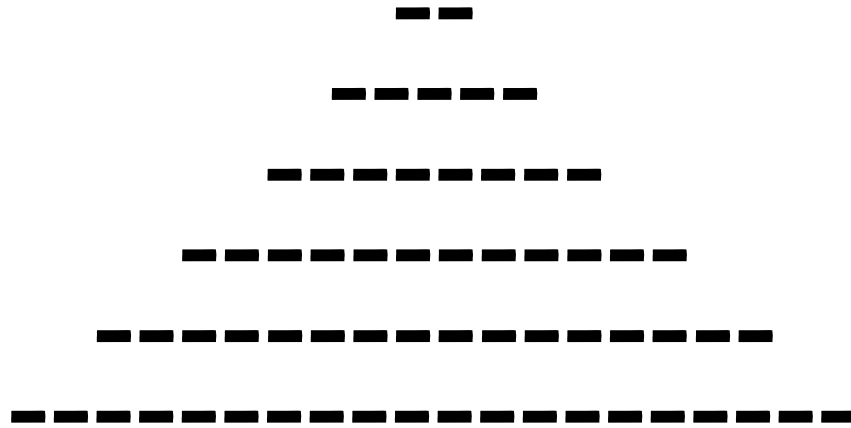


# 5 THESES ON INFORMATIONAL- COGNITIVE CAPITALISM



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Recession is here, everywhere. Whether recession is artificial and thus compatible with the axiomatic of capitalism (that is, the tendency toward a world market), or forced and thus a threat to capitalism is still debated. From the perspective of Capital, what is more important is that the historic magnification, which has been defining capitalism since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is not likely to maintain its pace or character. There are no more barbarians to civilise, no more virgin lands to conquer and colonise. The new barbarians are refined, the new virgin lands are not defined by geographical parameters. Primitive accumulation has been completed; explosion now gives way to implosion. It was reckoned that a myth central to capitalism came full circle in three generations: I would start from scratch with empty hands and empty pockets, slowly but gradually accumulate rights and money, then build a house, find a wife with whom I would make a family, then have a son and raise him, and, sooner or later, die. My son would repeat the process once more, but his son – my grandson – would inherit more than my son did, say three times more. In the elapsed space of three generations, total wealth would have multiplied by nine times. This myth starts to shun all relevance: the historic magnification of capitalism, based on long-established materialist notions of value, is no longer feasible. In all probability, my grandson will not inherit three houses. And here comes the reversal of perspective of Capital: as the concept of the Spectacle is conceived to its full radicality, as a process of generalised social abstraction, the commodity-form implodes to encompass and invest all of shared lived experience. The commodity-form has gone well beyond the romantic stage of fetishism: while there is no doubt that both the use- and exchange-value of a product now largely stem from intangible characteristics, such as perceived sex-appeal, "coolness", and ephemeral trendiness – a reality of contemporary commerce which compels us to rethink value along the lines of what Jean Baudrillard calls sign value – commodification does not stop at the twilight of shopfronts and commodity shelves, that is, the sphere of materiality, but it extends beyond them to encompass all of *the immaterial*. The leverage and diffusion of commodification has been so overwhelming that goods long considered public, such as century-old knowledges pertaining to medical treatments and the cultivation of the land have been appropriated<sup>1</sup>. In the age of universality of the spectacle, the ultimate commodity is the time of our own lives, that is, the relationships and experiences that give meaning to its space. "The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life"<sup>2</sup>. In effect, nothing escapes vulgar commodification. Even some of the most subversive and anti-commercial manifestations of shared lived experience have capitulated. Indicatively, in the space of the last fifteen years, *rave* has metamorphosed from an anti-commercial, underground social movement and cultural phenomenon into a lucrative industry of cool. With the notable exception of freeraves in England, the commodification of the pulse of rave is ensured by the increasing centrality of the figure of the Star-DJ (and the ephemeral trendiness of the Club) to the packaged experience. The associated process of social formation during a rave is accomplished by reference to the sign value of fluorescent Adidas trainers and

1 For example, farmers and indigenous people in many regions have painfully discovered that recipes, knowledges, and techniques that had been in common use for medical or agricultural purposes for centuries have now passed into the ownership of the global pharmaceutical complex in the institutionalised form of patents.

2 Debord, Guy. 1983. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Fredy Perlman et al., Detroit: Black & Red, #42, at [http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub\\_contents/4](http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub_contents/4).

ornament-ised Ecstasy. Rave is now about paying to dance to the beats of a culture-industry professional, rather than realising temporary autonomous zones through an intensive process of cross-fertilisation between underground sub-cultures based on the free sharing of conscience<sup>3</sup>. Presently, rave's claim to "hack reality" has given way to spectacular pomp. Far from becoming a universal anti-systemic movement, as it once aspired, rave, blessed by the high priests of the culture industry, became an industry of cool. Now, more than ever before, the utterance "the poverty of everyday life" attains a whole new meaning. It no longer refers to the near-complete lack of authentic excitement and stimulation in shared lived experience, that is, an ontological condition predicated on esoteric misery and social boredom; now, it comes to signify the centrality of the commodity-form to the satisfaction and saturation of *all* of our socio-cultural needs and wants.

2

Would-be information-technology (IT) workers are reckoned to be privileged because it is assumed that IT students are in the rare position of needing none and nothing, except for plenty of time perhaps, in order to acquire those skills and competencies that will later guarantee them a job in the epicentre of the most lucrative labour market. But this is yet another popular myth, in spite of its being perpetuated by a plethora of computer scientists. In a time when the tools of the trade are not free (*libre*) and certainly not free of charge, free time does not suffice. This becomes obvious when we take a look at the person who is constantly craving for fresh knowledge, in particular for knowledge that has been put to the service of capital by means of intensifying and imploding the wealth bondage that keeps unpaid-for labour hostage. The cost of the investment in time required to pick up a new skill aside, what is left to the inquiring mind who desires to internalise an external domain of knowledge, but has no money to pay for it? Suppose I have no problem spending lots of time getting myself up to speed with *Adobe Pagemaker*, *Logic*, *Cubase*, *AutoCAD* or any other piece of software made possible by incredible programming ingenuity, but I cannot afford to buy them. Do I abstain from using them as the result of my inadequate funding? Or do I resort to programming a real alternative (*ie. The GIMP Vs. Adobe Photoshop*), hoping that in time this knowledge will compensate for the loss of familiarity in the use of the mainstream tool which is the one valued by the market according to the particulars of the jobs currently advertised? From this vantage point, *free software developers, as well as illegitimate vendors of software, and people who crack software programs are located in the vanguard of the modern knowledge revolution*. Although they rarely understand the actual effect of their actions, illegitimate vendors of software contribute a strong blow to the world of commodified knowledge. For their clientele consists not only of intermediaries who intend to copy the software they have bought a thousand times and re-sell it, but also of people who have a genuine interest in acquiring the knowledge embedded in the software. Not that long ago, I happened to stand right next to a *deal*. The site was the famous agora of Monastiraki in Athens, Greece, located at the foot of the rock of Acropolis, where hundreds of small-time dealers set up shop every Sunday. The buyer

3 On rave as an underground socio-cultural phenomenon whose roots are inextricably linked to the computer underground and the hacker culture, and for a captivating account, placed in a historical context, of how rave started, see Rushkoff, Douglas. 1999. *Electronica, The True Cyber Culture*. May, at <http://www.rushkoff.com/columns/electronica.html> ; and *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace* (1994, Flamingo) by the same author.

had picked two or three CDs, one of which was a copy of *Avid*, and was negotiating the price for that software. In order to raise the price, I assumed for this is the only satisfactory explanation I can come up with, the dealer cunningly offered that this deal *was* illegal. To which the buyer replied: “I am doing nothing illegal here. I am not interested in re-selling this software. I only want it for the knowledge in it. And no one will stop me from acquiring knowledge”. The dealer, dazed a bit for it seemed he had not been given that particular reply on that day, nodded and agreed on the price the buyer had suggested. The *deal* took place, and in a moment's time the buyer had disappeared again into the crowd. The conscious realisation of the social effect of knowledge acquisition through illegitimate and clandestine channels, as exemplified by the determination shown by the above buyer to acquire the coveted knowledge by all means, even through his participation in *a deal*, seals the reversal of perspective: the perspective of power through the technique of indoctrination it employs with the help of mass media has come into such a fierce and cruel conflict with the imperatives of knowledge acquisition that the genuinely inquiring mind will assert its right to claim knowledge even in the obscene case that this process of knowledge acquisition has been criminalised. The primacy to establish *foundations for the advancement of illegal knowledge* can only be grasped on this plane: piracy is incorporated into the radical project of libre knowledge insofar as the *pirates* are seeking to extend their body of knowledge. As regards to crackers, they have been consistently portrayed by mass media as juvenile delinquents on the brink of a terminal mental collapse, whose kindest motivation can be explained by their vanity to demonstrate their skills to others. But this conceptualisation, though it illustrates the underlying motivation of some crackers, is far from adequate to explain the actions of *all* crackers. The practice of cracking envisages the most radical aspect of the project of libre knowledge: cracking does not stop at the boundary of illegal distribution – it goes much further than that. Crackers devote their time and skills to supplying the realm of illegal distribution with technology artifacts, and, not to forget, there is hardly ever any money for them. In effect, this critical aspect alone highlights the radicalisation of the cracker as a computer scientist put to the service of liberating knowledge from constraints imposed upon it by commodification.

3

*Free as in free beer* - The possibility that productive cooperation and the enactment of production in social networks no longer require the mediation of the capitalist in order to be effectuated – a presupposition of post-industrial capitalism that some theorists refer to as the *Communism of Capital* – is compelling enough to tremble the earth. A real-world demonstration of this phenomenon is provided by the development and organisation model at work in several large free software and open source projects, such as the Linux operating system. In fact, many look into networks of collaborative free software and open source development for a practical demonstration of how the *new* emancipated society will be organised. There are several issues to be stressed here. First, the absence of exchange value: free software, as a technology product, is given away for free, and this is, partly, why free software is radical. However, this fact may lead to wrong conclusions, for software is, by and large, a service-based industry, and, thus, there is money to be made by capitalising on free software. Indeed, corporate behemoths, such as IBM, are doing exactly this: they sell services (*ie.* consulting, training, implementation, maintenance and support, etc.) tied to

specific FS/OSS products. Paradoxically, the absence of exchange value does not negate the presence of market value. Further, not all FS/OSS development takes place outside a system of economic incentives; as a matter of fact, free software is often developed in direct response to market forces<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, it is common to underestimate the effect of such a paradigm of (im)material production on consciousness and subjectivity. In editing Wikipedia or hacking the Linux kernel, for instance, people are, *consciously or not*, educating themselves in what creative, collaborative work really consists. The realm of such networks of cooperative development is underpinned by the pleasure principle: people re-discover that products of unparalleled social and technical ingenuity can result from a production process that is founded on volunteer contributions; they re-discover the joy and personal fulfilment that accompanies creative work. On this plane, collective subjectivity is impregnated with the sperm of radicality, as people are suddenly becoming aware of the reversal of perspective that lies in the shadows: a production setting in which people are using the tools that they have themselves built to create situations they individually desire is always bound to outperform in efficiency and expose the poverty of production effectuated for the sake of profit. A direct confrontation stretching from the terrain of ideas to the very institutional nucleus of capitalist society is underway. On the one side stands the beast of living labour organised independently of the capitalist demand, and, the imaginary of intellectual property law, on the other. Whereas the beast of living labour seeks to gain its freedom by demolishing a world shaped by forced labour, the object of intellectual property law is the regulation of immaterial labour (rather than the creation of artificial scarcity, as so many critics of intellectual property claim)<sup>5</sup>. The imaginary of intellectual property law is, first and foremost, designed to control people through control of the production process, regardless of whether this production takes place within the factory or outside it. Indicatively, IBM has a patent on how to employ and retain FS/OSS developers, which means that in an insane world anyone who has ever written a single line of HTML would have to get IBM's permission to work at any company other than IBM<sup>6</sup>. Therein emerges a contradiction that FS/OSS is incapable of dodging, at least for the time being: given that the time is ripe for the systematic exploitation of immaterial labour, and draconian intellectual property regimes orchestrate the production process in accordance with the exclusive interest of massive intellectual property holders, the idea that radical subjectivity is being produced in networks of collaborative FS/OSS development is thrown into insignificance. Said otherwise: the global intellectual property law apparatus has both the power to operationalise FS/OSS for the benefit of its master – the cultural-industrial complex, and, most crucially, to render it illegal lest such a course of action is deemed necessary. In the latter case, in which FS/OSS developers are marginalised,

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4 For two treatises on the issue of motivation in FS/OSS development, which link developers' motivation directly to market forces and economic incentives, see Lancashire, David. 2001. The Fading Altruism of Open Source Development, *First Monday*, volume 6, number 12, December, at [http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6\\_12/lancashire/](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_12/lancashire/) ; and Lerner, Josh and Tirole, Jean. 2000. "The simple economics of Open Source", National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper, number 7600 (March), at <http://www.hbs.edu/research/facpubs/workingpapers/papers2/9900/00-059.pdf>.

5 Söderberg, Johan. 2004. Reluctant Revolutionaries: the false modesty of reformist critics of copyright, *Journal of Hyper(+)drome.Manifestation*, Issue 1, September, at <http://journal.hyperdrome.net/issues/issue1/Söderberg.html>.

6 *Ibid.*, endnote #38 at [http://journal.hyperdrome.net/issues/issue1/Söderberg.html#\\_ftn38](http://journal.hyperdrome.net/issues/issue1/Söderberg.html#_ftn38)

and networks of collaborative FS/OSS development are effectively forced into the computer underground, there is a good possibility that the subversive character of FS/OSS will re-surface, but nobody can tell with any degree of certainty whether its subversive motors are sufficiently equipped to deal with a world pompously indoctrinated to the advantages of a draconian intellectual property regime.

4

*The capitulation of volunteer labour* - Free (*gratis, unwaged*) labour is a requirement of the current configuration of cognitive-informational capitalism. There has never been a similar disruption in the number, and in the composition, of the unemployed population. Nowadays, hordes of university graduates and PhDs, that is, knowledge workers, are joining the boundaryless 'industrial reserve army' that sustains the delicate balance that, in turn, restrains the contradictions of capitalism from exhausting capitalism itself. It is to the credit of thinkers like Antonio Negri to have formulated the theory of the internal margin, of how internal ghettos are installed within over-developed regions and post-industrial metropolises in exactly the same time that under-developed, and developing countries in the periphery are undergoing a process of heavy industrialisation in agriculture and commodity manufacturing<sup>7</sup>. The structural violence produced by capitalism has run amok, giving rise to such a dislocation in the labour-force that no expansion in any sector of the economy will be able to absorb. And it is not likely that the historic magnification of capitalism will maintain its pace, or character, in order to offset the systemic shock triggered by the aggravation of the army of the unemployed. No previous generation faced the problem of unemployment to the extent that the current generation will be compelled to experience. It should not come as a surprise when the "tag" of insanity will be bestowed upon those who are or remain jobless. A number of pertinent questions arise: is this surge in the number of the unemployed, and the similarly pertinent shift in its composition toward increasingly more knowledge workers, likely to bring capitalism to a halt? Is this class revolutionary or counter-revolutionary? To a certain extent, the unemployed constitute a singularity deeply embedded in the revolutionary subject. Yet, against this pressure, the system – apparently - does not break down. One could argue that the system feeds on the fragile circumstances of the unemployed, seizing whatever opportunity there is to utilise volunteer labour for spectacular goals by turning it into forced labour: tens of thousands of volunteers were the human motor behind the 2004 Olympic Games, which took place in Athens, Greece. Whereas some of those thousands of people surely volunteered because they wanted to volunteer - and there is absolutely nothing reprehensible in altruistic volunteer work - , others though volunteered in hope that once the Olympic Games were over, *as it was implied*, they would find employment as personnel for the maintenance and operation of the sites that hosted the Olympic Games<sup>8</sup>. This volunteer labour is conditioned by the structural violence of late capitalism. Said

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7 Negri, Antonio. 1984. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, ed. Jim Fleming, translated by Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan and Maurizio Viano, South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey.

8 As of the time of writing, no official statement has been issued (by the government, the state commission charged with the organisation and supervision of the Olympic Games, or the commercial entities involved) regarding how many of the volunteers have been employed at the sites that accommodated the 2004 Olympic Games. However, based on anecdotal evidence (that is, from accounts of volunteers who remain unemployed), this implicit promise has not yet materialised, and it remains uncertain if it ever will.

otherwise: the unemployed (and under-employed) are forced to volunteer their labour if they wish to stand a chance of escaping unemployment.

5

A new class has arisen that is rapidly amassing increasingly more power through its ability to *veto* on the vectors of information which it controls, and which both knowledge workers and the industrial capitalists need<sup>9</sup>. This is the terrain of history where class struggle is being re-written. The capitalist, as John Kenneth Galbraith observed long ago, has been a dwindling figure in the economy. His hegemonic position has gradually been taken over by committees manned by technocrats that Galbraith termed the technostructure, and that we, today, would be more inclined to refer to as the class of knowledge workers.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of the technostructure, argued Galbraith, was conditioned primarily by the imperatives of sophisticated technology production. This still holds today: semi-autonomous knowledge workers are a requirement of late capitalism, without whom the transition from industrial manufacturing to information feudalism could not have been feasible. Yet, it is misleading to assume that capitalism had, or has, a hard time adapting to this reconfiguration: the constant presence of friction is not important, since frictionless capitalism, as well as static capitalism, is an oxymoron. On the contrary, the capitalist system not only required the formation of this class, but also incorporated it into its very operational logic. With the rise of this new class, which McKenzie Wark terms the 'vectoralist class', and, which, it should be noted, has its roots in the hacker universe, yet has chosen to disassociate itself from the interests of the 'digital proletariat', we witness the final stage of the transformation of information into property. This transformation, and the ensuing reconfiguration of class struggle that comes with it, are conditioned by the inability of capitalism to maintain its pace and character of historic magnification. For capitalism to elude the spectre of the falling rate of profit and to extend its degree of accumulation, capital has to turn into an image, and information, shared lived experience, and the commons be transformed into commodities – commodification turns inward. The internal need for continuous magnification, rather than ideology or class struggle, has led the convulsive reconfiguration of the convoluted mesh of power relations and the associated relations of production that are manifested as an intellectual property right. The organic composition of capital may well have undergone dramatic change, but the social worker of the present remains subordinated to a regime of spectacular oppression; a regime that substitutes one class for another, yet still maintains its class-based dichotomic character; a regime that by Marx's definition may be seen as non-capitalistic, yet it is still epitomised by the axiomatics of capitalism. To this day, the regime of signs founded on the emancipatory tendency of the "general intellect" negates the old regime of subordination and work done in factories and businesses, but it does so without negating its own Self. Consequently, although fueled by a desiring machine predicated on social ejaculation, it remains a regime of signs, rather than a concrete situation experienced in the urban territory.

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9 Wark, McKenzie. 2004. *A Hacker Manifesto*. Harvard University Press, and at [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors0/warktext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/warktext.html) .

10 Galbraith, John Kenneth. 1974. *The New Industrial State*. Penguin Books.

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