is only vengeance inflicted on those deemed one's peers.¹⁸ And yet, the system that so empowers and ennoble the slaver is itself based on endless vengeance.

6.

It is important to think about the vengefulness of systems and the particular vengefulness of today's form of financialised capitalism (and its utopian drives), if we want to understand the recent political turn towards neo-authoritarian politics. These politics, almost universally, are characterised by a kind of political revanchism: 'it's time to take back our country, even if it kills us'. Such authoritarianism does not conspicuously promise a better, utopian future, and the oath to return to some past seem dubious, even to adherents. But it does promise a revenge on those who can be blamed for some perversion or deviation in the past, those to whom 'we' (or at least some among us) were too kind, too generous, too welcoming, too compassionate, and who 'stabbed us in the back'. The affects and existential miseries that drive these revenge politics – this will come as no surprise – bubble up from the quagmire of contradictions of revenge capitalism itself. Unable to name capitalist exploitation and alienation as the source of their misery, yet all too aware capitalism is foreclosing the future, whole politics pivot around a politics of bilious invective which treads the well-worn paths of sexism, racism and xenophobia. When no utopian horizon is available, except endless commodification, financialisation and competition unto death, when we live in the shadow capital's utopia, all that is left is revenge.

Is there a possibility for a radical, revolutionary vision from within this situation? It is valuable here to recall Walter Benjamin's fateful 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', his last major work. Writing of the tragic political reversal of the Weimar Republic, which formed with Germany on the brink of a communist revolution (led by the Spartacists Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, who were assassinated on the orders of the 'moderate' Social Democrats) and ended with the ascendancy of the Nazis, Benjamin observed:

15. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 88–89.

16. See, for instance, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; repr., New York: Grove, 2008).

17. On sub-humanisation, see Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, 'Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations', in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9–89.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Other Writings*, ed. Keith Anell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

In Marx it [the proletariat] appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. ... [who] thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.¹⁹

In other words, for Benjamin, some measure of movement for liberation not only looks forward to brighter utopian horizons, but swears to account for the unpayable debt owed to all those who came before in the struggle. It is this imagination of avenging history that provides the proletariat with their greatest strength: the abiding hatred of oppression and a willingness to undertake sacrifice. When a politics of liberation refuses to engage with this 'avenging imaginary', it is easily co-opted and harnessed by reactionary forces.

7.

I don't think there is anything easy or comfortable about this formulation, but it does have some undeniable resonance for today. For my part, I have sought to meditate on what it would mean to cultivate an avenging imaginary around unpayable debts from below. These debts are not honoured or even acknowledged in the utopian ledgers of revenge capitalism nor in public discourse, until, that is, they express themselves in conventional legal and economic terms which allow them to be easily recuperated within that system. These might include demands for compensation, reparations and repatriation for losses suffered due to imperialism, environmental catastrophe, heinous exploitation and more. Today, there are many such efforts occurring around the world, which include attempts to retrieve ancestral human remains and artefacts looted during colonialism, demands by descendants for reparations for the transatlantic slave trade, and the insistence on compensation for the theft of Indigenous peoples' lands and resources.²⁰ These movements are vital, especially as they call together a radical constituency of claimants who discover their collective potential in common struggle and represent a reminder that the high-minded rhetoric and cultural supremacism of the coloniser is built on theft and violence. When these claims for repayment of the debt enter into courts and other official venues, they continue to do this work, demonstrating the decidedly illiberal, racist and exploitative origins of the very 'liberal' order that deigns to sit in judgement now of its own crimes. Yet, the great risk is that the official capture of these struggles, which are always hedged with questions of monetary compensation and 'reconciliation' of accounts (a closing of the books), sacrifice their greatest and most radical asset: the very unpayability of the debt, its vengeful afterlife.

Writing of the ongoing processes of settler colonialism in North America and the kind of racial ordering it demands, Unangax theorist Eve Tuck, writing with C. Ree, proposes a disturbing rebuttal to the recent enthusiasm, especially in Canada, for a state-led initiative towards reconciliation.

19. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Vintage, 2015), 251–52.

20. See, for example, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 2018); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Hilary Beckles, *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2013); and Roland P. Salzberger and Mary Turck, ed., *Reparations for Slavery: A Reader* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

Settler colonialism is the management of those who have been made killable, once and future ghosts—those that had been destroyed, but also those that are generated in every generation[...] Haunting, by contrast, is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances of innocence and reconciliation. ... Haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop. Alien (to settlers) and generative (for ghosts), this refusal to stop is its own form of resolving. For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved. [...] Haunting is the cost of subjugation. It is the price paid for violence, for genocide. [...] Erasure and defacement concoct ghosts; I don't want to haunt you, but I will. ²¹

What would it mean to refuse payment, or to insist that the debt cannot be repaid in the stolen coin of empire? What would it mean to refuse to forgive as there is no evidence that the conditions and structures that led to violences of the past have substantially changed? What would it mean to suggest that there is not enough money in the world to pay back the debt – the same money, no matter in whose pocket, only perpetuates the very atrocities now being assuaged? What would it mean to cultivate an avenging imaginary in which the closure of the debt is the abolition of the economy as such?

21. Eve Tuck and C. Ree, 'A Glossary of Haunting', in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (London: Routledge, 2013), 642–43.

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