

Response to McKenzie Wark's *Capital Is Dead*

Last week, in response to Jodi Dean's *The Communist Horizon*, the central question of the class was "is communism due for a rebranding?" It seemed as though everyone came to something of a consensus: that "communism" is not a term worth salvaging, as it's been thoroughly defiled by decades of failed attempts and experiments. We're sure to follow up in this week's class by asking whether or not "capitalism" is also a word that should be done away with.

Any proposition of rebranding is sure to feel at least a little dirty. To quote George W. Bush, probably: "if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear." If communism is so widely feared, then why is it worth still working toward? In Dean's mind, because communism is not Stalinism. It's not an end goal at all; rather, it's a condition. "The only condition," as Dean has said, "under which a politics adequate to the needs, demands, and common will of the people is possible."

This is a scary idea, for reasons McKenzie Wark understands in *Capital Is Dead*. She writes:

*If Communism—a state that exists mostly in the imaginal realm, always deferred into the future—has not prevailed, then this by definition must still be the reign of Capital. Let's pause for a moment over the ideological freight attached to this poetic conceit and its consequences: the present is defined mostly in terms of a hoped-for negation of it. Some theology!*

In her book, Wark posits that this theology—the belief that capitalism will endure right up until the second coming of communism—is due for something of a protestant reformation.

And so, in true Lutheran tradition, Wark attempts to provocatively declare dead the institution of capitalism and all its modifiers. No more *surveillance*, *platform*, *postfordist*, *neoliberal*, etc. These are lazy, boring, unpoetic addenda that only serve to bolster capitalist realism. Marx would've been disappointed, she figures, for he was really one of the great modern poets, and capitalism his greatest hit, but a hit that's now been played out. In that same radical tradition, though, Wark nobly seeks to turn a new leaf in history, and redefine our current system "in the interests of comprehending a present historical time in terms that enable it to appear as actionable," all the while attempting a postmortem investigation as to how we all got so caught up trying to explain away "emerging phenomena" as if they always had to be "expressions of the same eternal essence of Capital." As such, this book could well be read in direct response to the unrelenting bummer that is Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*. Because while our new thing may be worse, at least it could possibly be described in terms that will help us better organize resistance.

I don't think Wark's book provided worthwhile thought experiment, though. It actually made me pretty sad to read. Wark does not describe any new thing that doesn't sound exactly like capitalism, even to her own ears. In the introduction of the book, she lays out a case study in post-capital, imagining ordering Marx's *Capital* via an Amazon Echo so as to get at the new underlying logistics that make this something evolutionarily unique at play. After charting out a bit the supply chain, she writes:

*Certainly, a lot of what just happened here could be called capitalism. Labor was corralled into factories and made to work long hours to make stuff. Other labor drove trucks or sat in call centers answering calls from irate users whose stuff did not arrive. But maybe there is something else here as well. Not just the exploitation of labor through the owning and controlling of the forces of production, but also the extraction of what you might call surplus information.*

Although only ten pages into a nearly 200-page book, I think Wark's self-described "minimally plausible argument" can already be downgraded to an "implausible

argument.” I don’t think the extraction of “*surplus* information” is worth re-imagining the all of capitalism to refigure in “hacker” and “vectoralist” classes. In fact, I think it would be rhetorically inadvisable to do so.

Wark spends the last chapter of the book—Four Cheers for Vulgarism!!!!—playing devil’s advocate for “vulgar Marxism,” which is a crass, blue-collar, intuitive kind of critical mode that tends to focus on a society’s forces of production rather than the more philosophical superstructural elements that serve to maintain them. Wark explains that this “vulgar” Marxism has been derided by “genteel” Marxists, who have essentially gotten too caught up in haughty considerations of politics and culture and so have fallen out of touch with organic intellectuals who can teach from lived experiences working directly with society’s base. To the end of explaining this, Wark provides an exhaustive explanation of the differences between vulgar and genteel Marxisms as they’ve evolved from the early-twentieth century to the present, in less than twenty pages along the way citing the bodies of work of Césaire, Bataille, Williams, Federici, Debord, Práxedes, Lukács, Korsch, Benjamin, Sartre, Dietzgen, Merleau-Ponty, Althusser, Ricardo, Thompson, Caudwell, Negri, Karatani, Laclau, West, Jameson, Eagleton, Amin, Kristeva, Baudrillard, Rubin, Mulvey, Bellamy Foster, Engels, Bogdanov, Bukharin, Žižek, Platonov, Davis, Marcuse, Rainey, Smith, Pasolini, Jörn, Virno, Durkheim, and Weber.

Although Wark asserts that she is a vulgar marxist at least conceptually, it’s hard to interpret the chapter in which she does so as anything resembling accessible. Nevermind the glossary of obscure names: the very fact that Wark feels as though she must play devil’s advocate for vulgar Marxism is telling of who she suspects her audience to be. This book feels at once intended exclusively for people who already have a full shelf of Verso releases and the free time to conduct a recursive and prereq-heavy thought experiment, and at the same time for anyone but those people, as they’ll surely already have an understanding of how discrete data collection is altering capitalism from other works titled with modifiers like *platform* or *surveillance*, and too familiar with Wark’s concepts of the hacker and vector from her earlier works to find

them sufficiently fresh here. Why would you write a whole book advancing the idea of updating a language of resistance, exclusively using terms that you came up with decades ago that you now admit are obsolete and problematic?

In the wake of reading Fisher and Dean, I was disappointed by Wark's argument. Which isn't hard to believe, considering she doesn't even seem too keen on her own ideas either. She's eager to admit that her language is outdated and that she's perhaps making some pieces fit together where she shouldn't, and she's only tenuously committed to the idea that "vectoralism" could have any rhetorical utility at all. It's apparent in the book's lack of enthusiasm behind its main argument that she's as frustrated with capitalism's unyielding and ever-warping prevalence as the rest of us. I'm no better off for trying to embrace that rather than just coming up with some "thought experiments" of my own to try and change the words we use to describe what's awful. But I do think it's essential that capitalism remains called capitalism. Refresh communism all you want, say that's whatever. Confuse people with it, put it in a new shirt, try to shake off some baggage. But allow capitalism to accrue disaffect until globally untenable. While we will likely have to make linguistic revisions at some point in order for anti-capitalist to spread like it needs too, for now it seems as though there's no better way to try and imagine an end to capitalism besides letting it play itself out.

With that outlook, it's hard to find any "thought experiment" upsetting that manages to provide even a brief uptick in space for optimism. But the way *Capital Is Dead* promised to introduce revitalized language which could restructure possibilities for resistance only to not do any of that honestly? I have a lot of respect for Prof. Wark and her work, but I don't see how this book is anything beyond an enticing, provocative question that answers itself quickly but disappointingly, tagged with a nice capsule review of the 2017 film *The Young Karl Marx*.