

A Marxist heresy?

Accelerationism and its discontents

David Cunningham

In his study of the semantics of historical time, Reinhart Koselleck proposes that ‘two specific determinants’ characterize modernity’s ‘new experience of transition: the expected otherness of the future and, associated with it, the alteration in the rhythm of temporal experience: *acceleration*, by means of which one’s own time is distinguished from what went before’. If the concept of acceleration is thereby central to the emergence of a qualitatively different modern or new time (*Neuzeit*) around the latter half of the eighteenth century, it is also at this ‘epochal threshold’ that history itself, in the collective singular, comes to be first perceived as ‘in motion’ – a perception that Koselleck locates in a divergence between the ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’. There would thus seem to be good reason to argue, as Hartmut Rosa does in his recent book, *Social Acceleration*, subtitled *A New Theory of Modernity*, that acceleration just is the fundamental temporal experience of modernity as a whole: ‘the decisive and categorially new foundational experience of history, and the [basis of the] rapid establishment of the concept of *modernity*’ itself. Such a ‘transformation of the experience of history lies at the root’, as Rosa notes, ‘of the reconceptualization of the role and status of the political in modernity’, according new temporal meanings to such pivotal terms as ‘revolution’, ‘utopia’, ‘progress’ or ‘conservatism’.¹

It is all the more striking, therefore, that recent accounts of capitalist modernity have tended to stress in acceleration’s ‘alteration in the rhythm of temporal experience’ not, in fact, so much the opening to the alterity of the future, but what Paul Virilio – the curmudgeonly godfather of all such accounts – describes as a ‘futurism of the instant that has no future’, and of an increasing ‘shrinkage to the present’.² Thus, for Jonathan Crary, to take another recent example, if

‘the accelerations of an always globalizing capitalism’ produce what Marx identified in the *Grundrisse* as that ‘constant continuity’ essential to the temporalities of circulation at a world scale – particularly via an intersection of the increasing ‘velocity at which new products emerge’ with the pace of technological development and of its penetration into everyday life – this is generative, today, of what appears as ‘a time without time’, an ‘ever more congealed and futureless present’.³ Cut loose from historical narrative, the felt experience of the present is one of an *ongoing* state of transition, which tends to present itself less as a sense of possibility of the truly new than as a paradoxically frenzied sense of *repetition*, with a consequent depoliticization of the ‘dynamic and historical force’ accorded by earlier political modernisms to time itself. Acceleration become the mark not of ‘progress’ but of the paradoxical temporality of a ‘frenetic standstill’.⁴

This is ‘one familiar story’, as Benjamin Noys puts it. But there is ‘another, stranger’ one that has re-emerged over the last few years: ‘of those who think we haven’t gone fast enough’, who think that the way out of the ‘frenetic standstill’ of acceleration’s ‘futureless present’ is to accelerate through and beyond such (capitalist) acceleration itself. First named by Noys himself in a critical vein, in his 2010 book *The Persistence of the Negative*, where it appears as a subset of the more pervasive ‘affirmationism’ of contemporary continental theory, the idea of an *accelerationism* has subsequently been valorized as the basis for a re-politicization of leftist thought today.⁵ If contemporary politics is beset by a ‘paralysis of the political imaginary’, in which ‘the future has been cancelled’, write Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek in their 2013 *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, the ‘political left’ must disinter what they call its ‘suppressed accelerationist tendency’. And if

confirmation were needed that an accelerationist turn will thus have to be added to the sequence of all those other (dismally accelerating) recent 'turns' in contemporary theory, the appearance of Noys's own extensive critical treatment in his *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*, along with the 500-plus-page *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, should suffice to allay any doubts.*

The story so far

Accelerationism might only have been recently named, but both books are concerned to uncover the 'suppressed accelerationist tendency' across a much longer history. For Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, the editors of the *Accelerationist Reader*, this is mainly a question of providing a kind of intellectual prehistory for Williams and Srnicek's *Manifesto*, as well as providing a selection of recent texts presented as the work of fellow travellers, including ones by Tiziana Terranova, Benedict Singleton and Luciana Parisi, along with Ray Brassier and Reza Negrastani. (The kinship with speculative realism is especially important to Mackay and Avanessian; and, indeed, Srnicek was one of the editors of the 2011 collection *The Speculative Turn*.) The *Reader* also includes two direct responses to the 2013 *Manifesto* – sympathetic, if not uncritical – by Patricia Reed and Antonio Negri (one source of the 'lively international debate', as Mackay and Avanessian term it, to which the *Manifesto* has given rise). Notably not included is anything by accelerationism's principal antagonist, Noys, although this absence is compensated for by the more or less simultaneous appearance of the excellent *Malign Velocities*, which, while only directly engaging Williams and Srnicek's appropriation of his originally critical term in its conclusion, can also be read as offering a certain prehistory of its own.

Conforming to its technophilic and 'posthuman' orientation, Mackay and Avanessian's *Reader* sets out its 'construction of a genealogy' by beginning with Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' and Samuel Butler's 1872 *Erewhon*, before charting a course through Thorstein Veblen's 1904 'The Machine Process' to Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectics of Sex*. By comparison, Noys places more weight on those 'elements of the avant-garde' in the early twentieth century for whom 'the vanguard desire for the future' was broadly congruent with 'a time of acceleration' (*MV*, 27), although

he, too, places particular emphasis on an enthusiasm for 'the machine' as the central organizing trope in this respect. The first chapter of *Malign Velocities* is thus focused on Futurism before moving on to what Noys terms the 'communist accelerationism' of the Bolshevik embrace of a 'proletarian Taylorism', exemplified artistically in the technical utopianism of the poet Aleksei Gastev.

Where these different genealogical tracks meet is in 1970s' France, and in particular in the work of Deleuze and Guattari and Jean-François Lyotard. Politically, such writings are to be understood, Noys plausibly argues, as responses to 'the new libertarian mood induced by May '68', each of which came to claim that, as against 'traditional' socialist aspirations to rational state-led planning, 'desire' could be liberated not by regulating or controlling but only by radicalizing the 'deterritorializing' forces of capitalism itself in such a way as to ultimately 'exacerbate [it] to the point of collapse'.⁶ If capitalism is going to 'perish', as Lyotard asserts in 1972, it will not do so of 'bad conscience', but only 'through excess, because its energetics continually displace its limits': 'Destruction can only come from an even more liquid liquidation' (*AR*, 183, 203). Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* may have provided much of the vocabulary for such a position, but its most extreme (and bracingly 'posthuman') manifestation comes in Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1974), with its notorious account of nineteenth-century proletarian experience as a form of *jouissance* in which the worker 'enjoyed the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was' of industrial labour and the anonymity of the metropolis as an emancipation from the organic body and from the claustrophobia of village life (*AR*, 212–13).

If this constitutes the first wave of accelerationism 'proper', accelerationism mark 2 is to be found in the later re-embrace of these writings in the somewhat altered context of the UK during the early 1990s in the work of Nick Land and the CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit).⁷ While Deleuze and Lyotard wrote against the backdrop of May '68, Land and his compatriots, drawing on cyberpunk and rave culture, took up the accelerationist call in a context of an increasingly triumphant neoliberalism credo of 'no alternative'. Noys terms the result a 'Deleuzian Thatcherism', and certainly the CCRU's arguments,

* Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*, Zero, Alresford, 2014. 117 + xii pp., £9.99 pb., 978 1 78279 300 7; Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, eds, *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, Urbanomic and Merve Verlag, Falmouth and Berlin, 2014. 536 pp., £14.99 pb., 978 0 95752 955 7. *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* is reprinted in the *Reader*. Page references are given in the main text as *AR* and *MV*, respectively.

while still claiming that the post-humanist embrace of capitalist deterritorialization would ultimately generate ‘a cybernetic offensive capitalism could no longer control’, also resonate fairly obviously with (in Foucault’s phrase) a contemporaneous ‘state phobia’ of the New Right.⁸ To the degree that this remains a ‘left-wing’ politics in any meaningful sense, it is one for which it is the very failure of the ‘Left’ itself to ‘go all the way to capitalism (and not all the way to the left)’ that constitutes the main obstacle to some inhuman liberation (*MV*, x, 56). Land’s later writings subsequently jettison the horizon of a non-capitalist future altogether, favouring instead a full-on (and apparently endless) embrace of ‘the time-structure of capital accumulation’, whose ‘explosive’ momentum should be affirmed against any ‘compensatory action’ or ‘instance of intermediate individuation – most obviously, the state’ (*AR*, 511–20).

As the culmination of a certain strain of political modernism this is not uninteresting, since, while its source is rendered somewhat obscure in much of Land’s own work, there is general agreement in both Noys and Mackay & Avanesian that accelerationism has its primary origins in Marx – the ‘paradigmatic accelerationist thinker’, as Williams and Srnicek call him (adding ‘along with Land’, in what must be one of the most terrifyingly implausible couplings ever suggested). If, then, as Noys argues in *The Persistence of the Negative*, the works of Deleuze and Guattari and Lyotard are self-consciously ‘heretical’, they are nonetheless still a ‘Marxist heresy’, albeit one that evokes a distinctively Nietzschean ‘Marx of force and destruction’, a Marx who – freed from ‘negativity and guilt’ – is ‘fascinated’ by ‘capitalist *perversion*, the subversion of codes, religions, decency, trades, education, cuisine, speech’, in Lyotard’s words (*AR*, 182).

Contemporary accelerationism seeks to reconfigure this schema while claiming a continued fidelity to the Marxist tradition. However, if, broadly speaking, 1970s’ accelerationism finds its central dynamic in the ‘all that is solid melts into air’ of Marx and Engels’s 1848 *Manifesto*, for the new accelerationism it is the 1859 Preface and its argument concerning that ‘stage of development’ at which ‘the existing relations of production’ become ‘fetters’ holding back ‘the material productive forces’. At the same time, while maintaining Land’s technological enthusiasms, and the appeal to cybernetics in particular, this is combined with what Mackay and Avanesian describe as a ‘call for Enlightenment values and an apparently imperious rationalism’ at odds with the more vitalist proclivities of its predecessors (*AR*, 23).

Contemporary accelerationism is, then, in the difficult position of trying to resuscitate something of the rhetorical energy of earlier accelerationisms while simultaneously redirecting it towards a rather different if equally paradigmatic Marx: the Enlightenment Marx over the pervert. As a Marxist heresy, however, this is notably less heretical, and, once stripped of the affective charge of a poetics of onward rush, risks boiling down to not much more than a generalized political modernism in search of some future to call its own. In this way it is able, as Noys notes in a recent paper, both to proclaim its own (ceaseless) novelty as the latest thing on the market *and* suggest that it reveals ‘the truth that permeates the thinking of modernity or is even synonymous with modernity’ as a whole, in so far as it names, for its adherents, the affirmation of the new as such.⁹ (One must still be *absolutely* modern.) Yet simple antipathy to nostalgia – which might, after all, embrace a dizzying array of different theoretical positions – is far from being a political strategy or programme. (‘Everyone is an accelerationist’ remarks Mark Fisher in the *Reader*; *AR*, 340.) There is, then, a tendency towards a loss of steam, leaving behind a considerably scaled-down demand to keep facing forwards, rather than glancing back in the rear-view mirror, to which very few on the left could really object (*AR*, 5). Indeed, in this respect it reiterates what has become a thoroughly uncontroversial understanding of the crisis of the Left as a crisis in historical temporality more generally, of which the loss of a historical future appears as the main source of a political paralysis in the present. Appropriately abstracted, the task becomes simply ‘the recovery of the future as such’ (*AR*, 351).

Discourses of modernity

Symptomatically, what might be most interesting about accelerationism, particularly now, would be less whatever explicit political strategies it articulates, underelaborated and generally underwhelming as these are, than what it tells us about the current philosophical–political discourses of modernity more generally. As Rosa rightly notes in *Social Acceleration*, from the late eighteenth century onwards it is the ‘formulation of modern *philosophies of history*’ that become ‘constitutively tied to the idea of *political movement*’. The concept of ‘progress’ – as what Koselleck calls the ‘first genuinely historical category of time’ – constitutes, initially at least, ‘the key concept for this expectation of goal-directed historical development’.¹⁰ Yet, as the fate of such a concept suggests, what Koselleck defines as ‘the new experience of

transition' also intersects, politically, with a more profound tension between what we might call a *longue durée* of historical transition – classically, that between different modes of production – and, on the other hand, what Crary calls 'ongoing transition', in the form of an apparent acceleration of sheer temporal change internal to the 'constant revolutionizing' of the political economy of capitalist modernity itself. (This is also of course a problem of the relation between immanence and transcendence inherent to the concept of transition as such.) If, politically, this would thus frame the problem of how far it is possible to know whether 'social acceleration' is furthering some struggle to go beyond capitalism, or simply furthering the expansion of capitalism itself, it also reflects a problem, philosophically, of how to understand the relationship between the *temporal* concept of acceleration and the concept of *history* on which any notion of 'transition' depends.

In a passage from *Anti-Oedipus* much quoted in both these books, Deleuze and Guattari write:

[W]hich is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World Countries to do ...? Or might it go in the opposite direction? To go further still, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialisation? ... Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to 'accelerate [or hasten] the process', as Nietzsche put it. (AR, 162)

Although this Nietzschean account of the 'revolutionary path' must, in some sense, suppose a philosophy of history – since its articulation depends, at some level, on a conception of the qualitative *historical* otherness of the future to which such a 'path' might be directed – there is also, characteristically, a tension here between a historically specifically dynamic of the new, associated in this case with the distinctive 'deterritorializing' forms of capitalism, and Deleuze's tendency towards a more general ontologization of time *itself* as sheer movement, flow or change, which, as I would not be the first to note, effectively denies any distinctiveness of modernity as a temporalization of history in favour of a sense of time simply *as* the generalized New.¹¹

Philosophically, this promotes the primacy of time as a 'dynamic force in its own right' (to borrow some words from Koselleck), which is effectively opposed



to a 'history' reduced to the terrain of the empirical. (In his contribution to the *Reader*, 'Prometheanism and its Critics', Ray Brassier suggests that to 'orient oneself towards the future' comes down to a 'very simple question: What shall we do with time?' But, leaving aside the question of who this 'we', the collective Prometheus, exactly is, this is surely a question of *historical* time; AR, 469.) Moreover, politically, it generates a problem that might perhaps be best elucidated through a passage from the *Grundrisse*:

This tendency – which capital possesses, but which at the same time, since capital is a limited form of production, contradicts it and hence *drives it towards* dissolution – distinguishes capital from all earlier modes of production, and at the same time contains this element, that *capital is posited as a mere point of transition*.¹²

In part, to understand capital as itself 'a mere point of transition' is simply to remark, for Marx, capitalism's own historicity, and hence (however long-lasting) its status as a necessarily transitory social form. But this also intersects with that which 'distinguishes capital from all earlier modes of production': that is, its own 'revolutionary' temporality (the constant revolutionizing of production) evoked in the 1848 *Manifesto*. What, then, mediates between these two senses of capitalism as a time of transition is precisely Marx's proposition that it is *only* from the standpoint of a projected non-capitalist future that this temporality of capitalism can also be understood as historically progressive. Without this horizon of expectation, what results is simply the affirmation of a *metaphysics* of forces and tendencies that celebrates effects of 'decoding and deterritorializing' unmoored from any historical narrative within

which they might be rendered *socially* meaningful in ‘revolutionary’ terms. One logical, if extreme, consequence of this can be seen in what we might call Gilles Lipovetsky’s *ultra*-accelerationist text, ‘The Power of Repetition’, written in 1976, which resolves in an argument that ‘the supposed “contradictions” of capitalism’ are themselves precisely a question not so much of politics or history, but simply of ‘configurations of *time*’ (AR, 17). This is a Manichean conception that positions power, and ultimately the social itself, as secondary mechanisms of oppressive solidity opposed to the quasi-ontological forces of liquification *tout court*. Accordingly, what Lipovetsky terms ‘the meaning of *permanent revolution*’ (AR, 233) straightforwardly pits, in the words of Mackay and Avanesian, ‘capital’s essentially destabilizing temporal looping of the present through the future against *all* stabilising reinstantiations in the present’ (AR, 17; emphasis added).

What results, however, is a dehistoricization and reduction of revolution – as opposed to what, in the 1859 Preface, Marx identifies as an ‘era of *social revolution*’ – to an apparently endless ‘energetics’ of temporal dynamism (to borrow a term from Lyotard’s own accelerationist period) identified with the modern at its most abstract; what Adorno termed the ‘new as an invariant’ or the endless *desire* for the new. As such, in its ‘classical’ accelerationist variants at least, permanent revolution does little more than mimic that temporality of commodity production in which the new appears as the repetition *of* the ever-same. Ironically, this is the precise terrain of Cray’s or Rosa’s ‘futureless present’.¹³ In other words, the political modernism of the *Communist Manifesto*’s affirmation of the revolutionary temporality of capitalism needs to be read rather more closely alongside *Capital*’s later analysis of the commodity.

Problems of transition

If the current felt experience of ‘frenetic standstill’ identified in *Social Acceleration* relates to what Rosa terms a peculiar ‘detemporalization of history’, it might then equally – perhaps better – be understood as a consequence of capital’s distinctive ‘dehistoricalization of time’. It is significant therefore that where the ‘new wave’ of accelerationism seeks precisely to *re-historicize* the ‘libidinal energy’ of a metaphysics of forces, flows and tendencies, it can only do so by effectively undoing its own privileging of the temporality of acceleration itself. Hence, in Williams and Srnicek’s contemporary account of a contradiction between the forces and relations of

production, the key term becomes not ‘acceleration’ but rather *repurposing*:

Accelerationists want to unleash latent productive forces. In this project, the material platform of neoliberalism does not need to be destroyed. It needs to be repurposed towards common ends. The existing infrastructure is not a capitalist stage to be smashed, but a springboard to launch towards post-capitalism. (AR, 355)

There is the basis here of an argument to which one could well be sympathetic – at least in so far as it is posed against various forms of the politics of exodus and refusal. Yet it also makes clear the degree to which a ‘left accelerationism’ *requires* necessary mediation or supplementation by the modernity of what is actually a rather different and more complex Marxian tradition – that of the *appropriation* of the means of production and of the collective powers of social labour, or, in more specific form, what Brecht termed a process of ‘refunctioning’ (*Umfunktionalisierung*). (Noys discusses this at some length in his final chapter.) As such, however, it also entails the need for a far more variegated set of temporalizations of history, which the one-dimensional, flattened image of modernity as a time of acceleration at best obscures and at worst undermines. Williams and Srnicek recognize this – sort of – in declaring that acceleration must also be what they term ‘*navigational*’ (AR, 352). But ‘speeding up’ and ‘steering’ should not be confused – and the attempt to distinguish ‘acceleration’ and ‘speed’ (which they regard as Land’s problematically privileged term) tends therefore to founder, while effectively occluding what would in fact seem to be the central issue: namely, the historical time of transition itself.

The real question would, then, be not simply one concerning some vague availability of ‘the future as such’, but one concerning the consequences of actually existing acceleration for the broader notion that social transformation can be understood as a collective project ‘*to be politically organised in time*’. Indeed, in Rosa’s terms, it is a series of assumptions that follow from this that have ‘become problematic’ in the contemporary: ‘namely, the expectations that the future will be different from the past, [and] that societal development in this future is subject to our *understanding* and is supposed to be *steered* or *shaped* in a democratic political fashion’ – a set of expectations which rest, in turn, upon an assumption that ‘diverse, institutionalised temporal structures of political will-formation, decision-making and decision-implementation’ can, at some level, still be

synchronized with 'the rhythm, tempo, duration and sequence' of other social, technological and economic temporalities. Recent accounts of the acceleration of transaction speeds in High Frequency Trading (HFT) are emblematic here, to the extent that, as Rosa puts it, 'the information and financial markets in which transactions span the world in fractions of a second now hardly ... admit of political, and in part not even legal, *steering*. Individuals and nation-states have grown too slow for the rate of transaction in globalized modernity.'¹⁴

Rosa's own primary concern as regards such lack of synchronization lies with the comparative (and seemingly ineliminable) slowness of representative democratic systems in particular. But, for the Left more broadly, the far wider danger is that, as a result, 'today, "progressives" find themselves mostly [if often unwillingly] on the side of *deceleration* ... because they advocate political control of the economy, [and] processes of democratic negotiation'. As Rosa points out, this is, in many ways, 'a direct inversion of classical modern relations'.¹⁵ It is against this that accelerationism thus seeks to realign the Left with modernity in its most emphatically future-oriented form, so as to restore such 'classical modern relations' between Left and Right. Yet the problem that it faces is fairly immediately apparent in the concluding section of Williams and Srnicek's manifesto – 'Accelerationism pushes towards a future that is *more* modern – an *alternative* modernity that neoliberalism is inherently unable to generate' (AR, 362; my emphases) – and in the unacknowledged tension in this passage between the temporality of 'pushing' forward and the historical positing of an 'alternative' that can only problematically be mediated by the comparative criteria of a modernity that would be *more* modern than capitalism itself.

Somewhere in the background to this, we might see (a little charitably), a registration of some broad problems with the Deleuzian account of capitalist deterritorialization that informed most post-1970s' accelerationism. For while earlier stages of capitalism may have constituted 'the emancipatory dynamic that broke the chains of feudalism' (AR, 4), it would – certainly in the 'advanced' capitalist areas of the world upon which accelerationism is focused – be tricky to maintain that this dynamic is what predominantly defines any 'creative destruction' today, as opposed to the 'negation' of earlier forms of capitalism itself (most obviously, under neoliberalism, in the shift from hegemony of industrial capital to that of financialization). If this partly accounts for

the sense of *inertia* attendant upon neoliberal speed, it also registers the loss of a certain experience of modernity as precisely an experience of *contestation*, between feudalism, on the one hand, and a 'socialist modern', on the other.

This is where the problem of 'transition' reasserts itself, since the implication seems to be that while capitalism is capable of increasing (temporal) speed, it is now unable to deliver (historical) acceleration. Unsurprisingly, Williams and Srnicek throw a reference to High Frequency Trading into their manifesto, accompanied by some rather vague gestures towards the retooling of its technological and mathematical forms away from its deployment in the service of financial capital. (For a more developed version of this, see Parisi's essay on algorithmic automation in the *Reader*.) Equally unsurprisingly, however, as Noys observes in his few pages devoted to recent accelerationisms, they cannot ultimately 'endorse it', leaving them in an 'uncomfortable position in which HFT is taken as a new extreme', but one which in no way opens out onto 'a new conceptual space of opportunity' (MV, 95–6). At best, it becomes emblematic of a contemporary dynamics of capital as a kind of 'idiot savant driven to squander collective cognitive potential' that has to be somehow rescued from capital's grasp (and *then* accelerated?) in order to get history moving again (AR, 45). This explains, in part, the rather mournful tone that frames the *Manifesto*, since while capitalism has, on this account, got faster in a phenomenological sense, it has ceased to accelerate, leaving accelerationism in search of some other source of momentum. The result is, however, ironically enough, that the future can seemingly *only* be retrieved from the past – a 'recovery of lost possible futures' – while the possibility of any *actual* acceleration is effectively projected into some *post-revolutionary* moment in which modernity might begin again (AR, 351).

It is telling, then, that when it comes to fleshing out how 'emancipatory potentials' are to be socially and politically *realized*, the polemical desire to provoke, characteristic of the manifesto form – and the Deleuzian 'aesthetics' of excessive forces straining at the leash that, in this instance, underlies it – gives way to a set of arguments that are both vaguer and a good deal more sober. Indeed, they are downright 'sensible' in places: the steady building of a neo-Gramscian counter-hegemony which would balance a bit of democratic horizontalism with the 'command of the Plan', so knitting together 'a broad assemblage of tactics and organisations' (AR, 359–60). As Patricia Reed observes, in her contribution to the *Reader*, 'the

surging popularity of #Accelerate ... would not have functioned under a more accurately modest label of #redesigninfrastructureinstitutionstechnology-ideologytowardsotherends'. But it's certainly instructive to observe the ways in which 'an approach which in fact, paradoxically, seems more deeply attached to Gramscian "long institutional march" of politics', and whose principal past future to be recovered is one of rational planning, finds itself hitched to 'a model of political thinking bound to speed or the revolutionary event' (AR, 523).

Socialist futures

One way of narrating all this might be in terms of its relation to the historical fate of a certain conception of *socialism*. Or, rather, it is the crisis of socialism that constitutes, above all, the historical crisis – and, indeed, the crisis of history – of the idea of an alternative modernity as *more* modern (that is, an 'alternative modernity' as something more than a variant *within* the socio-economic system of a global capitalist modernity), for which, we might say, the maintenance of a messianic communist idea in much contemporary leftist thought functions as, at best, a kind of compensation for its absence.

If, in Deleuze and Lyotard, the accelerationist idea emerges in the context of a new libertarian politics that saw its struggle, at least in part, as one directed against a Stalinist Communist Party and a 'police-like paternalistic contempt for the masses and the libido' that they saw at work in both welfarism and the Soviet Union (AR, 173), Land and the CCRU ratchet up this opposition to a 'socialistic regulation' at a historical moment that was, in the early 1990s, understood to have *already* effectively accelerated beyond socialism through the contemporary reconfigurations of (neo-liberal) capitalism, and to which there could be no turning back.¹⁶ In Rosa's terms of 'a direct inversion of classical modern relations', it is worth considering someone like Schumpeter, who, while famously celebrating the creativity of capitalism's 'creative destruction' and entrepreneurial spirit, nonetheless argued, in the 1930s, that there was an 'observable tendency' in capitalism towards its *own* destruction, and hence effectively positioned the capitalist on the side of 'deceleration'. He extended this claim in his 1942 *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*:

Can capitalism survive? No, I do not think it can ... its very success undermines the social institutions which protect it, and inevitably creates conditions in which it will not be able to live and which strongly points to socialism as the heir apparent.¹⁷

Despite it beginning with an emphatic denial of any desire to return to either Fordism or 'mid-twentieth-century socialism' – even delivering a little rap on the knuckles to 'the neosocialist regimes of South America's Bolivarian Revolution' for their lack of imagination – it is hard not to sense a 'mood' of nostalgia in contemporary acceleration for a moment when, for example, having put the first man in space and apparently achieved extraordinary rates of industrial growth, the 'alternative modernity' of the Soviet Union could appear as 'more modern' than its capitalist foe (AR, 350). (Space exploration is a particular fascination of the new accelerationism, reflected in Singleton's contribution to the *Reader*, as well as Williams and Srnicek's own emphasis on 'the promissory note of the mid-twentieth-century's space programmes' (AR, 362); a telling coincidence with 'mid-twentieth-century socialism'.)

Notwithstanding Negri's attempt to co-opt an accelerationist politics for a cheerful autonomist 'goodbye' to 'Mr. Socialism',¹⁸ it is significant that, in setting out the terrain of their 'recovery of lost possible futures', Williams and Srnicek's own privileged moments of technological Prometheanism are themselves drawn from a fairly limited set of projects to be recovered from the past futures of 'actually existing socialism': the experiments with cybernetics undertaken by Soviet economists in seeking to rethink the planned economy, and the Chilean Cybersyn project overseen by the British cybernetician Stafford Beer during Allende's time as president. (More unexpectedly, the *Manifesto* also turns to Lenin's argument that '[s]ocialism is inconceivable without large-scale capitalist engineering based on the latest discoveries of modern science. It is inconceivable without planned state organisation'; AR, 353.¹⁹) Such references justify Noys's complaint that there is something of a paradoxical *nostalgia* for a future apparent here, premised on the lack of an actual instantiation of 'acceleration' that might be identified in the historical present. More specifically, they would seem to want to resurrect a time *before* the early 1970s' moment that both Noys and the *Reader* identify with the beginning of accelerationism proper. In this sense, the new accelerationism seems condemned to play out the role, in the old joke, of the urban rambler wandering lost around the countryside. Asking a farmer how they get to where they want to go, the farmer pauses for a moment before replying: 'Well, I wouldn't start from here.'

This leaves the 'new' accelerationism fundamentally 'ungrounded' despite its seemingly self-defining

'realism' about the present. As Noys notes, in his earlier book, the likes of Lyotard and Deleuze felt in some ways compelled by the political situation of the early 1970s to 'find a liberating dynamic in the "unleashing" of capital flows due to the withdrawal of post-war regulative mechanisms in the 1970s', but, in doing so, 'became increasingly detached from any actual social or political agency' that could realize an emancipatory project.²⁰ Contemporary acceleration would obviously like to claw its way back from this, if only to forestall a theoretical handing over, à la Land, of an agency of abstraction and emancipation to capital itself. Yet it has no real agent of its own, and so, despite a passing reference to the 'need to reconstitute various forms of class power', it remains largely unclear exactly *who* – what kind of political subject – is supposed to be carrying out its repurposing of a contemporary technological second nature, and when. The call for a renewed Prometheism is profoundly uncertain as to who its Prometheus is to be.

If accelerationism is a modernism, the suspicion would be that it cannot but be, therefore, a kind of vanguardism also. It is difficult, at any rate, to make much other sense of the *Manifesto's* quixotic suggestion of the necessity for a 'Mont Pelerin Society' of the Left 'tasked with creating a new ideology, economic and social models' (*AR*, 359). While this is explicitly conceived in neo-Gramscian terms as a hegemonic project, its form seems rather more technocratic, as much in the tradition of Saint-Simon as Marx. Not for nothing does *The Accelerationist Reader* include among its forebears Thorstein Veblen, for whom the revolutionary subject was to be found in the collective intelligence of the engineer and the scientist rather than the proletariat.

Politics of abstraction

None of this is to say that there are not a number of things to welcome in the idea of a 'politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology' (*AR*, 354). Many will certainly be sympathetic to contemporary accelerationism's recapitulation of Kracauer's argument that the problem with capitalism is not that it is too rational, but that it is not rational enough. Equally, the concern for questions of abstraction, as an ineliminable dimension of modern societies, is a strength in that it further challenges what has often been, on the left as elsewhere, a tendency to present abstraction as a necessarily tragic form of violence or instrumentality imposed upon the rich diversity of concrete particularity (as

opposed to that which may itself be a source of productivity). It echoes the arguments of a number of other recent thinkers in this respect.²¹ In particular, Brassier's insistence on a necessary coming-to-terms with abstraction as a basis for 'expanding the horizons of socialisation beyond parochial communitarian limits' can surely be fairly unreservedly endorsed, a few Invisible Committee fans notwithstanding, as can his conclusion that what is thus 'required is an understanding of social practices that would allow us to begin distinguishing between oppressive and emancipatory forms of mediation' rather than pursuing the chimera of communal immediacy and the eradication of forms of representation or mediation *per se*.²² Moreover, if one of Brassier's points is that attempts to cast 'every existing instrument, technique or method enveloped by capitalist social forms' as mere 'alibis for reformism' are both politically and philosophically simple-minded it is easy to concur. Indeed this is not so different from, say, David Harvey's sober assertion (in an exchange with Hardt and Negri) that '[c]apitalism, with its hierarchical forms, has made serious progress in feeding the world, albeit unevenly, so one must be careful not to demolish these structures too readily'.²³ But for this to continue to be yoked to a dynamic of acceleration requires that an awful lot of (notably undertheorized) weight be laid upon some idea of the *latent* 'emancipatory potentials' immanent to 'technologies whose functioning is currently subordinated to capital'.

On the one hand, stripped of its overexcited rhetoric, this risks boiling down simply to the banal point that we cannot but start from where we are; a baseline of any Marxist 'realism', which, the odd back-to-nature environmentalist or hard-core Rancièrian aside,²⁴ is hardly a contentious position in itself. The epigraph for Noys's first chapter is Brecht's famous assertion that we cannot start from the 'good old things' but only from 'the bad new ones'. Yet, as Noys rightly observes, if most on the left would accept this (including many who could hardly be described as accelerationists), it does not negate the *political* question of exactly how we are to recognize which of those 'premises now in existence' are indeed part of the 'state of things' to be 'abolished', and which could be the conditions of a possible non-capitalist future. Indeed, by contrast to someone like Land's gleeful embrace of the toxic, this would seem to be a necessary conclusion of contemporary accelerationism's emphasis on *escaping* (or steering away from) the inertial drag of neoliberal speed rather than pushing it still further forward.

On the other hand, and for all that the new accelerationism is largely opposed to vitalism, taken to an extreme, the idea of a 'latent' potential in technology that has been frustrated by its capitalist uses tends to repeat an image of capital as a merely vampiric apparatus of capture, feeding off some creativity or newness pulsating beneath it, whether one locates the source of such newness in a Negrian commons or in some more inhuman, machinic force of speculative reason. Once the vampire of capital is lopped off, according to this schema, the hitherto repressed creativity, whose 'functioning is currently subordinated to capital', can (like 'the future' itself) be liberated. The specific heresy of accelerationism's Marxism (which has a long and perfectly orthodox history of its own) would then lie, contra Negri's multitude, in a narrative according to which those deterritorializing forces unleashed by capital in the guise of sorcerer's apprentice are not so much its proletarian gravediggers as they are capitalism's own 'productive forces' themselves. But in imagining some more or less 'clean' extraction of technological latency from its capitalist 'subordination' – and, again, by *whom*, and *through what form* of 'socio-political action'? – it mirrors, too, that account of the latent creativity of a living labour that, as more ontologically primary, is supposed somehow to precede its capture by capital (or the state) altogether.²⁵

This is an argument that can certainly take some legitimation from *Anti-Oedipus*, but as an account of capitalism, and of the workings of the value form particularly, it is surely dubious, in both its post-autonomist and accelerationist variants. At the very least, it drastically underplays the degree to which *both* labour and technology come to be formed as moments in capital's self-mediation and valorization. This is not to say that existing technological forces are somehow capitalist 'through and through', nor that, speculatively, they could not be, or would not have to be, appropriated or repurposed for any socialist future if barbarism is to be avoided.²⁶ (None of which changes the fact that the latter seems a good deal more likely than the former right now.) But nor is it plausible to suggest that the 'material platforms' of finance or logistics could somehow be exempted from their historical formation altogether. It is true that in the 'Fragment on Machines', with which *The Accelerationist Reader* begins, Marx makes the claim that, even if the machine is produced within capitalist relations as a form of 'fixed capital', there is good reason to think that such technology might serve an emancipatory cause once freed from the dynamics

of extracting surplus value. But one would have to ignore a great many other passages in the *Grundrisse* to think that this is, for Marx, anything like a simple matter. The point is that this is a dialectical and *contradictory* process.

This is the underlying issue in what is perhaps Noys's central critical argument in *Malign Velocities*: that if, as Marx said, '[t]he *real barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*', such a 'barrier' is, in fact, 'what serves the "dynamic" of capitalism as contradictory social formation. The perpetual desire to purify and pierce the barrier of "capital itself" is encoded within the genetic structure of the capitalist social relation' (MV, 61). For Noys, the failure to recognize this is most apparent, and most revealing, in the accelerationist approach (exemplified by Lyotard and Land) to the 'moving contradiction' of labour's antagonistic relationship to capital, which seeks to overcome it through the unabashed embrace of an absolute integration of labour (variable capital) *into* the machinic and abstract (constant capital), and hence affirm its 'capture'. 'If we are forced to labour ... then accelerationism tries to welcome and immerse us in this inhuman experience', since, ironically, only this would put 'living labour' on the side of deterritorializing flows. As Noys continues, 'While this fails as a political strategy it tells us much about the impossible experience of labour under capitalism' (MV, ix). Of course, this could easily be extended to the value form itself, since, by this logic, the more the objects of commodification are loosened from their stubborn materiality and non-identity the better.

At the very least, at the level of political history, it is the relationship between the temporalities of movement and change, acceleration and progress, dominated by the 'revolutionary' temporality of capitalism itself (with its associated crises), and the historical time of *social* revolution (from the perspective of which 'capital is posited as a mere point of transition') that needs to be re-engaged as part of a speculative politics of abstraction, if the desire for the recovery of 'the future as such' is to gain any traction beyond the endless repetition of an avant-gardism without avant-garde. As against the apocalypticism and messianism that dominate much contemporary leftist thinking, the new accelerationism's attempt to rethink the 'old' socialist question of planning, and of a politics of abstraction, opens up some possibilities here. However, this requires an account both of 'progressive' forms of social abstraction and of the temporalities of the modern in terms of their relations to the possibility of the *historically* new – that is, of new

relations of production and forms of social production – without which, as Noys points out, Marx’s famous proposition in *Capital* that the ‘true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself’ recedes to the bad infinity of a limit that can never be reached. Acceleration may be the key determinant of modernity’s ‘new experience of transition’, as Kosselleck suggests, but an accelerationism remains constitutively unable to think through the full historical-political meanings of modernity itself.

Notes

1. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, p. 241 (emphasis added); Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, p. 257.
2. See, among various books, Paul Virilio, *The Great Accelerator*, trans. Julie Rose, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2012; *The Futurism of the Instant: Stop-Eject*, trans. Julie Rose, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010.
3. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, pp. 29, 35. A slightly different variant of this argument is to be found also in, for example, Franco Berardi, ‘Time, Acceleration and Violence’, *e-flux journal* 27, September 2011, www.e-flux.com/journal/time-acceleration-and-violence. Berardi’s own solution to the crisis for ‘our relationship to the world’ that he identifies in such an acceleration of acceleration in so-called ‘semiocapitalism’ is a ‘poetic’ restoration of the bodily and sensuousness. For a critical view on this, see my review of *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, ‘Only a Poet Can Save Us’, *Radical Philosophy* 178, March/April 2013, pp. 44–6.
4. Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, p. 15.
5. See Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010, pp. 4–9.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
7. One evident reason for the current ‘revival’ of interest in accelerationist tendencies more generally has been the return to Land’s own until recently largely forgotten writings, particularly through their promotion by ex-students at the University of Warwick, including Mackay, Brassier, Negrastani and Mark Fisher, all of whom are included in *The Accelerationist Reader*. A collection of Land’s work, edited by Robin Mackay with Brassier, was issued by Urbanomic, co-publishers of the *Reader*, in 2011.
8. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2008.
9. Benjamin Noys, ‘Accelerated Substance Abuse’, paper delivered at the New Centre for Research & Practice, October 2014.
10. Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, p. 257.
11. See Peter Osborne, ‘Modernism and Philosophy’, in Peter Brooker et al., eds, *Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, pp. 388–409.
12. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, London, 1973, p. 540, my emphases.
13. Crudely stated, this is, of course, reflected in #Accelerate’s own imbrication in the commodity logic of the rapid turnover of theoretical fashions.
14. Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, pp. 251, 252, 19.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 268
16. Land’s argument, written in 1993, and quoting *Anti-Oedipus*, is worth citing in full: ‘Machinic revolution must therefore go in the opposite direction to socialistic regulation; pressing towards ever more uninhibited marketization of the processes that are tearing down the social field, “still further” with “the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization”’ (cited by Mark Fisher, *AR*, 341).
17. Joseph Schumpeter, *Can Capitalism Survive? Creative Destruction and the Global Economy*, Harper Perennial, New York, 2009, p. 2. It is worth noting that, as well as writing in the wake of 1929 and the New Deal, Schumpeter is already responding at this stage to the emergent neoliberal ‘thought collective’ that would gather around the Mont Pelerin Society.
18. See Antonio Negri with Raf Scelsi, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism: Radical Politics in the 21st Century*, Serpent’s Tail, London, 2008, pp. 1–24.
19. To which might no doubt be added Lenin’s notorious assertion of the ‘need’ for socialism to appropriate the ‘apparatus’ of ‘big banks’ so as to ‘lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive’. This was, of course, Leninism’s specific understanding of the historical actuality of transition as precisely a root-and-branch systematic process of social, rather than narrowly ‘political’, revolution. Cited in Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, London and New York, 2009, p. 419. It turns out, then, that both Lenin and Jameson would have to be accelerationists too...
20. Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative*, p. 7.
21. See, for example, Peter Osborne, ‘The Reproach of Abstraction’, *Radical Philosophy* 127, September/October 2004, pp. 21–8; David Cunningham, ‘The Concept of Metropolis: Philosophy and Urban Form’, *Radical Philosophy* 133, September/October 2005, pp. 13–25; Alberto Toscano, ‘The Culture of Abstraction’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2008, pp. 57–75.
22. See Ray Brassier, ‘Wandering Abstraction’, Mute, www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wandering-abstraction. This is the text of a presentation to a conference on accelerationism held in Berlin in December 2013.
23. David Harvey, ‘Commonwealth: An Exchange’, https://antonioneagriinenglish.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/6422-commonwealth_an_exchange.pdf.
24. Lest one think that the accelerationists do not at least have some point, see, for example, Rancière’s assertion, in the closing pages of *Hatred of Democracy*, that ‘[u]nequal society does not carry any equal society in its womb’, as against what he terms, significantly, the ‘socialist’ (but also, in fact, Marxist) wager ‘according to which capitalist forms of production and exchange constituted the material conditions for an egalitarian society and its worldwide expansion’. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, Verso, London and New York, 2007, pp. 96–7.
25. To be fair, Williams and Srnicek do recognize some of the problems here: ‘We want to accelerate the process of technological evolution. But what we are arguing for is not techno-utopianism. Never believe that technology will be sufficient to save us. Necessary, yes, but never sufficient without socio-political action. Technology and the social are intimately bound up with one another, and changes in either potentiate and reinforce changes in the other’ (*AR*, 356). However, if winning ‘social conflicts’ is presented as essential to the possibility of any transition to a non-capitalist future, what these would be, and who is going to fight them, remain pretty vague, beyond the *Manifesto*’s appeal to a need for the left to ‘develop sociotechnical hegemony’ (*AR*, 357).
26. See David Cunningham, ‘Metropolitics, or, Architecture and the Contemporary Left’, in Nadir Lahiji, *Architecture Against the Post-Political*, Routledge, London and New York, 2014, pp. 11–30.