

McKenzie Wark <mw35@nyu.edu>

A Hacker Manifesto [version 5.1: transitional version]

00. Commodity production is in transition from the domination of capital as property to the domination of information as property. The radical and reformist theory of the transition beyond commodity production has not yet made this same transition. This body of theory has been through two phases, which correspond to two kinds of error. In the first phase, when theory was in the hands of the worker's movement, it fetishized the infrastructure, or economy of the social formation. In the second phase, when theory was in the hands of the academic radicals, it fetishized the superstructures of culture and ideology. Theory of the first kind reduces the superstructure to being a reflection of the economy; theory of the second kind awards the superstructure a relative autonomy. Neither grasp the fundamental changes in commodity production which render obsolete this understanding of the social formation or the new kinds of class struggle now emerging under the sign of the domination of information as property. Property is a concept that occupies a liminal, undecideable place place between economy and culture. Our task today is to grasp the historical development of commodity production from the point of view of property, fulcum on which not only infrastructure and superstructure hinge, but also the class struggle.

01. There is a double spooking the world, the double of abstraction. The fortunes of states and armies, companies and communities depend on it. All contending classes - the

landlords and farmers, the workers and capitalists - revere yet fear the relentless abstraction of the world on which their fortunes yet depend. All the classes but one. The hacker class.

02. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colourings, we 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 are produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old. While hackers 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 control the means for making worlds we alone discover. We do not own what we produce -- it owns us.

03. And yet we don't quite know who we are. While we recognise our distinctive existence as a group, as programmers, as artists or writers or scientists or musicians, we rarely see these ways of representing ourselves as mere fragments of a class experience that is still struggling to express itself as itself, as expressions of the process of producing abstraction in the world. Geeks and freaks become what they are negatively, through the exclusion by others. Hackers are a class, but a virtual class, a class as yet to hack itself into manifest existence as itself: as the utopian class.

Abstraction

04. 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. It is through the abstract that the virtual is identified, produced and released. The virtual is not just the potential latent in matters, it is the potential of potential. To hack is to produce or apply the abstract to information and express the possibility of new worlds.

05. As the abstraction of private property was extended to information, it produced the hacker class as a class. Hackers must sell their capacity for abstraction to a class that owns the means of production, the vectoralist class -- the emergent ruling class of our time. The vectoralist class is waging an intensive struggle to dispossess hackers of their intellectual property. Patents and copyrights all end up in the hands, not of their creators, but of the vectoralist class that owns the means of realising the value of these abstractions. The vectoralist class struggles to monopolise abstraction. Hackers find themselves dispossessed both individually, and as a class. Hackers come piecemeal to struggle against the particular forms in which abstraction is commodified and made into the private property of the vectoralist class. Hackers come to struggle collectively against the usurious charges the vectoralists extort for access to the information that hackers collectively produce, but that vectoralists collectively come to own. Hackers come as a class to recognise their class interest is best expressed through the struggle to free the production of abstraction not just from the particular fetters of this or that form of

property, but to abstract the form of property itself. The abstraction of property must be abstracted from itself.

06. What makes our times different is that what now appears on the horizon is the possibility of a life finally set free from necessity, both real and imagined, by an explosion in abstract innovations. Abstraction with the potential once and for all to break the shackles holding hacking fast to outdated and regressive class interests.

Production

07. Production produces all things, and all producers of things. Production produces not only the object of the production process, but also the producer as subject. Hacking is the production of production. The hack produces a production of a new kind, which has as its result a singular and unique product, and a singular and unique producer. Every hacker is at one and the same time producer and product of the hack, and emerges in its singularity as the memory of the hack as process.

08. The hack produces both a useful and a useless surplus, although the usefulness of any surplus is socially and historically determined. The useful surplus goes into expanding the realm of freedom wrested from necessity. The useless surplus is the surplus of freedom itself, the margin of free production unconstrained by production for necessity.

09. The production of a surplus creates the possibility of the expansion of freedom from necessity. But in class society, the production of a surplus also creates new necessities. Class domination takes the form of the capture of the productive potential of society and its harnessing to the production, not of liberty, but of class domination itself. The ruling class subordinates the hack to the maintenance of forms of production that maintain class

power, and the suppression or marginalisation of other forms of hacking. What the producing classes - farmers, workers and hackers - have in common is an interest in freeing production from its subordination to ruling classes who turn production into the production of new necessities, who wrest slavery from surplus. The elements of a free productivity exist already in an atomised form, in the productive classes. What remains is the release of its virtuality.

Class

10. The class struggle, in its endless setbacks, reversals and compromises returns again and again to the unanswered question - property - and the contending classes return again and again with new answers. The working class questioned the necessity of private property, and the communist party arose, claiming to answer the desires of the working class. The answer, expressed in the Communist Manifesto was to "centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state." But making the state the monopolist of property has only produced a new ruling class, and a new and more brutal class struggle. But perhaps this was not the final answer, and the course of the class struggle is not yet over. Perhaps there is another class that can pose the property question in a new way - and offer new answers to breaking the monopoly of the ruling classes on property.

11. Information, like land or capital, becomes a form of property monopolised by a ruling class, in this case 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. Information circulated within working class culture as a social 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 whole of time, time itself, becomes a commodified experience.

12. Vectoralists try to break capital's monopoly on the production process, and subordinate the production of goods to the circulation of information. The leading corporations divest themselves of their productive capacity, as this is no longer a source of power. Their power lies in monopolising intellectual property - patents and brands - and the means of reproducing their value - the vectors of communication. The privatisation of information becomes the dominant, rather than a subsidiary, aspect of commodified life. As private property advances from land to capital to information, property itself becomes more abstract. Just as capital as property frees land from its spatial fixity, information as property frees capital from its fixity in a particular object.

13. 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. The hacker class arises out of the transformation of information into property, in the form of intellectual property, including patents, trademarks, copyright and the moral right of authors. 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 beyond the property form. The formation of the hacker class as a class comes at just this moment when freedom from necessity and from class domination appears on the horizon as a possibility.

Property

14. Property constitutes an abstract plane upon which all things may be things with one quality in common, the quality of property. Land is the primary form of property. Pastoralists acquire land as private property through the forced dispossession of peasants who once shared a portion of it in a form of public ownership. Capital is the secondary form of property, the privatisation of productive assets in the form of tools, machines and working materials. Capital, unlike land, is not in fixed supply or disposition. It can be made and remade, moved, aggregated and dispersed. An infinitely greater degree of potential can be released from the world as a productive resource once the abstract plane of property includes both land and capital. But the abstraction of commodity production does not end with capitalism. The transformation of information into an even more abstract form of property, abstracted even from its material expression, takes commodification into a third, as yet uncharted phase of development.

15. Hackers must calculate their interests not as owners, but as producers, for this is what distinguishes them from the vectoralist class. Hackers do not merely own, and profit by owning information. They produce new information, and as producers need access to it free from the absolute domination of the commodity form. Hacking as a pure, free experimental activity must be free from any constraint that is not self imposed. Only out of its liberty will it produce the means of producing a surplus of liberty and liberty as a surplus.

16. Private property arose in opposition not only to feudal property, but also to traditional forms of the gift economy, which were a fetter to the increased productivity of the commodity economy. Qualitative, gift exchange was superseded by quantified,

monetised exchange. Money is the medium through which land, capital, information and labour all confront each other as abstract entities, reduced to an abstract plane of measurement. The gift becomes a marginal form of property, everywhere invaded by the commodity, and turned towards mere consumption. The gift is marginal, but nevertheless plays a vital role in cementing reciprocal and communal relations among people who otherwise can only confront each other as buyer and sellers of commodities. As vectoral production develops, the means appear for the renewal of the gift economy. Everywhere that the vector reaches, it brings into the orbit of the commodity. But everywhere the vector reaches, it also brings with it the possibility of the gift relation.

17. The hacker class has a close affinity with the gift economy. The hacker struggles to produce a subjectivity that is qualitative and singular, in part through the act of the hack itself. The gift, as a qualitative exchange between singular parties allows each party to be recognised as a singular producer, as a subject of production, rather than as a commodified and quantified object. The gift expresses in a social and collective way the subjectivity of the production of production, whereas commodified property represents the producer as an object, a quantifiable commodity like any other, of relative value only. The gift of information need not give rise to conflict over information as property, for information need not suffer the artifice of scarcity once freed from commodification.

18. The vectoralist class contributed, unwittingly, to the development of the vectoral space within which the gift as property could return, but quickly recognised its error. As the vectoral economy develops, less and less of it takes the form of a social space of open and free gift exchange, and more and more of it takes the form of commodified

production for private sale. The vectoralist class can grudgingly accommodate some margin of socialised information, as the price it pays in a democracy for the furtherance of its main interests. But the vectoralist class quite rightly sees in the gift a challenge not just to its profits but to its very existence. The gift economy is the virtual proof for the parasitic and superfluous nature of vectoralists as a class.

Vector

19. In epidemiology, a vector is the particular means by which a given pathogen travels from one population to another. Water is a vector for cholera, bodily fluids for HIV. By extension, a vector may be any means by which information moves. Telegraph, telephone, television, telecommunications: these terms name not just particular vectors, but a general abstract capacity that they bring into the world and expand. All are forms of telesthesia, or perception at a distance. A given media vector has certain fixed properties of speed, bandwidth, scope and scale, but may be deployed anywhere, at least in principle. The uneven development of the vector is political and economic, not technical.

20. With the commodification of information comes its vectoralisation. Extracting a surplus from information requires technologies capable of transporting information through space, but also through time. The archive is a vector through time just as communication is a vector that crosses space. The vectoral class comes into its own once it is in possession of powerful technologies for vectoralising information. The vectoral class may commodify information stocks, flows, or vectors themselves. A stock of information is an archive, a body of information maintained through time that has enduring value. A flow of information is the capacity to extract information of temporary value out of

events and to distribute it widely and quickly. A vector is the means of achieving either the temporal distribution of a stock, or the spatial distribution of a flow of information. Vectoral power generally combines ownership of all three aspects.

21. The vectoral class struggles at every turn to maintain its subjective power over the vector, but as it continues to profit by the proliferation of the vector, some capacity over it always escapes control. In order to market and profit by the information it peddles over the vector, it must in some degree address the vast majority of the producing classes as subjects, rather than as objects of commodification. The hacker class seeks the liberation of the vector from the reign of the commodity, but not to set it indiscriminately free. Rather, to subject it to collective and democratic development. The hacker class can release the virtuality of the vector only in principle. It is up to an alliance of all the productive classes to turn that potential to actuality, to organise themselves subjectively, and use the available vectors for a collective and subjective becoming.

Hacking

22. The virtual is the true domain of the hacker. It is from the virtual that the hacker produces ever-new expressions of the actual. To the hacker, what is represented as being real is always partial, limited, perhaps even false. To the hacker there is always a surplus of possibility expressed in what is actual, the surplus of the virtual. This is the inexhaustible domain of what is real without being actual, what is not but which may be. To hack is to release the virtual into the actual, to express the difference of the real.

23. Through the application of abstraction, the hacker class produces the possibility of production, the possibility of making something of and with the world - and of living off

the surplus produced by the application of abstraction to nature - to any nature. Through the production of new forms of abstraction, the hacker class produces the possibility of the future - not just 'the' future, but an infinite possible array of futures, the future itself as virtuality.

24. Under the sanction of law, the hack becomes a finite property, and the hacker class emerges, as all classes emerge, out of a relation to a property form. Like all forms of property, intellectual property enforces a relation of scarcity. It assigns a right to a property to an owner at the expense of non-owners, to a class of possessors at the expense of the dispossessed.

25. To the extent that the hack embodies itself in the form of property, it gives the hacker class interests quite different from other classes, be they exploiting or exploited classes. The interest of the hacker class lies first and foremost in a free circulation of information, this being the necessary condition for the renewed statement of the hack. But the hacker class as class also has an interest in the representation of the hack as property, as something from which a source of income may be derived that gives the hacker some independence from the ruling classes.

26. The very nature of the hack gives the hacker a crisis of identity. The hacker searches for a representation of what it is to be a hacker in the identities of other classes. Some see themselves as vectoralists, trading on the scarcity of their property. Some see themselves as workers, but as privileged ones in a hierarchy of wage earners. The hacker class has produces itself as itself, but not for itself. It does not (yet) possess a consciousness of its consciousness. It is not aware of its own virtuality. It has to distinguish between its

competitive interest in the hack, and its collective interest in discovering a relation among hackers that expresses an open and ongoing future. A future to which the utopia of free information points in its negation of the property form.

Revolt

27. The revolts of 1989 are the signal events of our time. What the revolts of 1989 achieved was the overthrow of regimes so impervious to the recognition of the value of the hack that they had starved not only their hackers but also their workers and farmers of any increase in the surplus. With their cronyism and kleptocracy, their bureaucracy and ideology, their police and spies, they starved even their pastoralists and capitalists of innovative transformation and growth.

28. The revolts of 1989 overthrew boredom and necessity. At least for a time. They put back on the world historical agenda the limitless demand for free statement. At least for a time. They revealed the latent destiny of world history to express the pure virtuality of becoming. At least for a time, before new states cobbled themselves together and claimed legitimacy as representations of what revolt desired. The revolts of 1989 opened the portal to the virtual, but the states that regrouped around this opening soon closed it. What the revolts really achieved was the making of the world safe for vectoral power.

29. The so-called anti-globalisation protests of the 90s are a ripple caused by the wake of these signal events, but a ripple that did not know the current to which it truly belonged. This movement of revolt in the overdeveloped world identifies the rising vectoral power as a class enemy, but all too often it allowed itself to be captured by the partial and temporary interests of local capitalist and pastoralist classes. It was a revolt in its

infancy that has yet to discover the connection between its engine of limitless desire and free statement, and the art of making tactical demands.

30. The class struggle within nations and the imperial struggle between nations has taken shape as two forms of politics. One kind of politics is regressive. It seeks to return to an imagined past. It seeks to use national borders as a new wall, a neon screen behind which unlikely alliances might protect their existing interests in the name of a glorious past. The other form is the progressive politics of movement. The politics of movement seeks to accelerate toward an unknown future. It seeks to use international flows of information, trade or activism as the eclectic means for struggling for new sources of wealth or liberty that overcomes the limitations imposed by national coalitions.

31. Neither of these politics corresponds to the old notion of a left or right, which the revolutions of 1989 have definitively overcome. Regressive politics brings together luddite impulses from the left with racist and reactionary impulses from the right in an unholy alliance against new sources of power. Progressive politics rarely takes the form of an alliance, but constitutes two parallel processes locked in a dialogue of mutual suspicion, in which the liberalising forces of the right and the social justice and human rights forces of the left both seek non-national and transnational solutions to unblocking the system of power which still accumulates at the national level.

32. There is a third politics, which stands outside the alliances and compromises of the post-89 world. Where both progressive and regressive politics are representative politics, which deal with aggregate party alliances and interests, this third politics is a stateless

politics, which seeks escape from politics as such. A politics of the hack, inventing relations outside of representation.

33. Expressive politics is a struggle against commodity property itself. Expressive politics is not the struggle to collectivise property, for that is still a form of property. Expressive politics is the struggle to free what can be free from both versions of the commodity form - its totalising market form, and its bureaucratic state form. What may be free from the commodity form altogether is not land, not capital, but information. All other forms of property are exclusive. The ownership by one excludes, by definition, the ownership by another. But information as property may be shared without diminishing anything but its scarcity. Information is that which can escape the commodity form.

34. Politics can become expressive only when it is a politics of freeing the virtuality of information. In liberating information from its objectification as a commodity, it liberates also the subjective force of statement. Subject and object meet each other outside of their mere lack of each other, by their desire merely for each other. Expressive politics does not seek to overthrow the existing society, or to reform its larger structures, or to preserve its structure so as to maintain an existing coalition of interests. It seeks to permeate existing states with a new state of existence, spreading the seeds of an alternative practice of everyday life.