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Book Review: *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*

Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?, by McKenzie Wark. Verso, 2019. 208 pp./\$25.95 (hb).



The commonsense pedagogical notion that questions are more important than answers is rarely borne out with the theoretical conciseness enacted by McKenzie Wark in her new volume, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* In seven short chapters, Wark extends the

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provocative suggestion that capital has lost its own devil's bargain with the information economy and today a more ruthless mode of production lurks in our midst. *Capital Is Dead* roots its critical engagement in a Debordian *détournement* not of *Das Kapital* itself but rather of the extracted ideals that have crystallized over the subsequent centuries into a Marxist mythology (35). The text is framed principally as a thought experiment, a project that pays fitting homage to Karl Marx's innovation of new forms of expression suited to contemporary conditions. For the span of her argument, Wark invites the reader to suspend institutionalized modes of engaging with capitalism, clearing the imaginative space for a lexicon specific to a new mode of production.

Assessing the mesh of overlapping terms that are alternately and variously applied to this set of emerging phenomena (surveillance capitalism, platform capitalism, neoliberal capitalism, etc.), Wark identifies the circuitous structure of a pop song: a melody arriving without fail at the refrain of eternal capital (27). This dogpile of "modifiers," she contends, does not adequately contextualize a world in which the information political economy has rendered every surface—whether material or immaterial—vulnerable to extraction. In order to confront the unique challenges of the Anthropocene, it will be necessary to begin thinking about property, production, and commodification according to a whole new set of parameters, and especially within a revised structure of class relations.

Capital is Dead builds directly on the foundations laid in Wark's seminal *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), tracking the legalities and technics of abstraction that have dramatically revised the possibilities for analysis and intervention across the last fifteen years. Despite these shifts, Wark holds to her earlier assertion that two of the key players in this emergent mode of production are new class categories, which she first described in *A Hacker Manifesto*: the hacker and "vectoralist" classes. The vectoralist class, according to Wark, arose from capital's overzealous extension of abstract, flexible labor structures and has now "subsumed and outflanked" capital by harnessing the vector of information (55). The hacker class, its constitutive inverse, produces information novel enough to be recognized as value according to intellectual property law. Closely aligned with Benjamin H. Bratton's concept of "The Stack,"¹ Wark's *vector* is a governing computational infrastructure that vertically integrates older modes of production, engaging in a crusade to subordinate capitalist and landlord classes worldwide (46). That is to say, contrary to the title's polemics, Wark is not making a claim here for the total extinction of capital, but rather the emergence of a more aggressive species of rationalization and commodification. Within this newly profiled topography, *Capital is Dead* explores the difficulties and possible rewards of solidarity building within the hacker class, a project that will require a radical rewriting of twentieth-century labor's organizational practices.

The colossal enterprise of this provocative little book is belied by its readability: Wark's endeavor to loosen critical theory's death grip on the semantics and technics of late capitalism is sprinkled with wry allusions to BuzzFeed quizzes and arguments for Marx's proto-punk sensibility. Performing a survey of labor representation in recent popular culture,

1. Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 3–13.

Wark invokes media texts as divergent as the film *Get Out* (2017, directed by Jordan Peele) and the television series *Dollhouse* (2009–10, created by Joss Whedon) and *Mad Men* (2007–15, created by Matthew Weiner), isolating moments that dramatize hacker-vectorial tension. Over any given page turn, Wark transitions from a Weberian analysis of opportunity hoarding to a pitch-perfect recapitulation of Cardi B's politics of self-entrepreneurship; in this book, perhaps more so than any other, Wark's range and verve as a cultural theorist are on full display.

After establishing the basic project and methodology of the text in the first two chapters, Wark outlines the progressive history of information commodification, providing a valuable overview of the contributions of Red Science and the far-reaching implications of its collapse after the Cold War. *Capital Is Dead* culminates in a call to reclaim the praxis of vulgar Marxism, which Wark frames—in opposition to the “genteel” Marxism of the academy—as a project of gathering pools of situated and specialized hacker knowledge into vast collectives. Included in this call to action are studies of four figures Wark claims as exemplar “vulgarians”: Marxist activist and academic Angela Davis, Situationist artist Asger Jorn, postwar filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, and modernist author Andrei Platonov.

While the argument of *Capital Is Dead* adheres to the basic principles outlined in her earlier work, Wark significantly revises her stance toward the intellectual commons. In *A Hacker Manifesto*, Wark proffered the claim that “Information is that which can escape the commodity form altogether. Information escapes the commodity as history and history as commodification. It frees abstraction from its commodified phase.”² In the subsequent fifteen years, as many of the last holdouts of a digital commons have become progressively assimilated into the attention economy and its corporate revenue streams, the dream of information-outside-of-commodity has been warped by the realities of “asymmetrical exchanges” of information (8). Wark no longer holds out hope for the digital commons; her argument now runs parallel to Silvia Federici's claim that computerization more broadly should be considered a dominant mechanism of new enclosures of human creativity and land.³ Furthermore, though Wark situates *A Hacker Manifesto* as a left-accelerationist work, she diverts here from her prior accelerationist inclinations; *Capital Is Dead* bushwhacks a path away from the signposts of accelerationist/negationist dualism as well as the Paul Mason-derived strand of techno-utopian postcapitalism. Instead, Wark extends the alternative of *acommunism*, a positionality that embraces the current impracticability of both capitalism and communism, redirecting energy to the innovation of new codes of production and communal living.

Like the Italian autonomist movement and other projects relating to the precarious situation of affective and cognitive laborers in the Global North, *Capital Is Dead* is often more attentive to potential alliances across class than to tracing distributed global power structures that house various strata of precarious laborers. Undergirding the concept of a unified, globalized *cognitariat* (here, a hacker class) are systematic procedures of ecological devastation,

2. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 253.

3. Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018).

electronic waste accumulation, uncompensated reproductive work, and a host of other nominally “immaterial” labor practices that reverberate across the globe. Where Wark invokes the concept of “free labor” to describe the content production and maintenance work performed by social media users (central to her productive discussion of asymmetrical information structures), she elides the question of the labor conditions that reproduce the material infrastructure that sustains the alliance-building work she describes.

The foundational thought experiment of *Capital Is Dead* can perhaps be considered productively in conversation with the work of feminist neomaterialist scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, who, in her article “Posthuman Critical Theory,”⁴ cautions against reading the information commodification of the globe as a flattening operation. In her own *détournement* of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Braidotti asserts that “‘Data-mining’ includes profiling practices that identify types of characteristics and highlights them as specific strategic targets for capital investments, or risk categories . . . producing multiple ecologies of belonging” (16). *Capital Is Dead* performs the vital function of uncovering a critical taboo in Marxist theory; like-minded theorists are now tasked with establishing (if this is indeed a new mode of production) how it is worse, for whom, and how. ■

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4. Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory,” *Journal of Posthuman Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 2017): 9–25.