McKenzie
Wark

It was the best of times; it was the end of times. It was the age of information; and it was the age of too much information. It was the epoch of ideology critique; and it was the epoch of acting the same way regardless. It was the season of clarity; it was the season of magic thinking. It was the fall of hope; it was the hottest summer on record. We had everything before us; we had no future before us. Many humble peoples and innumerable species were fast ascending to heaven; a few of many means retired below ground to their private bunkers. This is the tale of one city, one megalopolis that stretched out across the whole planet, adorning it and shrouding it in a third nature.

From the point of view of its beneficiaries, the order of the times seemed settled forever. The communists, the socialists, even the Keynesians had all been put in their place. Out in the ghettos of the urban globe, there were those who still clung to some other creed than the one true faith of the free market. They were hunted like dogs with death from the air, or silently rendered and tortured in places unknown. Everyone else was under such thorough surveillance that, if they had any sense, they wrote even their shopping lists discreetly.

The long counter-revolution had borne perfect fruit. The fruit was getting expensive, though. What was once charmingly thought of as *nature* did not quite cycle through its familiar seasons. It was hard to say whether the weather was weird, as nobody was quite sure any more what normal weather felt like. The bees were dying like flies; the flies were as busy as bees.

Some dared say things were also going less than swimmingly in *second nature*—that built environment of concrete and steel, with all its mines and factories and roads and endless shanty towns and occasional suburbs with backyard pools. This second nature was running out of planet to mine, ocean to trawl and sky into which to dump its waste particulates. The global urban sprawl really did feel like an alienated world of *dead labor* made concrete.

Things were not much better for *living labor*. With rural life collapsing in the underdeveloped world, many swarmed the borders of the overdeveloped world, where the natives languished in an austerity without rhyme or reason but with jingles and jingoism. For most this was the almanac of days: The season without steady work, followed by the season without money to buy stuff owing to the lack of steady work, followed by the season without steady work because nobody had much money to buy stuff owing to the lack of steady work, followed by the eternal season of debt, owing to those who owned it all.

Such was the lay of the land that was that artificial world of second nature. But salvation was at hand. We were all in the gutter, but some of us were looking at the clouds! This was the promising land of *third nature*. It had gone by many names, and these had to change like fashion as each had not quite lived up to its promise. And yet like the smileyface of some off-brand Cheshire cat, the promise itself remained. There had been the *information super highway*, there had been *cyberspace*, there had been *web 2.0*, there had been *supply chain management*, there had been interactivity, there had been the *flexible workplace*, there had been *user-generated content*, there had been *outsourcing* and *crowdsourcing*, there had been *topsight* and *total information awareness*. Each were temporary fixes, of both an actual and an ideological nature, and part of a larger historical process of solving old problems by creating new ones.

Looking back, it appeared that the first problem was that life and labor within nature was nasty, brutish and short. So collective human labor built a *second nature* to free our species-being from necessity. Ah, but second nature came with its own novel forms of exploitation and alienation. Some put this down to capitalism, but after they were put down for this heresy, its problems remained. Exploitation and alienation went on, to which was added depression, as there was no end in sight, just an enervated cycle of addictive and consumptive habit.

Just as second nature freed our species-being from necessity, so too *third nature* would free us all once again from the new necessities of second nature. Second nature had been mostly a matter of concrete and steel, a slender network of big things, of factories and ports, railways and housing blocks. The new third nature would be made of fiber optic cable and silicon semiconductors, a dense network of little things, of phones and laptops. It was the best of times. We had never had it so good. And by "we," I mean anyone with vast amounts of wealth and power.

Third nature enabled power to contain much of the world in nets of surveillance and control. Third nature enabled wealth to reproduce itself as wealth without troubling to pass much through the messy business of second nature, where things have to actually be made and sold. Third nature enabled the power and wealth of a new kind of ruling class to abstract themselves quite thoroughly from potential bottlenecks or critical sites at which popular revolt might strike or blockade or riot where such actions would have consequences.

Once upon a time: to rule meant to own the land, and sometimes even the people who had to work it as if they were a natural part of it, like the pastures and the streams.

Twice upon a time: to rule meant to own the means of production, the factories and mills. The people were now "free," meaning free to sell their labor. That labor built a vast and imposing second nature over and against the first.

Thrice upon a time: to rule meant to own, not the land, or even the factories, but the *information* about the land and the factories, and everything else. While they were working and even when they were not working, indeed even in their sleep, the people made information

which no more belonged to them than the things they made in the factories, or the ground beneath then.

It was as simple as one, two, three: first the people had their land taken from them, then the things they made by their labors, and then the information about their places, their labors and even themselves. Even the dreams of their collective unconscious were copyrighted; even the grain that stood in the fields was patented. The *vector* within which any information could be moved or stored, and hence any value to be extracted from that information, became the property of a new ruling class—*the vectoralist class.*

It did not have to turn out this way. Just as the form and habits of second nature reflect the series of victories won and defeats endured by popular forces, so too with third nature. Yes, third nature ended up making labor precarious, social life commodified and put thoughts and feelings under surveillance. That's the result not of some ineffable essence of technology so much as the result of a series of defeats in the struggle to build a different kind of third nature, one that could be the commons of the world. To attribute this defeat to some essence of the thing itself is to mystify the history of struggle that shaped first second nature and then, as an overlapping but mostly subsequent history, third nature.

Besides, it is not as if it is any more possible to refuse to live in third nature as it is in second nature. Our species-being might be fairly open-ended. We're creatures who make ourselves as we make our home. We're like a strange species of coral that not only builds its shell but continually modifies its design at the same time. There's no going back to nature. What we know of nature is a sort of second- and third-order product of the other natures our collective labor builds in and against it.

There was an unintended consequence to third nature. On the one hand, it smothered the whole earth in its layers of cling-wrap, in which all of the things and all of the people of the planet are translated into data which assesses them mostly as just targets and opportunities for investment or neutralization. On the other hand, it can't help generating, at the same time, a more or less accurate map of the consequences of its own actions. It could not but enter into its calculations that the mines were tapped out, the soil eroding, the climate altering, the seas rising, the people – angry, restless, depressed or at best – bored. Third nature entered a terminal phase in which it fed on the very entropic noise that it was itself producing.

Even for those for whom it was the best of times, it was yet the worst of times. A whole planet lay before it. *To the vector the spoils.* There was almost nothing that was not for sale. There was almost nobody not cowed into obedience by a future written only in the language of debt. And yet the vectoralist class was a ruling class presiding over the destruction of the very nature that was the real underwriter of the whole enterprise. It was a ruling class whose very means of power over nature and second nature would destroy them – and it knew it. For all their glory and power, nothing could legitimate the spiral of destruction over which they presided. They paid for their multiple contemporary art filled homes with the loss of all dignity.

It was a civilization that knew it was mortal. Guy Debord: "It has become ungovernable, this wasteland, where new sufferings are disguised with the name of former pleasures; and where the people are so afraid. They go round in the night and are consumed by fire. They wake up startled, and, fumbling, search for life. Rumor has it that those who were expropriating it have, to crown it all, mislaid it. Here is a civilization which is on fire, capsizing and sinking completely. Ah! Fine torpedoing!" [1]

It was time to start building another civilization, then. It was time that those who work the land, those who work the machines, and those who work the information, looked together for some common ground and some common sense about how their needs, interests and destinies might align, outside of those that the ruling classes and their publicists might prescribe. Since their last source of profit and interest is the very chaos they themselves create, then perhaps they have outlived their usefulness – as every ruling class does. Rulers come and go, but the tasks of making and caring in the world go on and on no matter how they change. It is either a new way of life, a new mode of production, or the end of times.

To be able to build a new world, it helps to know what materials are to hand. It might help to know something about the history of third nature, and the structure of it. It might help to know what kinds of information it relies on for control, and what kinds of information are lacking. It might also help to know what it is about the collective labors of our species-being that escapes from the ruling concept of what has value.

The hardest part is to understand the genuine novelty of the era. Those who have an interest in preserving it argue that the current forms of exploitation are marvelous novelties which nevertheless conform to some eternal essence of our species. We were destined since the Ice Age, apparently, to trade stocks on the internet.

On the other hand, those who would claim to be its destroyers seem to cling to old diagnoses. They want to insist that this thing is still capital*ism* as it was back in the steam age, that its essence is eternal even if its appearances change. Just as third nature rebrands new compulsions as old pleasures, so too a certain strain of marxocological quotation-grubbing insists that new phenomena are the age old ills diagnosed by Marx the Master. The marxocologicalists really need this to still be exactly the same old kind of capitalism as it is the only one they seem to have any ideas about overthrowing.

Perhaps the trick then is to find a method of starting with the old language with its given oppositions and displacing it a bit, to get out of the old habits of thought. For example, the habitual response that if you claim there is something really quite novel about the current order you must automatically be its apologist. But perhaps it is not enough to deconstruct old oppositions with a discomforting third term. Hence the method of this text is to start with a familiar opposition, turn it on its side, as it were, and produce a second one, resulting in a quartet of terms.

For instance, let's start with the old binary of nature and second nature, where nature is something harmonious and whole from which

the application of technology by human labor to produce a second nature is in some sense the fall. For starters, let's reverse the terms. Let's try thinking it this way: what if second nature in a sense comes "first," and what we think nature is and what we take it to be is a sort of after-effect of the very act of transforming it. Thus, it appears as a lost whole precisely as the mirror image of the second nature into which it was wrought.

But let's put that idea in play again as well. What if we think about not just nature and second nature, but double those terms again? Hence the distinction between a second nature and a third. What if we treat the technology that applies energy and labor to matter as different than that which applies energy and labor to information? It is still a kind of materiality we're dealing with here – there's nothing "immaterial" about it. But third nature might have some distinctive properties. While it still costs a lot of energy to store and transmit and process information, it nevertheless enables the production of a systematic and abstract map of the entirety of the world.

But this then begs the question of a fourth term. Second nature produces an image of nature as an after-image, as residue. Perhaps third nature can anticipate an image of nature as a project. Is it possible to map what the world could become other than a blue ruin in the graveyard of space? And so further analysis would best proceed in fours, and four times over, through the grids of history and structure; value and need.

There are some who think Marx's *Capital* can be read as a great nineteenth century literary novel. In that spirit, but offering a far lesser genre, this short text you have just read is best treated as pulp science fiction.[2] Let's pretend it was written some time in the near future by a bot that fed on certain texts current in the early twenty-first century (and read some English lit in its down-time). In accordance with the rules of a certain trashy sci-fi form, it is best read by suspending disbelief. Given that the world itself is now quite unbelievable, perhaps the best way to read about it is to read as fiction such an account of its unreality. Only thus might one get at the truth of it.

1
Guy Debord, **In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni**, translated by Lucy Forsyth, Pelagian Press, London, 1991, p. 74

2
See the science fiction story in Henri Lefebvre, **Introduction to Modernity**, Verso Books, London, 2006.