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ARTICLE



## Communism or Neo-Feudalism?

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### ABSTRACT

This lecture looks at the neo-feudalizing tendencies in contemporary capitalism. Expropriation, domination, and force have intensified to such an extent that it no longer makes sense to posit free and equal actors meeting in the labor market even as a governing fiction. Rent and debt feature as or more heavily in accumulation than profit, and work increasingly exceeds the wage relation. The alternative to neo-feudalism is communism.

### Introduction

In her new book, *Capital is Dead*, McKenzie Wark poses a provocative thought experiment: what if we are not in capitalism anymore but something worse? I respond to Wark's question not with a resolute yes or no but with a tendential analysis: what tendencies do we see leading us away from capitalism and toward something worse? For support, I enlist Rosa Luxemburg's famous positing of the choice between socialism and barbarism. My wager is that our choice is between communism or neo-feudalism. Capitalism is tending toward neo-feudalism. Our task is pushing it over and into communism. The advantage Luxemburg's enlistment affords is thus political. Tendencies are not all-determining. There is a space for, a *need* for, political action. We are in the setting we describe, the picture we take. Capitalism is turning itself into something worse. Nevertheless, we can intervene and redirect it.

By "capitalism" I mean a system where private property, waged labor, and commodity production propel the self-valorization of value. To maintain and legitimate itself, the capitalist system requires a particular state form, a bourgeois state of laws with claims to fairness and neutrality. Today's communicative capitalism is the system that is becoming neo-feudal as its own processes intensify and turn in on themselves.

By "communism" I do not mean the end of politics in a reconciled and harmonious totality. As we learn from psychoanalysis, antagonism is irreducible; it goes "all the way down." Rather than heaven on earth, communism is the political form through which production for the sake of the capital accumulation of the few is replaced with production for the sake of meeting the needs of the many, a form for the collective self-emancipation of the proletarianized (Marx makes this point in his discussion of the Paris Commune in "The Civil War in France").

So, again, I accept Wark's provocation to consider that we are not under capitalism but something worse. And I respond by drawing out the tendencies in the present that point beyond capitalism to this something worse, to a neo-feudalism of new lords and new

serfs, a micro-elite of platform billionaires and the massive service sector or sector of servants. Insofar as I am emphasizing *tendencies* toward neo-feudalism, my response to Wark is premised on the idea that capitalism has always overlapped with, relied on, and exploited other modes of production and accumulation. Indeed, capitalism makes them worse, dismantling the conditions to which they were adapted and subjecting them to alien laws.

Today capitalism is making itself into something worse as its processes of real subsumption turn in on themselves. Communicative capitalism's monopoly concentration, intensified inequality, and subjection of the state to the market are resulting in a neo-feudalism where accumulation occurs as much through rent, debt, and power as it does through commodity production. Globally, in the knowledge and tech industries, for example, rental income accruing from intellectual property rights exceeds income from the production of goods.<sup>1</sup> In the United States (US), financial services contribute more to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than manufactured goods.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, capital is not reinvested in production; it is hoarded, eaten up, or redistributed as rents. Value is thus decreasingly self-valorizing. Valorization processes have spread far beyond the factory, into complex, speculative, and unstable circuits increasingly dependent on surveillance, coercion, and violence.

Communicative capitalism is at a crossroads: communism or neo-feudalism. Communism names that emancipatory egalitarian mode of association to which we should aspire and for which we have to organize and fight. Neo-feudalism names the something worse that capitalism has become and is becoming. It is what happens if we do not fight back.

## Four Features of Neo-Feudalism

Neo-feudalism is characterized by four interlocking features: 1) the parcelization of sovereignty; 2) hierarchy and expropriation with new lords and peasants; 3) desolate hinterlands and privileged municipalities; and, 4) insecurity and catastrophism. I address each in turn.

### *Parcelization of Sovereignty*

Marxist historians Perry Anderson and Ellen Meiksins Wood present the parcelization of sovereignty as a key feature of feudalism. Two aspects of the parcelization of sovereignty are important for understanding neo-feudalism: fragmentation and extra-economic coercion. First, state functions are "vertically and horizontally fragmented."<sup>3</sup> Local arrangements occur in a variety of forms as different sorts of political and economic authorities claim right and jurisdiction. Arbitration and compromise take the place of the rule of law. The line between legal and illegal becomes weaker.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Westra, *Periodizing Capitalism and Capitalist Extinction* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords* (London, UK: Verso, 2008), p. 166.

<sup>4</sup>Chris Wickam, "The 'Feudal Revolution' and the Origins of Italian City Communes," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (2014), pp. 29–55.

Second, with the parcelization of sovereignty political authority and economic power blend together. Feudal lords extracted a surplus from peasants through legal coercion, legal in part because the lords decided the law that applied to the peasants in their jurisdiction. Neo-feudal lords like global financial institutions and digital technology platforms use debt to redistribute wealth from the world's poorest to the richest. In both the feudal and the neo-feudal versions, economic actors exercise political power over a particular group of people on the basis of terms and conditions that the economic actors, the lords, set. At the same time, political power is exercised with and as economic power, not only taxes but fines, liens, asset seizures, licenses, patents, jurisdictions, and borders. Under neo-feudalism, the legal fictions of a bourgeois state determined by the forms of neutral law and free and equal individuals break down and the directly political character of society reasserts itself.

Consider some contemporary examples of fragmentation and the merger of state and economic authority characteristic of the parcelization of sovereignty. Ten percent of global wealth is hoarded in off-shore accounts to avoid taxation, that is, to escape the reach of state law. Law does not apply to billionaires powerful enough to evade it. Correlatively, the largest tech companies have valuations greater than the economies of most of the world's countries. Cities and states relate to Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook, and Google/Alphabet as if these corporations were themselves sovereign states. Cities negotiate with, try to attract, and cooperate with these firms on the firm's own terms. Immense concentrated wealth has its own constituent power, the power to constitute the rules it will follow – or not. In the same vein, foreign investors have the right to sue state governments in international tribunals. They often do this when public interest regulations designed to protect water, communities, and the environment threaten to reduce the value of their investments. A large number of these cases are brought by Canadian mining exploration firms against Latin American governments. According to Manuel Perez- Rocha and Jen Moore, "The corporations are allowed to bypass domestic courts and sue governments before private tribunals, such as the World Bank-affiliated International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes. The tribunal members are highly paid corporate lawyers who have no obligation to consider the rights of local communities or the importance of health and environmental protections."<sup>5</sup> Private tribunals take the place of state law.

Sovereignty is parcellated, fragmented, on domestic fronts as well. Palestine is a clear example, as Israeli settlers illegally build up settlements on Palestinian land, under the protection of Israeli military forces. An example from the United States: cash strapped communities use elaborate systems of fines to expropriate money from people directly, usually impacting poor people the hardest. In her recent book, *Punishment without Crime*, Alexandra Natapoff documents the dramatic scope of misdemeanor law in the already enormous US carceral system. Poor people, disproportionately people of color, are arrested on bogus charges, and convinced to plead guilty so as to avoid the jail time they could incur should they contest the charges. Not only does the guilty plea go on their record, but they start to accrue fines that, if they cannot afford to pay, will turn in to more fines and more charges. We got a brief look into this system of legal illegality and unjust administration of

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<sup>5</sup>Manuel Perez-Rocha and Jen Moore, "Mining Companies Use Excessive Legal Powers to Gamble With Latin American Lives," *Truthout* (May 14, 2019), available online at: <https://truthout.org/articles/mining-companies-use-excessive-legal-powers-to-gamble-with-latin-american-lives/>.

justice in the wake of the riots in Ferguson, Missouri that followed the murder of Michael Brown: “the city’s municipal court and policing apparatus openly extracted millions of dollars from its low-income African American population.”<sup>6</sup> Police were instructed “to make arrests and issue citations in order to raise revenue.”<sup>7</sup> Like minions of some feudal lords, city governments use force to expropriate value from the people.

Here is one last example. Lordship designates a social relation for the appropriation of surplus.<sup>8</sup> Are we not in that same relation with the owners of communicative capitalism’s media platforms? They appropriate the surplus generated by our use – the data and metadata that accompanies our communicative interactions. Through networked personal communication devices, the social substance is appropriated, stored, and mined for the extraction of the resource “information.” What was common becomes private, expropriated from us not simply via user fees but also through the “feedback,” data, and metadata generated by networked lives.

### ***Hierarchy and Expropriation: New “Peasants” and “Lords”***

Feudal relations are characterized by a fundamental inequality. Meiksins Wood emphasizes that the distinct feature of feudalism in the West “is the exploitation of peasants by lords in the context of parcelized sovereignty.”<sup>9</sup> Anderson reminds us of exploitative monopolies such as watermills that were controlled by the lord; peasants were obliged to have their grain ground at their lord’s mill, a service for which they had to pay. So not only did peasants occupy and till land that they did not own, but they dwelled under conditions where the feudal lord was, as Marx says, “the manager and master of the process of production and of the entire process of social life.”<sup>10</sup>

Already in 2010, in his influential book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, tech guru Jaron Lanier observed the emergence of peasants and lords of the internet. This theme has increased in prominence as the tech giants have become richer and more extractive, their owners becoming billionaires on the basis of the cheap labor of their workers, the outsourcing of much necessary work to third party contractors, the free labor of their users, the tax breaks bestowed on them by cities desperate to attract jobs, and the solidification of their monopolies. Evgeny Morozov has drawn out the feudalization accompanying the rise of the tech giants. He writes, “The downside – never mind the privacy disaster – is that they pay almost no taxes; their penchant for moonshots undermines any state-led innovation efforts; their welfarism cannot possibly last forever. In fact, the latter is likely to result in the hyper-modern form of feudalism, whereby those of us caught up in their infrastructure will have to pay – at least it will be as easy as tapping your Oyster card! – for access to anything with a screen or a button.”<sup>11</sup> The tech giants are extractive. Like so many tributary demands, their tax breaks take money from communities.

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<sup>6</sup>Alexandra Natapoff, *Punishment without Crime* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018), p. 133.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>8</sup>George C. Comninel, “English Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 27:4 (2000), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords*, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup>Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, UK: Verso, [1974] 2013), p. 183. Anderson is quoting Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Evgeny Morozov, “Tech Titans are Busy Privatizing Our Data,” *Guardian* (April 24, 2016), available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/24/the-new-feudalism-silicon-valley-overlords-advertising-necessary-evil>.

Their presence drives up rents and real estate prices, driving out affordable apartments, small businesses, people. Shoshana Zuboff's study of surveillance capitalism brings out a further dimension of tech feudalism – military service. Like lords to kings, Facebook and Google cooperate with powerful states, sharing information that these states are legally barred from gathering themselves. Overall, the extractive dimension of networked technologies is now pervasive, intrusive, and unavoidable.

So while it is not quite right to say that the present is an era of peasants and lords, it is right to say that contemporary capitalist society is characterized by an intensification of inequality – more billionaires, greater distance between rich and poor, and the solidification of a differentiated legal architecture that protects corporations and the rich while it immiserates and incarcerates the working and lower class. In the US, the entrenchment of economic inequality is severe: the US has less economic mobility than England, a country with a landed aristocracy.

"Platformization" and land privatization index tendencies toward the hierarchy and expropriation characteristic of neo-feudalism. As Nick Srnicek explains, platforms as "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact."<sup>12</sup> Positioning themselves as intermediaries, platforms constitute grounds for user activities, conditions of possibility for interactions to occur.<sup>13</sup> Google makes it possible to find information in an impossibly dense and changing information environment. Amazon lets us easily locate, compare prices, and purchase consumer goods from established as well as unknown vendors. Uber enables strangers to share rides. Airbnb does the same for houses and apartments. All are enabled by an immense generation and circulation of data. The more people use them, the more effective, and powerful they become, ultimately transforming the larger environment of which they are a part. Hence, as I explain more thoroughly below in the discussion of complex networks, platforms tend toward monopolization.<sup>14</sup> And we should not forget that users are subject to the rules and directives of platform owners.

Two of the types of platform Srnicek considers are the cloud and the lean platform. The by now familiar cloud (which is not a cloud but a bunch of energy guzzling servers) features a broad array of on-demand computing services, typically storage, operating systems, and applications. Companies do not have to purchase or host software of their own; they can subscribe to or rent it as needed. The cloud platform extracts rents and data, like land squared or reflexivized. Lean platforms are similarly reflexive, able to extract rent without property by relying on an outsourced workforce responsible for its own maintenance, training, and means of work.<sup>15</sup> The primary examples are Uber and Airbnb, which reconfigure items of consumption as means of accumulation. One's car is not for personal transport. It is for making money. One's apartment is not a place to live; it is something to rent out. And in each case, what was personal property becomes an instrument for the capital and data accumulation of the lords of the platform, Uber and Airbnb. This tendency toward becoming-peasant, that is, becoming one who owns means of production but whose labor increases the capital of the platform owner, is neo-feudal.

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<sup>12</sup>Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 43–44.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 76.

Turning to land privatization, over the past forty years over two million hectares of British public land (ten percent of Britain's overall land mass) have been sold to private buyers. According to Brett Christophers, this sell off has occurred at various levels, from local to national, for various reasons, and under various auspices in a "piecemeal and fragmented process."<sup>16</sup> Christophers rightly points out that Marx saw the enclosure of the commons as a crucial condition for capitalist development insofar as this enclosure threw peasants off the land and forced them to sell their labor power in order to survive. Crucial to the new round of privatization has been a different set of tendencies: "a rise in private-sector land-hoarding; Britain's growing transformation into a 'rentier' type economy – one increasingly dominated by rents paid by the many to the affluent, land-owning few; and widespread social dislocation."<sup>17</sup>

As Marx emphasizes in the third volume of *Capital*, "the monopoly of landed property is a historical precondition for the capitalist mode of production and remains its permanent foundation."<sup>18</sup> Yet, he adds, it is capitalism itself that creates this mode; capitalism creates its own preconditions, giving new form to old objects and practices. Uber turns private cars into means of accumulation for distant platform owners. Contemporary processes of land privatization, rather than providing bases for capitalist development, tend toward its transformation into something worse, a neo-feudalism where billionaires buy and hoard massive amounts of land.

Land privatization also points to ways that the intensification of inequality into new lords and peasants has accompanied a personalization of consumption. Not all consumers are the same. Some are loyal retainers, who pledge loyalty to a corporation in exchange for points, discounts, benefits, and other rewards for their service as customers. Operating as a global aristocracy and world ruling class, the super-rich are increasingly protected from the rest of us.

Their planes are private, schools are private, clubs are private. More significant, though, are the ways their fortunes are made through the proliferation of mechanisms of direct expropriation: bank fees for every possible transaction, illegal foreclosures and evictions, the disaggregation of services into separate chargeable elements, direct wage theft – which is frequent, widespread, and impossible for people who cannot afford lawyers to address. The finance sector systematically takes from the poor to give to the rich. As Richard Westra observes, "Much of the arcane structure of financialization with its opaque securitized instruments is built upon exploding debts of average working people over home mortgages, credit cards, student loans, and so forth."<sup>19</sup> This same structure repeats on an international scale with entire countries forced to gut their social provisioning as they capitulate to powerful creditors. And, of course it is necessary once again to mention tech, which takes our data – whether we share it or not – and aggregates and mines and sells it in the contemporary equivalent of the water mill. At this point, we need our phones and internet; we cannot not choose our own expropriation.

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<sup>16</sup>Brett Christophers, *The New Enclosures* (London, UK: Verso, 2018), p. 329.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>18</sup>*Capital*, Vol. 3, p. 754.

<sup>19</sup>Westra, *Periodizing Capital and Capitalist Extinction*, p. 239.

## Cities and Hinterlands

A third feature of neo-feudalism is its spatiality: one of protected, often lively centers surrounded by agriculture and desolate hinterlands. We might also characterize this as a split between town and country, municipal and rural areas, urban communes and the surrounding countryside, or, more abstractly between an inside walled off from an outside, a division between what is secured and what is endangered, who is prosperous and who is desperate. Meiksins Wood says that medieval cities were essentially oligarchies, “with dominant classes enriched by commerce and financial services for kings, emperors and popes. Collectively, they dominated the surrounding countryside ... extracting wealth from it in one way or another.”<sup>20</sup> Anderson describes the feudal division between town and country as a “dynamic opposition” between commodity and natural production.<sup>21</sup> Correlative to this division are the nomads and migrants who, facing unbearable conditions, seek new places to live and work yet all too often come up against the walls. Their real conditions at the edge of survival become mirrored back to them in the fears of the protected who can never be safe enough.

The US hinterlands are sites of loss and dismantlement, places with fantasies of a flourishing capitalist past that for awhile might have let some linger in the hope that their lives and their children’s lives might actually get better. Emily Guendelsberger writes in *On the Clock*, “I’ve seen so many ghost towns and shuttered factories in Kentucky, Indiana, and North Carolina—just drive twenty minutes in any direction, they’re everywhere.”<sup>22</sup> Remnants of an industrial capitalism that has left them behind for cheaper labor, the hinterlands are ripe for the new intensified exploitation that looks like something worse than capitalism. No longer making things, people persist through warehouses, call centers, Dollar Stores, and fast food.

Politically, the desperation of the hinterlands manifests in the movements of those outside the cities, movements that are sometimes around environmental issues (fracking and pipeline struggles), sometimes around land (privatization and expropriation), sometimes around the reduction of services (hospital and school closings). In the US, the politics of guns positions the hinterlands against the urban. We might also note the way the division between hinterlands and municipality gets reinscribed within cities themselves. We see this both in the abandonment of poor areas and their eradication through capitalist gentrification land grabs. A city gets richer and more people become homeless; clear examples are San Francisco, Seattle, and New York.

Finally, we could note the new prominence of social reproduction theory as a response to “hinterlandization,” that is, to the loss of a general capacity to reproduce the basic conditions of livable life. This loss of capacity appears in rising suicide rates, increase in anxiety and drug addiction, declining birth rates, lower rates of life expectancy, and in the US, the psychotic societal self-destruction of mass shootings. It appears in the collapsed infrastructures and undrinkable water. The hinterlands are written on people’s bodies and on the land. With closures of hospitals and schools, and the diminution of basic services, life becomes more desperate and uncertain. Teachers’ strikes in the US have made their

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<sup>20</sup>Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords*, p. 172.

<sup>21</sup>Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, p. 146.

<sup>22</sup>Emily Guendelsberger, *On the Clock* (New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2019), p. 166.



primary issues not simply better salaries – although these matter – but better conditions for their students, for the children.

Phil A. Neel's recent book, *Hinterland*, notes patterns between China, Egypt, Ukraine, and the United States. They are all places with desolate abandoned wastelands and cities on the brink of overload. Neel's account of the stratification and struggle across the international periphery echoes arguments made by International Relations scholars thirty years earlier.

Already in 1998 Philip Cerny was writing of the "growing alienation between global innovation, communication and resource nodes (global cities) on the one hand and disfavored, fragmented hinterlands on the other."<sup>23</sup> Cerny warned of the resulting exclusion and lumpenization. As large geographical spaces are starved of infrastructure and support, he said, "many people will simply be 'out of the loop,' country bumpkins or even roaming deprived bands ... forced once again to become predators or supplicants on the cities, as in the Middle Ages."<sup>24</sup>

### ***Insecurity and Apocalypticism***

Finally, the fourth feature of feudalism important for thinking about neo-feudal tendencies in the present is affective and subjective – insecurity, anxiety, apocalypse. These affective orientations link the first three categories together. There is good reason to feel insecure. The catastrophe of capitalist expropriation of the social surplus in the setting of a grossly unequal and warming planet is real.

A loose, mystical neo-feudal ideology that knits together and amplifies apocalyptic insecurity seems to be taking form in the new embrace of the occult, techno-pagan, and anti-modern.<sup>25</sup> Examples include Jordan Peterson's mystical Jungianism and Alexander Dugin's mythical geopolitics of Atlantis and Hyperborea. We might also note the rise of the so-called "dark enlightenment" (Nick Land) and "neo-reactionaries" such as PayPal's billionaire founder Peter Thiel who argues that freedom is incompatible with democracy.<sup>26</sup> In a lecture in 2012, Thiel explained the link between feudalism and tech start-ups: "No founder or CEO has absolute power. It's more like the archaic feudal structure. People vest the top person with all sorts of power and ability, and then blame them if and when things go wrong."<sup>27</sup> What is interesting here is how feudal structure is rendered as an instrument of freedom, a move Corey Robin associates with American "democratic feudalism" where the "promise of democracy is to govern another human being as completely as a monarch governs his subjects."<sup>28</sup> While Thiel is happy to jettison the democratic element altogether, he shares the view that freedom is the

<sup>23</sup>Philip G. Cerny, "Neomedievalism, Civil War and the New Security Dilemma: Globalisation as Durable Disorder," *Civil Wars* 1:1 (1998), p. 45.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>25</sup>I owe this point to papers given by Ketii Chukhrov and Maria Chehonadskii at the 2019 meeting of the Radical Critical Theory Circle in Nisyros, Greece.

<sup>26</sup>See Klint Finley, "Geeks for Monarchy: The Rise of the Neoreactionaries," *Tech Crunch* (November 23, 2013), available online at: <https://techcrunch.com/2013/11/22/geeks-for-monarchy/>; and Peter Thiel, "The Education of a Liberation," *Cato Unbound* (April 13, 2009), available online at: <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian>. I am indebted to Tomislav Medak for bringing Thiel's piece and position to my attention.

<sup>27</sup>Keith A. Spencer, "Revenge of the Nerd-kings: Why Some in Silicon Valley are Advocating for Monarchy," *Salon* (April 13, 2019), available online at: <https://www.salon.com/2019/04/13/why-some-in-silicon-valley-are-advocating-for-monarchy>.

<sup>28</sup>Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 99–100.

protection of privilege and that privileges are the expression of an inner genius. Along with other Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Thiel is concerned to protect his fortune from democratic impingement, and so advocates strategies of exodus and isolation such as living on the sea and space colonization, whatever it takes to save wealth from taxation. In sum, the emergence of this neo-reactionary ideology illustrates the way extreme capitalism goes over into the radical de-centralization of neo-feudalism.

For those on the other side of the neo-feudal divide, anxiety and insecurity are addressed less by ideology than they are by opioids, alcohol, and food, anything to dull the pain of hopeless, mindless, endless drudgery. Guendelsberger describes the stress caused by constant technological surveillance on the job – the risk of being fired for being a few seconds late, for not meeting the quotas, for using the bathroom too many times. Repetitive, low-control, high-stress work like work that is technologically monitored correlates directly with “depression and anxiety.”<sup>29</sup> Uncertain schedules and unreliable pay – because wage theft is ubiquitous – are stressful, deadening. They suggest that neo-feudal apocalypticism, for some at least, may be individual, familial, or local. It is hard to get worked up about a climate catastrophe when you have lived catastrophe for a few generations.

I have tried to show how four elements of past European feudalism – parcelization of sovereignty, hierarchy and expropriation, cities and hinterlands, and insecurity and apocalypticism – are relevant to present trajectories. Together they let us see the present not as capitalist but as something worse, a neo-feudalism born of capitalist processes as they intensify and turn back in on themselves. To be clear, I am not making a historical claim about feudalism’s fundamental structure or an empirical claim regarding all existing feudalisms. I am drawing out tendencies that help us make sense of the present.

### **It is not about Democracy and Fascism**

By naming the “something worse” than capitalism *neo-feudalism*, I am rejecting the idea that the big confrontation today is between democracy and fascism. In the United States, we hear this a lot from liberal newspapers and mainstream capitalist politicians. But it makes little sense to think that the primary problem is the fascist threat to democracy given that capitalist democracies are dictatorships of the bourgeoisie, systems of rule arranged for the benefit of capital and the enjoyment of the powerful. Indeed, who does not know this now, given the increasing power of oligarchs – financiers, media and real estate moguls, carbon and tech billionaires? Particularly striking is the way that a vicious new anti-communism has accompanied the political rise of the oligarchs in the US, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the United Kingdom (UK).

To view our present in terms of democracies threatened by rising fascism deflects attention from the fundamental role of globally networked communicative capitalism in exacerbating popular anger and discontent. The rhetoric of fascism prevents us from considering why ostensibly democratic societies appear to be turning to the Right. This rhetoric naturalizes hate and treats it in terms of identity, as how someone simply is and how that is all that he is. It fails to see the rightward shift as a politicization. Underlying the

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<sup>29</sup>Guendelsberger, *On the Clock*, p. 125.

politicization toward the Right is economics: complex networks produce extremes of inequality, winner-take-all or winner-take-most distributions. The rightward shift responds to this intensification of inequality. People's lives have become more desperate and uncertain. Unions are weaker. Technology threatens to eliminate ever more sectors of the workforce, further diminishing sites and opportunities for organized resistance. Capitalism is changing itself into something worse. When the Left is weak, or blocked from political expression by mainstream media and capitalist political parties, popular anger gets expressed by others willing to attack the system. In the present, these others are the far Right.

As people experience insecurity and dispossession, they want something to hold onto and someone to blame. The Right offers an identity wrapped around nation, church, and family. It directs anger against threats to this identity: immigrants, socialists, feminists, and sexual minorities. Thinking in terms of neo-feudalism moves us away from the stage of identity and forces us to confront the impact of extreme economic inequality on political society and institutions. It makes us reckon with the fact of billionaires hoarding trillions of dollars of assets and walling themselves into their own enclaves while millions become climate refugees and hundreds of millions encounter diminished life prospects, an intensifying struggle just to survive. More bluntly put, recognizing that capitalism is becoming neo-feudal pushes us away from hopes that any election or set of small reforms are even slightly adequate to the present catastrophe.

By calling tendencies in our present "neo-feudal," I am also signaling a change in labor relations. Today the ideal of freely contracted labor that justifies and conceals coercive class relations is untenable. Not even the barest fantasy of freely given consent accounts for the social relations of wealth accumulation today. In the service dominated economies of the Global North, majorities work in service sectors. Some find that their phones, bikes, cars, and homes have lost their character as personal property and been transformed into means of production or means for the extraction of rent. Tethered to platforms owned by others, consumer items and means of life are now means for their, the platform owners', accumulation. Some of us enjoy the fantasy that our service is creative, that we are members of a privileged class of knowledge workers. Yet much of that work is increasingly done for free, maybe with a chance of pay. Knowledge workers, like day laborers, often have to compete for contracts – if they win, then they can work for a wage. Most of us constitute a property-less underclass only able to survive by servicing the needs of high earners (for instance, as personal assistants, trainers, tutors, child-minders, cooks, cleaners, et cetera). A report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics says that over the next ten years the occupation that will add the most jobs is personal care aids, not health workers but aids who bathe and clean people.<sup>30</sup> Another age would call them servants. The waged are further expropriated of their minimal incomes via unavoidable debts, fees, fines, and rents. In the US, taxes on people are redistributed to corporations. For example, in 2018, fifty-seven corporations, including Amazon, not only did not pay taxes but received money back, tax rebates. The US government squeezes its citizens for money to pay out to corporations.

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<sup>30</sup>Derek Thompson, "Why Nerds and Nurses are Taking Over the US Economy," *Atlantic* (October 26, 2017), available online at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/10/the-future-of-jobs-polarized-unequal-and-health-care/543915/>.

In the Marxist-Leninist tradition, part of the optimism around communism stems from how it is supposed to arise out of capitalism, how it would rest on the fixed capital and the organizational and infrastructural capacities generated by the capitalist mode of production. Even as crises of over-production always lead to immense waste and destruction, it was hard to believe that the bourgeoisie would oversee the dismantlement of society. The new lords of the anthropocene – the billionaires of finance, technology, media, real estate, shipping, and fossil fuels – have no such hesitation. In their self-interest, they prefer the destruction of the world to the diminution of their vast fortunes. In this phase of absolute subsumption, capitalism turns in on itself as a mode of waste, hoarding, and destruction where capital is accumulated as much via expropriation, rents, debts, and fines as it is by exploitation.

### More than a Parallel – a Tendency

Some might suspect that my argument for neo-feudalism is non-Marxist. They might associate Marxism with a reductive, determinist theory of stages and transitions where capitalism comes out of feudalism and the next stage is necessarily socialism. This is not my view. And it is not Marx's either. Marx was more nuanced. He acknowledged the co-existence of different modes of production and the ways this co-existence could intensify specific tendencies in the different modes, making domination and immiseration even worse. In a related vein, Rosa Luxemburg drew out capitalism's reliance on non-capitalist modes external to it. The primitive accumulation Marx places in the feudal period is an ongoing characteristic of capitalism – direct appropriation (rather than exchange) is a feature of capitalism, not a bug, not an exception. The concept of racial capitalism is undergirded by a similar assumption: capitalism was never reducible to equivalent exchange; that was always a bourgeois fiction. The very development of capitalist industry was premised on slavery and colonialism. Capitalism relies on force, extraction, dispossession, and entrenched, heritable, hierarchies.

Focusing on the United States, Karen Orren emphasizes the overlap of feudal and capitalist institutions and labor relations. She draws out the persistence of the law of master and servant, into the twentieth century. Echoing Anderson and Meiksin Wood's analysis of feudalism in terms of the parcellization of sovereignty in a setting of hierarchy, Orren writes, "Feudal society was a great honeycomb of separate realms, with separate privileges and separate judicial institutions to propagate and enforce them. Each realm exhibited its own particularized morality within the larger feudal ethic of hierarchy."<sup>31</sup> In the US, labor came under common law, blocked by the courts from the reach of legislation. From the perspective of the law of masters and servants, to be a worker was not the result of a contract with an employer; it was a status, attached to the person.<sup>32</sup> As already noted, Corey Robin similarly highlights the persistence of feudal relations in the US. "The priority of conservative political argument has been the maintenance of private regimes of power," he writes. "Allow men and women to become democratic citizens of the state; make sure they remain feudal subjects in the family, the factory, and the field."<sup>33</sup> So, again,

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<sup>31</sup>Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 40–41.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>33</sup>Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, p. 15.

we have strong examples of the co-existence of different arrangements of power and production, in particular the overlap of capitalist and feudal modes such that the feudal relations of personalized hierarchy help produce and intensify capitalist exploitation.<sup>34</sup>

In a discussion of “feudal appearing elements” in Latin America, Andrew Gunder Frank furthers the discussion. What appears as feudal is an effect of “economic ‘development’ under capitalism,” in the Latin American case that Frank analyzes, of imperialism.<sup>35</sup> Recall, Lenin theorized imperialism as an intensification of capital concentration, monopolies, and financial oligarchy. Today’s complex networks – digital, communication, information – amplify these tendencies toward inequality as they result in powerlaw distributions. As Frank noted in his analysis of Latin America, so today in the US, UK, and globally (but unevenly) neo-feudalism is a continuation of imperialism. This point becomes clear when we look at the structure of complex networks.

In his book, *Linked*, Albert-László Barabási, sets out the formal characteristics of power-law distributions in complex networks, that is, networks characterized by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment. These are networks where people voluntarily make links or choices. The number of links per site grow over time, and people like things because others like them. For example, it is generally the case that the most popular book or restaurant or internet site has roughly twice as many links/hits as the second most popular which has twice as many as the third most and so on down to the insignificant differences between those low in the food chain, those in the long tail of the distribution curve. This winner-takes-all or winner-takes-most effect is the powerlaw shape of the distribution. The one at the top has significantly more than the ones at the bottom. The shape the distribution takes is not a bell curve; it is a long tail. The most popular people on Twitter have over a hundred million followers; those ranked around nine or ten have around fifty million followers, and the average person has about two hundred followers. Another example: think of a workplace or organization where twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work; in classrooms or seminars or activist groups, some people take up all the space; a small number tend to do most the talking. Making the space equal requires an intervention.

The structure of complex networks invites inclusion: the more items in the network, the larger the rewards for those at the top. It induces competition – for attention, resources, money, jobs – anything that is given a network form. And it leads to concentration. The result, then, of free choice, growth, and preferential attachment is hierarchy, powerlaw distributions where those at the top have vastly more than those at the bottom. Another way to express the same point: hierarchies are immanent to networks. They are not transcendental impositions. Getting rid of them, combatting them, requires an imposition, a cut, a beheading, a disruption of the system that produces them. In other words, abolishing immanent hierarchies requires politics.

When we recognize that digital networks turn us into constant producers of communicative capitalism’s primary resource, data, we gain further insight into neo-feudalization – it is like we cannot escape subjection. The classic distinction between feudalism and capitalism

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<sup>34</sup>See also Vladimir Shlapentokh and Joshua Woods, *Feudal America: Elements of the Middle Ages in Contemporary Society* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011). Shlapentokh and Woods argue for a segmented approach to political analysis. They combine three models – liberal capitalism, feudalism, and authoritarianism – and use this combination to consider complex organizations as well as different states and societies.

<sup>35</sup>Andrew Gunder Frank, “Not Feudalism, Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* (December 1963), p. 470.

was that feudalism relied on direct expropriation and capitalism relied on free workers freely selling their labor power. Marx of course was clear that this fiction broke down in the “hidden abode” of the factory where there was no equality between capitalist and worker. He was also clear on the role of colonialism and the slave trade for the development of capitalism. In the networked social factory even the fiction of free production has dissolved. To communicate and interact and even move through social space generates data that is for another not ourselves. Our lives and interactions have been turned into resources for capital accumulation. Capitalism has not been able to maintain its rate of profit by exploiting productive labor. It now exploits consumption, drawing out a surplus by using data exhaust as a resource that it can then apply back onto labor, production, circulation, finance, and debt.

In intensely racist societies like the United States, as well as in the wake of decades of movement struggle around sex, race, and ethnicity, it is hard to imagine that bourgeois fictions of freedom and equality could ever legitimate market relations. Today, the rich and white no longer feel compelled to justify their unfair shares. The burden is on the rest of us to demonstrate why we should get anything at all. Imperialism has turned in on itself such that monopoly capital can force states to cut taxes, provide rebates and incentives, and produce treaties that replace state courts with private tribunals. Dependent on capital, states sell off public properties and assets, look for deals to attract developers, and pursue strategies that court the rich and displace the poor.

Neo-feudalism is not a conservative devolution into a previous political-economic form. Rather neo-feudalization is a continuation and reflexivization of imperialism under the conditions of communicative capitalism. The structure of complex networks demonstrates why contemporary capitalism tends toward neo-feudalism. Complex networks undermine equality and intensify hierarchy by means of inclusion, free choice, and democratic participation. Hierarchy is an immanent feature of networks characterized by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment. At the same time, in communicative capitalism practices associated with democracy – like free speech and discussion – concentrate and detach themselves into affective networks where politics is reduced to the daily outrage. Liberated from democratic chains yet pretending to democratic legitimacy, the state is refined as an instrument of coercive force, surveillance, and control, a means for the maintenance of order amidst ongoing expropriation, dispossession, and fragmentation. In the United States, this has meant funding prisons not schools, building up police not basic infrastructure like bridges and roads, and subsidizing corporations not social services.

## **The Political Purchase of the Neo-feudal Hypothesis**

One of the problems facing the Left today is that some of the ideas with the most support reinforce neo-feudalism or, at the very least, fail to confront it because they are trapped within its imaginary. Localism affirms parcelization. Tech and platform approaches reinforce hierarchy and inequality. Municipalism affirms the urban-rural divide associated with hinterlandization.

Emphases on subsistence and survival proceed as if peasant economies were plausible not only for that half of the planet that lives in cities (including eighty-two percent of North Americans and seventy-four percent of Europeans), but also for the millions displaced by climate change, war, and commercial land theft. Of course, those dwelling in the hinterlands face political, cultural, and economic conditions that make it so that

they cannot survive through agricultural work (approximately fifty countries are classified as low-income food deficit countries; most bear the initial brunt of the changing climate; most are in Africa). Universal Basic Income is a similarly untenable survivalist approach. It promises just enough to keep those in the hinterlands going – so long as they do not go to the cities where they cannot afford to live. The fourth element, insecurity and apocalypse, takes shape as that Left catastrophism preoccupied with extinction and the end of the world, as if the next hundred years or so just do not matter.

Taken together these positions envision a future of small groups engaged in subsistence farming and the production of artisanal cheese, perhaps on the edges of cities where survivalist enclaves and drone-wielding tech workers alike experiment with urban gardens. Such groupings reproduce their lives in common, yet the commons they reproduce is necessarily small, local, and in some sense exclusive and elite, exclusive insofar as their numbers are necessarily limited, elite because the aspirations are culturally specific rather than widespread. It is like the basic view of the future is of cool cities surrounded by organic farms (with little attention to farming's mode of production). Did the farmers choose to be farmers or were they born that way? Do they own their land? Share it? Export their products? And what about the hidden conditions that make the cool cities possible – the builders, cleaners, and maintainers of infrastructure, the providers of transportation and communication, the carers for health, education, and children? Are the cities cool for them? How do these cities relate to one another? Are they federated fortresses, which suggests a proliferation of borders and walls, of policing and insecurity, of intensified fear of the barbarians at the gates and the nomads in the hinterlands? Or does there flourishing on a warm planet in fact presuppose a larger unmentioned state with capacities to seize and dismantle the massive industries of the fossil fuel economy?

Popular Left ideas mirror neo-feudal tendencies as they converge via the abandonment of hinterlands, rural areas, and small cities that have been left behind, and the cultivation of those elements of the urban that benefit the rich and educated (our robot future). Far from a vision anchored in the emancipation of the working class, the model cannot see a working class. When work is imagined – and some on the Left think that we should adopt a “post-work imaginary” – it looks like either romantic risk-free farming or tech-work, “immaterial labor.” By now, the exposés on the drudgery of call center work, not to mention the trauma-inducing labor of monitoring sites such as Facebook for disturbing, illicit content, have made the inadequacy of the idea of “immaterial labor” undeniable. It should be similarly apparent that the post-work imaginary likewise erases industry, manufacturing, the production and maintenance of infrastructure, the wide array of labor necessary for social reproduction, and the underlying state structure. Given that most cities are on coasts, this model lacks the institutional basis necessary for responding to the changing climate.

The neo-feudal hypothesis lets us see both the appeal and the weakness of popular Left ideas. They appeal because they resonate with dominant sense. They are weak because this dominant sense is an expression of tendencies to neo-feudalism.

## Communism?

Some outside the Left have already formulated critiques of the present in terms of an emergent neo-feudalism. The head of Russia's Federal Anti-Monopoly Service warns of increasing “economic feudalism ... in which there is no private sector, no capitalistic



relations, but vassals and lords.”<sup>36</sup> His concern is with state involvement in the Russian economy, a concern echoed by Swedish market analyst Anders Aslund in an array of editorials on Russia’s neo-feudal capitalism.

Where these analyses of Russia see neo-feudalization as arising from the state, conservative and libertarian economists in the United States see mass serfdom emerging out of the green elitism of sustainability and less-is-more hipster downsizing, positioning these as components of a Silicon Valley, Hollywood, billionaire ideology of technology and high speed rail. For example, Joel Kotkin argues that sustainability is a liberal politics of the rich that hurts the majority. Energy, agribusiness, and construction employ more people than high tech and finance, he argues, which means they are better for the majority of people. Kotkin writes, “the old economic regime emphasized growth and upward mobility. In contrast the new economic order focuses more on the notion of ‘sustainability’ – so reflective of the feudal worldview – over rapid economic expansion.”<sup>37</sup> Presenting a division within the capitalist class as if it were a division between the many and the few (in other words, as a populist division), Kotkin places the oil and gas sector on the side of the people. High tech, finance, and globalization are the enemy, threatening “to create a new social order that in some ways more closely resembles feudal structures – with its often unassailable barriers to mobility – than the chaotic emergence of industrial capitalism.”<sup>38</sup> In this libertarian imaginary, feudalism occupies the place of the enemy formerly held by communism. The threat of centralization and the threat to private property are the ideological elements that remain the same.

These rightwing fears point to what the Left needs to embrace, that is, to the communist alternative to neo-feudalism. Returning to the four characteristics of neo-feudalism, we can locate possibilities that, with political organization and will, can be pushed in another direction. Parcelization can be reframed as the weakening of the nation-state necessary for communist universalism. Rendered not as fragmentation but as the separation of elements that might be reconfigured into the new global state structures necessary for confronting the catastrophe, transnational organizations – from financial institutions, corporations, and social media platforms to parties, issue alliances, and political formations – suggest the plausibility of communizing structures across and beyond nation-states. It is not hard to imagine them repurposed as the institutions of global communism, devoted not to capital accumulation and protecting the hoards and privileges of the billionaires but to the emancipatory egalitarian flourishing of the many.

Getting here requires political struggle – the capitalist class will not just roll over. But parcelization reminds us that their power is more fragile than any of us often acknowledge. And it gives us a way to think about how an international communist state might take form out of a complex tangle of associations operating in ways that exceed the simple geometry of vertical and horizontal or the clichéd geography of local and global.

Lords and peasants, that is, hierarchy, inequality, expropriation, and the long tail provide a second opening. The communist path recognizes this division as class conflict takes the side of the peasants and proletarianized. Such a trajectory already has

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<sup>36</sup>bne IntelliNews, “Russian Watchdog Warns State’s Role in Economy is Growing,” *The Moscow Times* (May 6, 2019), available online at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/06/russian-watchdog-warns-states-role-in-economy-is-growing-a65497>.

<sup>37</sup> Joel Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict* (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.



momentum in the peasant organizing carried about by *Via Campesina*, to use just one example. Eliminating the lords, we abolish private property and seize the means of communication, production, transportation, et cetera, making production serve human need. It is not hard to dissolve trillions of dollars of fictitious capital – the capitalist system does this regularly. We would just do it intentionally. And we would need to deliberate on what sort of technologies we want and need and their real costs – for example, are we willing to do time in coltan mines for the sake of cell phones? Do we want to abolish the collection of meta-data entirety or find ways to use it to better assess needs and uses? Liberated from the constraints of capital accumulation, we could finally grapple with fundamental choices regarding our collective life, rather than having these choices determined for us and behind our backs.

With respect to cities and hinterlands, the end of an economy of capital accumulation makes possible the dissolution of the rural/urban divide and the division of labor that drives it. More concretely and immediately: with a vision of communism mindful of the hinterlands, we open up new possibilities for organized struggle that build from current tendencies – we might think of the Maoist strategy of surrounding the cities. At any rate, the intensifying politics around migration and refugees, the class struggles unfolding in various forms on the outskirts of cities, and the growing anger of the hinterland's dispossessed that we see vividly in France and in the electoral politics driving the rightward shift in the US, Hungary, Poland, Canada, and elsewhere give us a setting of real struggle that is as yet undecided. There is nothing inevitable about the shift to the Right. It is a matter of organizing, of offering a politics that speaks to a wide array of human needs and concerns, that offers the possibility of flourishing.

Finally, instead of plagued by insecurity and apocalypticism we can – and must – cultivate communist virtues of solidarity, courage, discipline, and confidence, virtues that emerge out of and engender a sense of comradeship. Anything less dooms us to neo-feudalism.

To sum up: I have argued that we need to consider how we are not in capitalism anymore, but something worse, neo-feudalism. This does not mean that there are no longer capitalist relations of production and exploitation. It means that the other dimensions of capitalist production – expropriation, domination, and force – have become stronger to such an extent that it no longer makes sense to posit free and equal actors meeting in the labor market even as a governing fiction. It means that rent and debt feature as or more heavily in accumulation than profit, and that work increasingly exceeds the wage relation. It means that the state form associated with the bourgeoisie has been radically altered. Just as Lenin's account of imperialism as a stage of capitalism made clear that there were still capitalist relations, but in a new form, one where monopoly, finance, and the territorial division of the world necessitated another analysis, so might neo-feudalism lead us to a different appreciation of the forces communicative capitalism has itself produced. Luxemburg emphasized that imperialism is a feature of capitalism's need for an outside; capitalism always relies on materials and labor that it does not produce. But what happens when capitalism is global? It turns in on itself, generating, enclosing, and mining features of human life through digital networks and mass personalized media. This reflexivization produces powerlaws, extreme inequality, new lords and serfs, vast fortunes and extreme inequality, and the parcellized sovereignties that secure

this inequality while the many wander and languish in the hinterlands. Avoiding this – confronting this – requires organized political struggle for communism.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Notes on contributor**

**Jodi Dean** is the author of nine books, most recently *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (Verso 2019).