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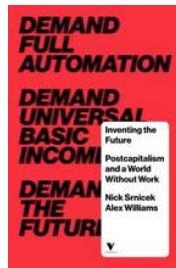
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# ON ACCELERATIONISM

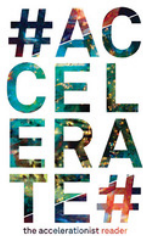
FRED TURNER



**INVENTING THE FUTURE:  
POSTCAPITALISM AND A  
WORLD WITHOUT WORK**  
Nick Srnicek and  
Alex Williams

Verso, 2015

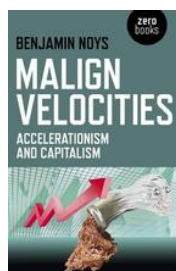
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**#ACCELERATE: THE  
ACCELERATIONIST  
READER**  
Robin Mackay and  
Armen Avanesian

Urbanomic, 2014

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**MALIGN VELOCITIES:  
ACCELERATIONISM AND  
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Benjamin Noys

Zero, 2014

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*September 1, 2016* — What is to be done? In 1901, when Lenin posed this now-canonical question, the answer was a communist revolution. Today, 25 years since the Internet went public, the answer has come to seem to many on the left to be a technological one. In the 1990s, it was right-wing libertarians such as John Perry Barlow who claimed to know what to do with the information system. In the future, they wrote, we would leave our bodies behind and dive headlong into a glorious pool of universal mind called Cyberspace. In the early 2000s, the builders of social media, some of whom subscribed to the tech-left ideals of open source software and copyleft reproduction rights, sold the public a new utopia. But instead of the world of technology-enabled interpersonal intimacy they promised, social media have become a series of commercially sponsored stages on which to preen for selfies and spin off data to be mined by states and corporations. During the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, pundits on the right and the left even declared that cell phones and the Internet were becoming tools of political revolution. Yet today the authoritarian leaders of Egypt are if anything more entrenched than their predecessors were.

In their new book, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, based on their widely circulated 2013 “[Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics](#),” British cultural theorists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue that all of this needs to change. At a time when the future seems to belong to Chicago-school economists and the Internet to Google and the NSA, Srnicek and Williams have courageously drafted a call to re-imagine left politics from top to bottom. Nonetheless, the alternative vision of the left they propose in fact owes a great deal to the neoliberal imagination it aims to challenge. Srnicek and Williams believe that emerging technologies have laid the foundation for the kind of egalitarian social world once promised by Lenin himself. To bring that world into being, they argue, we need not to resist but to *accelerate* the development of new technologies and the spread of capitalism. And they are not alone. In the last two years, a vigorous debate has bubbled up in England, where Srnicek and Williams live, and spilled over into the tech-savvy enclaves of the United States. To visit that debate may be to catch a glimpse of a new New Left emerging—or, in the view of some of the movement’s more strident critics, the final triumph of techno-libertarianism.

One thing that Srnicek and Williams make abundantly clear is that the tactics the left has inherited from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s no longer work. The antiglobalization actions of the 1990s, various student uprisings in Europe and North Africa, and, above all, the Occupy Movement in the United States—Srnicek and Williams argue that all have failed because of the left’s preoccupation with what they call, with the hint of a sneer, “folk politics.” This mode emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they write, from roots in anarchism, autonomism, and various forms of communism. In their view, the last 50 years have seen “the collapse of the traditional organizations of the left, and the simultaneous rise of an alternative new left predicated upon critiques of bureaucracy, verticality, exclusion and institutionalization.” This new New Left loathes all forms of top-down power, revels in consensus decision making, and believes in direct action. Above all, it hopes that its own local democratic processes might be a model for a new, more democratic social order at scale.

As Srnicek and Williams note, such an ethos has produced relatively little in

the way of lasting change—at least in social structure. The case of Occupy is particularly instructive. Many participants have described how gathering together in public squares, debating public issues, and shouting together in the Human Megaphone made them feel politically powerful, often for the first time. And few would deny that the Occupier’s famous phrase—“We are the 99 percent!”—shaped public debate for months to come. But where are the structural changes that Occupy has wrought? What congressmen are beholden to the Occupiers in the way that so many are to the Tea Party?

According to Srnicek and Williams, the logic of Folk Politics has prevented movements like Occupy from evolving into something more than a string of ephemeral protests. A faith in horizontal organizations, local action, and the transformative potential of immediacy is all well and good, they write, but almost by definition, it prevents the emergence of large-scale, well-organized forces that claim and hold institutional and financial territory. Folk Politics also reflect a failure to accept a series of truths about capitalism and modernity, they argue. The first of these is that capitalism is omnivorous. Srnicek and Williams note that, as Marx pointed out, capitalism devours almost all social forms in its way. This means that efforts to create local enclaves of, say, ethical consumerism or horizontal, extra-market social relations, are ultimately bound to fail. For all their emphasis on bottom-up reform, such efforts can do little to prevent the commodification of experience, the expansion of inequality, and the ever-extended need to turn social life toward financially profitable ends.

Anyone who has visited the cheese boutiques of San Francisco will recognize the truth of this critique. Even as the city hosts an ever-growing flock of charcuteries, hipster barbershops, and artisanal groceries, the rich young technologists who use them have been steadily pushing the poor out of their apartments. But this is where Srnicek and Williams take an unexpected turn. Rather than try to resist the forces of technology and capitalism, they urge us to embrace them. Or more specifically, they argue that in fact the only way to escape the maw of the consumer society is to accelerate the engines driving it. The left must do what the neoliberal right has done: it must celebrate the liberating tendencies of capitalism; it must take advantage of the ever-more-social affordances of new technologies; and it must help the world imagine both as sources of social improvement.

THE ALTERNATIVE VISION OF THE LEFT PROPOSED BY SRNICEK AND WILLIAMS IN FACT OWES A GREAT DEAL TO THE NEOLIBERAL IMAGINATION IT AIMS TO CHALLENGE.

Given the failures of conventional left movements in recent years, Srnicek and Williams’s call to imitate the tactics of the far more successful New Right makes a certain amount of sense. As they note, capitalism is a complex global phenomenon, a creature of banks and

states, digitized financial flows, global transportation networks, and transcontinental media systems, all defended by border police of various kinds. Thanks largely to the work of the Mont Pelerin Society, a network of economists and fellow travelers first convened by Friedrich Hayek in 1947, the neoliberal right has built a coherent ideological framework that takes into account the full range of capitalist activity. In other words, they explain, neoliberalism *scales*. In the hands of neoliberal ideologues, for instance, Schumpeter’s notion of “creative destruction” becomes something that individuals can do (as entrepreneurs), that companies can do (through innovation), and that even whole economies experience (in cycles of growth and recession). Neoliberalism seems to “work” at every level of individual and collective experience. To match its power, Srnicek and Williams argue, the left will need to build its own version of the Mont Pelerin group and spread its own alternative vision of the future.

Imitating neoliberal tactics is one thing; arguing that commerce and technology will bring about utopia is another. Srnicek and Williams want both. And they don’t think conventional politics is the way to get it. Instead, they hope to build “a post-work society” by “fully automating the economy, reducing the working week, implementing a universal basic income, and achieving a cultural shift in the understanding of work.” For Srnicek and Williams, the central problem with

capitalism is not the inequality it produces, nor the ways it intersects with longstanding patterns of racism and nationalism, but rather the hoary problem of labor. For generations, they write, the left has “sought to liberate humanity from the drudgery of work, the dependence on wage labor, and submission of our lives to a boss.” New technologies allow us to build “a postcapitalist and post-work platform upon which multiple ways of living could emerge and flourish.”

Here Srnicek and Williams resurrect the ancient ghost of romanticism and marry it to a Marxist critique of labor in a way that would be quite familiar to the American counterculture of the 1960s. First, they describe virtually all labor as a species of spiritual subjection. We have authentic selves, they argue, and to work for wages, we must leave our authentic desires at home. Such a view also animated the American communards of the 1960s. After all, the point of a commune was to bridge work and home so as to make it possible to be “authentic” at all times. Second, Srnicek and Williams misinterpret an important aspect of contemporary labor. They note that a 2013 Gallup poll showed that only 13 percent of workers worldwide find their work “engaging.” In their view, the survey provides evidence of global alienation. Yet Gallup conducted the survey for a group of CEOs who were quite likely seeking to make work more engaging precisely so as to draw out and monetize ever more of their workers’ inner selves. Today, levels of engagement at work measure not so much workers’ ability to achieve psychological authenticity on the job as they do the ability of employers to integrate the psychological needs of employees into the work process. Employers *want* their employees to be authentic at work. The more work feels like home, the more and better work employees will do.

Oddly enough, Srnicek and Williams seem quite comfortable with top-down management. In one of their book’s strangest passages, they invoke the computerized management system known as “Cybersyn” as an emblem of the future they hope for. Cybersyn was designed and partially built for Salvador Allende’s socialist government in Chile in the early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> It featured a command center that resembled the bridge of the Star Trek Enterprise. Like Captain Kirk and his officers, leaders were to sit together watching information stream in from around the nation, and to act on what they saw. Srnicek and Williams see today’s digital technologies as tools with similar potential. In order to free our individual desires, they claim, we need to automate all the work we can, manage that automation together using systems like Cybersyn, and so build a flexible postcapitalist economy in which we work when we want to, love when we want to, and all in all, “create new modes of being.”



The Cybersyn Operations Room, Santiago de Chile. After the military coup on September 11, 1973, Cybersyn was abandoned and the operations room was destroyed.

If this sounds more than a little like a marketing campaign for Uber, it should. This is the same logic that drives the rhetoric of the sharing economy. And that should make us nervous. New digital platforms really are making work patterns more flexible and automation really is replacing (some) drudgery. Yet, marketers’ claims notwithstanding, they have hardly brought us a new era of social sharing. Instead, they’ve marketized ever smaller segments of time and transformed formerly

private resources (such as your car) into potential sources of profit. You of course bear the responsibility for capitalizing those resources (buying and maintaining the car) and getting the training to use them (learning to drive). For all their vaunted computer power, companies like Uber, Airbnb, and TaskRabbit are essentially traditional service brokers. And the vision of sharing that underlies them belongs more to the legacy of Friedrich Hayek than of Karl Marx.

Srnicek and Williams are blinded by their faith in all things digital. To consider automation only in terms of its ability to replace onerous labor is wondrously naive. Who will build the machines? Manage them? Say we succeed in building a new Cybersyn. Who will sit in the armchairs of command? As the current rage for Donald Trump reminds us, leaders need hardly be rational, disinterested public servants. And what will become of those who never reach the centers of command? Or should I say, what will become of us? How will we speak back to power? Will we become the political equivalent of Uber drivers, communicating with central powers only through the data our work throws off?

Some of Srnicek and Williams's future is indeed enticing, particularly the notion of a universal basic income. And their willingness to crack open the door of left theory to embrace the sometimes liberating power of capitalism does offer an alternative to the Folk Politics they rightly critique. Yet, as two other important volumes point out, that door has been opened before, and not always with liberating results.

Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian's *#Accelerate* reprints two dozen essays and book sections written between the mid-19th century and today. In a wide-ranging introduction, the editors make the case that contemporary accelerationists belong to a long-neglected left intellectual tradition. "Accelerationism is a political heresy," they write. "The insistence that the only radical political response to capitalism is ... to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies" would seem, they suggest, to violate the founding principles of left politics. But that would be wrong, according to Mackay and Avanessian, who cite and reprint Marx's "Fragment on Machines" from the *Grundrisse* in reply. There Marx describes a process by which capital, embodied in the machines of production, draws the living labor of workers into itself. In Marx's account, automated machines work on behalf of capital to turn men into mere prostheses. Mackay and Avanessian take this to be a good thing. For Mackay and Avanessian, the best way to supersede capitalism is to become one with its machines.

THE SAME DEVICES THAT ARE SLOWLY  
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The "Fragment on Machines"  
notwithstanding, Marx might well have  
taken issue with their view. In *Das Kapital*  
he argues that the centralization of capital  
and of production will come into conflict  
with the social relations that support them  
and capitalism will crumble from there.<sup>2</sup> In

the Marx of *Das Kapital*, conflicts between men, machines, and money pave the road for revolution; in Mackay and Avanessian's introduction, the fusion of men and machines into something new *is* the revolution. In many ways Mackay and Avanessian's vision of accelerationism's postcapitalist effects derives from the readings of two bodies of philosophy. The first emerged in France in the early 1970s, when theorists like Deleuze and Guattari and Lyotard aimed to synthesize Marx and Freud. These critics sought to escape Marxist dialectics and to suggest that, in Mackay and Avanessian's words, "emancipation from capitalism be sought ... by way of the polymorphous perversion set free by the capitalist machine itself." The machine, these critics wrote, would free us to create what Mackay and Avanessian call "a new fluid social body."

As Mackay and Avanessian note, such work helped set the stage for Donna Haraway's celebration of the feminist cyborg in the United States and for the autonomist Marxism of Antonio Negri and Tiziana Terranova in Italy. But it also helped give rise to the reveries of Nick Land and the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the University of Warwick in England, which Land founded with cyber-theorist Sadie Plant. In the mid-1990s, Land and Plant played an ecstatic

prose accompaniment to the rise of the public Internet. A random sample, from the CCRU collective's essay "Swarmachines," which Mackay and Avanesian reprint: "Jungle rewinds and reloads conventional time into silicon blips of speed and slowness that combust the slag-heaps of historical carbon-dating."

This was the kind of thing that seemed to make sense about the time *Wired* magazine first appeared on corporate coffee tables. It was also quite right-wing. "The past is passed," wrote the CCRU collective. "The eternally deferred eschatologies of the left are consigned to the white trash-can of the future and leave a present tense with synthetic possibilities." Clumsy wordplay aside, the writers of the CCRU saw in the emerging digital matrix much what John Perry Barlow did: a new frontier on which they could leave their fleshy bodies and even politics itself behind. They dismissed not only Folk Politics, but all left politics. They embraced the logic of creative destruction—not only as an economic project, but as an aesthetic, and in raves at least, as a lifestyle too.

To British cultural theorist Benjamin Noys, the members of the CCRU had fallen under the spell of "Deleuzian Thatcherism." Noys is widely credited with having coined the term "accelerationism" in his 2010 volume of critical philosophy, *The Persistence of the Negative*. His recent *Malign Velocities* presents a sustained and stinging rereading of the history mapped out by Mackay and Avanesian. Like them, Noys points to 19th- and early 20th-century Marxism and Futurism and to early 1970s French philosophy as key sources of accelerationist ideals. Yet he reads both very differently. He reminds us that Lenin himself embraced the management theories of Frederick Taylor and dreamed of a world in which productivity gains would free workers to relax. Noys notes that such policies resulted not in universal leisure, but in the Kafka-esque machinations of Soviet bureaucracy. Returning to the reveries of the Italian Futurists, their love of speed and the automobile, Noys reminds his readers of their deep misogyny and their affection for Fascism.

As Noys points out, these first accelerationists did much more than fail to spark a populist revolution; they actually helped legitimate the technologies of domination in place today. Noys saves his harshest criticism for the French theorists of the 1970s, and for the CCRU. In the social unrest of 1968, he argues, the French left saw their hopes for an anticapitalist revolution raised and dashed. In response, thinkers such as Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Deleuze and Guattari turned their frustration into celebration. They not only accepted their inability to escape capitalism; they reveled in it. They dreamed of individuals who could melt into the libidinal slipstream of media spectacles and consumer delights. Like the Marx of the "Fragment on Machines," they dreamed of human beings who could become one with their tools.



Umberto Boccioni, *Elasticity* (1912). Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Museo del Novecento

In the 1990s, Nick Land and Sadie Plant promoted the same dreams, writes Noys, this time to a techno beat. Noys is not content to attack accelerationism as a philosophy. He also takes its aesthetics to task. Land and Plant wrote at the same moment that Kraftwerk and Detroit techno could be heard from London to Berlin. Such artists seduced listeners into a fantasy of becoming one with machine systems, of giving over their agency and taking pleasure in complete submission, argues Noys. Like the essays of the CCRU, the music appeared to herald an “exit from feeling and consciousness,” and this, writes Noys, is the true promise underpinning accelerationism. For all its talk of a technology-enabled socialist utopia, accelerationism actually offers little more than a steep dive down a nihilist rabbit hole.

Here Noys picks up on an essential paradox of accelerationism, and in fact of many ostensibly left-leaning, technology-embracing social movements. The same devices that are slowly choking off our ability to act in the world without their help have also offered us extraordinary pleasures. With our iPhones in our pockets, we can find out almost anything, instantly. We can summon the sounds of Muddy Waters and Django Reinhardt alongside Devo and Talking Heads. We see pictures of places whose names we’ve only just heard. And we can send them to people we’ve only just met. Much as the Italian Futurists did when they first drove off in cars, we have every reason to marvel at the new speed in the world.

Yet as the Futurists themselves have taught us, the dream of machines that will speed us away from everyday life can just as easily open the road to fascism as to democracy. In their rush to celebrate the benefits of automation, Srnicek and Williams have forgotten this history. Lenin may have turned to Taylorism to ease the lives of peasants, and the founders of the CCRU may have embraced Schumpeterian creative destruction in order to experience a technocentric form of ecstasy. Yet neither approach substantially improved the prospects for a more egalitarian social world. On the contrary, one set the stage for Stalin and the other helped legitimate Margaret Thatcher.

To their credit, Srnicek and Williams do not ask us to dissolve into digital ones and zeros, as John Perry Barlow once did. Their call for a universal basic income makes a kind of grounded sense that has eluded earlier accelerationists. So too does their critique of Folk Politics. Yet, the problem of politics writ large remains. How can we build a more just, more egalitarian society when our devices already surround us with so many of the personalized delights we might want such a society to offer? Meetings are boring. Talking to people unlike ourselves is hard.

How can we turn away from the mediasphere long enough to rediscover the pleasures of that difficult work? And how can we sustain it when we do?

To these kinds of questions, the accelerationists have no answers.

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1 See Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile* (MIT Press, 2011).

2 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Chapter 32, quoted in Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 43.

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Sep 5, 9:59 p.m.

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First, they describe virtually all labor as a species of spiritual subjection. Production of goods & services, that are desired and even needed by our brothers & sisters, is not "spiritual subjection." As we produce things for the global warehouse, we receive little green pieces of paper that represent the extent and value of our contribution to everyone else. We use those pieces of paper to collect what we desire and need from the global warehouse. Anything that interferes, represses, suppresses, subverts, or steals the fruits of someone else's labor is a significant mistake and harms us all.

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