We live in a radically unequal world. Nobody could seriously doubt that. But what are we to do with that knowledge? Bruce Robbins does not claim to have all the answers, but in *The Beneficiary* he provides an important account of how a significant number of people who live in the wealthier parts of the globe have come to be troubled by that inequality. To be sure, simply feeling troubled will not do anything to alleviate global poverty; yet Robbins sees in that feeling of discomfort an incipient moral consciousness that can potentially be directed toward a politics of equality and the common good. *The Beneficiary* is a slim but rich book that brings together in compelling form many of the themes that have animated Robbins’s thinking over the last couple of decades: it is a book about intellectuals and their responsibilities; about cosmopolitan political possibilities; and about the need to globalize certain sentiments, attitudes, and structures that emerge first at smaller scales such as the nation-state.

These various themes coalesce in the figure of the beneficiary, the unlikely protagonist of Robbins’s study. In its dictionary definition, paraphrased by Robbins, the beneficiary is the “one who derives...”

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I am grateful to the students in my spring 2018 graduate seminar “Memory, Violence, and the Implicated Subject” for their lively and engaged discussion of *The Beneficiary*, with special thanks to Kristal Bivona.
advantage,” primarily without having done anything to deserve that reward (5). As Robbins clarifies, his particular interest is in “the well-intentioned beneficiary: the relatively privileged person in the metropolitan center who contemplates her or his unequal relations with persons at the less-prosperous periphery and feels or fears that in some way their fates are linked.” If that well-intentioned figure sounds a little too familiar to readers of this journal, well, Robbins’s extended essay is designed to hit close to home.

In seeking to provoke a certain discomfort in its readers, *The Beneficiary* exemplifies stylistic features common to Robbins’s work, in particular the effective combination of a conversational tone and polemical critique. Indeed, his strategic use of direct, second person address is essential to his project. Early on he puts his readers on notice when he asks, “Who is a beneficiary?” and then answers:

> You are, probably. If you had not benefitted from some ambitious higher education, it seems unlikely that you would be dipping into a book with so earnest and unpromising a title as this one. The education that has prepared you to read this paragraph may not guarantee much in terms of job opportunities, income, or security, but on the global scale . . . it makes you one of the privileged.

(6)

Addressing a group—liberal and leftist academic intellectuals—that tends to see itself as marginal to the structures of power, Robbins challenges his readers to shift their perspective from their understandable sympathy with the “99%” to the sordid truth of their entanglement with global inequality. As he writes, “The target has to include ourselves” (36).

The book seeks to agitate and even transform its presumed readers—themselves beneficiaries—whom Robbins believes have a power to contribute to the transformation of the world precisely by virtue of their privileged position in wealthy North Atlantic states. Drawing on his earlier book *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism from the Viewpoint of Violence* (2012), Robbins locates this potential transformative power in “the paradox of empowered dissent”: “the process of global democratization,” he writes, “cannot afford to do without the input of those who are empowered (that is, who are beneficiaries) and yet who also dissent from and even denounce the system that
empowers them” (10). Robbins is well aware that in foregrounding the beneficiary—and even ascribing a certain political potentiality to the figure—he is bucking the trend of most leftist scholarship, not to mention activism. In those realms, politics is primarily imagined as a bottom-up movement, the revolt of the wretched of the earth, however defined. *The Beneficiary* is thus, in two senses, a book to argue with: it provides resources for addressing urgent real-world problems and it quite deliberately seeks to provoke critical engagement on the part of its readers. After illustrating why this is such a crucial book for our times, I will offer my own counter-proposal in conclusion.

One of the central premises of *The Beneficiary* is that it matters how we perceive and explain inequality. Above all, the book provides an account of the emergence of the recognition in the global North that the well-off and relatively well-off from the developed world owe their prosperity to the poor of the global South. From this recognition arises what Robbins calls the “discourse of the beneficiary” (6). This discourse has two rules: it is addressed to beneficiaries and not to victims; and it is “spoken by a fellow beneficiary” (7). One of the best examples of this discourse—and one that Robbins uses as a kind of refrain—is a powerful passage from George Orwell, whom Robbins seeks to recuperate as “a creatively cosmopolitan voice grappling with the dilemmas of global economic justice” (9). In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell writes: “Under the capitalist system, in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation—an evil state of affairs, but you acquiesce in it every time you step into a taxi or eat a plate of strawberries and cream” (qtd. in Robbins 9). Orwell’s notion of an everyday and largely unconscious acquiescence in an unjust system defines the life of the beneficiary that he (as well as Robbins) seeks to bring into a discomfiting light. (Note the use of direct address that Robbins adapts from Orwell.)

One further insight from Orwell’s passage is central to understanding how Robbins defines the discourse of the beneficiary. In seeing themselves as profiting from someone else’s poverty, well-off

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northerners who participate in that discourse recognize a causal link connecting the rich and poor, a link that makes moral claims on them. This is key. For Robbins, it is this recognition of such a causal relationship that distinguishes the discourse of the beneficiary from humanitarianism, which provides a very different epistemological frame for making sense of inequality. In humanitarianism, moral responsibility for distant others is premised on compassion for their suffering, but such compassion does not necessarily come with an understanding of one’s own implication in that suffering. Humanitarianism instead grows out of what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers would have called “metaphysical guilt,” a sense that we are responsible for suffering taking place anywhere on the globe simply by virtue of our being human.² In contrast, the discourse of the beneficiary arises from a more consequential—and secular—understanding of material global interconnections linking North and South. Such understanding, Robbins emphasizes, is not automatically or directly political: the discourse of the beneficiary possesses political potential, but it can remain stalled in a (self-)denunciatory mode that does not lead to action. Two linked questions then arise: where does the discourse come from and under what conditions can the consciousness of one’s beneficiary status lead to collective action?

A good part of the book involves constructing a genealogy of the discourse of the beneficiary and the possibilities it offers for confronting inequality. Inspired by Orwell and others, Robbins narrates an episodic and often surprising history of how consciousness of beneficiary status came into being. Such counterintuitive examples are characteristic of Robbins’s thinking and part of what makes his work so stimulating. He locates a key precedent, for instance, in a misogynous discourse—that may have begun with Swift in the eighteenth century—berating women for the consumption of luxury goods produced in far-off places under terrible labor conditions. Robbins believes that “a misogynous recognition of distant labor is better than no recognition of distant labor,” and that the

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insight provided by this discourse can be stripped of its politically retrograde packaging and redeemed in the interests of global economic equality (58). While this may seem far-fetched, Robbins cites the “sugar boycotts that accompanied the abolitionist campaigns of the 1790s,” which were largely led by women. Equally provocative, he finds another moment of emergence in the growth of nationalist sentiment during wartime. Orwell plays a big role here as well, this time in the guise of a broadcaster for the BBC Eastern Service during the Second World War (86–89). Ultimately, Robbins wants to suggest that the rationing of goods to which people readily agree during a war demonstrates that mass mobilization in the name of reduced consumption in the developed world—and thus greater equality seen from the perspective of the globe—is indeed possible (75–92). And if it is possible during wartime, Robbins asks, couldn’t it be made possible again under less bellicose circumstances? Here, Robbins is carrying forward the argument he made in *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (2007) and elsewhere about the way the welfare state and sentiments of collective accountability can open up new forms of solidarity that might ultimately transcend the scale of the nation-state.\(^3\)

For all its marshaling of eclectic forms of evidence and its heterogeneous archive ranging from George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Orwell to Jamaica Kincaid, Naomi Klein, and Larissa MacFarquhar, Robbins’s project is a supremely focused one: he wants to bring beneficiaries’ implication in global inequality into view to create a more egalitarian politics. Nobody, and certainly not me, could object to that. But Robbins deliberately restricts his definition of global inequality so that it leaves out the diversity of ways that people benefit (and suffer) from injustices. These restrictions concern scale, the genres of injustice, and temporality. Let me explain.

Inequality for Robbins must be reckoned at the scale of the global, which means that the relevant units are nation-states and regions (that is, North–South divides). Drawing on the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, Robbins foregrounds the international

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division of labor while downplaying divisions internal to particular nation-states with their relatively elite and subaltern populations. This is to say that *geography*—whether you live in the global North or the global South—trumps class position within a society: all residents of the North are, it would seem, necessarily beneficiaries and their well-being derives from causal relations to residents of the South (40–41). Robbins does not hesitate to follow this logic to its more extreme implications, as evidenced in his discussion of migrant workers who come to the US from Central America and elsewhere. Migrant workers, he knows, “lead very hard lives, some of them unimaginably so”; yet, “[f]rom a global perspective . . . they too have to count as beneficiaries” because of their ability to send remittances back home (113). Presumably this logic also implies that no residents of the global South are beneficiaries—an odd presumption in the postcolonial era and one that Robbins does not address. This approach adds another provocative dimension to Robbins’s argument in addition to those that seek to redeem a misogynous critique of exploitation and celebrate versions of wartime mobilization as potential sources of a politics of equality.

This matter of scale also entails, for Robbins, the necessity of downplaying other kinds of social hierarchies within the metropole and putting aside questions of historical injustice. As with the question of migrant workers, Robbins does not hedge when it comes to drawing out the logic of his argument. One reason, he admits, that “African Americans, Native Americans, and Latino Americans have played so negligible a role in my argument” is that “an argument that takes its rationale from injustice at the global scale is at perpetual risk of derailment each time it dwells on the domestically disadvantaged” (145). As I read this passage, leaving out the “domestically disadvantaged” seems to mean leaving by the wayside not only class divisions in the North but questions of race and colonization that, for Robbins, might cloud the issue of economic inequality.

Robbins also sees the risk of derailment in tendencies to turn to historical injustice. Although the central chapters of the book provide a historiﬁcized account of the growth of moral consciousness and sentiment, *The Beneﬁciary* is actually a deliberately presentist work. The book, he writes in conclusion, “has maintained a relatively single-minded focus on the beneﬁciary as a present-tense relation to
present economic realities” (148). Thus, Robbins wants to put aside a prominent dimension of beneficiary status: that advantage derived from inheritance or from other historical occurrences that precede one’s birth or fall beyond one’s direct involvement. He describes the reasons for setting aside the historical question as political: as with the question of domestic inequality, the turn to the past would, he believes, cloud issues of responsibility and distract from the urgent need for change in the present. Robbins nuances this position in the conclusion by emphasizing the need to address “ongoing” historical wrongs—the kind of wrong that, like racism, “continues to push its dirty fingers into the present.” With the category of the ongoing, Robbins seeks to distance himself from the “radical presentism” of Walter Benn Michaels, but tension remains between the historical nature of Robbins’s argument regarding moral consciousness and the contemporary focus of his critique.

In constructing his concept of the well-intentioned beneficiary, Robbins thus deliberately performs three simplifications: the beneficiary benefits primarily from “present-tense” relations of inequality; inequality is considered uniquely as economic; and economics is understood at the scale of the international division of labor. How should we assess these strictures? The ultimate question—and I mean it as a real question—is whether these simplifications are necessary to Robbins’s attempt to politicize the beneficiary and to identify, as he writes, “the most actionable locations of injustice” (145). In some senses, this is an empirical or strategic question: if we want to alleviate injustice, are we better off isolating particular cases—the single issue strategy—or should we seek to bridge problems and locations through a coalitional approach? There is also a theoretical question here: if we want to understand social relations—at whatever scale—can we afford to bracket out large realms of social experience?

I find Robbins’s approach invigorating: it helps us sharpen our moral and political intuitions and it challenges us to “get real” about existing problems. The Beneficiary is a book you need to read and argue with. My own approach to related questions has taken a different route, however. Drawing on both intersectional feminism and post-Holocaust approaches to historical responsibility, I have posited a new figure for critical thought that overlaps with the beneficiary but
also encompasses a greater range of injustices: the implicated subject. Like beneficiaries, implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm. Yet the scope of the concept’s analytical purchase is, I believe, greater and more heterogeneous than that of the beneficiary as deployed by Robbins; implicated subjects not only benefit from, but also contribute to, inhabit, and inherit regimes of domination without originating or controlling such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations in which the positions of victim and perpetrator are possible—even likely—yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles. In my terms, beneficiaries are implicated subjects, but not all implicated subjects are beneficiaries.

Thinking in terms of the implicated subject instead of the beneficiary leads me to offer an alternative to the three reductions Robbins recommends. Instead of limiting implication to the global scale, I see it working across scales in both local and translocal contexts. Instead of remaining limited to economic injustice, implication derives from racism, colonization, and environmental catastrophe, among other social ills. Clearly, these sources have strong economic components, but they also remain at least semi-autonomous in their impact. Finally, while Robbins stands by a “moderate presentism,” I want to open up the relations between past and present injustices to greater scrutiny than that offered in this book. To be sure, it is “ongoing” injustices that matter, as Robbins specifies, but the relations between past and present—as between economic and non-economic, local and global injustices—are more complicated than a polemical approach can acknowledge.

To illustrate this distinction between Robbins’s approach and my own, consider a passage from Jamaica Kincaid’s acerbic essay *A Small Place* (1988) that Robbins deftly reads as implicitly indicting the Antiguan author herself as a beneficiary because of her location in the US. Robbins quotes a famous scene in which a hypothetical white American tourist goes for a swim in the Caribbean (note again Kincaid’s use of second person address):

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You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it. You must not wonder where your bath water went when you pulled out the stopper. You must not wonder what happened when you brushed your teeth. Oh, it might all end up in the water you are thinking of taking a swim in; the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage disposal system. Robbins remarks, “‘You’ get punished by swimming into your own shit,” and then asks, “But what do you get punished for?” (38). The answer cuts to the heart of the beneficiary relation: “the lines of causality that connect the lack of a sewage disposal system in Antigua with a better sanitized life back in the United States.” Such lines of causality traverse geopolitical distances, Robbins rightly suggests: “What Kincaid is saying to ‘you,’ as I read her, is that your most intimate bodily identity is constituted by your relations with distant places” (39).

But lines of connection also traverse temporal distances in a way that Robbins doesn’t quite acknowledge. While he ends the quotation with the sewage disposal system, the passage continues like this: “But the Caribbean Sea is very big and the Atlantic Ocean is even bigger; it would amaze even you to know the number of black slaves this ocean has swallowed up.” In defamiliarizing a banal scene of international, North–South tourism, Kincaid offers not only a presentist indictment of economic inequality, as Robbins notes, but also a future-oriented vision of ecological devastation and an evocation of the catastrophe of slavery that opens up problems of historical justice. While Kincaid is certainly committed to exploring the ongoing nature of the slave past, I am not sure that the enslaved people swallowed up by the Atlantic can be subsumed under Robbins’s focus on “present-tense . . . economic realities” alone (148). Rather, Kincaid challenges us to acknowledge what Berber

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7. I am drawing here on a longer discussion of slavery, reparations, and A Small Place in The Implicated Subject, chapter 3.
Bevernage calls the “irrevocable” past. Bevernage’s irrevocable past weighs on the present as does Robbins’s “ongoing” past, but it does not let itself be subsumed under Robbins’s triad of presentism, the international division of labor, and economics tout court. In other words, the haunting, irrevocable past—here embodied in the Middle Passage—continues to implicate us and needs to be addressed and worked through on its own terms. Its ramifications include but extend beyond global economic inequality in the present; or, perhaps better, we could say that its ramifications cut across North and South, present and past, and economic, racial, and environmental injustice to link an array of implicated subjects in dispersed spaces.

Can such a vision—let us call it intersectional—produce a politics that avoids the “derailments” identified by Robbins? There are no guarantees here, but it seems we have no choice but to move in this direction. For guidance, I look to one of the founding documents of what would later be called intersectional feminism, the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977). While addressing the kind of economic inequality that preoccupies Robbins in The Beneficiary, the Collective also describes the need for a more encompassing approach to change: “We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. . . . We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation.”

Although the collective does not put it precisely in these terms, part of the reason that a socialist revolution would not guarantee the abolition of gendered and racialized oppression is that those forms of oppression would likely persist, and that persistence signals the historical nature of those wrongs—wrongs that are connected to the vision of the Atlantic sketched by Kincaid. While certainly material and structural in their expression, gendered and racialized forms of domination also involve processes of meaning making and subject formation that sediment historical legacies—both for those who are


disadvantaged by those legacies and for those implicated subjects advantaged by them.

Both the advantages and disadvantages accrue in the domestic spaces of the global North as well as those of the global South and they cannot be classified as uniquely economic in nature. What politics follows from this insight? Although rightly associated with the concept of identity politics and the theory of multiple oppressions, the Combahee River Collective was also at the forefront of thinking affiliation across social locations. As one member, Demita Frazier, later put it, “We [as black women] understood that coalition building was crucial to our own survival.”

Coalition building necessarily requires forging alliances between those who are oppressed in particular contexts and those who are beneficiaries or what I have called implicated subjects. Precisely because of the complex nature of the causality that connects beneficiaries and other implicated subjects to scenes of injustice, I do not think it is possible to limit our responsibilities to one set of social antagonisms. Nor do I think we should limit our sense of time only to the pressures of the present: we are haunted by the past just as we are already implicated in the unraveling future. The Beneficiary succeeds brilliantly in focusing its readers on the urgencies of our time. But injustices also overflow the narrow limits of space, time, and scale that Robbins sets. The political challenge lies here: in finding “the most actionable locations of injustice” while simultaneously building the heterogeneous coalitions we will need to transform them.

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