

A H A C K E R
M A N I F E S T O

McKenzie Wark

Thanks to: AG, AR, BH, BL, CD, CF, the late CH, CL, CS, DB, DG, DS, FB, FS, GG, GL, HJ, IV, JB, JD, JF, JR, KH, KS, LW, MD, ME, MH, MI, MT, MV, NR, OS, PM, RD, RG, RN, RS, SB, SD, SH, SK, SL, SS, TB, TC, TW.

Earlier versions of *A Hacker Manifesto* appeared in *Critical Secret*, *Feeler gauge*, *Fibreculture Reader*, *Sarai Reader* and *Subsol*.

Copyright © 2004 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wark, McKenzie, 1961–

A hacker manifesto / McKenzie Wark.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-674-01543-6 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Digital divide. 2. Computer hackers. 3. Social conflict.
4. Intellectual property. 5. Information technology—Social aspects.
6. Computers and civilization. I. Title.

HC79.L55W37 2004

303.48'33—dc22

2004047488

ABSTRACTION
CLASS
EDUCATION
HACKING
HISTORY
INFORMATION
NATURE
PRODUCTION
PROPERTY
REPRESENTATION
REVOLT
STATE
SUBJECT
SURPLUS
VECTOR
WORLD
WRITINGS

This land is your land, this land is my land

—WOODY GUTHRIE

This land is your land, this land is my land

—GANG OF FOUR

This land is your land, this land is my land

—LUTHER BLISSETT

*. . . it sort of springs organically from the earth.
And it has the characteristics of communism, that
people love so very much about it. That is, it's free.*

—STEVE BALLMER, CEO, Microsoft

A H A C K E R
M A N I F E S T O

A B S T R A C T I O N

A double spooks the world, the double of abstraction. The [001]
fortunes of states and armies, companies and communities
depend on it. All contending classes, be they ruling or ruled,
revere it—yet fear it. Ours is a world that ventures blindly
into the new with its fingers crossed.

All classes fear this relentless abstraction of the world, on [002]
which their fortunes yet depend. All classes but one: the
hacker class. We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce
new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out
of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming
language, poetic language, math or music, curves or col-
orings, we are the abstracters of new worlds. Whether we
come to represent ourselves as researchers or authors, art-
ists or biologists, chemists or musicians, philosophers or
programmers, each of these subjectivities is but a fragment
of a class still becoming, bit by bit, aware of itself as such.

And yet we don't quite know who we are. That is why this [003]
book seeks to make manifest our origins, our purpose and
our interests. A hacker manifesto: Not the only manifesto, as
it is in the nature of the hacker to differ from others, to dif-
fer even from oneself, over time. To hack is to differ. A

hacker manifesto cannot claim to represent what refuses representation.

[004] Hackers 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 produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old. While we 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 monopolize the means for making worlds we alone discover. We do not own what we produce—it owns us.

[005] Hackers use their knowledge and their wits to maintain their autonomy. Some take the money and run. (We must live with our compromises.) Some refuse to compromise. (We live as best we can.) All too often those of us who take one of these paths resent those who take the other. One lot resents the prosperity it lacks, the other resents the liberty it lacks to hack away at the world freely. What eludes the hacker class is a more abstract expression of our interests as a class, and of how this interest may meet those of others in the world.

[006] Hackers are not joiners. We're not often willing to submerge our singularity. What the times call for is a collective hack that realizes a class interest based on an alignment of differences rather than a coercive unity. Hackers are a class,

but an abstract class. A class that makes abstractions, and a class made abstract. To abstract hackers as a class is to abstract the very concept of class itself. The slogan of the hacker class is not the workers of the world united, but the workings of the world untied.

Everywhere abstraction reigns, abstraction made concrete. [007]
Everywhere abstraction's straight lines and pure curves order matters along complex but efficient vectors. But where education teaches what one may produce with an abstraction, the knowledge most useful for the hacker class is of how abstractions are themselves produced. Deleuze: "Abstractions explain nothing, they themselves have to be explained."*

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 [008]
which otherwise different and unrelated matters may be brought into many possible relations. To abstract is to express the virtuality of nature, to make known some instance of its possibilities, to actualize a relation out of infinite relationality, to manifest the manifold.

History is the production of abstraction and the abstraction [009]
of production. What makes life differ in one age after the next is the application of new modes of abstraction to the task of wresting freedom from necessity. History is the virtual made actual, one hack after another. History is the cumulative qualitative differentiation of nature as it is hacked.

[010] Out of the abstraction of nature comes its productivity, and the production of a surplus over and above the necessities of survival. Out of this expanding surplus over necessity comes an expanding capacity to hack, again and again, producing further abstractions, further productivity, further release from necessity—at least in potential. But the hacking of nature, the production of surplus, does not make us free. Again and again, a ruling class arises that controls the surplus over bare necessity and enforces new necessities on those peoples who produce this very means of escaping necessity.

[011] What makes our times different is the appearance on the horizon of possibility of a new world, long imagined—a world free from necessity. The production of abstraction has reached the threshold where it can break the shackles holding hacking fast to outdated and regressive class interests, once and for all. Debord: “The world already possesses the dream of a time whose consciousness it must now possess in order to actually live it.”*

[012] Invention is the mother of necessity. While all states depend on abstraction for the production of their wealth and power, the ruling class of any given state has an uneasy relationship to the production of abstraction in new forms. The ruling class seeks always to control innovation and turn it to its own ends, depriving the hacker of control of her or his creation, and thereby denying the world as a whole the right to manage its own development.

[013] The production of new abstraction always takes place among those set apart by the act of hacking. We others who

have hacked new worlds out of old, in the process become not merely strangers apart but a class apart. While we recognize our distinctive existence as a group, as programmers or artists or writers or scientists or musicians, we rarely see these ways of representing ourselves as mere fragments of a class experience. Geeks and freaks become what they are negatively, through exclusion by others. Together we form a class, a class as yet to hack itself into existence as itself—and for itself.

It is through the abstract that the virtual is identified, produced and released. The virtual is not just the potential latent in matter, it is the potential of potential. To hack is to produce or apply the abstract to information and express the possibility of new worlds, beyond necessity. [014]

All abstractions are abstractions of nature. Abstractions release the potential of the material world. And yet abstraction relies on the material world's most curious quality—information. Information can exist independently of a given material form, but cannot exist without any material form. It is at once material and immaterial. The hack depends on the material qualities of nature, and yet discovers something independent of a given material form. It is at once material and immaterial. It discovers the immaterial virtuality of the material, its qualities of information. [015]

Abstraction is always an abstraction of nature, a process that creates nature's double, a second nature, a space of human existence in which collective life dwells among its own products and comes to take the environment it produces to be natural. [016]

Hackers find themselves dispossessed both individually, and as a class.

[022] **A**s the vectoralist class consolidates its monopoly on the means of realizing the value of intellectual property, it confronts the hacker class more and more as a class antagonist. Hackers come to struggle against the usurious charges the vectoralists extort for access to the information that hackers collectively produce, but that vectoralists come to own. Hackers come to struggle against the particular forms in which abstraction is commodified and turned into the private property of the vectoralist class. Hackers come as a class to recognize 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.

[023] **T**he time is past due when hackers must come together with workers and farmers—with all of the producers of the world—to liberate productive and inventive resources from the myth of scarcity. The time is past due for new forms of association to be created that can steer the world away from its destruction through commodified exploitation. The greatest hacks of our time may turn out to be forms of organizing free collective expression, so that from this time on, abstraction serves the people, rather than the people serving the ruling class.

C L A S S

A class arises—the working class—able to question the necessity of private property. A party arises, within the worker's movement, claiming to answer to working class desires—the communists. As Marx writes, "in all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time." This was the answer communists proposed to the property question: "centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state."* Making property a state monopoly only produced a new ruling class, and a new and more brutal class struggle. But is that our final answer? Perhaps the course of the class struggle is not yet over. Perhaps there is another class that can open the property question in a new way—and in keeping the question open end once and for all the monopoly of the ruling classes on the ends of history. [024]

There is a class dynamic driving each stage of the development of this vectoral world in which we now find ourselves. The vectoral class is driving this world to the brink of disaster, but it also opens up the world to the resources for overcoming its own destructive tendencies. In the three successive phases of commodification, quite different ruling [025]

classes arise, usurping different forms of private property. Each ruling class in turn drives the world towards ever more abstract ends.

[026] First arises a pastoralist class. They disperse the great mass of peasants who traditionally worked the land under the thumb of feudal lords. The pastoralists supplant the feudal lords, releasing the productivity of nature that they claim as their private property. It is this privatization of property—a legal hack—that creates the conditions for every other hack by which the land is made to yield a surplus. A vectoral world rises on the shoulders of the agricultural hack.

[027] As new forms of abstraction make it possible to produce a surplus from the land with fewer and fewer farmers, pastoralists turn them off their land, depriving them of their livelihood. Dispossessed farmers seek work and a new home in cities. Here capital puts them to work in its factories. Farmers become workers. Capital as property gives rise to a class of capitalists who own the means of production, and a class of workers, dispossessed of it—and by it. Whether as workers or farmers, the direct producers find themselves dispossessed not only of their land, but of the greater part of the surplus they produce, which accumulates to the pastoralists in the form of rent as the return on land, and to capitalists in the form of profit as the return on capital.

[028] Dispossessed farmers become workers, only to be dispossessed again. Having lost their agriculture, they lose in turn their human culture. Capital produces in its factories not just the necessities of existence, but a way of life it expects

its workers to consume. Commodified life dispossess the worker of the information traditionally passed on outside the realm of private property as culture, as the gift of one generation to the next, and replaces it with information in commodified form.

Information, like land or capital, becomes a form of property monopolized by a class, 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. This information, once the collective property of the productive classes—the working and farming classes considered together—becomes the property of yet another appropriating class. [029]

As peasants become farmers through the appropriation of their land, they still retain some autonomy over the disposition of their working time. Workers, even though they do not own capital, and must work according to the clock and its merciless time, could at least struggle to reduce the working day and release free time from labor. Information circulated within working class culture as a public 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 farmer becomes a worker, and the worker, a slave. The whole world becomes subject to the extraction of a surplus from the producing classes that is controlled by the ruling classes, who use it merely to reproduce and expand this matrix of exploitation. Time itself becomes a commodified experience. [030]

[031] The producing classes—farmers, workers, hackers—struggle against the expropriating classes—pastoralists, capitalists, vectoralists—but these successive ruling classes struggle also amongst themselves. Capitalists try to break the pastoral monopoly on land and subordinate the produce of the land to industrial production. Vectoralists try to break capital’s monopoly on the production process, and subordinate the production of goods to the circulation of information: “The privileged realm of electronic space controls the physical logistics of manufacture, since the release of raw materials and manufactured goods requires electronic consent and direction.”*

[032] That the vectoralist class has replaced capital as the dominant exploiting class can be seen in the form that the leading corporations take. These firms divest themselves of their productive capacity, as this is no longer a source of power. They rely on a competing mass of capitalist contractors for the manufacture of their products. Their power lies in monopolizing intellectual property—patents, copyrights and trademarks—and the means of reproducing their value—the vectors of communication. The privatization of information becomes the dominant, rather than a subsidiary, aspect of commodified life. “There is a certain logic to this progression: first, a select group of manufacturers transcend their connection to earthbound products, then, with marketing elevated as the pinnacle of their business, they attempt to alter marketing’s social status as a commercial interruption and replace it with seamless integration.”* With the rise of the vectoral class, the vectoral world is complete.