In *Capital* (1867), Marx identified the ruling class as those who controlled the means of production. In *Capital is Dead* (2019), McKenzie Wark proposes that a new form of class exploitation has emerged, headed by a ruling class they term the "vectoralists" – those who own and control the means of producing information. Wark, who works as a professor of culture and media at the New School in New York, considers the possibility that under such conditions, the term "capitalism" may no longer be useful. Guy Mannes-Abbott speaks to Wark about the implications of their latest book.

Guy Mannes-Abbott Let's start with this peculiarly resonant title. If *Capital is Dead*, where is the body? Or, what have you done to Marx?

> **McKenzie Wark** Capital is dead in two senses. Firstly, in Marx, capital is dead labour. It's a very physical metaphor. Capital absorbs the active body of the worker into itself as dead meat. Secondly, what I want to explore a bit more than Marx was able, beyond a few sketches, is how capital really wants to eat brains. I'm interested in the ways that extracting information, rather than energy, out of human bodies and accumulating it, as a thing over and against us, might be a bit different.

GMA The book is also a provocation; you describe this

as the book's "task". How so?

MW It will probably not be popular with the self-appointed sheriffs of Marxism, who think like cops. The provocation is to propose that we don't actually know very much about the controlling layer of ruling-class power at the moment, and to start the analysis and critique over again, rather than assume some quotations from uncle Karl will do the job. Capitalism still exists, but if there are multiple modes of production, as there always were in the past, maybe there is also a new one that we don't know much about. Perhaps because we only look at and think about those aspects that look like good old capitalism.

GMA In the book you refer to the "sheriffs" of Marxism as "conservative textologists" or "genteel Marxists". Can you distinguish between your provocation at the level of language – against impoverished prefixes to capitalism, like "neo" and "post" – and the substance of your argument?

MW No, because I don't think there is a universal Marxism independent of the tactics of language in which it tries to harry and attack the ruling class. Nor do I think Marxism is independent of its own means of knowledge production. One of the questions, then, is whether we can have a critique of political economy that has its own means of knowledge production with its own standards of error correction that don't collapse back into scholastic habits, conventional disciplines, and so on. Marxism has to be made, as many of its more interesting currents were, by the organic intellectuals of the exploited classes. That now includes those who produce information.

GMA Beyond the provocation, *Capital is Dead* has long roots in your work, relating most obviously to *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), and is a broad development and a precise articulation of those elements in your work. What is the new book's central thesis?

MW In *A Hacker Manifesto*, I was dealing with an earlier stage in the development of the class struggle around information, where

it seemed we could outflank the commodification of information, not by making it free, but by creating a new kind of abstract gift economy, at least in part outside the commodity form.

Those of us engaged in that struggle were defeated, but not before pushing an emerging ruling class into finding ways of commodifying the gift economy itself, in its totality, which is where we now are. We won the battle and lost the war. Time to regroup and try other tactics.

GMA Could you trace how that thesis has developed since *A Hacker Manifesto*? The latter was a declamatory statement, appropriate to a manifesto, whereas *Capital is Dead* is much more explicatory. Can you address the differences in style and enunciation, as well as substance?

MW I wrote *A Hacker Manifesto* around 1999–2000 when I thought the social movement devoted to de-commodifying information had a chance. But we lost. Manifesto is not the appropriate genre for the current situation, and writing should, I think, always have some orientation to a situation at the level of form. What happened is not just that information became a special class of thing that could be commodified, but this was a mutation in the commodity form itself: a commodity no longer has to be a thing. It's clear now that one can only write from inside that production process.

GMA In this new situation or "class formation", what is a hacker class and what is a vectoralist class?

MW The vectoralist class is that ruling class that owns and controls the means of producing information, distinct from the capitalist class that owns and controls the means of production and the landlord class that owns and controls arable land and extracts ground rent. There may be other kinds of dominant class, particularly when you start trying to understand, for example, what the People's Republic of China became. But let's stick to those three. Class is always a dynamic relation. It's not about a sociological classification, still less is it an identity. If there are three dominant classes, each is in relation to its respective dominated and exploited classes: farmer, worker, and for the subordinated class in conflict with the vectoralist class, I chose the word hacker. I mean that in the broad sense of anyone who produces new information out of old in any medium whatsoever. There is a technics that started to make that possible in the late 20th century. There are elaborations of legal form, which enable the capture of information.

My interest is in the thought experiment: there have always been

multiple modes of production – what if there is a new one layered on top of the old ones?

A mode of production to which capital is subordinated, more or less as capital subordinated the landlord class.

GMA It's a mode of production that you write "is not capitalism anymore; it is something worse". You continue: "something else is being commodified here: our sociability, our common and ordinary life together, what you might even call our communism." What is "worse"?

MW It's worse in that information becomes a very fine-grained and also very totalising means of control over all other classes. It constricts the tactical space for class struggle from below. It's worse also in that the abstraction of information enables a kind of absolute surveillance and commodification of the entire earth. All of it becomes available for extraction. That just accelerates the destruction of the conditions of possibility for all life.

GMA You write: "The power of the vectoralist class is not cognitive; nor is it a power over the general intellect. It thrives just as well on noise, on volatility, on bad information as it does on any kind of intelligence or reason." As you say, the "how" – as you describe it – is also worse, isn't it?

MW There were some innovations made in thinking this situation by those open-minded Marxists who built out Marx's idea of the "general intellect" into a more robust theory: Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato. But it was just a start, and Marx was really only talking about the forces of production of the late 19th century. Those are not the technics we're enmeshed in any more. One has to understand the technics of our time in the way Marx tried to understand those of his time, and start from there.In notebooks largely untranslated and not often studied, Marx spent a lot of time trying to understand how steam engines work.

GMA You first wrote of "vectors" in *Virtual Geography* (1994), describing "weird global media events" including when Saddam Hussein stroked the head of a British boy on television in 1990. You wrote of "this extraordinary attempt at direct political communication along the media vector between widely differing

cultural sites" and a need for critique and resistance to "the cunning of mediated power". The idea of the vector runs through that book, while hacker does not yet appear. How did you get to vector in 1994 and to hacker in 2004?

> **MW** This is a thing I got in part from my own readings of Marx: his interest in novel situations that might be more than temporary conjectures of history and so point to its direction. I worked in media all through the 1980s and 1990s, as the industry's technical form was changing, and I was playing with the avant-gardes who were exploring the affordances of emerging media. All that pointed to the emergence of information production as a locus of class conflict. So I thought: that's a whole additional world of struggle. We can learn from the artists and scientists who were radicals, but we have to move past their tactics by understanding the form of our own work.

GMA The success of these ideas, their urgency and tangibility, relates to where you are writing from, doesn't it? This seems central: "Of particular use to me is something that is much less a method of reading and more a procedure for writing: what Guy Debord called *détournement*. The word includes the sense of the detour, the turning aside, a hijacking, but also a seduction, which, Debord says, 'restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths'." How does this work now?

> **MW** I'm interested in those who read Marx as a writer, and who themselves were trying out various tactics as writers. *Détournement* is a tactic Marx used quite a bit, although it was the Situationists who named it and saw its implications. Marx took lines from great writers and "corrected" them, rather as [Comte de] Lautréamont did to very different effect. Marx was also a great satirist. He could also elaborate a conceptual language, but then he also told great anecdotes. So I'm interested in Marxists who could write like [Andrei] Platonov, [Pier Paolo] Pasolini, [Guy] Debord, just to give three who make an appearance in *Capital is Dead*.