

# **WILL NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM SURVIVE THE CORONAVIRUS CRASH OR IS THIS THE BEGINNING OF TECHNO- FEUDALISM?**

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It has become something of a cliché to note that since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, we have been living through an interregnum in which ‘the old system is dying but the new cannot yet be born’ (Gramsci 1935: 572). The Coronavirus Crash of 2020 has redoubled the seriousness of our conjunctural moment in ways that may only be fully comprehensible by the middle of the next decade. Critics of neoliberalism were quick to assume that the 2008 crash would signal its immediate dissolution. Keynesian economists boasted that the fiscal stimulus measures adopted by governments and their central banks around the world indicated that a new progressive alternative would shortly replace it (Krugman 2009: 1). Crouch wrote of *The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism* (2011: 23). Bruff (2014) coined the phrase ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ to describe the phenomenon whereby, in the era of fiscal austerity in the 2010s, the system’s innately coercive, disciplinary and panoptic tendencies have had to be imposed through significantly escalated scales of state violence. The latter has been evidenced by augmented police militarisation, mass incarceration, the conflation of protest with forms of low-level terrorism, and the widening presence of riot police across urban space (Elahe 2017; Balko 2013: 162; Wood 2014: 15). A few years later, Jaffe (2017: 1) compellingly framed Hillary Clinton’s doomed 2016 presidential campaign as a toxic form of ‘Zombie Neoliberalism’. This gothic imagery depicted how neoliberalism was characterised by a profound legitimacy

**Waters, A. (2020)**

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***Journal of Australian Political Economy*  
No. 86, pp. 406-31.**

crisis amongst large swathes of the masses, yet rambled on regardless due to this crisis not being as visible by elites. Then along came COVID-19.

Despite the depth of the Coronavirus Crisis of 2020, as Crouch (2011: 23) might have remarked, neoliberalism seems to linger on without any clear singular replacement ideology waiting for it to neatly exit the stage of history, providing a void for some new ideological framework to fill. Where there is no alternative, we can expect existing trends, tendencies and their usual outcomes, to continue to escalate. The fiscal responses that states have adopted in light of the economic crisis of 2020 vary widely. Some reflect the imposition of a neoliberal shock doctrine (Klein 2007: 4). Compounding neoliberalism's legitimacy crisis, governments around the world have deemed that to resuscitate growth it has been necessary to unleash trillions of dollars in Keynesian stimulus spending – quite contrary to free market orthodoxy. Right-wing populists have done so in distinctly reactionary ways, such as in the case of the US where trillions has been spent artificially inflating the stock-prices of major corporations and banks (AFP 2020). At the other end of the spectrum, left-wing populists, such as Podemos, which sits in coalition government with the traditional social democratic party in Spain, has shown that it is possible to seize this moment to permanentise radical-democratic and egalitarian reforms like a universal basic income if you control the levers of state power (Cervera-Marzal 2020). Like all crises this moment presents an opportunity for those with a plan and the will to execute it. Unfortunately for the radical left, there are few cases like Podemos, and the general tendency for how nations will rebuild in the wake of the Coronavirus Crisis resembles the American experience of deepening reaction.

Building affirmatively on the theories developed by McKenzie Wark in her 2019 book, *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* and the responding 2020 article in *New Political Science* from Jodi Dean *Communism or Neo-Feudalism?*, this article argues that the neoliberal model of capitalism has been pushed beyond its limits by recent crises (those of 2008 and 2020). As a result of this exhaustion, a new form of political economy called 'techno-feudalism' is being advanced by elites and reactionary social movements to replace it. This refers to the novel political economy evolving out of neoliberalism in the conditions particular to core nations of the capitalist world-system, with the United States being the closest approximation to an ideal form of techno-feudalism within the core (Wallerstein 2013; Waters 2020). More specifically, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's (1992: 1) profoundly prescient

essay, *Societies of Control*, this new political economy can be summarily defined as a system dominated by the ubiquitous presence of technology for social control (mass surveillance, automation of production, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things) by the rentiers and oligarchs who own the crucial platform networks into which we are all subsumed. This system grows naturally from the tendencies and trends that began during the neoliberal era, such as financialisation, the rise of intangible capital and immaterial commodity production (Tomo 2020: 2), consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of a transnational oligarchy, and the unending assault on democratic institutions and norms previously allowing for some redistribution (Crouch 2004: 5).

Today's billionaire class of platform-owning oligarchs are among the richest men (and they are mostly men) in human history (Kenney and Zysman 2016). There are few kings or queens who ruled under feudalism, few emperors who presided over ancient slave-based empires, whose wealth was so unimaginably greater by ratio compared to the subjects that served them (Piketty 2014: 77). Some of them, such as the billionaire venture capitalist and early investor in Amazon, Nick Hanauer, are surprisingly forthcoming about this state of affairs:

Inequality is at historically high levels and getting worse every day. Our country is rapidly becoming less a capitalist society and more a feudal society. Unless our policies change dramatically, the middle class will disappear, and we will be back to late 18th-century France. Before the revolution (Hanauer 2014: 1).

While we cannot predict the future, we can observe that trends such as those listed above, if they continue in the long-term, point in the direction of a highly class-stratified form of society akin to those preceding capitalism. At some point, such a system merits its own name other than 'capitalism'. While perhaps no perfect name exists, language tends to evolve, and each generation finds its own ways to reinvent how they talk about their society as it undergoes political economic transformations. Thus, we can observe and remark upon the evolution of a techno-feudal society in that *history is simultaneously moving forwards technologically and backwards politically*. This argument – that neoliberal capitalism has entered a terminal crisis and is in the early phase of being replaced by techno-feudalism in the core nations of the world-system – is supported by four key propositions. Each of these is primarily expounded in the discussion section, following a brief overview of key theorists and debates in the literature review.

The four key claims each describe one feature of techno-feudalism that delineates it from neoliberal capitalism. The first discusses the new rent-based economy dominated by multi-sided platform corporations, such as Amazon and Google. These corporations produce little in the way of material commodities, but act as gatekeepers of information, intangible capital and immaterial commodities, extracting rents through their strategic monopolisation of the central crucial vectors of information exchange in vast ecosystems of consumers, producers and third parties (Tomo 2020: 1-4). Here I am suggesting that the label of 'techno-feudalism' can unite the insights of the *Hacker Manifesto* (Wark 2003: 20-1), *Capital is Dead* (Wark 2019: 38) and Srnicek's *Platform Capitalism* (2016: 33).

The second key claim holds that a new set of class structures has evolved, featuring both elites and an underclass distinct from those which prevailed under capitalism. The social relations of capitalists and workers engaged in the production of material commodities have been displaced, respectively, by the owners of platforms known as Techno-Rentier Oligarchs (TRO) and the vast underclass known as the Techno-Precariat Commoners (TPC). The latter performs a fragmentary and constantly shifting combination of material and immaterial labour, very rarely for a full-time wage or for a single capitalist. This new underclass is forced to subsist through improvised, insecure and precarious means. Casualised jobs in commodity production persist alongside unpaid or unreliably paid labour, which produce information to be commodified into intangible capital or immaterial commodities in the cloud, fill-in surveys, volunteer to be the subject of pharmaceutical studies, or rely on charity, petty crime, pan-handling and a plethora of crowd-funding platforms like Kickstarter, GoFundMe, Patreon, Venmo and PayPal (Gray and Suri 2019: 24).

The third key claim is that the above relations of production have given expression to new forms of class subjectivity and struggle which are associated with the TRO and the TPC. These stem from efforts to control technology itself as a central field of struggle, and to create a system of resource management characterised by freely accessible *New Commons* or privatised and militarised *New Enclosures* from which rents can be extracted. Fourth, and finally, techno-feudalism is argued to be distinct from capitalism in that alongside the development of a new economy, new classes, and new class subjectivities, a new kind of state has emerged. The state under techno-feudalism bears some resemblance to the dictatorial state of feudalism, in which political and economic power was

concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy and very little popular democracy was found in any institution (Hosseini-Zadeh and Gabb 2016). Together these claims amount to a renewed conceptual framework for interpreting the major political economic events of the early Twenty-First century as the birth-pangs of a new system. In this system, technology and the purposes to which it should be put has become the central field of struggle between popular movements for the democratisation of resources, thus creating *New Commons*, and elites who seek to monopolise and control them in order to extract rents, thus creating *New Enclosures*. In line with the thesis advanced by Wolfgang Streeck (2016: 28), I argue that the breakdown of the global neoliberal capitalist system will not be replaced in any neat, coherent way with another in a singular collapse event. The transition which we have been living through since 2008, and which sharply accelerated with the Coronavirus crash of 2020, will be a process of geographically uneven decay and devolution. This, in turn, is resulting in a multipolar world with different modes of political economy predominating in different spheres of influence simultaneously. This includes a Chinese-led area of state-socialism across the Afro-Eurasian landmass – the particular contours of which are plainly visible from the Belt and Road Initiative (Pan *et al.* 2019: 385). It further includes a non-aligned sphere spread across the peripheral and semi-peripheral states of the world-system, which is experimenting with a plurality of different political forms alongside a capitalist economy. Some nations will remain underdeveloped, stuck in neo-colonial dependency relations with the core (such as those of West Africa with France). At the same time, as the core of the world-system is finally left with no new frontiers to colonise, capital has returned home to colonise itself – like the zombie unable to find living brains to feast upon, it must resort to eating its own flesh.

### **Literature review**

In the context of the post-neoliberal interregnum, prominent morbid symptoms – or ‘monsters’, to use a more evocative translation of Gramsci’s famous phrase – are extreme and historic peaks of inequality, as well as the absence of a mass organised leftist politics represented through the traditional means of trade unions, socialist and social democratic parties and mass publications with an explicitly leftist editorial agenda. As a result of the prolonged retreat of these forms of leftist politics

in the post-Cold War era, the political void has been filled by a chaotic pan-populist reaction to inequality, dominated by right-wing populism but also including some movements for left-populism and liberal or centrist-populism (Mouffe 2018: 5).

To explain this interregnum, three categories of literature are currently prominent. The first holds that this is a temporary blip and the infinite capacity of capitalism to reinvent itself will imminently see-off this crisis as it has every previous one. This category takes capitalism as a transhistorical 'given' and stubbornly rejects any notion of system change. Aaron Benanav's *Automation and the Future of Work* (2020: 29), for example, offers a compelling analysis debunking many of the more outlandish claims made in the service of techno-dystopian/utopianism. From this perspective, capitalism has always been an inherently unstable system prone to thriving off this dynamic, such that the present crisis should not be treated as an exception.

The second category of literature is largely centrist or liberal in ideological framing, and is defensive of the neoliberal status quo. This category features an abundance of authors cashing-in on the elite and centrist moral panic about what Chantal Mouffe called the 'populist moment' – the decade following the 2008 crash (Mouffe 2018: 7). Broder (2020) presents an excellent critique of this tendency in contemporary liberal-centrist thought. Specifically, he contends that by using the word 'populist' as a pejorative, as authors do within this tendency, they reveal a primal fear of crowds, the people, and democracy in general. Numerous texts within this tendency fetishise the individual leaders of right-wing populist movements as the exceptional problem in an otherwise perfectly functional democracy. A particularly galling example is presented in *Fascism: A Warning*, by former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright (2018). The labels 'fascist' or 'neo-fascist' are used therein without performing any analytical work to explain 'fascism' as a form of capitalism when the ruling class has hit the figurative panic button and suspended liberal democratic institutions and norms. This labelling is presented to reinstate capitalist social relations when they are under threat from militant striking workers, boycotts, protests, and other forms of collective action that disrupt the 'normal' flow of capital. Little discussion is offered for how fascism historically has only emerged in response to highly militant and organised labour and an ascendant mass-based communist movement (see Parenti 1997: 5 for a proper definition and analysis). Based on this alternative understanding that fascism is about crushing the organised working class

as it is poised to take state power and build socialism, it is problematic to apply this label to the next system since these ingredients are missing today.<sup>1</sup>

The third category of literature on the post-neoliberal interregnum is heterogenous and features Marxist, critical and progressive perspectives that all argue, in one way or another, that this crisis is the opening event of a transition to some form of post-capitalism. Within this category, key texts that have influenced this article are Deleuze (1992), Dean (2020), Wark (2019), Streeck (2016) and Frase (2016). Each of these holds that the current model of capitalism is coming to an end and will eventually be replaced by an alternative system. Frase (2016) features a very engaging exploration of both utopian and dystopian futures that may emerge based on factors like ecological scarcity vs. abundance and a high vs. a low level of sustained class struggle.

This article, while engaging with the perspective offered by the former two categories of scholarly literature, aligns most closely within the third.

## Discussion

The aim and overarching argument of this article, having gone through the above described method, is to establish that techno-feudalism is a distinct mode of political economy separated from capitalism, and is the destination at the end of a decades-long transition resulting from processes set in motion by capitalism's neoliberal form. This argument is supported by four key claims, namely that techno-feudalism is delineated from capitalism in four primary respects: a new prevailing form of economy,

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<sup>1</sup> The claim here is not that fascism can only refer to the classic cases of Germany, Italy and Japan during the 1930s-40s. Per Parenti (1997: 5), 'fascism' refers to the specific form of capitalist society resulting after the ruling class feels so threatened by the high intensity and wide scale of militant working class struggle in the midst of a deep economic crisis, that they hit the figurative 'panic button', formally abolish liberal democratic institutions, and rally a reactionary mass movement of the aspirational middle classes to crush the ascendant working class trade unionist, socialist or communist movement through scapegoating ethnic minorities and romantic appeals to a mythical golden age. Two prominent examples which highlight the possible emergence of fascism beyond the 1930s-40s and outside the countries typically associated with it, are General Pinochet's coup in Chile of 1973 and General Suharto's coup in Indonesia in 1964, which Bevens (2020: 74) argued was among the most decisive conflicts of the entire Cold War. In both examples, the organised left itself was articulated as a scapegoat.

new class structures, new forms of class subjectivity and a new form of state. These will be discussed in turn.

### **The economy of techno-feudalism**

Frase (2011) claims that under feudalism, land or ‘immobile property’ was the primary unit of value. This shifted to the commodity under mature industrial capitalism and has shifted, once again, to information under techno-feudalism. According to the teleological grand narrative of the labour metaphysic, history is ‘supposed’ to move towards communism or what we might, less ambitiously, call ‘political progress’. Given that socialism, besieged by relentless sabotage and interference from the nations of the imperial core, has hitherto failed to abolish the commodity form, political progress has been temporarily reversed, despite technological advancement continuing. Thus, history is simultaneously moving forwards technologically and backwards politically.

Techno-feudalism represents the emergence of a post-capitalist mode of production because it features this shift in emphasis away from material commodity production (physical goods like cars, toys, clothing) and towards intangible or immaterial production of information, data, code, websites, apps, financial claims, intellectual property, copyrights, patents, affect, care and so on (Tomo 2020: 2). Although they do so under conditions of isolation from one another, one can conceive of these forms of activity as the ‘production of the common’ (Hardt 2010). It bears some similarity to the phrase ‘platform economy’, which Kenney and Zysman (2016: 61) introduce as being dominated by a handful of giant technology corporations with monopolistic tendencies such as Amazon, Facebook, Google, Salesforce, Uber and AirBnB. Each of these firms acts as a powerful middleman, positioned strategically between billions of globally dispersed consumers and producers. The recurring small-transaction spending by all platform users is continually mobilised by such companies through their highly-targeted cultivation of dependency relationships with every entity with which they come into contact. Internet browser cookies facilitate this by providing the platform firm with data telling third-party advertisers every site users have visited, what advertisements they have clicked on, their online purchase history and so on.

Platform firms actively cultivate the normative power of monopoly status within their industry as a key to their growth strategy. The financiers

behind such platforms have such a glut of surplus capital that they are willing to absorb significant losses over the long term, as exemplified by Uber's CEO (Bussewitz 2019: 1) when he defended his company's latest quarterly losses of a 'mere' \$5.2 billion. According to *laissez-faire* economists, under such conditions, the market will ensure that firms like Uber immediately go broke and make way for potentially more efficient firms. Owing to the excessive power of rentier capital to intervene in markets and influence norms, this simply is not happening anymore (Hossein-Zadeh 2014). Uber is valued at hundreds of billions of dollars and yet owns no cars, employs no drivers and loses fantastical sums of money every hour of every day. Crucial to the model of these firms is that they themselves do not engage directly (at least, not primarily or significantly) in material commodity production. Spotify is a music hegemon that produces no music. AirBnB is a housing giant that neither builds, nor owns, any housing. Firms such as these have become the platform giants of the world economy today simply through extracting rents derived from immaterial commodity production and exercising control over the information vectors which determine the flows of intangible capital (Tomo 2020: 2; Wark 2003: 20-21).

One of this mode of political economy's primary features is its use of technology for social control (Deleuze 1992). The neoliberal narrative tells us that technology provides the user with freedoms via credit cards, mobile phones and seemingly infinite viewer choices provided by cable television networks with thousands of global channels and more recently by streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Video. But each of these technologies, at least as they are configured under their current ownership arrangements, *radically* enhance the social control capabilities of the techno-rentier oligarchy. Credit cards provide the freedom of being able to make purchases without using cash currency anywhere around the globe, but they also tell an intimate narrative to the company that extends you credit concerning every single purchase you make. Perhaps you live in a devoutly religious society and you purchase atheistic reading materials. Perhaps you're a political dissident in a police state who frequently purchases radical literature. In all these ways, the liberation that technology promised masks social control, due to its ownership and direction by the oligarchy, much of it policed and maintained through the auto-panopticon effect (Bruff 2014).

Skirmishes driven by film and music studios lobbying hard for the enactment of anti-piracy legislation over the first decades of the Twenty-

First Century have, quite possibly, been the opening battle in a longer war over whether these resources should be commodified to further facilitate the capital accumulation of transnational corporations, or simply allow free access to them as so many demand. These forms of 'digital enclosure' have clear parallels with the UK *Enclosure Acts* of the Eighteenth century, which dispossessed peasants of their land, creating an abundant labour surplus – such as exists once again today. Wark (2004: 20-1) offers a similar theory of this new technologically empowered oligarchy when she claims that

the vectoralist class wages an intensive struggle to dispossess hackers of their intellectual property. Patents and copyrights all end up in the hands, not of their creators, but of a vectoralist class that owns the means of realizing the value of these abstractions.

Wark proposes that the vectors of information exchange are becoming crucial to the global economy, as the shift from material commodity production to immaterial commodity production (the results of human labour and creativity, such as ideas, language, affects) continues to accelerate. File-sharing may seem unthreatening to rentier capital and this newly repressive state apparatus, owing to the fact that people do not seem to get punished for it according to the letter of the law. Yet, the reality is that the practice is so widespread that all the prisons in the world – which in the biggest countries, like the US and China, can hold roughly two or three million people in total – would quickly be over-capacity should such a crackdown be attempted on the over four and a half billion Internet users, most of whom will have engaged in file-sharing at some point, to say nothing of the popular reaction such an act of overreach might provoke.

### **The class structures of techno-feudalism**

The former section outlined how rents extracted through flows of intangible capital have come to displace material commodity production as the primary source of value accumulation, alongside an explication of why technology for social control is so crucial to the reproduction of this new mode of production. This section outlines the new class cleavage which has emerged as a result of changes to the mode of production. There is the elite class of Techno-Rentier Oligarchs (TRO) who own the platform giants or are among those in their orbit (such as the Professional Managerial Class discussed by Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich 1977: 31 – treated in this analysis as an appendage to the elite, rather than a separate class

with distinct interests). Conversely, there is also the popular class of Techno-Precariat Commoners (TPC) who provide the mass of information through immaterial commodity production upon which the platform giants depend. A dualistic antagonism between these classes has been developed here, in part, to avoid the problem of bourgeois sociological approaches to class. Such approaches may offer the benefit empirical precision by featuring multiple class layers and linking each to particular income brackets or some other arbitrary trait, but falter analytically when considering the *relational* dimension of class and how each is shaped and reproduced by the other. All frameworks for analysing class and sociological structures generally have their limitations. The one adopted here simply seeks to keep the focus on which cohort in society is in control of technology and to what purposes it is being dedicated – a popular class whose interests naturally align with those of society as a whole or an elite whose interests serve only a few at the expense of the many.

The scale of wealth inequality in the US is well-known at this point. To offer one empirical confirmation of this dynamic, consider the *Material Power Index*, which measures national inequality by comparing the household wealth – excluding home equity – of the richest 100 households to the bottom 90 percent of households. The ratio between the two in the US was 108,765 to 1 (Winters 2011: 217 quoted in Streeck 2016: 29). This is approximately the difference in material power between a senator and a slave at the height of the Roman Empire. Consider, further, that Winters' most recent data is from 2004. As of 2020, that ratio is likely much higher, factoring in the regressive concentrations of wealth resulting from the 2008 crash and the budgets implemented during the Trump Presidency (Gordon 2020). The 2020 Coronavirus Crash alone has seen the wealth of US billionaires increase by nearly a third (Neate 2020: 1). This is at a time when unemployment peaked at 25 percent of the workforce – equivalent to over 40 million Americans (Lambert 2020). Moreover, Amazon's hegemony in the online retail and server-hosting farm business has been so extreme that, based on recent earnings and a fortune of \$204 billion as of August 2020, its owner and founder, Jeff Bezos, saw his fortune increase by 65 percent during the Coronavirus crisis and is projected to become the first trillionaire in history within the next five years (Sonnemaker 2020: 1; Neate 2020: 1).

This extreme inequality is significant because it allows elites to effectively decouple from the social bonds which hold the rest of us together. Through freeing themselves of the pressures previously imposed on elites from

below, they are in the process of creating militarised, securitised spaces of communal luxury for their class alone – the borders of which are policed and monitored by the most sophisticated and barbaric state repressive apparatus ever devised. There is no period in the history of capitalism, or even in the history of feudalism, when inequality was as extreme as it has become in the contemporary US (Piketty 2014: 72). It is incumbent upon every generation to develop its own new lexicon for articulating the particularity and what is recognisable about these class structures and this form of class society.

Under techno-feudalism, the popular class whose labour enables the building up of a surplus for the owning class to control, and thus enables the reproduction of daily life, shifts from agrarian peasants (as under feudalism) and industrial workers (as under capitalism) to those forced to subsist through insecure and precarious means through a combination of material and immaterial production. Part-time jobs in material commodity production persist, although they are no longer primal in the way that they were under capitalism – existing alongside unpaid or unreliably paid labour producing information which becomes commodified into intangible capital or immaterial commodities in the cloud, relying on charity, petty crime, pan-handling and digital forms thereof such as crowd-funding. Standing (2010) refers to workers with such precarious conditions as ‘the precariat’ (a portmanteau of precarious and proletariat) and is pessimistic about their political potential. He has argued for social democratic reforms to prevent them from turning to nihilism or right-wing populism. While acknowledging the causes for pessimism, I view the subjectivity of the TPC as containing contradictory and dualistically opposed tendencies – hence the addition of the word commoner, those who create the commons. This acknowledges both how the class is shaped by structure and its potential for collective agency.

The TPC are unlike the proletariat of industrial capitalism in that they are highly isolated from each other in the way that feudal peasants were divided up along the lines of their plot of land. The enormous amount of time that the average person today spends online, for example, compounds their isolation. Concomitantly, the results of their immaterial labour and creativity gain concrete form as ideas, language, affects, and so forth, which the platform giants can siphon into vast surpluses of data to be sorted, commodified and resold to third-parties (Hardt 2010; Frase 2011). Consider the many women providing unpaid care for the elderly, young, and disabled, performing domestic labour in suburban housing estates

where one drives from the garage to the shopping mall without interacting with other residents, where there is no communal space apart from privatised spaces explicitly demarcated for acts of consumerism. Drink this cup of coffee here and then make way for the next customer. Purchase this toy here and then leave.<sup>2</sup> In all these spheres of isolation, techno-feudal society is designed to prohibit the possibility of mutual empathy and solidarity to emerge. By contrast, throughout the history of capitalism up until the post-war suburbanisation phase, masses of people have been heaped together in chaotic high density city squares and open-air markets, contributing towards their socialisation, politicisation and the potential for class consciousness to develop.

The TPC is highly heterogeneous in composition, as opposed to a neat, clean relational or empirical categorisation. It envelops the entire working class (both in the cliched manual, labour-intensive, industrial form typical of socialist realist artwork and those who perform the labour in call centres, for instance). It includes what Marx (1977 [1850]: 4) referred to as the lumpenproletariat: the underclass which is devoid of class consciousness. Writing of the class struggle in France in the years surrounding the wave of revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848, Marx dismissed and contrasted them with the proletariat. Subsequently, racialised sections of the lumpenproletariat, such as Black people and Latinos in the US, have become the primary social base of radical political formations such as the Black Panthers and the Young Lords (Hayes and Kiene 1998: 160-1). The considerable militancy and growth of such organisations during the 1960s suggests that, with some assistance, the underclass is capable of politicisation and community organising. In today's context, the underclass is much larger and more variegated than in Marx's era of the mid-Nineteenth Century. It envelops those in latter day debt peonage to credit card companies, those who have taken on personal

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to advocate anti-consumerism or ecologist austerity – by all means, consume like Caligula. Rather, the problem here is that this form of society has been designed to prevent individuals from interacting and forming social bonds, let alone class solidarity. This is not an accident. It should concern those of us who would seek to bring about a more democratic and egalitarian society, where spontaneous interaction between the people, including encounters with the Other, is an ordinary part of daily life. Socialism for the Twenty-First century means more than a Leninist taking over of the state in order to democratise the means of production. It must further involve the reconfiguration of the urban spaces where most of humanity now lives, so as to promote the common rather than the isolation of the individual.

loans, student debt, medical debt, mortgage debt simply to pay for the ever-escalating cost of living, broke students, the unemployed, underemployed, sex workers, the homeless, the housing insecure, the elderly and the disabled. It also includes the Standing's (2010: 5) precariat – labelled a 'dangerous' new class, a social layer that floats or, at other times, is more fixed in its positionality, and embraces gig economy workers and casual workers on zero-hour contracts. Finally, it contains the lower-middle class, which might be termed the 'downwardly mobile petite-bourgeois'. This comprises people who may own a small amount of capital – whether in the form of their own home, perhaps a single rental unit, or a small business that makes profits only unreliably and, thereby, forces its owner to engage in auto-exploitation to keep it afloat – but whose expectations of a good life have been let-down and whose interests are structurally aligned with those owning no capital, such as the groups described above.

### **The class subjectivities of techno-feudalism**

Associated with the breakdown of the proletarian-bourgeois class structure that evolved with high industrial capitalism is the breakdown of proletarian-bourgeois subjectivity in the core post-industrial nations. Rigid archetypes and discourses grounded in Nineteenth-to-Twentieth Century workerism have lost their political currency because the reality is that most people in post-industrial societies possess a fragmentary class subjectivity: they do not work in factories, most people are not union members, and many do not even know their own boss. How can they be expected to develop an explicitly Marxist understanding of their exploitation when these basic ingredients have been so carefully hidden from them by design in the 'gig economy'? Labour for commodity production persists, of course – continuing to partially contribute to the subjectivity of the popular class. Yet, it has also become displaced and supplemented by other forms of daily activity which have come to shape that subjectivity. Prominently, for example, is the debtor-creditor relation (Lazzarato 2012: 5), time spent online performing digital labour (Hardt 2010) and unpaid domestic labour (Standing 2010). Other complicating forces, such as national context and local subcultures, exert their own impact on the way in which individuals perceive and act on their class status. Universal class archetypes of any kind are, thus, perhaps impossible to identify, but we can still observe how changes in production have transformed the way individuals become class

subjects and, in the process, perhaps aid in the consolidation of such fragmented identities.

The Techno-Precariat Commoner has a contradictory class character because it inherits the well-known pessimistic and insecure traits of the precariat under neoliberal capitalism. Lazzarato (2012: 4) articulates such traits through the debtor-creditor relation (typically being in various forms of debt – such as credit card debt, personal loan debt, pay-day loan debt, car-loan debt or student loan debt, mortgage debt). This relation acts as a form of social control by preventing one from taking part in potentially risky political action. Yet, it also has an innately revolutionary character in that wherever they go, those part of the TPC are compelled to improvise the creation of commons systems of management for every conceivable resource in order to survive. File-sharing services are a perfect example of how this behaviour is socially learned. Knowing this about themselves and seeing others engage in such practices, this awareness imbues the popular subject with a ‘nothing-to-lose’ mindset. The TPC is materially united as a class in that, although its members have a plurality of experiences and do not relate or offer solidarity immediately to one another as workers at the point of production, they all need basic services to live, their lives are threatened by the artificial scarcity imposed by the TRO’s accumulative drive for enclosure and privatisation of everything. In turn, they share an interest in doing something about this – namely, turning all that is needed for a good life into a common resource for the benefit of all, rather than a commodity for the super-rich.

Conversely, consider the elite class of techno-feudalism, the Techno-Rentier Oligarchs (TRO). If members of this class never have to look their workers in the face, live in a gated community insulated from the effects of their capital and the degenerating urban and residential slums of workers, and can be quickly whisked-away in a private jet to another global city, what social contract binds their mutual interests together? Why should they care if workers can afford healthcare, sanitary housing, food, security or anything else? Why should they care about anything that happens to strangers in a state of total alienation and atomisation from them?

Why should the new oligarchs be interested in their countries’ future productive capacities and present democratic stability if, apparently, they can be rich without it, processing back and forth the synthetic money produced for them at no cost by a central bank for which the sky is the limit, at each stage diverting from it hefty fees and unprecedented

salaries, bonuses, and profits as long as it is forthcoming – and then leave their country to its remaining devices and withdraw to some privately owned island? (Streeck 2013: 22).

To take it a step further, consider how the so-called gig-economy differs from the factory shop-floor. Perhaps workers are not even hired by the TFO's company, but are subcontracted out through a complex corporate network of third-parties on a short term basis – even hourly or according to individual tasks. Perhaps TFOs own or invest in a platform application like Uber or AirTasker, where a surplus labour supply is constantly available and waiting for the tiniest scrap of production from which to extract a fraction of an hour's wage (Gray and Suri 2019: 5). The latter are not people to the TFO as they share no meaningful relation. By way of contrast, during the early-Twentieth Century, in order to prevent industrial action, Henry Ford – a capitalist who had to look his workers and their trade union delegates in the face and knew they recognised him as such – wanted his own workers to be able to buy the cars they built. This social relation was what propelled the social contract of the great class compromise between labour and capital in the New Deal. It was no intrinsic altruism on the part of industrial capitalists. They profited if workers had disposable income which they could spend on consumer goods. All of this sentiment began to disappear with the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s (Harvey 2005: 12). This restructuring of the global class system (triggered by the first round of austerity during the crisis of social democracy to which neoliberalism responded in the late-1960s to the early-1970s) is a necessary precondition for the rise of left-populism and the new form of class struggle between the TRO and the TPC.

The class struggle between the TRO and the TPC is characterised by competing visions for the application of technology – specifically, between a *New Enclosures* and *New Commons*. The TRO seek to create New Enclosures through controlling, privatising, militarising and restricting access to resources, thus creating artificial scarcity conditions ripe for the infinite extraction of rents from all seeking to gain access to a resource. The TPC, in contrast, has a material collective interest in pursuing control over technology to create New Commons and the conditions for universal free access and abundance. A united and class-conscious TPC could seek to undo the many sites of privatisation which spread across the world during the neoliberal era – of electricity, water, Internet provision, urban space, public transport and all the other necessities for having a good life, in a process sometimes referred to as 'commoning' (Bauwens 2015; Hardt

2010). The rapid and seemingly unstoppable spread of file-sharing websites and software shows the TPC's intention, while the TRO's response to this attempt to create a New Commons has been to punitively develop armies of lawyers and police focused on cyber-crime who seek to defend the interests of intellectual property rights by imposing a digital regime of New Enclosure (Wark 2003). Therefore, the name 'Commoners' is included in the title of this class. Where these individuals unite and realise their collective subjectivity as a powerful actor capable of transforming their material circumstances, they can create New Commons where there was previously privatisation and a form of New Enclosure.

### **The state under techno-feudalism**

Techno-feudalism is distinct from capitalism in that alongside the development of a new economy, new classes, and new class subjectivities, a new kind of state has emerged. Again, in a process begun during the neoliberal reassertion of class power (Harvey 2005: 12), the democratic institutions of the political sphere and economy were systematically crushed, leaving an increasingly anti-democratic state with an ever-expanding repressive apparatus. The most iconic recognisable feature of this is the phalanx of riot cops, clad in military armour carrying a shield and military grade firearms, as the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn such important critical attention to in recent years (Wood 2014: 38; Balko 2013: 162). In reaction, conservatives have rallied the absurd claim that there is a 'war on police' (MacDonald 2016: 14). It seems that there is always enough money for the latest weapons technology for riot police, but never enough money to fund basic needs like public healthcare, housing or education. This state and all the institutions within it have become captured by the Techno-Rentier Oligarchs which have come to replace the capitalist class – comparable to how the early merchant-capitalists previously replaced the rule of the aristocracy during the transition from feudalism. We can observe this through many institutions, but a prominent one would be the criminal justice and taxation institutions within the state, which systematically do not and will never punish these oligarchs, no matter how grave their crimes.

One of the hallmarks of capitalist society is the principle that all are equal before the law. The spirit of the bourgeois revolutions against feudalism was that all citizens should have rights, the entitlement to pursue those

rights and have violations adjudicated fairly by the great institutions of the justice system. In 2016, one of the most important stories of the last generation broke when the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists released to the public what they called the Panama Papers (Foroohar 2016), followed by the Paradise Papers (Lynch 2017). Both revealed in morbid, painstaking detail the corruption, theft, tax evasion and sheer class arrogance of oligarchs from almost every country on earth. Tens of trillions of dollars had been hidden away in tax havens like Panama, and a network of similar centres catering solely to this class of individuals. This system of organised theft had been set-up to allow their class to do this for over 80 years. Having committed such crimes on such a such a global scale and having them revealed to so many people – including plenty of judges and lawyers – one could reasonably assume that somebody should have faced their day in court and been punished. At the time of writing, half a decade since these leaks were revealed, not a single oligarch in the Panama or Paradise Papers leaks has been to prison, paid a fine or faced criminal charges of any kind.<sup>3</sup> The tax havens are still open. The trillions in stolen funds remain safely hidden from commoners. It is rarely discussed in the mass media or any public setting. It is almost as if the leaks never happened. This demonstrates that no matter the scale of theft or other injustice the TRO commit, the system remains structured in favour of these oligarchs.

The emergence of techno-feudalism is a – if not *the* – key reason that mass protest has ceased to function as a mechanism through which the people can exercise their collective democratic will by means of extracting progressive redistributive reforms from elites via the state to the economy. Throughout the course of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, the labour movement, the socialist movement, the women’s movement, the environmental movement, and the anti-racism movement, to name a few, each witnessed millions of participants join their struggles. They produced significant, material political change by applying disruptive pressure to elites and forcing them to yield to popular demands. Some of them even overthrew a state and established socialism. To illustrate the impact of the labour and socialist movements, for instance, of the ten demands listed in the Communist Manifesto (Marx & Engels 2012[1848]: 73), perhaps half

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<sup>3</sup> The Prime Minister of Iceland faced popular pressure and had to resign after protestors objected to his family’s use of a tax-dodging scheme unveiled by the Panama Papers. To date, as far as is known, nobody involved has been charged with any crime.

are now taken for granted as the basis of a just social contract in social democratic societies across the OECD. These include a heavy progressive income tax, establishment of a central bank, centralisation of the means of transport and communication in the hands of the state, abolition of child labour, and universal public education. During the neoliberal period of 1973-2008, these began to be reclaimed by the capitalist class through one wave of privatisation after another, demonstrating the conditional and contingent nature of all reforms under capitalism. In the past 10-15 years, many social movements have developed and mobilised on a similar scale. Yet few-to-none have had a decisive impact. The mobilisations to stop the Iraq War in 2003 were among the largest in history, and yet the American invasion of that country went ahead as planned. A highly vibrant and militant third wave feminist movement has mobilised on a very significant scale, and yet deep-rooted structural inequality remains, as reflected by the gender-wage gap. As one of Occupy Wall Street's founders put it, 'protest isn't working anymore' (White 2016: 10).

### **The Coronavirus crash, Malthusianism and exterminism**

The ongoing Coronavirus crash has regularly been observed as demonstrating something significant about the nature of neoliberal capitalism: namely, that it appears unable to contain its economic crash as it did during the previous economic crises of the 1970s-2008. This time something is different. The governments of most countries around the world have prioritised public health above the economy, adopted a staged lockdown policy and promoted social distancing to prevent the pandemic from spreading. The President and Federal Government of the United States, however, have adopted a policy of prioritising the economy over public health, as evidenced by their rapid drive to reopen all sectors as quickly as possible – effectively leaving individuals on their own if they catch the disease (AFP quoting Trump 2020). At the time of writing, over 12 million Americans have caught the virus and over 250,000 Americans have been killed by it. The Government's commitment to keeping the economy open no matter the cost to public health reflects a deeper dynamic – one that reveals the oligarchy's contempt for the underclass which it regards as a surplus class no longer needed for the reproduction of society (Harari 2016: 349).

Elites and the state neglecting a class of people who have become surplus to the productive requirements of a particular form of class society is not new. In his legendary study on the living conditions of the industrial working class in English cities, Friedrich Engels (1845: 95) gave it the name 'social murder'. One of the most visible features at the ideological heart of techno-feudalism is its elite contempt for the 'surplus class' (see Harari 2016: 349), rendered neither necessary nor a threat by automation of labour and the precariousness of work. It could be argued, then, that societies such as the US are being psychologically prepared for a near future in which Malthusian concerns about overpopulation and a scarcity of resources become mainstream features of political debate. Instead of weather or not to build a wall along the Mexican border, perhaps US elections in the near future will feature debates about whether existing military technologies such as combat drones can be deployed domestically by agencies such as ICE and municipal police departments in order to reduce the surplus population. When combined with far-right conservative ideas about people in the surplus class – especially those in the Global South – being expendable, we might call this eco-fascism or to use Naomi Klein's (2019: 38) term 'climate barbarism'.

As Frase (2016: 71) has pointed out, economic elites have grave concerns about the coming era of wars for control of resources such as food, water and oil, which will become scarcer should existing ecological projections continue to hold true (Turner 2014). For instance, the most recent IPCC report on climate change has estimated that humanity has until 2030 to radically reduce carbon emissions and limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above temperatures since the industrial revolution or face unpredictable effects of runaway climate change (Klein 2019: 5). Calls for a reduction in the global population, often couched in humanitarian-interventionist and environmentalist terms, have only grown louder since Paul Ehrlich released his seminal book *The Population Bomb* in 1968 – blaming every social problem imaginable on resource scarcity triggered by overpopulation. This forms a potential rationale for what Frase called 'exterminism' (reinterpreting an idea advanced in the final decade of the Cold War by Thompson 1980: 1): the policy of wiping out much of the world's population, either through passive neglect or overt military force as a solution to the scarcity and ecological crises generated by this system (Frase 2016: 71). Frase seems to think the bourgeois have a conscience and will ultimately back away from such barbarity. As we currently rocket towards a warming scenario of 3-6 degrees Celsius above Nineteenth

Century global temperatures, against the best knowledge and expertise on how to stop this process and transition using green technologies already available, these calls for population control and eco-barbarism only seem likely to grow only louder.

Even more extraordinary, and indicative of a structural transformation as a result of the social murder that the coronavirus is visiting upon society, is the acquiescence with which this ongoing trend is accepted as normal. In the US, the life expectancy gap between people in the underclass and the oligarchs is 20 years and currently projected to increase indefinitely with no point of equalisation on the horizon (Dwyer-Lindgren *et al.* 2017). This speaks to the naturalisation of class inequality, a return to the notion in pre-modernity that everything in existence is in its 'natural' place. These statistics do not get produced in a cultural vacuum. They are the consequence of consciously planned economic policy over a period of decades which treats the growing underclass as an externality. In previous eras – during the expansionist and social democratic phases of capitalism – when the state was more responsive to popular demands, social movements (especially the labour movement) would have mobilised and extracted reforms to reduce the severity of issues such as these. The critical theorist Han (2015) suggests that over the neoliberal period, we have lost the capacity for such collective and political action, supplanted by the selfish neoliberal subject which directs frustration inwardly. It is perhaps one of the unintended long-term consequences of neoliberal governmentality that now there is little public discussion or protest of the innumerable dead due to Engels' notion of social murder (1845: 95). It is treated as an unfortunate inevitability to which there is simply no alternative.

### **Limitations**

The literary license taken to use the term techno-feudalism itself could be interpreted as problematic. Some might condemn its ahistoricism and insist on the literal definition of feudalism as singularly defined as the period between the Fifth and Fifteenth Centuries. Other analysts would deny that there is anything new about precarious labour conditions and would argue that work has always been precarious under capitalism, thus negating the term TPC and reiterating the orthodox terminology. Others still might insist that the mode of political economy described is just plain

old capitalism, and that these changes amount to new symptoms rather than a whole new disease. However, since the overwhelming majority (Tomo 2020 estimates it at 90 percent) of all the value in the economy today is characterised by intangible capital and takes on no material form, it makes little sense to say that this form of class society would be considered interchangeable with that recognisable to economists of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries at the height of industrial capitalism's global proliferation, in which 100 percent of it had a material basis. Although the next system will be built out of the ashes of the old, and thus necessarily will feature relics and common attributes of some kind, just as capitalism never fully liquidated prominent features of feudal society from the landlord, to rent, to the church, at some point it will become necessary to draw a figurative line in the sand and say that the prevailing form and relations of production are distinct enough to be described and analysed on their own terms.

## Conclusion

Neoliberal capitalism is in a long hegemonic crisis in the core of the world-system and some new form of political economy is going to replace it sooner or later – just like the social democratic model of capitalism and the *laissez-faire* model which came before it, just as feudalism and slave-based empires transitioned through their final days too. Through the well-organised collective action of human beings, each system had a beginning and it is through the well-organised collective action of human beings that each had an end. It is up to us, our collective will and ambition as societies to determine the contours of the next system that will replace our present form of class society.

To organisers and activists who would seek to challenge the TRO and their emergent system of control, two questions bear sustained reflection as a starting point before contemplating engaging in collective action. Firstly, how can you rally popular and fragmented social forces to your cause by getting people to rupture with individualistic, precarious, neoliberal subjectivity? In turn, how can you foster the adoption of new forms of class subjectivity particular to the conditions of post-industrial societies such as the US, thereby allowing the TPC to begin realising its collective agency and potential political power? Secondly, how can the TRO's monopolisation of technology via the platform, its use for social control

and to create New Enclosures become popularly understood as a central injustice connected to other injustices in our society? In turn, how can this help propagate the notion that, through sustained mobilisation and the use of state power, technology can be made to serve the TPC as a tool for the democratisation of resources and the creation of New Commons? Although there are powerful structures arrayed against movements for a more democratic society as we emerge from the ruins of neoliberalism, the future is never predetermined.

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