

## Thought, Talk & Theory

# Leaving the Twenty-First Century: A Conversation with McKenzie Wark

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In this conversation, the acclaimed writer and media scholar McKenzie Wark discusses critical theory, global climate change, the future of the university, the capitalist labor process, and more. Drawing on books such as *General Intellects* (Verso, 2017), *Molecular Red* (Verso, 2015), *The Beach Beneath the Street* (Verso, 2011), and *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard, 2004), Wark argues that the university is a troubled, multi-layered institution, containing elements both neoliberal and feudal. The future prospects of critical theory will hinge on the twin mobilization of a transformed university and various para-academic and virtual spaces. Intellectual labor, which Wark has previously described as constituting a distinctive “hacker class,” is increasingly commodified, but intellectual laborers often control the immediate means of production, meaning that their labor process bears the hallmark of both capitalist and pre-capitalist relations of production. Returning to

the question of writerly style, Wark enjoins us to read classics of critical theorizing, such as Marx's *Capital*, not first and foremost as works of philosophy but works of literary art, capable of provoking a visceral response to the calamities of contemporary capitalism. If capitalism is not an "eternal essence," as Wark convincingly argues, then much work remains to be done in dissecting and analyzing its present-day features and mutations. The success of this labor will shape our chances of transcending capitalism in the twenty-first century.

We met McKenzie Wark, Professor of Culture and Media in Liberal Studies at The New School in New York City, on a Saturday morning in downtown Oslo. Wark, whose recent books include *Molecular Red* (Verso, 2015), *General Intellects* (Verso, 2017), *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (Verso, 2013), and *The Beach Beneath the Street* (Verso, 2011), was in Norway to give the annual FORART lecture, centered on the works of Andrey Platonov and Alexander Bogdanov and what they might have to say about our current political, philosophical, economic, and technological situation. Our conversation was wide-ranging, moving from critical theory, Marx's *Capital*, digital technology, the Situationist International, and catastrophic climate change, to the Democratic Socialists of America and the future of the university.

Wark has opened up a new field of critical theorizing by combining a series of scholarly methods, writerly devices, and analytic concerns not usually seen in a single theorist's body of work, including the *juxtaposition* of disjunctive literary traditions, as in *Molecular Red*, with its contrasting of the Californian posthumanism of Donna Haraway and Kim Stanley Robinson's techno-futurism with the early Bolshevik utopianism of Bogdanov and Platonov's collectivist "factory of literature"; *historical inquiry*, as with the unearthing of the subterranean history of the Situationist International in *The Beach Beneath the Street*, with its promise of offering the possibility of a really radical *détournement* in an age that constantly promotes the hijacking and commodification of cultural expressions and political movements; and a constant concern to *make theory accessible*, as in *General Intellects*, where Wark provides a survey of twenty-one leading thinkers "for the twenty-first century," from Judith Butler to Maurizio Lazzarato –

individuals whose work can help us think through this terrifying new century, with its rampant inequalities, military bloat, and climatic catastrophes. Wark is one of the few critical theorists who takes on the digital, the geological, the economic, the intellectual, and the literary, all in a single career, not out of any morbid fascination or antiquarian delight, but with the aim of pushing us beyond unforeseen horizons. Wark's work is a thrilling blend of invigorating theory for a cataclysmic, wasteful, and (yet) promising new age.

**SHAMMAS:** I thought we might start by talking about a recurring motif in your writings, the idea of “needing to leave the twenty-first century behind.” Slavoj Žižek talks about the need to leave the *twentieth* century behind, by which he means fully admitting, as you mentioned in your talk last night, the failures of the left. So, what does leaving the twenty-first century entail?

**WARK:** “Leaving the *twentieth* century” came from the Situationist International. I can't remember what text it's in any more – it's like I kind of dump it all out of my brain after I've done it: “Yeah, I wrote three books about this and I don't remember anything!” (laughs) But for the Situationists, it's sort of a historical gesture: The twentieth century is a wrong destiny, where history had got onto the wrong track. And they're writing this in the 1950s and 1960s, so they're fairly deep into the twentieth century, and they're trying to figure out a way out of it.

But I thought that “leaving the *twenty-first* century” had this different sort of valence, given that we're coming up on 20 percent done, and there's a sense in which this century still is a new space, but one that we won't necessarily survive. It used to be “socialism or barbarism,” in the famous Rosa Luxemburg formula. Now it's kind of like “barbarism or barbarism.” It seems like: Which barbarism would you like? Eric Hobsbawm's book on the twentieth century is called *The Age of Extremes*, and I thought: Maybe we haven't seen anything yet. Already the weather is more extreme than it was then. The refugee crisis is worse now than it was then. So, we may not have seen anything yet. Rethinking the figure in terms of whether another historical destiny is still possible becomes the thing to think about.

**SHAMMAS:** Is it too early to leave a century that has only just begun? We are still in the initial phases of the twenty-first century. Is it too soon to start thinking about the horizon beyond it?

WARK: It's too *late*, in the sense that the ship has sailed on climate change: Even if we decarbonize *now*, there's enough carbon in the atmosphere to mess us up for good. So, you know, that's the reality that needs dealing with, a kind of geological instability that's unprecedented for our species-being. The last time this sort of thing happened, we weren't quite *Homo sapiens sapiens* yet. We actually know nothing about where we're heading or even what we're doing.

**HOLEN:** During your talk yesterday, you said that "you can't be a materialist in philosophy because if you're a materialist philosopher, you'll turn to other bodies of knowledge," including science. This strikes me as very Deleuzian. It's reminiscent of his radical empiricism. Does his work resonate with your way of thinking?

WARK: Yeah, you know, I was a card-carrying Deleuzian for many years. Now, there's a way in which he still wants a special role for philosophy that I maybe wouldn't. But then again, he was a professional philosopher – that's what Deleuze did, so it kind of makes sense. However, he wanted to put the production of concepts, percepts and affects on the same plane, which is sort of almost getting there.

But I think the production of concepts has an even more modest function, particularly if one is a materialist: What are the labor processes through which the material world is discovered? And they're not philosophy: They're the sciences – and actual labor. So maybe there's a more modest role for the production of concepts. And wouldn't that be enabling? Concepts are really powerful, but their function is kind of secondary to the things one needs a concept of. That's external.

**SHAMMAS:** You talk about "hypocritical theory" in your work, a form of critical theory that really isn't as critical as it's made out to be. What

concepts would a “non-hypocritical” theory make use of? Which concepts could we use to better understand our world?

WARK: Well, maybe there’s two parts to this. One is the things that are classical. Some of these aren’t resolvable. So, what is a concept of nature? It’s not *resolvable*, and yet some concepts work better than others, given the external circumstances. Philosophy of nature is sort of back on the agenda with new materialism and all that. In the 1980s, it was the last thing you’d ever do.

There’s that side of it. But the other is what I think of as a very enlightened contemporary understanding of what forming concepts might be about. In Deleuze there’s the idea of a *concept for every perception*, which is his deeply strange reading of what empiricism is all about. It’s not *aconceptual*, it’s *multiconceptual* – there’s a concept for every perception. That’s an interesting approach and completely at odds with how I was taught to read Hume. They’re possibly very temporary concepts, and you just make them up and see if they work. A good fact is *mostly* true about something in particular. A good concept is *slightly* true about a lot of things. That’s its first function.

**SHAMMAS: Running throughout your work there’s a constant engagement with critical theory, but there’s also a slight distance to the field. Does critical theory have a future? Is it on the right track or is it moving in the wrong direction?**

WARK: It’s striking how the people who end up being treated as canonical in the academic version of critical theory are not of it at all. Spinoza was not a professional philosopher, Marx was not a professional philosopher, Freud was not a professional philosopher. Nietzsche *was*, got fired – and wrote the stuff we actually really value in early retirement. These thinkers weren’t of the trade. So there’s this kind of perverse thing where critical theory needs the outsider. Academic philosophy refused to give Walter Benjamin his doctorate, and now he’s compulsory to read. This sort of thing is rarely addressed in critical theory. It is not particularly critical about its own means of production.

**SHAMMAS:** That ties into our concern with the university as an institution. Is it configured in the right way? Do we need to become outsiders to it? Or even more emphatically, is the university dead, and do we need to move beyond it?

WARK: Well, I hope not. For all its flaws, it's a kind of institution it would be hard to live without. But I think the university is in trouble – not for the first time, I might add. It's really got to do with media. I'm from media theory, so I've tried to think of universities as ensembles of media practices and how they've changed. This is an era of change media form, but not an unprecedented one.

The universities invented the scriptorium. (I'm speaking of the European context.) They figured out how to adapt themselves to the mass print era, and then they didn't really adapt to the broadcast era but saw themselves as an alternative to it, which maybe isn't the worst strategy. This is all in Harold Innis: The thing about broadcast media is that they're space-binding, they create national public cultures through national television broadcasts, but they're not time-binding – they have no idea what happened yesterday or years ago. So, universities saw themselves as the opposite axis, in a way.

But what do you do with universities' relation to contemporary media? Nobody knows. Meanwhile, those of us who are in the university are being eyed as a kind of public asset that can be stripped and privatized. There's a new kind of ruling class that wants to commodify *all* information. And then we're also being infiltrated and taken over by labor management techniques that have figured out what to do with intellectual labor. It used to be that the university was a great exception, but now you can put it on a factory basis.

**HOLEN:** You write about that in *General Intellects*, how the role of the modern intellectual or academic has been embedded into this whole system.

WARK: Yeah, and it's relatively new. Gramsci has this useful distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. Most of the people I'm writing about in *General Intellects* are still only traditional intellectuals. They're not really *of* the twenty-first century in that sense. So, it's relying

on this residual bulwark of left-over intellectual privilege, but it's not going to last much longer, so what's another model for a critical, creative practice of knowledge. I don't know! (laughs) We have to figure it out!

**SHAMMAS:** It's interesting how a lot of new, fascinating ideas are being generated in the art field, design schools, like Benjamin Bratton who you spoke of yesterday, is a professor of design, you spoke in the context of an art lecture series. Is there a sense in which the traditional social sciences and academic philosophy, have they missed the boat on new, innovative ideas? Have they been left behind, in a sense?

WARK: Maybe it comes and goes, and there are specific sociological, historical, political, and technical circumstances, where critical theory, broadly understood, can get some purchase. You know, I was formed on the tension between French Marxism and French poststructuralism. But in retrospect it happened in a really strange moment, through the expansion of the university and the mass paperback – which comes pretty late in France. You needed a ticket to get into the library before – a weird thing specific to the French context, whereas then a public discourse happens with the advent of the mass paperback. But it also seemed to be about the present, to be addressing things that people were concerned about.

I read all this in Australia, and what I'm reading doesn't strike me as some esoteric theory – this is the news. This is actually describing everyday life. The language is difficult, but once you've figured it out, it's like, "Oh, yeah, that just happened to me." This is not like a formal object of study; this is the world. This is what theory is to me. It is not being able to form sentence that begin: "As Walter Benjamin said...." It is being able to form concepts that articulate the feelings and perceptions of *this* everyday life.

So, every now and then the writing of theory actually happens. The circumstances are usually that the disciplinary logic of producing work that functions in a language-game and, you know, makes the killer move that gets you the jobs, and a promotion, and tenure – those break down. As when Benjamin's thesis was not accepted. So he ends

up outside the habits of traditional intellectuals, He becomes an organic intellectual of a kind of lumpen white collar 'creative' class.

**SHAMMAS:** The things you said about bibliometrics and the discipline of disciplines really resonated with some of us who are trained sociologists – in the Norwegian university system we have “publication points” – they form a rolling or ongoing Research Assessment Exercise, where some journals are considered “Level 2,” which is prestigious, and some are “Level 1,” which is kind of adequate, and then you have “Level 0” journals, which are considered “non-scientific.” To speak with Bourdieu, there’s a lot of *symbolic power* involved in categorizing publications, and it shapes the entire scientific field. Do we need to struggle or fight within or against those systems?

**WARK:** You know, it’s complicated. It happened in Australia in the 1980s. It might have been one of the places where it first started. I’m sorry! (laughs) And it was the work of a Labor Government that took over and decided to reform higher education. I think the background to it is: What is state policy in relation to the university? What does the state want from the university? And a lot of university administrators sort of made a promise, which was, “If you keep giving us money, we’ll keep the economy going. It’s now a knowledge economy, and we make knowledge.” And it was partly an honest promise and partly not. And then the wager came due. The state tended to respond by saying, “Oh, so you’re an *economic* actor now? Well, then we’ll measure you the same way we measure the other economic actors.” That was the devil’s bargain the universities ended up with.

Personally, I have mixed feelings about this. I was at a not-prestigious university in Australia, and when it was put on this system, you suddenly realized the massive inequity between the resources we got and the resources the prestigious ones got, when their outputs didn’t match. So, we realized, wait a minute, you’re paying the University of Sydney all this extra money, and theirs works no better than ours. But on the other hand, everything is reduced to measurement. You’re forced into a quantification of knowledge as information, one of the inputs to a new kind of economy, a quantification that reveals certain resource allocation inequalities.

**SHAMMAS:** So, it had an almost progressive potential to undermine those distinctions?

WARK: Yes and no. Then you're wedded to turning the whole of education into an economic sector, run as a kind of gamespace. It made it very, very cynical in a way: "Oh, so this academic publishing racket is just a game." I started in journalism. I can write quickly. I was used to hunting for publications as a freelancer. So personally, I did pretty well out of this gamespace approach to measuring academic 'quality.' But it is really just a fantasy of measuring quality via quantity.

The tragedy for critical theory about these kinds of academic management systems is that there is usually no point in writing books, because the amount of work doesn't really 'count' the same was as with articles and possibly can't even be counted.

**SHAMMAS:** In Norway, at least, a book is worth around three journal articles. So, there's at least a slight recognition that a book is more work.

WARK: Yeah, but come on, it should be like ten articles! (laughs) They are not even comparable. The internal complexity and resonance that's possible rises steeply as you move from the length of an article to a book. Not many people in the critical theory world even know how to write books any more, and this includes many famous names. They treat books as just collections of articles. The form of the book is not part of the concept of it. So, if you do it right a book is worth more like a hundred articles.

**SHAMMAS:** Should we be struggling to change those rates of conversion, or is that already buying into the devil's bargain, as you call it?

WARK: Well, I wouldn't want to tell anybody what to do in a context that I know nothing about. But it is worth thinking about, because I see this with some of my colleagues, where they're dead-set against the "*neoliberal university*" – but wait a minute, what you're defending is the

*feudal university*, in which *you're the lord*. You had this position of privilege that often seems unearned. That can't be the answer, and a lot of younger and more precarious scholars and writers reject it out of hand.

So, maybe it's a question of a topology of forms of universities and their errors. But also: Universities always have these weird archaeological layers to them. They're never one thing. People say, "There's the *neoliberal* university!" It's like, have you been in it? People still wear the freakin' caps and gowns at graduation. There are all these weird layers of other times embedded in the university – its national function from the heyday of Fordist capitalism hasn't gone away either. It still does a piece of that. So universities are very hybrid things. Rather than being for or against any model of it, we could look for the gaps between the models and ask what's actionable within those gaps.

**SHAMMAS:** I suppose the problem might be thought of as trying to develop a third form – neither a feudal university, nor a neoliberal university. Does part of solution lie in things like MOOCs, online seminars, virtual conferences, informal reading groups, or spaces like Library Genesis, AAAAARG, and Sci-Hub? Can we develop a virtual space that moves us beyond the traditional university?

WARK: I think all of those things are really important, and I've been involved in some of them. If you want that out of print English translation of Platonov's *Chevengur*, you can get it on Monoskop, because that's my copy. It's got my notes in it. If you want Bogdanov's *Essays in Tektology* in English, which is an incredibly rare book, that's my copy on Monoskop.

But there is a sense in which this is not a generalizable model. It fails the categorical imperative test. If that became the general model, then the whole of publishing would collapse, and that's *not* a good thing. We're in this hybrid situation where the free stuff is very important, particularly outside the developed world. I hate Academia.edu, because it's a business. But they tell me what countries people are accessing my stuff from, and it's like, oh, well, there's this entire half the world where you just have no chance of having legal

editions of books or journals, it's not even for sale in your country, let alone if you can afford it. A lot of my stuff is on Sci-Hub.

I don't PDF the books I have sold to Verso, which they give me money for, but other people do, and I know – and Verso knows. I want my publishers to make money and pay the copy editor and the acquisitions editor and the cover designer and the website manager and so on. Nobody volunteers for the routine work of publishing for long. In this economy that can't all be 'free.' But oddly enough, my books being free ends up being quite compatible with them also being sold as commodities. It's a quite perverse and curious hybrid economy.

**SHAMMAS: Are you opposed to the illegal distribution of your books online?**

WARK: Not at all. I've had conversations with people at Verso about this. Actually, it's the distributors more than the publishers who often get territorial about this. Because we've seen how this stuff works. Now, I sell copies of books. This is why I have a publisher – because the books sell enough to justify making them. But what's crazy is that it is often the same person has bought it *and* downloaded it free from the Internet. What *is* this economy? There's no explanation for how this stuff works. It doesn't fit with how economics says it's supposed to work. Information economies are very strange. Neither orthodox economics nor Marxism have really figured it out.

**HOLEN: I think you mentioned yesterday that *General Intellects* is free and available online –**

WARK: Most of it is based on pieces I wrote for *Public Seminar*, which is the New School's free, open-access intellectual discussion space. Occasionally I get messages saying, "This is so terribly proofread!" And my answer is: Do you want to volunteer to proofread it? You're welcome to it if you want to go through and fix it – or you can have it for free in this slightly rough version. Or, you can wait until its available in book form and pay 17 dollars and labor will have been done to it that people don't really want to do for free. So, my policy is: I'll put it online first for free, but it really is pretty rough. I'm not going to be bothered

fixing it. I'm not going to ask grad students to do it for free – they've got better things to do. But eventually, there'll be a version of it where you pay for a finished version that is easier to read and better to cite. Those are then also two different information fields, with different speeds and styles. There's quick, online exchange and the slower, more considered one after book publication.

**SHAMMAS:** This discussion ties into a question of style, and, more specifically, your own style of writing. Your books are very carefully edited, and there's a highly distinct voice, a distinctive prose style. How important is it to maintain a distinctive style of theorizing – not just substantively, but how theory is presented to the reader? Is that an important part of the critical project as well?

**WARK:** Well, I'm a writer! I'm a better writer than I am a scholar, and I kind of figured that was a niche. My language skills are not great. My French is a little atrophied, but I can still muddle through. That's why I write about stuff that's in French. But I can't do real Comp Lit, because I just have the one other language. There are people who are much, much better at that. I have limited patience for doing archival work. I love tracking down *living* people, and having a journalistic background – I do *that*. I know other people who work on the Situationist International, and I say things to them like, "I got Michèle Bernstein's phone number!"<sup>1</sup> And they're like, why would I want that? I'm like, are you fucking kidding me? Where I come from, this is gold, you want to go talk to the person. Which means I also have great gossip that you can't put in print. The who-fucked-who stuff.

As Oscar Wilde says, every artist has their limitations, and those limitations are called *style*. All I can do is turn a passably good English sentence, as that's my first language. And the people whose work I really love could do that. Guy Debord's late prose is just some of the most beautiful I've read, in English or in French. (It survives translation.) You look at how it's put together and you think, this is just astonishing, this is a way of thinking about the whole of what the act of writing is. Walter Benjamin could write his ass off. I have limited German, but I can look at it alongside the translation and go, this is just the glory of language. Marx was a journalist. The prose is amazing, and *Capital* is

full of jokes. I got this from Keston Sutherland: When Marx talk about labor, it's *Gallert*. it's aspic, it's meat jelly.<sup>2</sup> The labor process turns the worker into meat-jelly. You know, it's like a joke on how the bourgeois eats (laughs). You can read all of this highfalutin theory on abstract labor, and they don't mention that there's a joke embedded in Marx's writings about it.

So, these were the models, and these people could really write. It's a genre of literature we're talking about here: theory. If you look at a novel and if it's not well or interestingly written, like why would you read it? So there's all this bad theory: Why are there are all these books that you don't want to read? It makes no sense to me. The people you're writing about could do it. So all my books are constructed as books, taking the book as a form, taking theory as a genre. They go through more than a hundred drafts. The book version of *A Hacker Manifesto* is version 14.1, so draft one hundred and forty-one.

**SHAMMAS:** It's so very different from how modern sociologists think. I remember one prominent sociologist who dismissed the work of a critical theorist by saying, "Well, that person's a *writer*," implying that their work was not to be taken seriously: only "serious" social science deserves to be taken seriously, and to be serious means not being a writer, not having a particular style – modern social science is not interested in style and sees style only as a limitation.

**WARK:** Well, there's a role for social science, and they sort of live or die by whether you can find evidence for a proposition, and someone else can replicate it. It turns out, on the second of the first two criteria, the answer's turning out to be no 60 percent of the time! So, all right, let's see your stuff replicated by somebody else then, and then I'll read you. If you want to claim that it's a science, prove to me that it's a science. That's a very, very strong claim to make.

If that's the claim you're going to make for sociology, it's never really succeeded at it. Whereas Max Weber could write when he wanted to. Durkheim is a bit turgid, perhaps, but Simmel could write, and so could Tarde. Karl Manheim could write, which is maybe why we remember his sociology of knowledge and not Bogdanov's tektology, from which he got a fair chunk of it. And starting with Weber, they had

to write against Marx. They had to step up at least to within sight of his prose. There would be no sociology without literary talent. It was written into existence.

**SHAMMAS:** There's a consistent attack on bourgeois values, and middle-class values, in your work. In *Molecular Red* you write that critical theorists have fallen in love with bourgeois idols like Wagner, Hegel, Mallarmé. Is part of the problem that academics are middle-class human beings, that they exist in a middle-class space?

WARK: There are whole literatures *about* class by academics which don't even mention the class *of* academics. I'm provincial, petit bourgeois, my father was an architect in the provinces. It's not *haute bourgeois*. I have this conversation a lot with grad students who have fallen in love with, y'know, Adorno, and my response is always: You know, he really was on the one hand haute bourgeois, on the other hand Jewish, and so completely excluded from working for the state, or from academic jobs anywhere outside of Frankfurt. So there's this incredible tension, and he sort of super ramped up the other thing that as a son of a bourgeois that he could do. His mother was an opera singer, for crying out loud, who had a career in it. So of course he knows music. He was tutored in Kant by Kracauer at the age of 15! You're never gonna beat this! (laughs) The amount of on the one hand privilege involved in this, and on the other hand, how fragile it was, given that by 1933 you can't even exist in the country.

I think what's more common is a sort of class denial: On the one hand, petit bourgeois people like myself *pretending* we're culturally the bourgeoisie when we're not (laughs). On the other hand, actual bourgeois kind of pretending they're workers: They want to organize workers. It's like, do you have any idea what labor organizing is like? (laughs) I was a party militant in my teens. I saw what that as like.

And then these may well be obsolete class categories in the over-developed world, at least. Does the bourgeoisie even still exist? Or is there some new kind of ruling class which does not have the old bourgeois values?

**SHAMMAS:** Should we accept our class identity then – and just go with it?

WARK: I don't know about going with it, but a certain amount of honest self-reflection might not be a bad thing. To think about how class and class culture forms one. How is high culture an aspirational goal. If you're a petit-bourgeois it's not really your culture. It's often a dead culture: The bourgeoisie doesn't do this stuff anymore. If there is even a bourgeoisie to speak of.

**SHAMMAS:** You write somewhere that these people end up exaggerating what the bourgeoisie is capable of reading – the bourgeoisie in the United States today is not a literate class.

WARK: No! (laughs)

**SHAMMAS:** It's a kind of Trumpist, vulgar –

WARK: Yeah! And so why would you counterweight to that be an older version of the bourgeoisie. It doesn't make any sense. I think for Adorno, he thought he had found pockets of exception to bourgeois forms within what the bourgeoisie inherited as a culture: European art music and the novel. Anachronisms. But the exceptions have long since been absorbed.

**SHAMMAS:** In *Molecular Red*, you suggest that we should accept vulgarity – we should embrace the vulgar. Žižek offers the opposite claim, namely that we need to be more polite, more decent, especially in the face of people like Trump, and that the dominant elites are now the voice of vulgarity. Is there a case to be made for that?

WARK: It's complicated, and Žižek works this kind of high-low thing, speaking of people who are obsessed with Wagner, and then mixing that with crude jokes. Working the tension between the high and the low for writerly effect. But maybe one could unpack the vulgar a little bit more.

So think about the components of it: There is a certain perversity to Marxists wanting not to be vulgar, when vulgar is the common, it's the people. There's this whole literature about the commons, the people, the multitude – "vulgar" is a word connected to all of those things. But then it's also connected to something that's outside bourgeois sexual morality. Are there ways one could open up a range of senses of this word, "vulgar," a little bit more?

This is the other thing that fascinated me: The thing that unites Lukács, Althusser, and pretty much everybody in so-called Western Marxism, is that they're all opposed to vulgar Marxism. Like that's the *only* thing they have in common, pretty much – even more than their opposition to the ruling class is their opposition to vulgar Marxism. So it's like, what does that make you? Are you then *gentee*/Marxists? It's a null category, a blank category. If you're not vulgar Marxists, you're basically genteel: You want to be the gentry. There *isn't* one. So it would be occupying an imaginary class culture, a spiritual gentry, leading the working class – in its own imagination – against the bourgeoisie.

It's this sort of Nietzschean will to power thing: You want to be in the moral exemplar of a class that's ceasing to exist. There is no classical bourgeois, to the extent that the bourgeoisie selectively absorbed genteel values and made them their own. And now you're wanting to absorb some other genteel values and make them your own. Why is that never questioned? It's kind of crazy to me. Or at least very dated. So is there a way to rethink "*vulgus*."

But I had a more specific aim in mind with embracing the vulgar. Vulgar Marxism was always thought of as an economism, but it was usually an economism of the *relations* of production. You know that gesture of, "Everything is explained once you understand the relations of production. I will explain Wagner to you as an epiphenomenon of the laws of exchange value." But it's always *relations* of production, never *forces* of production. The blind side of not only Marxism but critical theory in general is that no one even asks what are the forces of production now.

But this ain't your grandad's capitalism! There sure ain't steam engines any more. You'd be hard pressed to find a working model of one. This is not classical industrial production. Information has wormed

its way into the very organization of the factory floor as a control technique. Just as Marx spent quite a bit of time trying to understand steam engines, we have to figure out what the forces of production are now, in collaboration with those who work with them.

**SHAMMAS:** That ties into your concept of the “hacker class,” or the “vectorial class,” which you discuss in various places in your writings. During your talk yesterday, I detected a slight backtracking on the concept of the hacker class. You don’t seem entirely satisfied with it any more. Is that an accurate assessment?

WARK: It’s really hard to name things and to get names to stick. Often what we consider really successful works of theory did just that. They got concepts to stick by messing with language. Marx did it. He gives “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie” a new conceptual meaning. They all did it, all the critical theory we admire intervened in language and named things in new ways. In Walter Benjamin it is “mechanical reproducibility”: it’s awkward perhaps even in German, but he makes it a concept and it’s powerful. So, we’re stuck with this language, but it describes a past century. What would be a language that describes this historical period? That turns out to be really hard.

So, I really think there are new classes, generated by developments in the forces of production modifying the relations of production, the property form, the commodity form, and so on. Marx got a little obsessed in writing *Capital*, with a reduction of everything to an ideal-type mode of production where there’s only two classes. He thought the historical tendency was to abolish other classes and compress class struggle into that dynamic between labor and capital. It turns out that this may not be the case at all.

And in the rest of Marx, that’s clearly not the case. He’s talking about multi-class politics in the writings on France. The *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire* is wonderfully subtle about all the different classes and how they’re aligned and so on, and of course Gramsci and others take their cue from this. So if you start from Marx’s political writing, rather than that more simple two-class diagram – there can be multi-class contests, as the mode of production changes, different class formations can emerge. What are they *now*?

And what is this class that we might belong to that's not quite labor, and it's not helpful to call us petit bourgeois – that's my class by origin. I don't own property. I need to sell something. But I don't quite sell labor. It is not measured the way labor time is measured. And I don't quite make commodities. I make variants in patterns of information. As it happens, whole new private property forms emerged to recognize this as something that can be owned – intellectual property. But it is based on information, which as we saw has weird commons-effects, a simple instance of which is how theory itself circulates. And oddly enough, I do actually own the immediate tools of production, as peasants did. I have the laptop. But beyond that I don't own the means of realizing the value of what I do.

**SHAMMAS: That was something that really resonated with us during your talk yesterday –**

WARK: Yeah, it's like being a peasant again! It's weird.

**SHAMMAS: It's not a laptop proletariat but a laptop serfdom.**

WARK: Yeah, exactly, and that's super weird. I have deadlines, but how I meet them is entirely up to me, which is exactly like being a peasant. What they used to call Saint Monday – peasants just worked their asses off for four days and took a three-day weekend. The lord doesn't give a shit and can't do much about it so long as the tithe is there. We're more back in that, rather than clock time: You must clock on, you must clock off, you can't have a toilet break until the union fights for that right, and so on.

Of course, there's different things going on. Another effect of information as a force of production is that some kinds of labor are much more closely measured and controlled on the factory floor. But what are those workers making? Things designed by this other class, imbued with information by this other class, which designed the circuit or the software or the logo or chose the colors – who *informed* mere matter with some difference. That's the hacker class. And we're no angels. Our class also designed these hellish distributed, precarious labor forms.

**SHAMMAS:** Which kinds of labor are you thinking of in particular? Uber, Airbnb, the sort of platform-capitalist labor process described by Nick Srnicek and others?

WARK: I mean in a way the archetypal version of it would be Amazon warehouse workers, where the system generates inactivity reports measured in seconds. "You did nothing for 15 seconds," and it wants to know why. And sure, call it "platform capitalism" if you like, but maybe just sticking modifiers on the word capitalism – as if it was an eternal essence that simply changes in appearance – isn't much of a concept. Maybe it is not even capitalism any more, but something worse. Commodification actually has three distinct modes: commodification of land, of fungible goods, and now of information. Just as capitalism seizes control of the old landed estate economy from without, I think new information-centric forces of production have seized upon manufacturing capitalism from without, controlling production through information.

**HOLEN:** They recently patented armbands that vibrate if you place a book in the wrong position.

WARK: Exactly, so there's that. Not everything is this other kind of hacker creativity outside of laboring in the historical sense. But the thing about industrial labor is that it's production of the same thing. That's how exchange-value works. Equivalent units of the same exact thing. That's *not* my job. *My* job is to produce difference. It only gets to count as a product if it's in some weirdly defined sense novel. What kind of class does that? I called it the hacker class, but I don't if this language still works in 2018 the way it did in 2004. Because hacker got to be a kind of massively criminalized as a term. It's less ambivalent than it once was.

**SHAMMAS:** And now, of course, the term hacker – it used to be this shadowy figure, at the cutting edge of technology, who was both subterranean and vaguely progressive, but now with the US-Russian hacking scandal, hackers are increasingly seen as an extension of

traditional geopolitical forces. Has history caught up with your concept?

WARK: Yeah, that's the thing. It acquired a much more restricted valence. So I'm kind of stuck for a name. It was a lovely word to use a decade ago. In the space of English, it has these Saxon roots, it's not one of these Latinate abstract nouns. *A Hacker Manifesto* is written in all those abstract nouns, Latinate in origin, except for that one. So I'm sort of playing a lot with the language in the book. I say that it's written in European, an imaginary language which is equal parts church Latin, Marxism and business English.

SHAMMAS: Recently we met with Maurizio Lazzarato, and he of course writes a great deal about how neoliberalism turns us into our own managers, managers of time, as you mentioned. Are you interested in the subjective dimensions of this period of time that we're in? How it affects our sense of well-being?

HOLEN: The production of subjectivity –

WARK: Yeah, I wanted to not call it neoliberalism, because it's on the verge of becoming a commonplace. It is now about as meaningless as "postmodern" became by the mid-80s. Besides, "neoliberal capitalism" is a (non) concept where even the modifier has a modifier. When you make something that unintentionally odd out of language, some conceptual work has not really been done.

There should be a slightly counter-intuitive side to concepts, how they're named and used. Neoliberalism is becoming too – like, what *isn't* neoliberal now? It gets a little bit maybe broadened to the point where it's starting to collapse, conceptually. But in *Gamer Theory*, looking at the cultural realm, what I wanted to ask is: how did the subjectivity of the game become generalized? Maybe what we think of as neoliberalism is mostly kinds of game-logic. Even if you don't play games, as a leisure activity, you then start to think of everything in the workplace and everyday life as a game – including *dating*. Those dating apps just a gamespace version of love and sex (laughs)! Everyone gets those little scores, swipe left or right. It's a part of

gamespace along with how one is supposed to think about labor, about life.

**SHAMMAS:** It's nicely described in Alfie Bown's recent book, *The Playstation Dreamworld*, where he talks about how games are now bigger than the Hollywood movie industry, and that, regardless of whether you play them or not, video games and computers games now, directly or indirectly, shape the field of desires.

WARK: Right. So one can look for ways of understanding subjectivity today in postwar right wing German economists if you like, but it begs the question of how subjectivity today is learned and felt in everyday life. There one has to look at the interfaces through which so much of that life is now lived. You have to do some media theory based on an actual study of the forms.

**SHAMMAS:** But he also suggests that games might teach us how to push beyond capitalism. Is that something you've given thought to as well?

WARK: Yeah that's been going on for a long time. Going back to Bernie DeKoven's New Games Movement and the kind of – I'm always interested in avant-gardes, and I found one in game design, and New York was one of the places you could find it, because the industry is very California-based, so New York was full of people who were like, we're never going to make a big 100 million dollar game, let's make this other stuff that'll work on peoples' phones. They found this play in that area. So yeah, there are people who work on that. And then you can design a whole research project around it.

Guy Debord was a game designer. Debord's *Game of War* is actually a super interesting game. I learned how to play it, but I never got good. Richard Barbrook beat me the one time he let me play, which he'll never let me forget (laughs). I played Alex Galloway to a draw on the set that Alice Becker-Ho owns.<sup>3</sup> But the security wanted to close the building, so we never got a chance to finish – but I knew Alex was going to beat me...I actually really suck at games. But Debord's embodied certain strategic principles for how to learn tactics that I

think he really wanted to teach as a kind of counter-gaming within gamespace. Same with Asger Jorn's three-sided football game, which is about learning both collaboration and competition at the same time.

So yeah, I think that's a whole really viable option, to the extent that games really do become a kind of widespread culture, and where counter-hegemonic struggle really has to happen – because of Gamergate, a certain kind of masculinity got wedded to a certain kind of model of what games could be. I don't think it's the only way it could be. Hence there's a space for avant-gardes to come up with new forms, to work directly in "vulgar" culture with advanced concepts and practices.

**SHAMMAS: In your talk yesterday, you said that utopians want to organize everything relentlessly—they make too many detailed plans—and that utopianism arises in periods of defeat. Are we in a period of defeat and therefore utopian thinking?**

WARK: I think it's useful, as someone trained by the labor movement, for whom that's my home, my life, my people, to view it as a project that ended in defeat. We are a defeated people. Hence there is no point to the arguments between the Trotskyists, the anarchists, the council communists, the cooperative movement, the parliamentary roaders, and so on. We all lost. There's elements you can recycle in all those tactics, but none really worked. And so it may also be a good time to revisit the utopians. And their relentless working-through of what the practicalities of life could be like.

On the other hand, I'm aware, particularly in the United States, of being surrounded by 20-year-old optimists. There was once this tiny little organization called the Democratic Socialists of America, and Bernie Sanders started talking about "democratic socialism" and everybody googled it, found the DSA and joined it. They had like nine members, and now it has like 50,000. Continually, I'm genuinely impressed by the quality of the activism of the new people coming up.

**HOLEN: Are you involved in their work?**

WARK: Partly. I have a past life as a party militant, but I can't do it anymore. But I kind of want to support the people who *do*. Our last branch meeting was all about tenant activism. There's a housing crisis in New York. They really have their shit together. They have strategy, they have data, they understand the law, the politics, who's influential and who's not, how to organize communities and why that's important. So I'm like, oh, there's actually this optimistic kind of crew I'm surrounded by – but I'm 57 (laughs)! You know, this isn't my first rodeo. "Good luck with this!" (laughs) But I always show up.

**SHAMMAS: You supported Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her victory in the primaries. Reading *Molecular Red*, especially the concluding chapter, where you write about being a member of the Australian Communist Party, I wonder: Is that something you miss? Could you see yourself joining up again, and not just being an intellectual?**

WARK: Yes and no. There is a tension. As a writer, there's some distance from the world that's kind of necessary. I was just reading Marguerite Duras. She has this lovely little text on writing where she basically says she locked herself away in a house in the country for 20 years with a bottle of whiskey and a piano and wrote masterpieces – *I'm* not going to do that, I'm not comparing myself to Marguerite Duras (laughs)! But I understand the feeling of a sort of distance from the world, which is what writers are actually about. So with politics I'll sign up to do the donkey work in the office. It's all app-based today – millennials, they really have their shit together. Older people complain about them a lot but I'm always impressed by the mistakes they *don't* make. So I'll go to the branch meetings, hand out the fliers.

The thing about that is refusing the sense intellectuals always have that they should lead these things, which I'm kind of suspicious of. I really admire Victor Serge for that reason. Victor Serge was a very sophisticated Marxist thinker, as you see in his books on revolutionary movements in Barcelona, but mostly in the Soviet Union. But he *never* had a leadership role. He worked as a translator. That I really get. He was just a foot-soldier. And, again, not comparing myself here. But that would be my model.

SHAMMAS: We saw that in the Occupy Wall Street movement, where some intellectuals were happy to join if they could stand on a soap box and talk to the people, instruct them. But they weren't willing to get their hands dirty in activism per se.

WARK: Yeah, and I think there's increasingly less tolerance for that. You saw that with Black Lives Matter, where – and it was done very politely—younger African-American activists were sort of like, "Thanks, but no thanks. We need money, we need you to open doors, but we don't need you to be the figurehead any more, that's not how it works anymore." That's kind of interesting, a refusal – it's a little punk rock to me, too. "Fuck you, dinosaurs, we've got this." So I really don't want to be on the wrong side of that. With Occupy Wall Street I just showed up. I was there. I wrote a psychogeography of Zuccotti Park. That's one thing I know how to do.

SHAMMAS: There's a nice scene in the movie *Malcolm X* – it's just a movie, but I think it actually happened, it's in Malcolm X's *Autobiography* – where he's walking across the Columbia University campus and a white college student walks up to him and asks him, "Mr. X, what can I do to help your movement?" And he just looks at the student and says, "Nothing." And then he walks off.

WARK: (laughs) Yeah.

SHAMMAS: To loop back on our earlier discussion: If we're not going to use the term neoliberalism, what term should we be using? I find myself using it all the time, almost involuntarily.

WARK: Words like post-Fordism and neo-liberalism just put modifiers on existing things, so you're not out of the woods. It's as if we never got past Aristotle in how to construct a concept – as if there can only *ever* be capitalism with modifiers of it, until The Great Negation. The Great Negation will come and turn it into something else. Kojève in the lectures on Hegel is already tipping us off that this is a theological gesture. Is there a way of thinking periodization differently, where you're

not reliant on this underlying sense an eternal essence of something?  
Can our concepts be historical?

And then, we might also ask, where did the idea of capitalism as an eternal essence come from? Maybe from reading *Capital* as if it's a work of philosophy when it's not. It's literature. It has literary tactics. But it is also a work of social science. It's trying to describe the moment, not trying to give you concepts that are extractable from that situation for all time. It has literary form, which neither philosophers nor social scientists even want to address. They pretend like half the book is not even there. It's a work that's extremely funny, among other things. And there are pages that are meant to make you really angry. It just does all these things that a work of literary art is supposed to do.

So, I think that's the challenge: How to reinvigorate what language is, what language can do? So I don't want to say what word to use. That's part of the problem, in a sense. What is the struggle in language? Well, one needs to understand how language works a little more. What was Marx's job? He was a writer? How did he do that? What are his techniques? His craft? One can't just consume the end result as a product. Same with Foucault, or whoever. We would probably have a low opinion of someone who follows Beyoncé on Instagram and copies her clothes, but that is pretty much what happens with theory. People just follow the Marx or Foucault Instagram. They don't make their own concepts. Marx and Foucault made their own concepts.

**SHAMMAS:** One of the things we've worked on is outer space, the privatization of the space industry. We've written a paper about what we call the figure of "capitalistkind," which takes the place of "humankind," as private entrepreneurs, like Elon Musk, look to outer space. Kim Stanley Robinson touches on some of the same ideas in his *Mars Trilogy*. You talked a little bit about outer space yesterday. Could you just reflect a little more on what's going on in space today? Is that a site of critical theorizing as well?

**WARK:** Yeah, it's worth thinking about. The great Accelerationist dream may never come to pass, and to what extent is this a kind of avoiding of the planetary, which is a great figure in neglected French theory of

the 60s. Kostas Axelos has a thing about “the planetary.” It shows up in Henri Lefebvre a little bit. Those guys stole each other’s stuff like crazy, but Axelos is the one who wants to think “the planetary,” and to think the planetary as a space of *limits*.

Thinking limits is the hardest thing, because when you play Anthropocene bingo, someone will immediately say, “You’re a Malthusian!” My take is that, no, Marx had this really good answer to Malthus, but it’s to do with *temporary* relief from a particular definition of scarcity. Do you really want to say that the resources of the planet are infinite? I’d really love for someone to make that argument, because they’re not, and we screwed up the planet. That’s the meaning of the Anthropocene: We filled the ocean with plastic. So there’s a way in which there’s an avoidance gesture involved: “Forget this, we’ll be somewhere else.” Kim Stanley Robinson ends up being more critical even of its own socialist revolution on Mars thinking by the time you get to his more recent book *Aurora*.

**SHAMMAS:** Elon Musk says we need to become a “multiplanetary species,” and that’s because, the world will implode through global climate change, so we need offshoots on Mars, and on the Moon. Is this a last, desperate attempt to find a solution *within* capitalism? We talk about an *outer space fix*, modeled on Harvey’s idea of a spatial fix.

WARK: Right. Oh, that’s nice. It makes a good tweet, a good distraction. But, it’s kind of a pipe dream. Musk is not a real billionaire. He’s a negative billionaire.

**SHAMMAS:** In the sense that his assets aren’t real?

WARK: Yeah, this thing is literally money on fire. Why are we listening to this guy who’s not making cars? (laughs) It’s kind of insane. And he diverts attention by talking about space or the Hyperloop. It’s like, wait a minute: What’s the core business here? This thing is only being propped up because if not it literally means that everyone who’s invested in Tesla will be flushing billions of dollars down the toilet, in case the Model 3 doesn’t work.

You gotta love the hubris of kind of this – automotive engineering of production systems is one of the most sophisticated, specialized, highly developed kinds of engineering on the planet. And some guy who made some money on PayPal and thinks he's just going to go and reinvent that process? Some of the smartest minds on the planet have spent 50 years figuring out the cheapest way to make a Toyota. And they're good at their job. You're just going to reinvent that? It turns out there's a reason you don't have robots do a whole bunch of these fiddly assembly jobs.<sup>4</sup> Because humans are cheaper, even when you pay them an actual wage, than robots. There's a reason people do it the way they do it! Apparently with Tesla there's some really good IP [Intellectual Property] in the battery stuff, which is worth real money and has a real future. But what does it say about our era that we're listening to the Donald Trump of the car business—who's massively in debt, who's not delivering the product that he's supposed to have delivered—and what he has to say about outer space? I'd rather listen to Kim Stanley Robinson, who has spent a lifetime studying it and thinking about it.

**SHAMMAS:** One of the things we discovered in the course of our research is that SpaceX's Falcon Heavy launch vehicle is still not as powerful as the most powerful developed by NASA in the 1960s, the Atlas V rocket.

WARK: And didn't the Russians have bigger ones anyway? I was, and still am, fascinated by the Soviet space program, as it was on a non-commodity basis and done with far fewer resources and for few obvious practical reasons. Maybe some military reasons, but mostly it seems to simulate a military capacity the Soviet forces of production could not really support. And then it feeds into a whole Cosmist-Communist ideology: things on the ground are miserable, but we'll conquer the stars!

But I don't really know this stuff anymore, I used to be more fascinated with it than I currently am (laughs). I was in hospital having surgery on my disabled feet when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. I could just barely walk and there's this guy walking on the moon! I'm of that generation.

But now, I'm a little wary of how people who hire very good publicists make themselves appear to be spokesmodels for certain things, are able to shift the discourse around this. So we're going to do this because we fucked the planet? Wait a minute (laughs). Maybe if we just got rid of you lot, that'd be a better start.

KSR [Kim Stanley Robinson] has come around to this. It's so much harder than anybody imagined to do. His generational voyage book [*Aurora*] is about that. I found it very moving, which is rare with me with his books – they're interesting for other reasons – but yeah, it's a generation starship, and they get to the planet, and it turns out the planet has some version of prions, and you're just dead on contact. And they try to come back. And there's this really vivid description of the slow unraveling of a closed ecosystem that I think is allegorical. That's his description of where we are.

One of his other points is the problem of island populations. Small, restricted island populations tend not to do very well. This idea that part of the ruling class thinks they're just going to leave us all behind – it's like, well, I wouldn't want to be hanging out with you guys in a couple of hundred years, with your idiot-offspring who all bred with each other and still think they're masters of a universe that doesn't exist.

Another book that's good on this is William Gibson's *The Peripheral*. It has some great language. It's got two timelines, connected by a "Chinese router." It's one of these hand-waving versions of science-fiction. It's poetry, right? And there are a lot of different pasts that can be "stubs" into this future, and what separates them in time is an event that's called "The Jackpot." On the other side of which [spoiler alert] everyone is pretty much dead, except for this tiny population that's still alive – everything else is robots. The class that survives is simply called "the klept" – like *kleptocracy*. Not even "the klept," just *klept*. Looking around New York, I find that it's a very useful word. They are already in charge, a new ruling class, who rule via asymmetries of information, stealing data you're your body. "Check out the *klept* in the corner of the room." You can spot them (laughs). Yeah, the \$30,000 handbag, that's a give-away...

**SHAMMAS:** In closing, we wanted to ask you about The New School, your employer, and whether you think it could serve as an alternative model for critical scholarship?

**WARK:** You know, I love The New School, and I've been there for 13 years, but the answer is no (laughs). It was founded to do some very idealistic things. It was founded in 1919 by people who left Columbia University because they wouldn't sign loyalty oaths, they wouldn't be party to wartime propaganda. But they really thought they could found a social science school that wouldn't have an endowment, and they didn't know where the money would come from. And so one or two wealthy women propped the thing up for a while.

They invented adult education, which in America, particularly in New York, was a thing that didn't exist. There's two books on The New School, and one of the authors went through all of the students who were enrolled in the early years, claiming that a third of them have Jewish names – and the proportion was probably even higher – because they couldn't go to Columbia. If you're Jewish in New York in 1919, they're just not going to let you in. So The New School had this constituency. Thorstein Veblen was there, John Dewey, he wasn't technically on the faculty but he was an advisor to it, and Charles Beard – very interesting people.

To make money, they're doing night school, and it's basically bohemia. Every interesting, crazy downtown artist was either a student or a faculty there. Jack Kerouac went to The New School, and it was probably formative, though he denied it, because he's "self-invented," his whole mythology. So the whole downtown avant-garde and bohemian culture that I love about New York, it all has intimate connections to the place. John Cage taught there. Martha Graham, Wilhelm Reich.

The other thing is that it becomes the University in Exile in the 1930s. This is really key. One out of seven German academics who escape the Nazis came to The New School, which got foundation money to bring people over, a lot of them Jewish, a lot of them Social Democrats – not all of them from Germany, like Franco Modigliani, who later won a Nobel prize in Economics, who was Italian.

They created what used to be called Graduate Faculty, and they modeled it on serious German social science. Uniquely in America, it included philosophy as a social science, following the German model. Philosophers were going to do a sort of Kantian regulation of what sociologists, and economists, and psychologists were doing. It's where gestalt psychology comes into the United States – that's through The New School. Arendt was there later. And there's a myth that the Frankfurt School had a connection with The New School as well: The reality is that Horkheimer wouldn't let the Frankfurt School people talk to The New School people, because The New School people were political and Horkheimer was worried about the FBI. Rightly as it turns out.

**SHAMMAS: They were at Columbia –**

WARK: Sort of, temporarily, yeah. So New School is a bunch of mostly German, some Jewish intellectuals, connected to the social-democratic party, making a transition out of Marxism towards left-liberalism. They translated Hitler's *Mein Kampf* into English to warn the Anglophone world about how dangerous he was.

It got seriously purged of Marxists and communists in the 1950s. Henri Lefebvre was supposed to come to the New School, but he couldn't get a visa. Hence, [the composer Hanns] Eisler had to go back to East Germany. Erwin Piscator, the great theater director, got kicked out. So this was not a noble moment in The New School's history. But it's still an interesting place today, because it's in the cultural DNA of the institution.

There was a whole French section as well. They all went back, after the war. It was sort of like the Gaullist think-tank in exile. Claude Lévi-Strauss met Roman Jakobson at The New School and invented basically structuralism. I'm not exaggerating too much. That story's kind of great, too. Because there's all these French intellectuals who think they have to reinvent French culture when they defeat the Nazis: "It must be based on Christendom!" And you can imagine Lévi-Strauss looking at Roman Jakobson across the table, going, "We're Jews, they're not talking about us at all, we need a whole other project. What would a *science of culture* be?" It's an astonishing idea. Lévi-Strauss

had this fieldwork that he'd already done, Jakobson already has the beginnings of structural linguistics, like in the famous study of aphasia – it all comes together.

So it used to be this great place – but we don't have any money! We don't have anything that generates cash: It's all tuition-based, and we're one of the most expensive schools in America. There's no foundation. If you get in, you can basically go to Harvard for free now, up to a family income of \$250,000, but the reason is that Harvard is a *hedge fund* that maintains a university for tax purposes (laughs). Some say, "It's unethical for The New School to charge all this money." And it's kind of like, wait a minute, it's unethical to go to a hedge fund university too. *None* of these things are ethical.

I really think the university system was *the one* high-functioning institution in the United States – because of its diversity. There were multiple state systems, not just one. Most European countries have one state system, but the United States had fifty. So there's this difference and tension. Then there were the not-for-profits, some of which have accumulated ridiculous amounts of money. And then some are founded on unique intellectual principles, of which The New School was one. So there was this ecosystem of higher education in America that was genius – and during the Cold War, the government just pumped money into it. With the Soviet launch of Sputnik in the 1950s, they realized: "We have to compete with that, on a scientific front *and* a cultural one. Marxism is a philosophy of history that's really persuasive – well, we've got to have an alternative to that." Then, particularly after the Cold War, it was like, "Ah, forget about it."

In the 1980s, universities are allowed to keep the intellectual property that they generate from state-funded research. And that's a game-changer. Universities become quasi-factories of ideas. *The* model of the university now is Stanford, because that's exactly what it does.

**SHAMMAS:** The New School is incredibly expensive. Do you feel that there's an ethical tension between, on the one hand, training students in the critique capitalism, and on the other hand, charging them more than \$20,000 a year.

WARK: Yes, absolutely. We're taking their money! That only works if you can get your degree and get a better job than you would otherwise get with it. But you have to assume the subjectivity of a gambler, of a player, or a hustler, as the language of hip-hop would have it.

**SHAMMAS: Is that a problem to be solved, or is it just a given contradiction within currently-existing forms of capitalism?**

WARK: I've never claimed to be an ethically consistent person (laughs). I'm not privately wealthy: I need a day job. Also, I'm an immigrant. I can't fall back on my family. They're half a world away. I'm obviously a very privileged immigrant: I'm white, I speak English as a first language, I already had a doctorate when I got there, so I'm not claiming hardship. But I need a *job*, and that was the job I could get. I'm an outsider to American higher education. My degrees are from universities no one has ever heard of in a world that's very, very based on an almost feudal sense of what qualifications are and what they're worth.

But yeah, it's not defensible. But now, The New School *was* a model, and its history is worth looking at, for what it wanted, and also for what it failed to do, what the world would not let it become.

Because there are a lot of startup models, like the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, which is deliberately playing on our name to reinvent the mission. And it's great. Their courses are very cheap. But everyone is paid as adjuncts. No one makes much money teaching there. On the other hand, it's cheap to study. I support them, I'm friends with them, but they're not generating real jobs for anybody, because they can't. And there are other examples like that.

In a way, it's great, because you need to pluralize models of the university and what one can do inside them. There's what Fred Moten calls "the undercommons." You use its resources for another project. Now he's been in real research universities where you can do that sort of thing. He went to Harvard. He worked in a big state university, then NYU, a big private one. It's a good tactic for those situations. Some of the interesting stuff is going to come from simply using the resources of research universities to do something else. So you won't be one of those pain-in-the-ass people whose arguing with everyone all the time,

you'll do your job because it's a job, but your real mission is the undercommons – to use this space for a different kind of knowledge.

That doesn't work for me as I'm at an institution with fewer resources to begin with. Also: I was trained by Old Left people who actually ran things, ran unions and things. I'm not a great organizer or administrator, but by the standards of the university, I'm a B, maybe B+ at that sort of thing. I've had leadership positions, I've been department chair, I was Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, I helped create a tenure system, and I'm proud of doing that work. I think of my colleague Jay Bernstein, who's a philosopher of the Frankfurt School, who was also doing similar work, I asked him: "Jay, you're still sort of a Marxist, why are you doing this administrative work?" And his answer was, "If the university doesn't exist, critical theory doesn't exist."

It's no longer entirely the case, but it's partly the case. A lot of these para-academic worlds still depend on the existence of the university system. So we've got to make this thing work the best we can, accepting the compromises that come with having some tiny smidgeon of power and exercising it to the best of our abilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Michèle Bernstein is French writer and was a prominent member of the Situationist International from 1957 to 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Marx writes that "*abstrakt menschliche Arbeit*" is a "*bloße Gallerte unterschiedsloser menschlicher Arbeit*," See Keston Sutherland, "Marx in Jargon." [http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_1.1/KSutherland.pdf](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_1.1/KSutherland.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Alice Becker-Ho (b. 1941), author of *Les Princes du Jargon*, member of the Situationist International, and co-publisher of *The Game of War (Le Jeu de la Guerre)* with Guy Debord in 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Wark is alluding to news coverage of Musk's costly attempt to automate the Tesla Model 3 production line and reduce human labor inputs, see e.g. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/business/tesla-musk.html>.