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Abstraction/class, by McKenzie Wark

Abstraction

A double spooks the world, the double of abstraction. The fortunes of states and armies, companies and communities depend on it. All contending classes, be they ruling or ruled; revere it – yet fear it. Ours is a world that ventures blindly into the new with its fingers crossed.

All classes fear this relentless abstraction of the world, on which their fortunes yet depend. All classes but one: the hacker class. We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we are the abstracters of new worlds. Whether we come to represent ourselves as researchers or authors, artists or biologists, chemists or musicians, philosophers or programmers, each of these subjectivities is but a fragment of a class still becoming, bit by bit, aware of itself as such.

And yet we don't quite know who we are. That is why this book seeks to make manifest our origins, our purpose and our interests. A hacker manifesto: Not the only manifesto, as it is in the nature of the hacker to differ from others, to differ even from oneself, over time. To hack is to differ. A hacker manifesto cannot claim to represent what refuses representation.

Hackers create the possibility of new things entering the world. Not always great things, or even good things, but new things. In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it, and where in that information new possibilities for the world produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old. While we create these new worlds, we do not possess them. That which we create is mortgaged to others, and to the interests of others, to states and corporations who monopolize the means for making worlds we alone discover. We do not own what we produce – it owns us.

Hackers use their knowledge and their wits to maintain their autonomy. Some take the money and run. (We must live with our compromises.) Some refuse to compromise. (We live as best we can.) All too often those of us who take one of these

paths resent those who take the other. One lot resents the prosperity it lacks, the other resents the liberty it lacks to hack away at the world freely. What eludes the hacker class is a more abstract expression of our interests as a class, and of how this interest may meet those of others in the world.

Hackers are not joiners. We're not often willing to submerge our singularity. What the times call for is a collective hack that realizes a class interest based on an alignment of differences rather than a coercive unity. Hackers are a class, but an abstract class. A class that makes abstractions, and a class made abstract. To abstract hackers as a class is to abstract the very concept of class itself. The slogan of the hacker class is not the workers of the world united, but the workings of the world untied.

Everywhere abstraction reigns, abstraction made concrete. Everywhere abstraction's straight lines and pure curves order matters along complex but efficient vectors. But where education teaches what one may produce with an abstraction, the knowledge most useful for the hacker class is of how abstractions are themselves produced. Deleuze: "Abstractions explain nothing, they themselves have to be explained."¹

Abstraction may be discovered or produced, may be material or immaterial, but abstraction is what every hack produces and affirms. To abstract is to construct a plane upon which otherwise different and unrelated matters may be brought into many possible relations. To abstract is to express the virtuality of nature, to make known some instance of its possibilities, to actualize a relation out of infinite relationality, to manifest the manifold.

History is the production of abstraction and the abstraction of production. What makes life differ in one age after the next is the application of new modes of abstraction to the task of wresting freedom from necessity. History is the virtual made actual, one hack after another. History is the cumulative qualitative differentiation of nature as it is hacked.

Out of the abstraction of nature comes its productivity, and the production of a surplus over and above the necessities of survival. Out of this expanding surplus over necessity comes an expanding capacity to hack, again and again, producing further abstractions, further productivity, further release from necessity – at least in potential. But the hacking of nature, the production of surplus, does not make us free. Again and again, a ruling class arises that controls the surplus over bare necessity and enforces new necessities on those peoples who produce this very means of escaping necessity.

What makes our times different is the appearance on the horizon of possibility of a new world, long imagined – a world free from necessity. The production of abstraction has reached the threshold where it can break the shackles holding hacking fast to outdated and regressive class interests, once and for all. Debord: "The world already possesses the dream of a time whose consciousness it must now possess in order to actually live it."²

Invention is the mother of necessity. While all states depend on abstraction for the production of their wealth and power, the ruling class of any given state has an uneasy relationship to the production of abstraction in new forms. The ruling class seeks always to control innovation and turn it to its own ends, depriving the hacker of

control of her or his creation, and thereby denying the world as a whole the right to manage its own development.

Class

A class arises – the working class – able to question the necessity of private property. A party arises, within the worker's movement, claiming to answer to working class desires – the communists. As Marx writes, "in all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time." This was the answer communists proposed to the property question: "centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state."³ Making property a state monopoly only produced a new ruling class, and a new and more brutal class struggle. But is that our final answer? Perhaps the course of the class struggle is not yet over. Perhaps there is another class that can open the property question in a new way – and in keeping the question open end once and for all the monopoly of the ruling classes on the ends of history.

There is a class dynamic driving each stage of the development of this vectoral world in which we now find ourselves. The vectoral class is driving this world to the brink of disaster, but it also opens up the world to the resources for overcoming its own destructive tendencies. In the three successive phases of commodification, quite different ruling classes arise, usurping different forms of private property. Each ruling class in turn drives the world towards ever more abstract ends.

First arises a pastoralist class. They disperse the great mass of peasants who traditionally worked the land under the thumb of feudal lords. The pastoralists supplant the feudal lords, releasing the productivity of nature that they claim as their private property. It is this privatization of property – a legal hack – that creates the conditions for every other hack by which the land is made to yield a surplus. A vectoral world rises on the shoulders of the agricultural hack.

As new forms of abstraction make it possible to produce a surplus from the land with fewer and fewer farmers, pastoralists turn them off their land, depriving them of their livelihood. Dispossessed farmers seek work and a new home in cities. Here capital puts them to work in its factories. Farmers become workers. Capital as property gives rise to a class of capitalists who own the means of production, and a class of workers, dispossessed of it – and by it. Whether as workers or farmers, the direct producers find themselves dispossessed not only of their land, but of the greater part of the surplus they produce, which accumulates to the pastoralists in the form of rent as the return on land, and to capitalists in the form of profit as the return on capital.

Dispossessed farmers become workers, only to be dispossessed again. Having lost their agriculture, they lose in turn their human culture. Capital produces in its factories not just the necessities of existence, but a way of life it expects its workers to consume. Commodified life dispossess the worker of the information traditionally passed on outside the realm of private property as culture, as the gift of one generation to the next, and replaces it with information in commodified form.

Information, like land or capital, becomes a form of property monopolized by a class, a class of vectoralists, so named because they control the vectors along which

information is abstracted, just as capitalists control the material means with which goods are produced, and pastoralists the land with which food is produced. This information, once the collective property of the productive classes – the working and farming classes considered together – becomes the property of yet another appropriating class.

As peasants become farmers through the appropriation of their land, they still retain some autonomy over the disposition of their working time. Workers, even though they do not own capital, and must work according to the clock and its merciless time, could at least struggle to reduce the working day and release free time from labor. Information circulated within working class culture as a public property belonging to all. But when information in turn becomes a form of private property, workers are dispossessed of it, and must buy their own culture back from its owners, the vectoralist class. The farmer becomes a worker, and the worker, a slave. The whole world becomes subject to the extraction of a surplus from the producing classes that is controlled by the ruling classes, who use it merely to reproduce and expand this matrix of exploitation. Time itself becomes a commodified experience.

The producing classes – farmers, workers, hackers – struggle against the expropriating classes – pastoralists, capitalists, vectoralists – but these successive ruling classes struggle also amongst themselves. Capitalists try to break the pastoral monopoly on land and subordinate the produce of the land to industrial production. Vectoralists try to break capital's monopoly on the production process, and subordinate the production of goods to the circulation of information: "The privileged realm of electronic space controls the physical logistics of manufacture, since the release of raw materials and manufactured goods requires electronic consent and direction."⁴

That the vectoralist class has replaced capital as the dominant exploiting class can be seen in the form that the leading corporations take. These firms divest themselves of their productive capacity, as this is no longer a source of power. They rely on a competing mass of capitalist contractors for the manufacture of their products. Their power lies in monopolizing intellectual property – patents, copyrights and trademarks – and the means of reproducing their value – the vectors of communication. The privatization of information becomes the dominant, rather than a subsidiary, aspect of commodified life. "There is a certain logic to this progression: first, a select group of manufacturers transcend their connection to earthbound products, then, with marketing elevated as the pinnacle of their business, they attempt to alter marketing's social status as a commercial interruption and replace it with seamless integration."⁵ With the rise of the vectoral class, the vectoral world is complete.

As private property advances from land to capital to information, property itself becomes more abstract. Capital as property frees land from its spatial fixity. Information as property frees capital from its fixity in a particular object. This abstraction of property makes property itself something amenable to accelerated innovation – and conflict. Class conflict fragments, but creeps into any and every relation that becomes a relation of property. The property question, the basis of class, becomes the question asked everywhere, of everything. If "class" appears absent to the apologists of our time, it is not because it has become just another in a series of antagonisms and articulations, but on the contrary because it has become the

structuring principle of the vectoral plane which organizes the play of identities as differences.

The hacker class, producer of new abstractions, becomes more important to each successive ruling class, as each depends more and more on information as a resource. Land cannot be reproduced at will. Good land lends itself to scarcity, and the abstraction of private property is almost enough on its own to protect the rents of the pastoral class. Capital's profits rest on mechanically reproducible means of production, its factories and inventories. The capitalist firm sometimes needs the hacker to refine and advance the tools and techniques of productions to stay abreast of the competition. Information is the most easily reproducible object ever captured in the abstraction of property. Nothing protects the vectoralist business from its competitors other than its capacity to qualitatively transform the information it possesses and extract new value from it. The services of the hacker class become indispensable to an economy that is itself more and more dispensable – an economy of property and scarcity.

As the means of production become more abstract, so too does the property form. Property has to expand to contain more and more complex forms of difference, and reduce it to equivalence. To render land equivalent, it is enough to draw up its boundaries, and create a means of assigning it as an object to a subject. Complexities will arise, naturally, from this unnatural imposition on the surface of the world, although the principle is a simple abstraction. But for something to be represented as intellectual property, it is not enough for it to be in a different location. It must be qualitatively different. That difference, which makes a copyright or a patent possible, is the work of the hacker class. The hacker class makes what Bateson calls “the difference that makes the difference.”⁶ The difference that drives the abstraction of the world, but which also drives the accumulation of class power in the hands of the vectoral class.

The hacker class arises out of the transformation of information into property, in the form of intellectual property. This legal hack makes of the hack a property producing process, and thus a class producing process. The hack produces the class force capable of asking – and answering – the property question, the hacker class. The hacker class is the class with the capacity to create not only new kinds of object and subject in the world, not only new kinds of property form in which they may be represented, but new kinds of relation, with unforeseen properties, which question the property form itself. The hacker class realizes itself as a class when it hacks the abstraction of property and overcomes the limitations of existing forms of property.

The hacker class may be flattered by the attention lavished upon it by capitalists compared to pastoralists, and vectoralists compared to capitalists. Hackers tend to ally at each turn with the more abstract form of property and commodity relation. But hackers soon feel the restrictive grip of each ruling class, as it secures its dominance over its predecessor and rival, and can renege on the dispensations it extended to hackers as a class. The vectoralist class, in particular, will go out of its way to court and coopt the productivity of hackers, but only because of its attenuated dependence on new abstraction as the engine of competition among vectoral interests. When the vectoralist act in concert as a class it is to subject hacking to the prerogatives of its class power.

The vectoral world is dynamic. It puts new abstractions to work, producing new freedoms from necessity. The direction this struggle takes is not given in the course of things, but is determined by the struggle between classes. All classes enter into relations of conflict, collusion and compromise. Their relations are not necessarily dialectical. Classes may form alliances of mutual interest against other classes, or may arrive at a “historic compromise,” for a time. Yet despite pauses and setbacks, the class struggle drives history into abstraction and abstraction into history.

Notes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 145. Throughout *A Hacker Manifesto*, certain protocols of reading are applied to the various textual archives on which it draws, and which call for some explanation. It is not so much a “symptomatic” reading as a homeopathic one, turning texts against their own limitations, imposed on them by their conditions of production. For instance, there is an industry in the making, within the education business, around the name of Deleuze, from which he may have to be rescued. His is a philosophy not restricted to what is, but open to what could be. In *Negotiations*, he can be found producing concepts to open up the political and cultural terrain, and providing lines along which to escape from state, market, party and other traps of identity and representation. His tastes were aristocratic – limited to the educational culture of his place and time – and his work lends itself to the trap of purely formal elaboration of the kind desired by the Anglo-American educational market particularly. One does better to take Deleuze from behind and give him mutant offspring by immaculate conception. Which was, after all, Deleuze’s own procedure. He can be turned away from his own sedentary habits.
- 2 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), 164. This classic work in the crypto-Marxist tradition sets the standard for a critical thought in action. Debord’s text is so designed that attempts to modify its theses inevitably moderate them, and thus reveal the modifier’s complicity with the “spectacular society” that Debord so (anti)spectacularly condemns. It is a work that can only be honored by a complete reimagining of its theses on a more abstract basis, a procedure Debord himself applied to Marx, and which forms the basis of the crypto-Marxist procedure.
- 3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings*, vol. 1, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 98, 86. Karatani would see the property question coming from Marx, but the state ownership answer as belonging to Engels, and a distortion of Marx’s whole trajectory. See Kolin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003). *A Hacker Manifesto* is clearly neither an orthodox Marxist tract nor a post-Marxist repudiation, but rather a crypto-Marxist reimagining of the materialist method for practicing theory within history. From Marx one might take the attempt to discover abstraction at work in the world, as an historical process, rather than as merely a convenient category in thought with which to create a new intellectual product. Crypto-Marxist thought might hew close to the multiplicity of the time of everyday life,

which calls for a reinvention of theory in every moment, in fidelity to the moment, rather than a repetition of a representation of a past orthodoxy, or a self-serving “critique” of that representation in the interests of making Marx safe for the educational process and its measured, repetitive time.

- 4 Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994), pp. 16–17. See also Critical Art Ensemble, *The Molecular Invasion* (New York: Autonomedia, 2002). This group discover, through their always-inventive practice, just what needs to be thought at the nexus of information and property, and provide useful tools for beginning just such a project. Their work is particularly illuminating in regard to the commodification of genetic information – a frontline activity for the development of the vectoral class. All that is required is a deepening of the practice of thinking abstractly. Together with groups, networks and collaborations such as Adilkno, Ctheory, EDT, Institute for Applied Autonomy, I/O/D, Luther Blissett Project, Mongrel, Nettime, Oekonux, Old Boys’ Network, Openflows, Public Netbase, subRosa, Rhizome, ®TMark, Sarai, The Thing, VNS Matrix and The Yes Men, Critical Art Ensemble form a movement of sorts, where art, politics and theory converge in a mutual critique of each other. These groups have only a “family resemblance” to each other. Each shares a characteristic with at least one other, but not necessarily the same characteristic. *A Hacker Manifesto* is among other things an attempt to abstract from the practices and concepts they produce. See also Josephine Bosma et al., *Readme! Filtered by Nettime* (New York: Autonomedia, 1999).
- 5 Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 35. See also Naómi Klein, *Fences and Windows* (New York: Picador, 2002). This exemplary work of journalism discovers the nexus between the brand and logo as emblems of the hollowing out of the capitalist economy in the overdeveloped world, and the relegation of the great bulk of capitalist production to the sweatshops of the underdeveloped world. We see clearly here that capital has been superseded as an historical formation in all but name. Klein stops short at the description of the symptoms, however. She does not offer quite the right diagnosis. But then that isn’t the task she sets herself. There can be no one book, no master thinker for these times. What is called for is a practice of combining heterogeneous modes of perception, thought and feeling, different styles of researching and writing, different kinds of connection to different readers, proliferation of information across different media, all practiced within a gift economy, expressing and elaborating differences, rather than broadcasting a dogma, a slogan, a critique or line. The division of genres and types of writing, like all aspects of the intellectual division of labor, are antithetical to the autonomous development of the hacker class as class, and work only to reinforce the subordination of knowledge to property by the vectoral class.
- 6 Gregory Bateson, *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972). Bateson grasped the link between information and nature on an abstract level, even as he shrank from examining the historical forces that forged just this link: And yet he is a pioneer in hacker thought and action in his disregard for the property rules of academic fields. He skips gaily from biology to anthropology to epistemology, seeing in the divisions between fields, even between statements, an

ideological construction of the world as fit only for zoning and development in the interests of property. At the moment when the foundations of the ideology of the vectoral class were in formation, in information science, computer science, cybernetics, and when information was being discovered as the new essence of social and even natural phenomena, Bateson alone grasped the critical use of these nascent concepts.

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