

The Sublime Language of My Century

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One thing that the left and right now seem to agree on is that the society in which we live is called *capitalism*. And strangely enough, both now seem to agree that it is eternal. Even the left seems to think there is an eternal essence to capitalism, and only its appearances change. The parade of changing appearances yields a series of modifiers: this could be late capitalism or communicate capitalism or cognitive capitalism or neoliberal capitalism. But short of an increasingly allegorical or messianic leap into something other — it is as if this self-same thing just went on forever.

Maybe its because I have a taste for old-fashioned modernism, but whenever I come across a piece of language about which there is such wide consensus I want to trouble it, somehow. This capitalism that we have all agreed that we live in: has it not become too familiar, too comfortable an idea? The reality the term tried to describe is of course far from comfortable. Capitalism, if this is what this is, appears to be smashing not only the social but the natural conditions of its existence to pieces. But then maybe this is the thing to ask about. Why have we become so comfortable with a way of describing an uncomfortable reality? Do we want a certainty in language that can't be had anywhere else?

That the world we live in is capitalism has become a familiar way of describing something that destroys what is familiar. It atomizes and alienates. It renders everything precarious except its own grasp on the imagination. If the greatest trick of the devil was to persuade us that the devil does not exist; then maybe the greatest trick of capitalism is to gull us into imagining that there is nothing but capitalism.

It is hard to describe things that change imperceptibly. This may well be the level of language on which the problem rests. It has to do with using the combinations of language, which have something of a binary quality, to describe changes that might be gradual or might be swift, but which aren't neat digital divides between one term and another. It is as hard to describe transitions between modes of production as it is to describe changes in mood.

There was once a language about transitions between modes of production. It is striking how the left and the right alike ended up working within the same language about this. Marx really was one of the great modern poets. Of course he worked with the materials of the languages he had to hand, but he wrought something lasting: a combinatory of terms for describing history. Like any great poetic corpus, his work contains multitudes. But there are a few standard permutations than came to stick in the mind, like great pop songs.

Here I think is his greatest hit, one that has become something of an earworm. It goes something like this: this is capitalism. It has an essence and it has appearances. Its essence is defined by these things: the commodity form, with its doublet of use value and exchange value; by labor's double form, as concrete and abstract labor; by the extraction of surplus value in the production process, by the wage relation, by the rising organic composition of capital, by the crisis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. And finally, by negation.

There are actually two variants of the poem here, about negation. Either capitalism negates itself, brought to ruin by its own contradictions. Or: it is negated by a force it produces as its own negation, the working class. In either variant, one thing is key: capitalism can change its appearances, but never its essence. Its essence can only be negated, by contradiction or struggle. Various variant tunes spill out of this rhetorical frame, like mutating like genres of techno music.

There are other variations. One can swap out the abstract verb negation and replace it with acceleration. This is currently popular again, as it was in the twenties. Here the idea is that there's nothing that can negate capital, either in its own contradictions or in the force it produces in and against itself. Rather, the best one can do is accelerate it to its end, towards a Promethean leap into another historical figure. But note that this is not as much of a change in tune as its advocate like to imagine. It leaves intact the rhetorical form of capital as an essence.

The essence of capital is eternal. This is the striking feature of how it is now imagined. Those who love it of course embrace this thought. It needs merely to be perfected by our love. This is sometimes called, with a stunning lack of imagination — neoliberalism. But what is even stranger is that those who do not love it seem to agree. The essence of capital is eternal. It goes on forever, and everything is an expression of its essence. Capital is the essence expressed everywhere and its expression is tending to become ever more total.

The other side of the eternal essence of capital is its ever changing appearances. Change is accounted for via the use of modifiers. Its appearances can even be periodized. There was merchant capitalism then industrial capitalism, then monopoly capitalism then neoliberal capitalism. There's some ambiguity as to what to call the current stage, however. It could be multinational, cognitive, semio, late, neoliberal, or postfordist capitalism, to name just a few. Note that the last two of these are temporal modifications to a modifier: neoliberal, postfordist. Could there be any better tribute to the complete enervation of the imagination by capitalism, or whatever it is, that this is the best our poets can do? Modify the modifier? Capitalism must be very disappointed in our linguistic competence.

Of course there's the opposite rhetorical tack as well, which is to go a bit overboard with the binary difference between two terms, although its partisans have not been so bold as to break too much with the essence of capitalism. Rather, it worked like this: there used to be material labor; now there is immaterial labor. Its a different kind of labor. Its the opposite! But its still only a modified capitalism, a *cognitive* capitalism. Its not material any more. Capitalism itself is about ideas. Its striking how much one can get carried away with the play of language, and forget to look at the world. Somehow, I don't think the hundred million industrial workers of China perceive their work as immaterial.

The task of this talk is thus a provocation: to think the possibility that capitalism has already been rendered history, but that the period that replaces it is worse. That it could be worse gets us away from the happy narratives in which capitalism gave way to a postindustrial society or some other magic kingdom, free from contradiction and class struggle. Rather, in this thought experiment, I propose to think the present as a new kind of class conflict, including new kinds of class arising out of recent mutations in the forces and relations of production. But putting this pressure on our received ideas and legacy language, perhaps we can begin to see the outlines of the present afresh, estranged from our habits of thought.

There was once an attempt to have done with at least part of this great rhetorical-historical edifice. It started with questioning the idea of capital as having an essence and an appearance. What if appearances were as equally real as the essence? There were actually two version of the essence-appearance structure. One took economic to be the essence, but in the sense of being the base, and everything else was dependent on it. This version is called economism. In the other version, its not the economic, but the commodity form that is the essence, one that has come into being in history and then become the essence of history, which records its forms of appearance as a false totality, as spectacle.

Against this, some took the view that the economic only determined everything else in the *last instance*, that things like politics and culture were not mere appearances but had their own material form, but one whose function was to reproduce the essential economic form of capitalism.

If things like politics or culture are relatively autonomous, if they have their own material form, maybe they even have their own essence! It did not take long for culture to have its own essential categories: the signifier and the signified were just like exchange value and use value! An abstract essence! But a different one! So one could just specialize in singing the song of this (relatively) autonomous world of essences and appearances, while still gesturing to the master-narrative, that this is indeed and will remain, capitalism.

If the economy has an essence and appearances, and culture too has an essence and appearances, then maybe politics does too! The wonderful thing about language is that if you seek it you can find it. Yes, politics has an essence, the great fundamental drama of friend versus enemy, or maybe its dissensus, or something. The main thing is we can sing the song of the essence and appearances of politics, while still gesturing to the master-narrative, that this is indeed and will remain, capitalism.

I have to say that my inner modernist finds this all rather banal. Is this the best we can do to speak the sublime language of our century? Why does it all seem the same? Like pop music? Variations on themes, all leading back to the same old note, that capital is eternal? That one day (that will never come) there will be a messianic leap into something else, but until then, let's just go to the movies. It seems to me that our poetry of capitalism, or whatever it is, shows all the signs of being a culture industry. Nowhere in these tunes is there that striking note of non-equivalence, or that moment of de-familiarization when the roof falls in.

Perhaps one has to ask: what the *emotional attachment* that we have to the idea that this is capitalism, and that it is eternal? It has to be said that the most vigorous attempts to tell a different story, to strike a different tune, where made in bad faith. Still are, perhaps. There was a time when it was a popular art form. Once the narrative of capitalism and its coming negation got out, you could make a good living coming up with a different story. Not surprisingly, it was former Marxists and socialists who came up with most of those alternative stories. Thus we had the story of the managerial revolution, of the postindustrial society, of the conditions for take-off and growth. What these stories all had in common was that they accepted the basic premise of the Marxist story. They conceded its power, its poetry. But they changed the ending. Rather than negation, the story ended in a resolution of contradictions. These were extorted reconciliations. But they had some currency nonetheless. But with the collapse of the supposedly socialist world, which at least pretended to live up to the great Marxist story, these counter-narratives lost their force.

One counter-story from that era survives. It was not written by a socialist, although he briefly worked for a socialist government. In this story, capitalism negates itself, and in a good way. It can pivot and disrupt itself. Indeed, its essence becomes its self-disruption. And it is our sacred duty never to get in its way. This is the rhetorical art-form of the 'California ideology.' Into it can be folded certain other variations, about the fourth industrial revolution, for example.

The conceit of all these post-capitalist stories was that this is not capitalism, it's better! When people hear the beginnings of a story about this no longer being capitalism, their resistance generally rises at this point. Unless you happen to be worth several million dollars, the chances are you do not perceive this as something better than capitalism.

But maybe it would be interesting, politically and aesthetically, to take the other fork of the binary here. Instead of the idea that this is not capitalism, ts better, what if we explored the idea that this is not capitalism, but worse? This also meets a lot of resistance. This I can tell you from experience, having tried to write variations on this text for fifteen years. Nobody wants to leave the certainty of the devil they know, or think they know, for something that promises to be worse.

Interestingly, few people will even attempt it as a thought experiment. There really is something fundamental to the belief that this is capitalism. It may even be the defining feature of ideology today. Ideology today is not the acceptance of a neoliberal structure of feeling or habits of thought and action. Ideology today is clinging to the belief that this is capitalism.

Another way to tackle this would be impute some meaning to Marx's famous remark to the effect that he was not a Marxist. What if what he meant by that is that he was not one of those who simply took a language and a rhetorical form extracted from his texts as a given? He was, to the contrary, the one who had constructed that language with a quite particular purpose in mind: to understand the situation of his times from the labor point of view. So: what if we kept the commitment to understanding, not his times, but ours, from the labor point of view, whatever that might mean now — and bracketed off the rest?

That makes a certain sense to me. I really am puzzled by why we should use blocks of linguistic material from his time again to understand our time. Why use the fashionable philosophy, the popular science, the political tracts, or the technological metaphors of the mid-nineteenth century? When poets or novelists do that, we immediately think its dated and quaint. But somehow we want our great narrative to be about capitalism, even if it is dated and quaint.

Of course different genres of text have a different relationship to tradition and innovation, and at different moments in their development. They aren't always in synch. And of course there's generally a culture industry in which the texts get pulped into sameness, and an avant-garde trying to do something else. If you are trying to write an interesting, rather than merely successful, novel or poem, you want to change things at the formal level, rather than ship your wine in the same old bottles. The thing is, where readings and rewritings of Marx are concerned, they seem to me to belong to the culture industry. Its a commonplace now [to read](#) *Capital* as a work of philosophy or an epic novel, but to do so very conservatively. And indeed could there be anything more conservative now than the tradition of continental philosophy?

I have not named names in this text, partly to avoid embarrassing its characters. But mainly because I take it as given that texts writes their author, rather than their author writing them. Authors are never good guides to their own writings, as the writings exceed conscious intention — although I would not take that insight as far as the psychoanalytically inclined, who maybe create too big an interpretive playground for themselves out of it. So in describing my own attempt to write within the space, all these caveats also apply to me.

It has not always been the case that Marx was read conservatively, as a great text for explication, interpretation and imitation. Where the Marxocological savant became a master simply by producing a variation on the theme. There are those who read Marx the same way they read Rimbaud and Lautréamont. I'll mention just three: Aimé Césaire, JBS Haldane, and Guy Debord. From the latter I'll also take a few clues about method. Could there be a way to write after Marx that isn't based on conservative habits of mastery and interpretation, but which are based instead on experimentation and détournement?

Of course, being a very minor poet, I did not get very far. But I gave it a shot. I wrote a way of describing the current situation that is not capitalism, but worse. Here's how: what if, rather than start at the beginning, one started at the end? The capitalism story always starts in the past, with the birth of capitalism, and imagines a destiny, a teleology, wherein the present must be some continuum from that past. This must be some modification of the essence of the thing. Let's do it the other way around. Let's first describe the present, then secondarily figure out where it came from. This may even, in the end, involve modifying our understanding of capitalism's past. In short, let's start where Marx started, describing a present — not from his results.

Let's start by being very 'orthodox' — (I use the term ironically). Let's start with the forces of production, with the relations of production that correspond to them, the class conflict generated out of those relations of production, and the political and culture superstructures that correspond to that base. And let us also, just as Marx did, try to describe what may be emerging, rather than what is established. If one starts with what is established, it is easy to interpret any new aspect of the situation as simply variations on the same essence. Starting with what is emerging provides a suitable derangement of the senses, a giddy hint that all that was solid is melting into air.

The thought experiment that might result is quite simple. What if it was like this: There really is something qualitatively distinct about the forces of production that produce and instrumentalize and control *information*. This is because information really does turn out to have strange ontological properties. Making information a force of production produces something of a conundrum within the commodity form. Information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains. It isn't scarce, and the whole premise of the commodity is its scarcity. Information as a force of production called into being particular relations of production. In classic Marxist style, one can look here at the evolution of legal forms. What we see there is the emergence of *intellectual property* as close to an absolute private property right. One that makes the once separate and local property forms of patent,

copyright and trademark equivalent forms of private property. Forms which, as the negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership make clear, need transnational forms of legal enforcement, precisely because information is such a slippery and abstract thing.

And so, like the enclosures or the joint-stock company before it, intellectual property law becomes the form of a new kind of relation of production, more abstract than its predecessors, and one which makes not land or physical plant a form of private property, but information itself. Like those preceding forms of private property, this one gives rise to a class relation. As an absolute form of private property, it creates classes of owners and non-owners of the means of realizing its value. Land as private property gave rise to the two great classes of farmer and landlord. Capital as private property gave rise to the two great classes of worker and capitalist. Is there a new class relation that emerges out of the commodification of information?

For argument's sake, let's say it does. I call those classes the hacker class and the vectoralist class. The hacker class produces new information. What is 'new' information? Whatever intellectual property law recognizes as new. It's a strange kind of production. Where the farmer grows crops and the worker stamps out units of some thing, the hacker has to make the same old stuff, information, appear in new configurations. Getting this done is not like the seasonal repetitions of farming or the clocking-on of the worker. It happens when it happens, including time spent napping or pulling all-nighters. Hackers can't be managed like farmers or workers. They are not the same as either class.

Like the farmer and the worker, the hacker does not usually end up owning the product of her efforts. Unless you own a drug company or a tech company or whatever, you have to sell the rights to what you produce. It is not always the same as selling labor-power. You might still own the intellectual property, for example. But the hacker rarely captures the value of what they invent. Not everyone gets to be Bill Gates — precisely because there is a Bill Gates, who is not the avatar of the hacker class, but of its opposite — the vectoralist class.

The vectoralist class owns and controls the vector, a term I use to describe in the abstract the infrastructure on which information is routed, whether through time or space. You can own stocks or flows of information, but far better to own the vector, the legal and technical protocols for keeping information scarce.

If one takes a look at the top *Fortune 500* companies, it is surprising how many of them are really in the information business. I don't just mean the tech and telco companies like Apple or Google or Verizon or Cisco, or the drug companies like Pfizer. One could think of the big banks as a subset of the vectoralist class rather than as 'finance capital.' They are in the information asymmetry business. And as we learned in the 2008 crash, even the car companies are in the information business — they made more money from car loans than cars. The military-industrial sector also also in the information business. Even the companies that make things like Nike are really in the brand business. Walmart and Amazon compete with different models of the information logistics business. The oil companies are in the prospecting business. The actual oil drilling is contracted out. Perhaps the vectoralist class is no longer emerging. Maybe it is the new dominant class.

That might only be the case in the overdeveloped world where we live. Many of the world's peoples are still peasants who are being turned into farmers by the theft of their land by a landlord class. Much of the world is a giant sweatshop. The resistance of labor to capital is alive and well in China or India. The older class antagonisms have not gone away. It's just there's a new layer on top, trying to control them. Just as the capitalist class sought to dominate and subordinate the landlord class as a subordinate ruling class, so too the vectoralist class tries to subordinate both landlords and capitalists, by controlling the patents, the brands, the trademarks, the copyrights, but more importantly the logistics of the information vector.

A side note here: In *Capital*, Marx really only deals with an ideal-type political economy with two classes. But in his political writings it is clear that he understands social formations as hybrids of combined and overlapping modes of production. Landlords and farmers loom large in his writings on France, for example. So here I'm simply taking my cue from the political writings, and thinking a matrix of six classes, three ruling and three subordinate. The dominant classes are thus: landlords, capitalists, vectoralists. The subordinate classes are: farmers, workers, hackers.

Now imagine all the possibilities of class alliance and conflict that this generates. It turns out that politics is much less about the relation between the friend and the enemy, and much more crucially about relations among *non-friends* and *non-enemies*. As anyone who has actually done politics, or knows some semiotics, could figure out.

So how is it worse that capitalism? The vectoral infrastructure throws all of the world into the engine of commodification. There is nothing that can't be tagged and captured via information about it and considered a variable in the simulations that drive resource extraction and processing. Quite simply, we have run out of world to commodify. And now commodification can only cannibalize its own means of existence, both natural and social. It's like that silent film where the train runs out of firewood, so the carriages themselves have to be hacked to pieces and fed to the fire to keep it moving, until nothing but the bare bogies are left.

It is worse also in that rather than some vague multitude, there's complex class alliances at play in the political space. The trickiest part of it is the politics of the hacker class. Which after all is the class most of us here belong to. Yes, it sometimes appears as a privileged class. But it is a class that has a very hard time thinking its common interests. Largely because the kinds of new information its various sub-fractions produce are all so different. We

have a hard time thinking what the poet and the scientist and the engineer have in common. Well, the vectoral class does not have that problem, what all of us make is intellectual property, which from its point of view is all equivalent and tradable as a commodity.

Also, the hacker class experiences extremes of a winner-take-all outcome of its efforts. On the one hand, fantastic careers and the spoils of some simulation of the old bourgeois lifestyle, on the other hand, precarious and part time work, start-ups that go bust, and the making routine of our jobs by new algorithms designed by others of our very own class. Of course it is always a tough argument to propose common interests among subordinate classes. Counter-hegemony is hard. Hackers, like workers or farmers, are distracted by particular and local interests. Class consciousness is rare among hackers. Most of us are rather reactionary — even in the nontechnical trades. But then class consciousness is always a rare and difficult thing. Unlike other identities, it has to be argued *contrary* to appearances.

I could add more to the picture, but perhaps that will do for now. Treat it as a thought experiment. Maybe like a science fiction story where you have to suspend disbelief. Or an avant-garde prose poem. That was [secretly how I thought about *A Hacker Manifesto*](#) when I wrote it, although of course I did not tell Harvard University Press that, as everyone knows prose poems don't sell. I can say that I got that prose poem to sell quite well. And be reprinted, and translated into eight or nine languages. But I think now I can safely reveal that my first crack at this way of experimenting with Marx was an also a stab at a avant-garde prose poem.

It was written, incidentally, in a non-existent language. I wrote it in European. That's a language, which, if it existed would be equal parts church Latin, Marxism and business English. Maybe that's why I suspect it reads better in French, German, Italian or Spanish, as those translations are better than my translation of it into English.

So to sum up: what if we took a more daring, modernist, de-familiarizing approach to writing theory? What if we asked of theory as a genre that it be as interesting, as strange, as poetically or narratively as rich as we ask our poetry or fiction to be? What if we treated it not as high theory, with pretensions to legislate or interpret other genres; but as low theory, as having no greater or lesser claim to speak of the world than any other. It might be more fun to read. It might tell us something about the world. It might, just might, enable us to act in the world otherwise.