

McKenzie Wark
**The Vectoralist
Class**

01/08

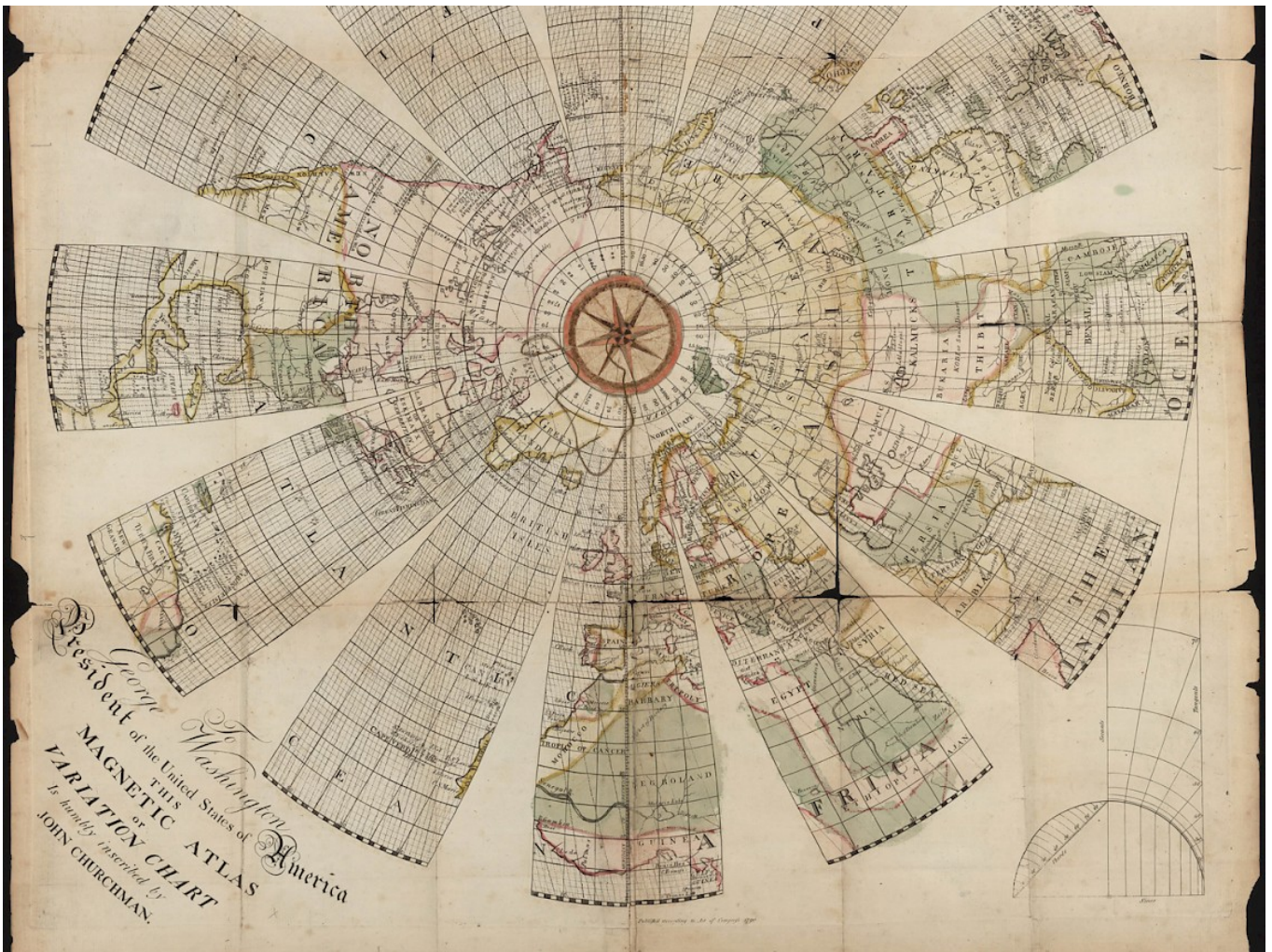
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“All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned.”¹ Of course, much of the resonance of this phrase is an artifact of translation: “Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft”: All that stands steams into statements. Such was Marx’s thrilling phrase for how the commodity form sets the world ablaze, vaporizing old social forms and norms, such that whole ways of life and their corresponding worldviews, one after the other, go up in smoke. Such is the grand historical story of *capitalism*, as pretty much everyone has now agreed to call it. Its fanboys now even celebrate its nihilistic torch, rebranded as *disruption*.

For its beneficiaries, capitalism brings the best of times: freedom and prosperity for all, well, maybe not for all, but at least for those most devoted to it. For those cut out by its will, it brings the worst of times, incinerating communal and traditional forms of life, offering in exchange lifetimes of wage servitude and debt peonage. For its protagonists, capitalism is the best of all possible worlds and cannot be improved upon. For its few remaining antagonists, capitalism is the worst of all possible worlds, but the last remaining class society, before the final overthrow of class rule forever. This is now more of a spiritual will-to-power than an actual strategy.

Either way, historical storytelling has somehow become stuck on the fixed idea that there is a thing called capitalism, and we’re all moving parts within this same eternal machine. All that was sacred is profaned – except the ideal of capitalism itself. That became something of a fixed idea. For its beneficiaries, because the system from which they benefit must be made to seem natural; for its detractors because the only exit they can imagine to another life is from capitalism. Hence in true theological fashion they insist that while the appearances of capitalism change, the essence remains the same. Is this still capitalism? Or is it actually something worse?

There was a time when it was fashionable to argue that capitalism had already been superseded.² These theories are something of an embarrassment now. During the Cold War, those whose typewriters tapped away in the service of the Western capitalist powers needed an historical story to compete with that deployed by the supposedly Socialist states, which claimed that they had entered on an historical stage beyond capitalism in which its class relations would be abolished. And so the Western apologists borrowed from their rivals the idea of an historical form beyond capitalism, that would put an end to class conflict. They called it the information society or the knowledge society or postindustrial society – or anything, really, but not capitalism.



John Churchman's Magnetic Atlas or Variation Chart was the first chart registered under the Copyright Act of 1790 and the second work of any kind, after *The Philadelphia Spelling Book*, to be registered under the act.

With the collapse of the so-called Socialist states, those historical narratives that tried to will into existence an historical stage beyond capitalism disintegrated. Practically everyone called it capitalism again. But by the late twentieth century, this seemed no longer the basic, unmodified capitalism of the past, and so new adjectival flavors had to be conjured up to explain its strange appearances. So this was now late capitalism, neo-capitalism, neoliberal capitalism, post-Fordist capitalism, postmodern capitalism, biopolitical capitalism, semiocapitalism, cognitive capitalism, and so forth.

The historical story-telling option that was less often rehearsed would be to wonder whether this was maybe still an exploitative and class-ridden society – just not exactly or entirely a capitalist one.³ Maybe a fair bit of it could still fairly be described as capitalist, but perhaps there's some new – if no less exploitative – form accreting on top of it. After all, it is clear in Marx's political writings that he thought of social formations as made up of multiple modes of production, of which only one could be called capitalist. The others, he thought, were residual, such as leftover bits of feudalism; or marginal, like simple commodity production.

Some flavors of adjectival-capitalism theory hold that there was a decisive moment when capitalism no longer ruled over these other modes of production in a formal way, but really did subsume them into capitalist relations of production proper. But they tend to retard historical thinking at that point: all that is solid melts into air – except capitalism, which goes on forever as always the same. It goes on forever, because in such historical theories, only the proletariat can negate capitalism. History cannot be imagined as changing phases in any other way.

The proletariat as negating agent has taken different forms in different times. It can be the industrial worker, the mass worker, the multitude of the social factory, the masses of the colonial world, and so on. Sometimes it's a matter of alliances, of worker and peasant, or later of worker and student. Sometimes it's a matter of agents from the sphere of reproduction rather than production, such as feminist and queer anticapitalist agency. Sometimes the agent of negation is based more on racial domination than class exploitation.⁴ In any case, what such theories have in common is the fixed idea that capitalism only comes to an end when it is negated by the force of an agency coming from below.

To think this, one has to take as given something that for Marx was only a tendency, and perhaps not a tendency realized: the

polarization of the whole social formation into only two antagonistic classes. It is a well-studied problem that on the losing side of this equation, class identity does not at all become clarified. Differences between workers do not become less acute. Problematic “middle strata” cloud the contrast of the class picture. Nor can differences of race and gender be waved away. Nationalism and religious identity stubbornly persist in claiming the allegiances of the oppressed.⁵

Even among those who have paid close attention to differences among the oppressed, and who have taken pains to map out how changes in the mode of production change the kinds of workers who labor within it, there is scant attention to the complexities and changes among the *ruling* classes. This is generally designated just as capital, and with at best two or three crude subgroups. Yes, there's industrial capital and there's finance capital, but that's about it.

So, to sum up our heretical proposals for the historical imagination, they are three: perhaps thinking historical change is a matter of multiple classes and class conflicts; perhaps other classes besides capital and labor could be thought of as driving agents of historical change; and perhaps even within capitalism a new kind of class conflict based on a new mode of production could emerge.

This might seem heretical in relation to Marx's *Capital*, which deals in a simplified form with just the capitalist mode of production and its binary classes of capital and labor. But it might not be too original a manner of thinking forward from Marx's political writing, for example about the sequence of revolutions in France. These were multiclass affairs, in which a rising bourgeois class mobilized peasants and artisans to realize bourgeois interests as if they were the general interest. The coming into being of the labor movement was a long apprenticeship in revolution under the tutelage of another class, before being able to articulate its own interests and methods – however briefly – in the moment of the Paris Commune.

The idea of divisions among ruling classes is hardly all that novel either. Looking backwards, it might be useful to differentiate between a capitalist class and its rural counterpart, a landlord class. The transformation of the old feudal estates, with their peasants paying tithe in kind, into various forms of tenancy in which farmers paid rent in cash is in some respects an historical moment quite distinct from the rise of an industry and the formation of capitalist and laboring classes based on the wage relation.

Second Nature

In the work of David Ricardo, the main class

conflict is actually an intra–ruling class conflict between landlord and capitalist.⁶ The more of the surplus landlords can capture in the form of rent, the less there is for capitalists to capture in the form of profit. Land being in fixed supply, the economics of rent behaves quite differently to the economics of profit. Rising demand drives up rents, and no new supply of land can enter to bring rents back down. Rising demand drives up profits, but profit is derived from industry, which is not in fixed supply. The rise in profits draws competitors into the market to drive profits back towards historical norms.

Industry is in a sense *more abstract* than land. A piece of land is what it is and it is where it is – a *topos*. A piece of industry is rather more fungible and moveable. Particularly after the rise of fossil fuels as an energy source, industry occurs in a rather more abstract *topographic* space, needing only to be at the crux of flows of energy, labor, and raw materials. It is in this sense that industry can be said to create a second nature: a built environment that no longer follows and forms the contours and *topos* of the land but rather transforms them into a abstract topographic plane.

Thus, one could tell an historical story about the past that entailed not just multiple classes, and conflict not just between ruling and subordinate classes, but conflict among ruling classes themselves. And perhaps there's more. What if the historical tendency towards a more and more abstract terrain of social production and exploitation did not stop with industry? Under what conditions could it be said that there is a new kind of ruling class?

Here it might help to think in what way industrial commodity production might differ from agrarian commodity production. The latter is already a kind of abstraction. It separates the peasantry from its ancient rights and obligations to a particular estate. It makes not only peasants but their land equivalent and exchangeable. It eventually undoes the hereditary title of the lord to the land. To belong to the ruling class is no longer a hereditary right. Particulars of place, or right and duty and custom, are swept away.

But there is still a certain fixity to agrarian commodity production. The land is the land. A place is a place. A *topos* is a *topos*. It remains a landscape of fixed contours that the farmer *forms* but does not really *transform*. Flows of agricultural produce issue from it, but from a quite stable field.

Industry is different. Particularly once there are flows of coal, grain, and labor and the iron means to carry them, a far more abstract and malleable topography comes into being. It draws a new diagram across the old terrain. The towns expand to soak up the now surplus labor from

the countryside. That labor is set to work in the new factories, supplied by rail and canal with raw materials and food from the colonies.

This is the era in which the town wrests political and economic power from the country, using the first rudimentary fruits of a soon to be systematic instrumentalizing of nature itself – an industrial technology. Capital and labor transform the once solid world of rural life into the liquid world of industrial second nature.

The transition from feudal to commodity production in agriculture might be mostly a change in forms of property, but the creation of commodity production in industry took a bit more than that. It was a transformation not only of the relations but also of the forces of production. It is worth noting here the role that scarcity played. With the mines running ever deeper and the forests going under the axe, it took a considerable application of technical ingenuity to keep production going. The coal-steam-iron complex arose out of scarcities of natural resources but at the same time produced a quite other nature.⁷

This second nature, while in some respects a more abstract terrain, nevertheless had certain vulnerabilities that could be turned to advantage by a rising working class. What made the strike an effective weapon was that industry relied on the constant flow of resources, of coal and raw materials, and of finished goods speeding off to market. Those flows could be disrupted at key choke points. Second nature was a slender network – ports and rail – of big things – mines and factories – and could be shut down at its weakest link. Organized labor achieved its victories – the eight hour day, the right to organize, universal suffrage, the welfare state, even the October Revolution – not so much through any ideology or organizational form as through the actual or potential use of this power to shut down the infrastructure of second nature.⁸

If the technology from which second nature was built was first industrial and then military, in the case of third nature it was rather the other way around. World War II was the great incubator of information technology, which subsequently played a significant role in the Cold War as well. From the design of complex products to the control of inventory to the logistics of distribution, information technology at first enabled industrial forms of organization on an expanded scale.

But when the Fordist system of mass production and consumption ran aground in the late twentieth century, that same information technology provided the means to circumvent its limitations.⁹ In particular, it greatly reduced the power of labor. The power of labor was to

interrupt the flows – of the assembly line, of the raw materials, of the energy source. Information technology could replace labor in production, and could provide a more flexible and redundant network that would enable industrial capital to move its sites of production away from labor militancy, or to route flows of materials around potential blockages. This is the era of automation, deskilling, and the runaway factory.¹⁰ This was the underside to the historical fables of the information society as the end of class struggle.

The Vectoralist Class

The defeat of labor came at a price for the capitalist class. It meant ceding part of its power to a new kind of ruling class. One that no longer relied on either land or industry as its source of wealth. Its working asset was information itself. The separation of industry from land produced the abstract terrain of second nature. The separation of information from industry produced a yet more abstract terrain of third nature.

Capital defeated labor. This is the era often referred to as “neoliberalism,” but this term obscures more than it explains. Ideas don’t make history, and certainly not mere revivals or extensions of old ideas. How was it possible materially to route around the power of labor? It has to do with the powers of a new kind of terrain, running on a new kind of infrastructure.

Second nature is still rather topographic, in that the location of industry is still tied to features of the landscape such as natural harbors or coal and iron deposits. Third nature is rather more *topological*, in that the dense network of information that overlays the territory enables the landscape to be stretched, compressed, folded, and twisted into new shapes – at least for the purposes of economic activity. It becomes a dense network of rather more temporary things. The liquid world of second nature, with its canalized flows of capital, labor, energy, resources, and goods, really does vaporize into a new, rather more gaseous state.

Third nature becomes an envelope of information flows that doubles not only the natural landscape but the second-nature one as well. It still has some ties to topography, of course. The old cities of second nature become information hubs. The vast data centers that will continue to mushroom in the early twenty-first century still require massive amounts of power and access to water for cooling. But all this new infrastructure yet produces a topological space in which information comes to control the movement and deployment of industrial resources, which in turn command the extraction

and deployment of natural resources.

All that was solid and then liquid finally does melt into air. Space becomes a topology in which any point can connect to any other. A line of economic activity becomes a *vector*, in the sense that it can in principle be deployed anywhere. Connect a supplier of materials to a site of processing with a vector. If the supply becomes erratic, move the vector to connect a different supplier. If the labor at the processing site becomes difficult, move the vector again, connecting the new supplier to a new site of processing. If the capitalist firm doing the processing demands too much in profits, switch to another.¹¹ Castells describes the transition from a space of places to a space of flows, or what I call third nature.

Not only labor loses its power on the terrain of third nature. So too does the capitalist class. Here capital has to be understood in the specific sense of the class that owns the means of production. In many cases this is no longer a locus of power. The vector can route around not just labor but capital too. The ascendant power over both labor and capital is the vectoralist class. It does not control land or industry anymore, just information. It does not claim its share of the surplus as rent or profit, but as *interest*.¹²

The oldest form of the vectoralist class is finance, but in the past its power has always been relative. Second nature did not support the use of information as a means of absolute control. It is only with the production of an infrastructure in which information becomes separated from its material strata, and can be efficiently channeled anywhere on the planet, stored at negligible cost, processed easily into complex patterns, that the vectoralist class comes into its own.

Finance finds itself joined by other kinds of control through information, whether through the control of patents, copyrights, and brands, the control of supply chains through logistics, the control of the spatial deployment of resources through GIS, or most recently through control of access to information about the shifting landscape of people and things by making all things addressable.

The power of the vectoralist class is in the accumulation of interest, which in this context means not just the return on the investment of information in the form of money but any surplus information, acquired through unequal exchanges of information. Its power is now global. Based mainly in the overdeveloped world of Europe, and the United States, the vectoralist class thrives by extracting surplus information on a global scale. It rarely owns the means of production anymore. The actual making of things

can be contracted out.

Of course capitalist producers challenge vectoral power, but mostly by trying to gain access to the control of information themselves – and hence to escape from capitalist industry and become vectoralist themselves. First in Japan, then Korea, and then China, manufacturing firms have tried to acquire the symbolic power of brands, the patents to sophisticated technological processes, the efficiency of data-controlled labor and supply chains, and to divest themselves of the trouble of directly owning the more routine means of production.

The Hacker Class

The vectoral class enabled the capitalist class to defeat labor, but the vectoralist class has its own problems with a subordinate class. It's problem is not to dominate the class who *forms* nature, or who *transforms* second nature, but who *informs* third nature. Let's call them the *hacker class*. The extraction of interest from the unequal exchanges of information requires the constant production of new information. The production of new information is the job of the hacker class. That this production takes place within a class relation stems from the containment of the production of new information within newly elaborated versions of the private property form.

Over the course of the late twentieth century, so-called intellectual property emerged out of traditional copyright and patent and gradually became essentially a set of fully private property rights. The production of new information as information is based on a technical separation of the flow of information from its material substrate, such that while information still has no existence outside of a material substrate, its relation to that substrate becomes abstract. The potential of this development is then constrained and channeled via elaborations of the private property form.

But the production of intellectual property, like the production of anything, requires cooperation and collaboration. The source of all production passes through what is common. As with the landlord in relation to the farmer, and as with the capitalist in relation to the worker, the vectoralist class has to separate the hacker class from that which its shared endeavors makes.

Once again, the commons is either enclosed, or retained as a subordinate sphere from which commodification draws its reserves. The difference this time is that commons is potentially infinitely shareable. Land or goods can be scarce, but information is only artificially scarce in an era of plummeting costs of copying

and archiving. Hence one of the great social movements from the late twentieth century onwards is dedicated to making information common. Information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains.

Freedom with and of information is the utopia of the hacker class. Four strategies for controlling the hacker class are worth mention. Firstly, the hacker aristocracy: a small cadre are encouraged to see themselves not as part of a class but members of an elite. They are rewarded handsomely, and sometimes share an interest in the vectoralist firm through stock options or bonuses. Secondly, routinization: the vectoral infrastructure is itself designed to separate a few specialized control positions from routine work, in turn separated into discrete parts. Object-oriented programming, for instance, is designed in this fashion. Thirdly, in-sourcing. If outsourcing sends a worker's job overseas to another worker, in-sourcing assigns the hacker's job to anyone who will perform the task for free. Thus the cooperative effort and the commons of information is itself treated as a resource from which to extract interest. Lastly, if all else fails, the hacker can be criminalized, imprisoned, or forced into exile.

The domination of the hacker by the vectoralist is embedded in the very design of the infrastructure within which the hacker class operates. This domination goes far beyond the superstructural domination through ideology of the capitalist over the worker, or the domination through religion of the landlord over the farmer. Indeed all contending classes have to operate within an infrastructure increasingly designed to the specifications of the vectoral class, which not only subordinates the hacker class to it, but all other classes as well.

In sum, then, the history of commodified modes of production can be thought of as passing through three overlapping stages, each of which entails a bifurcation into two classes which polarizes the social field. In each stage that field has a certain quality. The rise of industry, and the struggle between worker and capitalist, produces a more abstract topography, a second nature. The rise of information and the struggle between hacker and vectoralist produces an even more abstract topology, a third nature. This space becomes a global topology in which almost any point can connect to any other, mobilizing resources on a planetary scale.

At each stage, the field of class conflict might have a certain polarity between dominating and dominated classes, but all classes across all three "natures" interact, as if in a game of three-dimensional chess. In many instances the key class conflict may be between different ruling classes. The unity of the three

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dominated classes can also never be guaranteed. They are not a multitude, but distinct classes with different functions in the production process.

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1
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848* (London: Verso, 2010), 70. See also Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988).

2
Richard Barbrook, *Imaginary Futures: From Thinking Machines to the Global Village* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

3
Although this was the path taken in my *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Richard Barbrook, *The Class of the New* (London: Mute, 2006), on various past attempts to reimagine class.

4
For example, see Dennis Altman, *Oppression and Liberation* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2012); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (London: Verso, 2015); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

5
Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1998).

6
David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

7
J. D. Bernal, *Science in History* Vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), 410ff.

8
Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013).

9
For political economies of second and third nature, respectively, see: Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation* (London: Verso, 2001); Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

10
See David Noble, *America By Design: Science, Technology and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

11
See Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12
Dan Schiller, *How To Think About Information* (Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), has a fine account of the struggle to break up America's telephony monopoly in

the late twentieth century, which I read as a failed attempt to curtail the power of a rising vectoralist class.

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The Vectoralist Class, Part Two

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Continued from “The Vectoralist Class”

In the first part of this essay I presented the history of commodity production as passing through three overlapping stages, each of which entailed a bifurcation into two classes, which polarizes the social field. In each stage, that field has a certain definitive quality. The rise of industry, and the struggle between worker and capitalist, produces a more abstract topography, a second nature. The rise of information and the struggle between hacker and vectoralist produces an even more abstract topology, a third nature. This space becomes a global topology in which almost any point can connect to any other, mobilizing resources on a planetary scale.

At each stage, the field of class conflict might have a certain polarity between the principle dominating and dominated classes, but all classes across all three “natures” interact, as if in a game of three-dimensional chess. In many instances the key class conflict may be between different ruling classes. The unity of the three dominated classes can also never be guaranteed. They are not a multitude, but distinct classes with different functions in the production process.

With this understanding in place, it is possible to reframe a somewhat confused debate about whether to imagine historical change in terms of a force that would *negate* the relentless drive of commodification, or rather would *accelerate* it towards its end. Neither, as we shall see, offers much in our times by way of renewing the historical imagination.

Particularly in the Western or Hegelian Marxist tradition, the proletariat is a force that is supposed to negate capital.¹ The proletariat bursts out from inside the commodity form which traps it as just another thing and realizes its full subjectivity and universal humanity. The particular act of blockage that is the strike is thus either a precursor or a limit on thinking the total blockage to be an act of will of the proletariat as revolutionary subject of history, rising out of, and refusing, its objectification.

With the failure of the revolutions of the late sixties, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, and Negri started to think more in terms of an acceleration of capitalism towards its end.² This was really a frank admission of the weakness of labor and the loss of its power to block and stop, let alone to totally negate, the flows of commodified life. The idea was instead to press the development of capitalism to its limit, which is indeed what seemed to have occurred.

To its detractors, acceleration smells too much like the much derided if never clearly spelled-out bad other that is neoliberalism. It seems too close to the ideology of what in our terms is a fraction of the vectoralist class, that

which claims to be about “tech,” and which wants to pivot and disrupt and generally creatively destroy the world for fun and interest. However, it could be pointed out that in many ways this ideology is just as much about negation. It is just that the vectoralist class ascendancy wants to destroy the last vestiges of the power of *both* capital and labor, and subordinate both to control through information.

The problem is more that both negation and acceleration are limited forms of historical imagination. Negation is a figure that presupposes that there is only second nature. There is only capital and its negation by the proletariat. Acceleration is a figure that presupposed that there is only third nature. There is only the abstraction beyond second nature. It is not a form of historical imagination that has grasped the development of new class relations on this terrain.

Both negation and acceleration neglect the problem of the limits to the transformation of nature by *both* second and third nature. The historical imagination of negation makes a fetish of the social, as if it were not embedded in both nature and techne. The historical imagination of acceleration in its earlier versions makes a fetish of desire, and in its later iterations of a technical

rationality. Desire was never thought together with need; rationality was never thought through the property form and hence class relations in which it appears in third nature.

Neither had much to say about the vast *metabolic rifts* opening up through the operation of second and third nature on their natural substrate.³ The best known of these is molecular flows of carbondioxide and methane into the atmosphere, caused by fossil fuels and livestock. The intensive development of second nature, followed by the command of any and all of the world’s resources that third nature enables, causes entropic feedback into the whole global production and reproduction process.⁴ Indeed, the vectoralist class now feeds off the very entropic disorder that it produces. Thus, human, social, and technical history can no longer be imagined independently of natural history.

Only an alliance of all the subordinated classes could ever hope to confront this potentially catastrophic development of third nature under the domination of the vectoralist class. Such an alliance would need to clearly identify new vulnerabilities, given that few of the old choke points of the factory or even the “social factory” of the city can “derail” a power that does not depend on rails but rather on the

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The campaign for Universal Basic Income was launched in Davos, Switzerland, this year with the help of a friendly robot that demands UBI for his fellow humans. A referendum is scheduled for June 2016.

more flexible topology of the information vector. It may have been symbolically and poetically helpful to say “occupy Wall Street” – but it is rather more difficult to do in practice. How do you occupy an abstraction?

Thinking about history in terms of either negation of acceleration leaves out too much of the picture. These are views which not only neglect certain key features of third nature, they miss what is crucial in our times about nature itself. The era of third nature is one that commands not only all of second nature as a resource, but all of nature as well. Moreover, all of nature becomes the exhaust, the heat sink, the dumping ground, for all of the entropic waste products of a now planetary scale of abstract social production.

What if history can be neither negated nor accelerated? Perhaps second and third nature have been built so broad and so deep that there’s no getting around this infrastructure. Thus while the commodity economy keeps plodding along, at its own relentless pace, it forms agents of any class in its own image and obliges them to work in the forms it determines. What if even the vectoralist class had little power anymore over its own creation?

This would be to think then about the *inertia* of history. Jean-Paul Sartre offers a brilliant account of this, in his own distinctive language, here translated into the language of this text.⁵

03/06

Collective social endeavor, first in agriculture, then industry, then information, built an infrastructure over and against itself, which then shapes those ongoing efforts to its calcified forms. All that is solid might melt into air, but it precipitates back out of the gaseous into the solid state again as more of the same.

The commodity form drives labor to create not only the product of the moment but an infrastructure that endures and that has the commodity form embedded in itself. Thus it shapes action on and in and through it into its own form, stripping collective effort of its social character and robbing it of the capacity to change it. Action becomes, even as action, a form of *passivity*, in which each action appears separated from all others, as mere individual action, for which there can be only individual rewards.

Hence there is no negation, as the infrastructure itself does not afford much by way of action that could confront it with a qualitative break in its form. And hence there is no acceleration, as the infrastructure of second and third nature alike determine the pace at which change is to happen, and moreover shape change as simply more of the same. Acceleration is no more capable of rendering a qualitative break than negation.

This paraphrase of Sartre is as bleak as the original, if not quite in the same rich language.



A literally decaying society adorns the poster from the 1989 Brian Yuzna film, *Society*, here shown in a detail.

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An illustration retrieved from googling "hacker," the keyboard is a weapon.

Sartre held out some hope for a kind of action that would fuse individual wills and get them out of the solipsistic and unrelated separation from each other. In Sartre this is the *fused group* – an idea that shows up in modified form as Guattari's subjective moment or Badiou's subject-forming event.

In any case, this line of thought about historical action still bets heavily on a collective human action, or even a posthuman rationality in and against an infrastructure whose very form absorbs and renders inert such activity. The paradox of third nature is thus that it does indeed accelerate and proliferate transactions of a commodified type, but always of the same type. The flexibility and precarity it generates on the surface is the effect of a deep and wide infrastructural immobility.

This is where the disruptive capacity of collective endeavor, whether the farmer's riot, the worker's strike, or the hacker's exploit, has to be acknowledged to be a limited and one-sided view of historical action.⁶ Which brings us to a fourth term, implied as a gap left over in the matrix of the other three. If the attempt to negate or accelerate history runs up against the inertia of the infrastructure on which it runs, then perhaps it's a question not of braking or

speeding that infrastructure, but of *designing a different one*.

The infrastructures of second and third nature have taken on the form of commodity exchange and embedded it into every aspect of everyday life. The design of a different one has to look elsewhere. Perhaps the natural history of forms can here come to the rescue of the social history of forms, now that the latter have come to be endless clones and servants of the one form, just of an ever more abstract nature.

This is a perilous path, as it is almost impossible to avoid projecting backwards onto natural forms the habits of thought of second nature and now third nature. In the industrial era, liberal capitalism and the steam engine shaped an image of nature as a Darwinian free market. In our own time, neoliberal vectorialism and the computer shape a different image of nature, but one no less a matter of substituting images from the world of production onto nature itself as a petit-bourgeois struggle of "selfish genes."

What would it mean, then, to understand nature from the points of view not of the dominant classes but of the dominated? To think nature as the farmer or the worker or the hacker might, as symbiotic practices of transforming, respectively, matter, energy, and information?

05/06



The British twenty-pound note glorifies Adam Smith's considerations on the increase of productivity with the introduction of the division of labor.

Might it be possible to use the collective struggles of three stages of the commodity economy to critique the dominant worldviews that have emerged about nature, but not to stop there? The task for the historical imagination is to move on, and attempt to *extrapolate* from what can be known about natural forms the possible morphologies for the design of a new infrastructure.⁷

So, the bad news: the juggernaut that is third nature cannot be negated, as its very form is dedicated to routing around any specific points at which action could be effective. Nor can it be accelerated. There is no subordinate class in a position to push it further or faster than it goes of its own accord. Thinking history from the point of view of the product rather than the producers flips the picture around and shows that the cumulative heft of what collective endeavor has built is what stands in the way of its own transformation.

Which leaves only the option of redesigning it on the fly. This would require collaborative action among the subordinated classes. The differences among such classes cannot be wished away by branding it the multitude or by imposing by fiat a kind of philosophical universalism. It means an approach to coalition building that is more about economic agents than merely political ones, as in most versions of radical democracy.⁸ It is time to build a new infrastructure within the ruins of the old.

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e-flux journal #70 — february 2016 McKenzie Wark
The Vectoralist Class, Part Two

1

See, for example, Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972) and Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994). Interestingly, the latter is only partly a theory of history as negation. The last chapter, on détournement, rather points in other directions.

2

Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014); *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomics, 2014).

3

On metabolic rift, see: John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); John Bellamy Foster et al., *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

4

See Robert Biel, *The Entropy of Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

5

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 1 (London: Verso, 2004).

6

On precapitalist forms of revolt, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (London: Norton, 1965). On forms of revolt of the hacker class, see Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007) and Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014).

7

I take the concept of extrapolation from Joseph Needham, *Time: The Refreshing River* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1948).

8

For the classic statement of radical democracy, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 2014).