

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poetry Benefits

Robert Wood · Wednesday, October 14th, 2015

Leaving aside the material ills of big businesses, the desired undialectical unity of most corporations is problematic. Hence, corporate social responsibility is established as a separate entity lest it undermine the autonomy of the profit logic. What we see in such apparently paradoxical offerings as benefit corporations, which have recently arrived in Australia, is an aim to get over this. There is a sort of unrecognisable though apparent contradiction of aims from the beginning even as it may simply be a heightening of the social responsibility model.

The cynic will suggest that the structural deficiencies of capitalism doom benefit corporations to be anything more than a bandaid on an axewound and in so doing they will refuse to think through the possibilities of incrementalism possibly while eating their Ben and Jerry's ice cream with a spoon from Etsy wearing a Patagonia beanie. The optimist might champion this nice new face of business, arguing that growth, trade and other such economic aspects of life are inescapable as well as desirable so long as they are 'conscious' and 'ethical' preferring all along that this model encourages yet more consumption albeit 'greenwashed'.

But the desire for the rhetoric of the market, that for example 'we must invest in the future', demonstrates the predisposition and predetermination of the logic – we are tied into a corporate way of thinking rather than discovering a different one as we go. It is very dissimilar to the writing of a poem then. The rhetoric gives away the idea before the idea has even been allowed to form – there is a strict teleology at play here. Moreover, what happened to the language of the common good? What of citizens rather than shareholders, of community members rather than clients, of workers rather than ordinary people? What happened to the state as an organization of the good?

Benefit corporations reinforce a liberal fantasy because they make an ideological claim, leveraging a sort of belief system into a marketable brand. It works to attract investors and consumers. It is indicative that, for the most part, the businesses in America that have signed on as 'b-corps' are the Californication, culture industry types enamoured by organics and technology.

B-corps are an expression of, in other words, bourgeois utopian capitalism. What we might wonder is whether or not there will be a government embrace of 'b-corps' here leading to different taxation regulations. If, in other words, actions deemed to be in the public interest are recognised by the state and hence the 'b-corp' as a social enterprise can pay less tax or even receive subsidies greater than those of corporations. Indeed, there may, paradoxically, be more benefit to remaining a corporation. As the ABC reported in June 2014, 'The Australia Institute has pored over the past six budgets from each state and territory, finding at least \$17.6 billion worth of assistance for the

mining sector.’ When will it subsidise organic ice cream, polar fleece, hippy chic?

Rather than seek to redeem the corporation by helping it to consciousness we could propose collectives based on autonomous, flat, ‘Occupy’ models of organising. These limit the bureaucratic apparatus, blunt the profit logic and make people participate as co-operative members in a sustainable manner. I have sought these models out in poetry communities over time and found an approximation of these in various publishers, including [Ugly Duckling Presse](#) and [Timeless, Infinite Light](#).

In a gift economy such as poetry there is an awful lot of will (good and bad) and dedication that does not have a resonance with profit. People are not concerned with the material even as there is a sense of needing to get by. The lack of money that exists in poetry is part of its ethical appeal precisely because people need to find and express motivations other than through a triple bottom line as it is expressed monetarily. That is to say, we cannot deduce how something has gone simply by assessing it financially.

Poetry is not without its gripes nor is it without its economics. Poetry though offers one way of understanding social relations that sit in a complicated position with regard to money precisely because it is about status. The superstars of the poetry world are, in the context of Australia, tenured academics. This offers a very different picture of the economy than the art market, for example.

Big capital is not part of contemporary poetry even as there are discernible and profitable industries for a slew of the canonical dead. What the benefit corporation could learn from poetry at a conceptual level is that there are different social relations when people are focused on something other than an endpoint and they orient themselves less around questions of money and numeric ways of assessment. Of course the relationship between b-corps and poetry depends on the people who populate such concerns. What happens in some very specific interactions? Can we discern the use of certain language techniques deemed poetic in b corps rather than corporations or other social enterprises? What we have to think through is both what a benefit corporation is and does as well as how it can learn to be a good organisation by learning from some of poetry’s collectives.

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