

Debt

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Thinking about debt has become pop, and David Graeber's *Debt* is the genre's "Stairway to Heaven."

We may never cease debating whether pop culture can ever offer ruthless critique – or whether, formed in the crucible of things as they are, pop can think only within the limits of the given world. Perhaps it can grasp something elusive, or disclose utopian impulses shimmering below the gunmetal gray of political realism. But in the end we expect, armed with pessimism of the intellect, that pop's very forms must be learned from whatever it postures against. Pop is, after all, part of what makes the world work.

Debt is a kind of pop culture in this sense, an atmospheric condition of modern life for mortgage holders, governments, students, those hustling through the last week of each month on rip-off credit cards worn thinner than nictitating membranes. It has been ascendent since the real-wage stagnation of the 1970s that compelled all manner of humans to paper over the gap between income and outlay. Banks, with few investment avenues in the old industrial sectors, were anxious to push credit out the door into whatever market they could find or fabricate.

Thinking about debt has itself become pop. David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Melville House; Paper \$17.50) is magisterial, the genre's "Stairway to Heaven." Its hauntingly deliberate opening sections offer a virtuoso account of debt as human obligation, a name for the lines of force that hold societies together, something systematically deformed by monetization until we come to think of cash debts as moral imperatives.

Like "Stairway," the book is epic and will endure. Also like that song, it wanders off a bit toward the end. Its account of the last few centuries of capitalism and the role debt has played seems less focused, with less purchase on the radical displacement of ethical ties by the compulsions of labor and markets. The desire to see these senses of debt as still intertwined, one as capital's opportunistic reconfiguration of the other, is appealing, if finally mistaken: they are two fundamentally different things, driven by qualitatively different forces, and one is immune to ethical entreaties. Nonetheless, the book's charisma underscores the genre's: certainly since its star turn around 2008, debt has been a fixture of popular consciousness.

Graeber notes the biblical history of debt jubilees wherein a mass forgiveness allows for a sort of reset, in a way that's good for the whole society in the long run, and delivers a kind of freedom for many people immediately. A current apparition of this project is Strike Debt, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street.

Strike Debt's lawyer-vetted Debt Resisters' Operations Manual is intended to work as best as possible within the very legal framework that maintains and enforces debt; that is, it promises to leave the power and form of debt intact, while encouraging individual evasions. This is suggestive enough of pop's limits, its promise of personal release, its inability to depart the given world's prescriptions.

Strike Debt's Rolling Jubilee is debtpop of the first order: it's got a great hook, is instantly appealing, and speaks to its moment. The plan is to gather donations and use them to buy out anonymous bundles of debt, mostly medical. Because these debts are distressed (i.e., likely unpayable by the debtors) and have been sold on to collectors, they can be discharged for a fraction of the nominal price. And the people, now emancipated from the misery and discipline that debt enforces, are free to – what?

We must always be on the side of abolishing immiseration. We must also note immediately that the outcome here – a paper claim on future income put to the fire – is business as usual for capitalist crises. Generally, capital handles this itself. Here is a nineteenth-century commentator reflecting on the earliest such episodes: "The portion of capital value that exists simply in the form of future claims on surplus-value and profit, in other words promissory notes on production in their various forms, is devalued simultaneously with the fall in revenues on which it is reckoned." We now call these devaluations "haircuts" – the losses that major creditors must bear when an economy collapses, not out of moral duty but because these debts can't be repaid anyway and clearing the books allows the congealed global mess some room to move again.

It has been the hubristic strategy of the ownership class to dodge any haircuts this time; this is the meaning of "bailouts" and the logic of "quantitative easing." History suggests this can't work and leads to stagnation: a bunch of value must be destroyed for even a minimal reset. Strike Debt in this regard has committed to the odd task of modeling capitalism's own best practice for crises. It does for the creditors what they would otherwise have to do for themselves.

But what it can't do, even if it were to operate at a vastly larger scale, is change the history and conditions that generate compulsory debt. Anyone freed from debt now will at the very best return to a labor market that will have them borrowing instantly to make ends meet. That's not freedom, it's just a cycle of abuse. Some parts are less abusive than others.

It is in this sense that the jubilee confirms the most pessimistic view of pop. It is without doubt a critique, and bears a utopian hope. It is also an absolute agreement with the given world, as if it were inarguable, unassailable. Indeed, it takes its part in the annealing and refreshing of that world. But that world features debt as a necessity; such pop conceptions return us to necessity over and over, never seriously considering what it would entail to move from necessity to freedom.

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P.S.

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