

**THE ENIGMA OF CAPITALISM – BEYOND HUMAN POWER II AND JOHN  
GABRIEL BORKMAN  
BJØRNSTJERNE BJØRNSON AND HENRIK IBSEN AS CRITICS OF  
CAPITALISM<sup>1</sup>**

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The period from the 1870s to the 1890s constituted in some ways to a long wave of economic depression in the modern world. Low growth rates were accompanied by financial panic, most dramatically in 1873 and in 1893. Simultaneously, it became a period of decisive social, cultural and technological transformation. In Norway rapid modernization of the economy was taking place. Urbanization became a significant social force; employment in manufacturing grew by more than thirty percent; the amount of loans from commercial banks more than doubled (SSB, 2012). Capitalism as an economic system was established on a broad basis.

It was also the period of the "modern breakthrough" in Scandinavian literature and culture. One of the works heralding this was Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's play *The Bankrupt* (1875), which brought capitalism to the centre stage of modern literature. Henrik Ibsen followed Bjørnson's lead two years later with *Pillars of Society* (1877), which made capitalism a core theme in the introductory play to his suite of contemporary dramas. In these early plays, Bjørnson placed his main focus on financial questions, whereas Ibsen depicted the industrial aspects of capitalism, such as the shipyard and the planning of new railway tracks.

Shortly before the turn of the century both dramatists returned to the theme of capitalism, now in a mature phase of their authorial career. Over a twenty-year period they had witnessed the emergence of modern society, observed the changes in capitalism and seen it grow in importance, and had the opportunity to reflect on its inner mode of functioning. Simultaneously, their psychological understanding had been deepened. Bjørnson again took the lead with *Beyond Human Power II* (1895), which provided a broad description of the new social landscape of social and political conflict. Ibsen followed up a year later with *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896). This time it was Ibsen who zoomed in on financial transactions, whereas Bjørnson covered the broad picture of business relations and capital/labour conflicts. These mature dramas deserve a place among the masterpieces by both authors. The following discussion will concentrate on these two plays, sketch the contrasts between them, and discuss possible commonalities in the underlying conceptions and normative patterns in their views of capitalism.

There is certainly a great difference between dramas and sociology with a structural focus – plays are about people, not about social patterns as such. When a critique of capitalism is embodied in a drama, salient features of the capitalist system will appear mostly indirectly on the stage. It is the statements, thoughts, and actions expressed by the protagonists that make it possible to grasp more general conceptions of capitalism. The workings of the system are always mediated by

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individual actors, their experiences, and projects. Hence, two basic questions come to the fore: what does capitalism do to people; and, what do people do to capitalism?

Bjørnson and Ibsen, in line with their authorial styles, divide their attention very differently between these issues. Even so, they share some literary reference points. The most obvious is Friedrich Nietzsche, who was the subject of lively debates in Scandinavia in the early 1890s. Both Ibsen's Borkman and Bjørnson's Holger bear clear resemblances to Nietzsche's concept of master morality. They are towering characters who regard it as their obvious right to conquer the world, despite the costs that may be inflicted on others. In both cases, however, another character looms behind Nietzsche, that of Goethe's Faust. In *Beyond Human Power II*, Mephisto is even explicitly mentioned (VII, 147).<sup>2</sup> The variations in the relationships of both Bjørnson's and Ibsen's plays to *Faust* will be an important theme in the discussion to follow.

But *Faust* is not about capitalism, it may be countered, it is played out in a basically pre-capitalist world. It should not be forgotten, however, that a memorable scene in *Faust II* (1832) is about the invention and effects of paper money (6006-6171).<sup>3</sup> Even if Goethe intended this as a parody, to a modern reader this is quite striking, as in some respects it is quite close to Keynesian conceptions of the state attenuating business cycles by creating money. This specific topic, however, is an example of a larger and more salient theme, that of magic and wonders. Faust's relationship to Mephisto endows the former with the ability to create wonders and transcend given laws, be they natural or social. Such wonders of the world have a parallel in the unprecedented power of capitalism to rouse slumbering powers, and to produce and distribute enormous amounts of goods through processes of unprecedented complexity. At the same time the Faust character, with his untiring restlessness, may to some extent be seen as a precursor to the capitalist entrepreneur – similarly untiring and restless. This is not to say that Faust is a capitalist character at heart, but that his character is a central node in an intertextual network, and thus may influence the way capitalist entrepreneurs are conceived of by later authors.

### **Bjørnson - *Beyond Human Power II***

In one sense Bjørnson's play may be seen as a true mirror of its time. Large-scale factories were emerging, the number of wage labourers was growing. The conflicts between labour and capital were not only increasing, but also about to enter a phase of institutionalisation. The Norwegian Labour Party was founded in 1887, while the Christiania Workers' Society (*Christiania Arbeidersamfund*) went through a period of radicalization in the late 1880s. The strike by female match-packers in 1889 drew national attention. Bjørnson was very much part of these events: as an active supporter of the new movement; as a keynote speaker at the Workers' Society (Bjørnson 1913, 109-116); and, as a spokesman for the cause of the match-packers. He even declared sympathy for the cause of socialism (Hoem 2011, 322). Events outside Norway also served as sources, not least the German Socialist Acts, which

<sup>2</sup> All references are to volume and page number in the standard edition of Bjørnson's collected works, edited by Francis Bull (1927). Translations are by the author.

<sup>3</sup> References are to line numbers in *Faust I-II*. English translations are from Stawell and Dickinson (1928).

for many years seriously inhibited the activity of the German Social Democratic Party. Several years earlier, Bjørnson had written a homage to Ferdinand Lassalle, founder of one of the forerunners to the party (1879/IV, 484).

The core of *Beyond Human Power II* is the conflict between labor and capital. Workers at the local factory live in utter misery in a dark place called Hell, a dump where the sun never shines. Alcoholism and suicides reflect and reinforce the misery of life. When the first act commences the workers are on strike, demanding more decent living conditions. Their charismatic leader Bratt, a former minister, wants to prolong the strike despite the anxiety and poverty it creates in the workers. Another prominent character is the fanatic activist Elias Sang, the editor of their newspaper.

The contrast with the misery of the workers may be found at the Castle, a large building on a sunny plain, inhabited by the tycoon and employer Holger. In order to crush the workers' struggle, Holger convenes employers from all over the country to a meeting at the Castle to form an employers' association. His plan is warmly supported by the majority; only a few oppose it and his quest for unlimited power; one of them subsequently leaves the building in protest. However, in contrast to his thirst for power, Holger plays out a human side vis-à-vis Rakel, Elias Sang's sister. She wants to found a hospital, and Holger supports her with money and a plot of land. Rakel also wants to take custody of Holger's young niece and nephew, Spera and Credo. The youngsters wish to stay with Rakel, but Holger insists that they are his responsibility.

In collaboration with the architect Halden, Elias has secretly placed explosives under the foundations of Holger's Castle, and he manages to blow up the whole building during the meeting. Elias is shot, and the sole survivor is Holger, who is severely wounded. Rakel is the only one who is not directly affected by the explosion, apart from her grief for her brother. Also unaffected in another sense is Halden, who is revealed to be Holger's son. Despite its tragic aspects the explosion puts an end to the strike and changes the balance in the labour/capital conflict more generally. In the final scene, the two youngsters dream of the wonders of the technological innovations to come, which will shape a new and completely different society. Rakel concludes that it is time to start negotiations based on forgiveness between the parties.

The title of the drama, *Beyond Human Power*, refers to all of the main protagonists in the conflict between capital and labour: Holger, Bratt and Elias. Holger's ambition is to take total control of society by heading the planned employers' association. Possessed by a thirst for power, he is unwilling to accord his opponents any form of expression of counter-power. He refuses to negotiate with the workers as long as they retain membership of the trade union led by Bratt, or subscribe to Sang's newspaper. In other words, he denies citizens elementary social and political rights. This, however, turns out to be beyond even his human power; some sort of revolt is unavoidable.

On the other side stand Bratt and Elias. Bratt demands sacrifices which are too great from his followers, and also from himself. He has taken the lead in a strike he cannot win. Bratt's problem is that he persuades himself into positions that are implausible or even impossible, and he founders in self-deception. In this he is aided by Elias Sang, who donates all his money to the strike funds, but makes it appear as

though the contributions come from donors all over the country. Elias, the suicide bomber, does not believe in the strike because it is reformist; nevertheless, he gives away all his money to support it. If Bratt believes in an unrealistic long-term struggle, Elias believes in the ultimate moment after which all things shall arise as new. Both are stuck with ideas that are beyond human power.

In order to understand the views of capitalism as a system espoused in Bjørnson's play, a detour to Ferdinand Lassalle and Karl Marx seems apt. In the early socialist movement a salient question was which social class is the source of economic value. Both Marx and Lassalle held that values were created by workers,<sup>4</sup> not by capitalists, who are superfluous. In direct opposition to this view, Holger holds that the capitalist class is the sole creator of value, because it organizes workers. Without capitalists no value would be created:

*Holger:* Did I take what belongs to others? What were you without me? What? Who created this here – you or I? (VII, 119)

One of the workers replies:

*Hans Olsen:* There was somebody taking part in the fabrication. And from the first day. Now thousands are contributing. (VII, 119)

Hence, the norm espoused in the play is that of a compromise; a combination of labor and capital is necessary. In addition to existing property rights, work itself is also a source of social rights; it is even anticipated that workers may take a seat on the board of directors (VII, 147). The assumption of balance between rights in labor and capital is underlined by the workers' suggestion of neutral arbitration between the parties in the labour market (VII, 118). This is flatly rejected by Holger; an assumption underlying arbitration is that both parties are necessary for a productive process. Moreover, this would put an end to Holger's attempt to gain total control of the physical capital.

The dialogues in the play imply that capitalists are necessary because they organize. But there is something more – they also innovate. Routine labour performed by workers does not lead to substantive technological innovation, which is assumed as the precondition for a good society. This is represented by the character of Johan Sverd, the only one to survive the explosion because he got out in time. Sverd has access to the latest technological developments; he even brings modern sound-recording equipment to the meeting.

Another question concerns the relationship between the economy and politics. Holger takes the classical, libertarian view that the economy should be superordinate to politics; radicalised by the notion that the economy can replace the state, by means of organizing society as a whole on the basis of the production system. Paradoxically Marx takes a related view, but based on the opposite assumption, that the state is unnecessary, because workers, when liberated from the chains of capitalism, can do

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<sup>4</sup> In *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), Marx vehemently attacked Lassalle on several points. Among other things he held against Lassalle that nature also is a source of value, but this divergence is unimportant in the present context.

without the state, which is only a medium of oppression (Marx, 1894, 828). In the play, the Marxian view is actually spelled out by one of the delegates at the meeting, who exclaims: “The state is ours, that’s how it has been, and that’s how it shall remain” (VII, 143).

The play, however, takes a different stance. In the debate at Holger’s Castle, there are two people who clearly oppose Holger’s plans, Anker and Johan Sverd.<sup>5</sup> Anker adheres to the idea of moderate differences in incomes and fortunes (VII, 149). This implies some sort of policy of redistribution, in order to curb Holger’s power to force workers into accepting a minimum wage. Sverd, however, expresses the necessity of social and political pluralism:

*Johan Sverd:* You command the factory owners, the workers, the market; thereby indirectly municipalities and the state. What is the result? After a situation of abuse of power from your side – so much power gives a constant temptation to abuse – a rebellion breaks out, more intensely bitter than the religious wars of our forefathers! (VII, 145)

The conclusion is that without an autonomous state, a fair balance between labor and capital is impossible. In opposition to Marx, this is more in agreement with Lassalle, who saw the state as a precondition for a just society (Berlau, 1949).

The preceding discussion may produce the misleading impression that *Beyond Human Power II* is a formulaic play, but this is not the case. Despite its many references to ideological issues, some of them relevant even to contemporary society it is written with a strong dramatic nerve. Nevertheless, it has drawn negative criticism, pertaining mostly to the final scene in which Rakel and her young friends dream of a new society based on technological wonders. Bjørnson breaks with dramatic conventions in ending the play this way. This is the result of a deliberate choice, and is not reducible to a continuous penchant in Bjørnson to end his literary works on an optimistic tone. Here Bjørnson the visionary politician is talking, be it at the cost of the playwright (Engelstad, 1992). Simultaneously, Bjørnson the playwright is in no way mute; he brings his play close to the finishing scenes of *Faust II*. In Goethe’s play too, social progress plays a vital role. Faust’s unrest is not stilled by all the wonders staged by Mephisto. It is when he in a vision encounters the uses of the full potentials of human work that he at last feels able to utter the key words: “Verweile doch, du bist so schön” – “Thou art so beautiful, wilt thou not stay?” (11582). His death is followed by a metaphysical dispute between celestial voices over whether Faust’s soul will be saved or not. Even if Goethe was an atheist, Bjørnson the rationalist did not follow him and end his play with a dialogue between supernatural voices. Nevertheless, the final scene of *Beyond Human Power II*, with its exalted prophecies of technological progress, has an ethereal quality reminiscent of the ending of *Faust II*.

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<sup>5</sup> The name Johan Sverd obviously alludes to the politician Johan Sverdrup, leader of the Venstre (Left) party. However, the idealized character of Sverd bears few resemblances to the actual politician Sverdrup. From the early 1880s Bjørnson regarded Sverdrup as a great leader who had failed the cause of progress (e.g. Bjørnson 1913, 115; Hoem 2011, 637ff). Nevertheless, some years later Bjørnson explained that Sverd was a portrait of “the man as I see him in public life from his best time” (Bjørnson 1913, 445).



Now, does it make sense to compare some of the protagonists to the character of Faust? At any rate, the thought experiment regarding the protagonists in the light of Goethe's drama may shed some light on Bjørnson's play. First, Rakel has a functional similarity to Gretchen, as she is the one who plays the role of a saviour, even if it is the soul of society that it is saved, not that of the main protagonist. In both cases "Das Ewigweibliche / zieht uns hinan" – "The Woman in woman / leads forward forever" (11210-11). At the same time there is not one distinct Faust-like character in the play, but Faustian traits are divided between Holger and Elias. Holger, the tycoon, may say with Faust, "In the beginning was the deed" (1237); he never rests, is always searching for something new. If Holger is longing for a decisive moment, when everything is in balance, it would not be the moment of communal work, but absolute power. But it will never come. Elias the activist also longs for a decisive moment, the moment when evil is exterminated because all capitalists have disappeared. None of these longings points toward the reconciliation that is the end point of Faust's life. But the fall of the two characters opens up for visions of the bright future of a society that rests on technological dynamism as well as social fairness.

Bjørnson's critique of capitalism is thus not so much a critique of the system as such, as of its excesses. A modern society is dependent on the dynamism and innovativeness created by capitalism. The resulting economic inequalities are acceptable, though within fairly narrow limits. Without social regulation this dynamism becomes destructive. Capitalism fosters social progress, but progress is accompanied by a never-ending struggle between the innovative forces of capitalism, and the necessity of political governance and moral self-restraint.

The critical edge of the play is directed towards rebellious agitators and ruthless capitalists alike. Activist fanaticism is basically seen as a response to social oppression, gross inequalities and the contempt of the upper class, even though Elias Sang may be regarded as a character in search of an extremist cause. But what about the greed for power and money in capitalists: are they also a product of capitalism as such, a necessary by-product of the dynamism of the system? Holger is above all a Nietzschean master, paying respect to others only if they are of "master blood" (VII, 121). Ketil, one of his followers, praises the killing of ten thousand rebels in the Paris Commune (VII, 152). These attitudes are not created solely by capitalism, but are undoubtedly reinforced by the power accorded to capitalists. In the words of one of the workers, contemporary capitalism has sharpened class differences and forced wages downward. Earlier the upper class "had much more sense of honour than what *you* have! – You and your equals!" (VII, 117).

The most deadly critique of the master morality of capitalists, however, comes from within. In his youth Holger had a sexual relationship with a maid servant, who was sent off to America where she gave birth to a son. As a young man the son returns and, unknown to his father, starts working as his architect under the name of Halden. Holger's unacknowledged son is the one who lays the technical groundwork for the destruction of his Castle, and destroys his father's dreams of total power over society.

**Henrik Ibsen – *John Gabriel Borkman***

A little more than a year after the appearance of *Beyond Human Power II*, Ibsen published *John Gabriel Borkman*, among other things a reflection on financial capitalism. Himself an investor since the mid-1870s (Meyer, 1967, 422), Ibsen had touched upon the subject of long-term investment strategies in *Pillars of Society* (1877), and banking in *A Doll's House* (1879). In the following years the financial aspects of capitalism had grown in prominence. A possible model for Ibsen's John G. Borkman is the American tycoon John P. Morgan, one of the world's greatest capitalists in the years before 1900.<sup>6</sup> Morgan owned one of America's largest commercial banks, had enormous investments in railroads and steel, and was responsible for the restructuring of large companies and whole industries. What Borkman dreamed of, Morgan brought to life.

Even though the play links several strands – ambition, vitalism, generational conflict, jealousy – into a complex fabric, in the following the focus is placed on the elements connected to capitalism. John Gabriel Borkman is the ambitious son of a miner, and he has carved out a career reaching the pinnacle of the financial world. On his way upward he was engaged to the rich and beautiful Ella Rentheim, but he called off the engagement and instead married Ella's twin sister, Gunhild. The reason for this was not an emotional conflict, but the assumption that his mentor Hinkel desires her makes Borkman sacrifice his love to advance his position as bank director. But Ella rejects Hinkel.

Borkman secretly uses the great amounts of shares and securities deposited at the bank as a mortgage in an extensive financial operation to create an economic empire of unprecedented dimensions. As a bank director, Borkman is already highly conspicuous in the public sphere, and he makes the most out of it, behaving almost "as if he were a king" (291).<sup>7</sup> Hence, his large-scale financial operation would bring him to the very top of society.

But he fails. Borkman is betrayed by his friend and mentor Hinkel, who reveals his plans at the last moment. Borkman is then fired from his position at the bank and sentenced to five years in prison. The bank's depositors lose all their savings. Until the end of the play, Borkman does nothing but bemoan his fate. Then suddenly he leaves the house one winter's night, walks up to the top of a hill behind the house, and sits down to watch what would have been his kingdom, had he not failed in the last moment: the city below, with its lights, busy factories and steamships on the fjord. There he suffers a fatal heart attack.

Unlike Bjørnson's vivid depiction of capitalist relations and class conflict, Ibsen's drama is limited to the financial aspect of capitalism. No workers are visible, modern technology does not appear, confrontations between labour and capital go unmentioned. With the exception of the pathetic would-be dramatist Foldal, the unfortunate depositors remain in obscurity. Despite their huge losses, they are the object of contempt. In this drama of capitalism it is Borkman and Hinkel who are the main protagonists. Borkman is highly visible, a megalomaniac who regards himself

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<sup>6</sup> Morgan's name is not mentioned in Ibsen's texts. Nevertheless, in addition to the striking similarity between their surnames, there is a significant reference in the spelling of Borkman's first name (John with an h). This is quite unusual in Norwegian.

<sup>7</sup> Page numbers refer to the translation by Una Ellis-Fermor (Ibsen, 1958).

as “like a Napoleon who was maimed in his first battle” (V, 319). Nevertheless, Borkman’s fate sheds light on one of the mysteries of capitalism, the mystery of productive finance. In contrast, Hinkel remains invisible to readers and spectators; he is present only as a shadow.

Having grown up the son of a miner, Borkman dreams of liberating the ore, of rousing the slumbering powers of the mines, and of setting them to work. The magical wonder of capital is that of transforming money in the form of metal into the abstract figures of bonds and securities, thereby creating specific objects of value. There is a parallel between the galleries of the mine, where the metal is extracted, and the vault of the bank where the bonds are deposited and then extracted by Borkman. He tries to liberate the slumbering powers of the bonds in the same way as the metal. But there is a crucial difference between the two. In the words of Karl Marx (1867) capital is a social relation, not a thing that can be disposed of at will. When Borkman fails, he loses everything, as do the bank’s customers.

In this play, Ibsen brings *Faust* to the fore, as he did in *Peer Gynt*, and also in *Brand* (Kittang, 2002). Though it was a parody in Goethe’s time, the scene featuring the creation of paper money in *Faust II* had increased its relevance towards the end of the nineteenth century by virtue of its allusion to the wonders of the modern financial economy. But there are deeper similarities with Goethe’s play in the relationship between Borkman and Hinkel.

Who is Hinkel, this enigmatic man in the shadows? The information on his character is scarce but significant. As Borkman’s mentor, Hinkel was the one who raised him up to his powerful position. Given that Borkman was the top leader of the bank, Hinkel must have been chairman of the board; the only man with the power to employ and later dismiss a director. This means that Hinkel is part of the power structure of the bank, yet also stands outside of it. Borkman regarded Hinkel not only as an ally, but also as a close friend, and kept him informed about his grandiose plan:

*Borkman:* There wasn’t a corner in all my affairs that I hesitated to lay open before him. (320-321).

Nevertheless, even though Hinkel knew about Borkman’s plan, he did not stop him until the very last moment. Unlike the bank’s depositors, Hinkel loses nothing when Borkman’s plans are revealed. This must mean that Hinkel’s fortune was deposited elsewhere. What lies behind this can only be guesswork, but it would be peculiar if Hinkel had not had his own reasons. According to Borkman, the reason for Hinkel’s betrayal was revenge for Ella’s rejection.

Borkman believes that Hinkel believes that he was behind the rejection, which he was not. Therefore, Borkman believes Hinkel wanted to crush him by revealing his investment plans. How plausible is this assumption? As chairman of the board of directors, Hinkel must have been well aware of the consequences of revealing Borkman’s plan and consciously chose the timing. Taking care of his own interests, he must have acted very deliberately in order to avoid being drawn into bankruptcy when the plan was made public.

Moreover, what was Hinkel’s connection to Ella? There is no reason to doubt her attractiveness, both as a woman and as the heiress to a considerable part of the



Rentheim fortune. But after all, there are other attractive women around; Fanny Wilton is one of them, and she comments on Hinkel's home: "The house is full of young women." (306). Was Ella's rejection really such a hard blow to Hinkel, or did he have other reasons to crush Borkman? If Hinkel's goal was revenge, he could have disclosed Borkman's plans at an earlier stage, and then probably saved the depositors from losing their savings. By letting Borkman continue with his secret plan, Hinkel must have had a separate interest in the fatal outcome, that of bolstering his economic and social position.

One possible alternative, then, is that Hinkel made Borkman do some dirty work for him, and when the right moment came, he was able to increase his own fortune due to the losses of the bank's depositors. Finally, there is also a power relationship involved. By making Borkman sacrifice Ella, Hinkel binds him more closely to himself, and increases his power over him. After Borkman commits the "double murder" of Ella's soul and his own (V, 332), only one goal is left in his life: the accumulation of capital.

Just as Faust sells his soul to Mephisto, Borkman sells his to Hinkel. Hinkel has created the wonders that Borkman dreamt of; made him live like a king. But is it farfetched to identify Hinkel as a Mephisto? One indication is the meaning of his name. To the best of my knowledge, the word 'Hinkel' does not exist in European languages except as a proper noun. However, it has two close connotations in German, a language in which Ibsen was proficient. "Henkel" means "door knob", "opener". "Henker" means "hangman" – and "devil"!

Another reference to *Faust* is also found at the core of *John Gabriel Borkman*. When Borkman is sitting on the top of the hill looking down at the city, he experiences a moment of "verweile doch" – "wilt thou not stay?" The ageing and blind Faust has a vision of opening up a large fertile field where people can joyfully work, making it into a kingdom of freedom:

*Faust:* Green are the fields and fertile: herds could graze  
And men live gladly on the new-found soil  
And on the great hill-barriers that they raise,  
Strong in the nation's valiancy of toil. (11564-67)

Shortly afterwards he dies. In a similar way Borkman has a vision of the prosperous society he wanted to build:

*Borkman:* Can you see the smoke from the great steamships on the fjord? ...  
They come and go. They carry the spirit of unity all around the world. They  
shed light and warmth over the souls in many a thousand homes. It was that I  
dreamt of creating. (367).

Borkman too dies right after having his vision. But there is a crucial difference. Faust envisions a kingdom of freedom for humanity; Borkman dreams of a kingdom of industry and affluence where he himself is king. Borkman's heart attack feels like a hand is taking hold of his heart.

*Borkman*: It was a hand of ice that took hold of my heart.

*Ella Rentheim*: John! Did you feel the hand of ice?

*Borkman* : No. No ice hand. It was a metal hand (369).

If it was an ice hand, that would mean he died from the coldness of his betrayal of love. The metal hand, however, signifies to him continuity from his early days to his last, and becomes in this way a sign of fulfilment. But the fulfilment remains unachieved. Simultaneously the metal hand signifies the primacy of metal over financial capital. The dreams of the miner's son of liberating the ore did not come true; Borkman was unable to accomplish the great wonder, the transformation of the metal into shares and bonds, and then into absolute social dominance.

The abstractions of financial capital lead away from life. If capital makes social relations take the form of things and abstract signs, for those who strive to make it grow this entails an estrangement, an alienation of relationships between humans. The cold ensues, and it does not loosen its grip. If Borkman denies the ice hand, the two women around him take the opposite view. Their version is that he died of the cold due to his betrayal of love, not by the hand of the metal.

*Mrs. Borkman*: ... He was a miner's son – the bank director. Couldn't stand the fresh air.

*Ella Rentheim*: It was more likely the cold that killed him.

*Mrs. Borkman*: ... The cold do you say? The cold – that had killed him long ago. (370)

Ibsen's critique of capitalism, then, is that it makes its leading characters sell their souls to the devil. Blinded by the wonders of capitalism they become megalomaniacal. Directing all their energy to capital accumulation makes them despise their fellow human beings and betray love. Erhart Borkman, the son of Gunhild and John Gabriel, senses this. He turns away from serving capitalist society; he wants to live for sensuousness alone. Does he thereby escape the devil? He accepts the invitation from Hinkel, who is not only rich and powerful, but who can also offer sensual pleasures. His house is full of young women – and some slightly older, like Fanny Wilton. Even if Erhart's fate is another story, it is difficult to escape the feeling that sensuality may be just as much a source of alienation as is capital.

### **The enigma of capitalism**

The common element in Bjørnson's and Ibsen's critique of capitalism lies in the destructivity of the capitalists; their arrogance, narrowness and their wish for complete domination of the world. This is obviously a Nietzschean motif (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 1990). But the idea of master morality in Nietzsche is static. Masters do what they do; they just live out their impulses. The Faustian motif brings in the dynamics that are necessary to characterise capitalism; the restlessness, the wonders, the vision of an affluent society.

At the same time, the reasons for the ills of capitalism are described differently in the plays. Bjørnson places his focus on its productive aspects, and draws the

organization of production and its class relations into the centr. Keywords are technology, organisation, negotiations and governance. If the ruthlessness and condescension of capitalists are a product of capitalism itself, one reason is that their success in rationally organizing production and instigating innovation makes them blind to the fate of others. Hence the powers of capitalism must be curbed. In one sense it is possible to say that Bjørnson's critique is directed against the capitalist system in its contemporary form, while its future depends on what people make out of it.

Ibsen takes a more psychological, and a more radical, stance. Not organization and the wonders of productivity, but finance and the wonders of abstract representation; transformations from metal to money to shares and bonds. In the world of abstract capital there are no practical challenges, no ideas of social fairness; history and politics are out of sight. Despite ongoing social change, the future is absent. Ibsen's exploration of what capitalism does to the deeper layers of identity is instead couched in a broad set of emotional conflicts, and gives his play a stronger feeling of timelessness. But ambivalence is present here as in Ibsen in general; in the contrast between the depositors who lost everything and the busy life of the city; between the loser Borkman and the winner Hinkel.

It would be easy to subsume the varieties of supremacy in these capitalist characters under the standard formula of *hubris*. But are not Ibsen and Bjørnson describing something different? *Hubris* refers to a weak point in a dramatic protagonist, as presumptuousness in a specific person. To take a well-known example, in *Antigone* Creon is struck by *hubris* when he denies Antigone the right to bury her brother, the traitor Polyneices. But this is only half of the story; any ruler in a Greek city state could do the same. *Hubris* is linked to a weakness in an individual. Creon's deficiency resides in his overlooking the exceptional intensity of Antigone's emotions, anchored in her incestuous attachment to her brother (Foss 2012).

Bjørnson's notion of "beyond human power", as expressed in the title of his play, has a wider extension. This is not to deny that the traditional conception of *hubris* is found in several traits in Holger. He is overconfident in his personal power, he sends the woman bearing his child away to America, and he treats his workers with utter contempt. Obviously, this may be interpreted as a flaw in his character. But there is more to it than a personal flaw. Holger's actions and attitudes are also legitimized by a specific ideology, shared by the dominant fraction of his social class: he has the right to do so because economic values are presumed to be created by capitalists alone. This is not only an immoral idea, it also rests on a logical flaw, that capitalists can pressure workers indefinitely, while depending on their labour power. Here there is a parallel with the way that Bratt in the first play on *Beyond Human Power* seeks to establish the truth of faith with absolute certainty.

Borkman's striving for total dominance both over the economy and society is likewise flawed. His social ambitions were reinforced by his ability to move to the top. If his only wish was to dominate society, this might be regarded as *hubris*. But he wants something more; namely to achieve this goal by magic, by carrying out secret financial transactions, connected solely to signs on paper. It then becomes meaningful to ally oneself with the devil. It is Mephisto who has the power to bring forth incredible wonders; Faust is his follower, not his leader. No social class stands

behind Borkman, as it rallied behind Holger. Standing behind Borkman is the invulnerable, invisible Hinkel. He lends legitimacy to capitalism; Borkman's actions follow his plans, Borkman's fall is his triumph.

Here the enigma of capitalism comes to the fore. Marx speculated on its seemingly everlasting ability to expand, and placed its sources in social exploitation. This would eventually lead to its fall, he thought. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Ibsen both think differently. Capitalism is in constant change, ever ambiguous, they seem to say, but despite its serious imperfections, it has come to stay. Once out of the bottle, the spirit will not be put back.

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### Summary

The mid-1890s saw the publication of two seminal critiques of capitalism in Norwegian drama: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's *Beyond Human Power – Second Play* (1895), and Henrik Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896). The obvious differences, as well as the similarities of these plays, invite a comparative analysis.

Bjørnson's play is a sociological depiction of class differences and class struggles, expressed in collective action strategies by employers, and a strange mixture of powerlessness and terrorism by the working class. The main references are work relations and social and political collectivities. Nevertheless, identities and close social relations are a necessary part of social structures as well as dramatic plots. The analysis of Bjørnson's play focuses on the relationships between individual lives and individual action on the one hand, and the broad social landscape on the other.

*John Gabriel Borkman* is about a stagnated universe, where all of the main characters are trying to revive the past. *Borkman* is not about work and collectivities, but about financial capital. To Ibsen, financial capital is the ideal environment for research on the ambitions and shortcomings of individuals. Finance in one sense leads to the aggrandizement of individual power; it makes possible the idea that one man can rule the world. At the same time, there is a world of production in the Ibsenesque universe, as there is a world of social identities in Bjørnson.

The inspiration for both plays may be found in the developments of capitalism during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but also in their intertextual relationships with Nietzsche and Goethe's *Faust*.

### **Biographical note**

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### **Keywords**

Ibsen, Bjørnson, capitalism, labor conflict, finance, Faust