

Core Course I
Essay block 4
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Aspects of Acceleration:

Tracing Accelerationism's Intellectual Foundations to
its Appropriation by the Contemporary Left

Introduction

Accelerationism is the cool kid in humanities-town. This school of thought attempts to centre on the questions arising from a future in which technological progress and automation reign supreme: mass unemployment, the rise of artificial intelligence and the abstraction of value in global market (Beckett). Once a fringe movement, starting roughly around the early 1970s and mostly published through works of fiction, nowadays accelerationism has “gradually solidified from a fictional device into an actual intellectual movement”; “accelerate is a sexy word”, The Guardian wrote (Beckett). While there exist many flavours of this particular school of thought, it finds its universal identity in arguing for an intensification of technology and capitalism, either because it is considered as the only route for progress or because it might lead to a more humane post-capitalist society (Beckett, Haider). The former thesis transformed into intellectual food for thought for far-right “neoreactionaries”

(Haider), exemplifying the oscillation of accelerationism between mainstream and niche. Because this high diversification in accelerationist conceptualisation, the intellectual underpinnings can be complex to trace – for instance, Marx can be considered both a founding father as well as a highly antithetical accelerationist thinker, depending on the form of accelerationism in question.

As accelerationism grows and diversifies, it is important to keep track of the theoretical underpinnings of its varying forms. Therefore, this text seeks to trace the intellectual lines between “traditional” accelerationist thought as identified by Benjamin Noys, a prominent critic of accelerationism, towards the conceptualisation of the more recent Left Accelerationism. The introduction of Benjamin Noys’ *Malign Velocities* will serve as a reference for traditional accelerationist writing, while Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’ “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics” (MAP) will be scrutinized as the contemporary piece. The former is chosen because it forms both a comprehensive as well as an authoritative overview of accelerationist history, while the latter is a highly influential and exemplary text for (leftist) accelerationism in a more general sense. The essay starts with a summary of Noys’ introduction of *Malign Velocities*, in which he formulates the intellectual foundations of accelerationism, after which the text describes the main theses of the MAP. Thereafter, the text elaborates on three theoretical underpinnings of the MAP that lay bare discrepancies between the conceptualisation of accelerationism of Noys on the one side and Srnicek and Williams’ on the other. This way, the text both attempts to formulate specificities in accelerationist theory on both sides as well as explore the intellectual framework supporting Left Accelerationism.

Benjamin Noys’ Conceptualisation of Accelerationism

In the 2014 book *Malign Velocities*, Benjamin Noys explores the intellectual history of accelerationist thought. For Noys, accelerationism was first explicitly theorised in 1972 by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (2). In it, the authors historicise how value is societally attributed, for which they use the term “territorialization”. In tribal societies, material flows were attributed to the earth, mapping them as products of the soil. As such, the matter of the earth was credited as the source of all value production and value was thus “territorialized”. With the rise of empires, the recognition of earthly matter as the de facto productive force

faded. Rather, production was “deterritorialized” from the earth and “reterritorialized” onto the despot, who claims credit for value production. Capitalism further deterritorializes material flows, this time through the abstractness of capital (“Gilles Deleuze”). Therefore, capitalism is “unique for unleashing the forces of deterritorialization and decoding that other social forms tried to constrain and code” (Noys 2). Deleuze and Guattari draw from Freud to claim that the abstraction and deterritorialization of capitalistic society stimulates schizophrenic disorder of its subjects (Noys 2). However, Deleuze and Guattari argue that this abstractness correlates with a reterritorialization of value onto the manageable model of family (Noys 2). In this way, capitalism works both alienating in its abstraction on the one hand and constraining in its Oedipal repression on the other. To overcome the capitalist alienation and constraint, Deleuze and Guattari draw from Nietzsche in arguing that perhaps it is most effective “not to withdraw from the process [of capitalisation], but to go further, to ‘accelerate the process’” (Deleuze and Guattari 260), aiming for an absolute deterritorialization that will eventually mean capitalism’s meltdown (Noys 3). This climactic process is necessary to “exceed the capitalist forces of production” towards reaching what they call “desiring-production”: human desire not Freudian unconscious exploited by capitalism’s conditions but as a genuinely productive force (Noys 3).

Noys identifies other origins of accelerationist thought that propose less optimistic visions. If Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring-production envisions an alternative mode of production that strays from capitalistic abstraction, Jean-Francois Lyotard dismisses this alternative in arguing that the desire can only exist within the economy of capitalism (Noys 3), controversially arguing that labourers enjoy their exploitation with masochistic pleasure (*jouissance*). Jean Baudrillard criticises both the focus on desire and libido in arguing that only death forms an escape to the commodification of capitalism. He identified the acceleration as “a catastrophic and entropic negativity that floods back into the system causing it to implode” (Noys 4). Lyotard, in his turn, critiques Baudrillard in arguing that this implosion or the escape of death does not suddenly cause a turn to primitive symbolic value – the “desire of capital” will still persist (Noys 4). As such, Noys claims that each scholar criticises the other “of not really accepting that they are fully immersed in capital and trying to hold on to a point of escape: desire, libido, death” (5), implicitly agreeing on the

persistence of capitalism. Drawing from recent history, Noys cites how this thought has become prescient because capitalism adapted and was reinforced, e.g. illustrated by the fading anti-capitalist spirit after the 1960s, the elections of Thatcher and Reagan, the subsequent rise of neoliberalism, and the confrontation the abstraction of value through the cataclysmic 2008 financial crisis (6).

Noys follows by tracing a theoretical line from Marx to accelerationism. For Noys, the accelerationist proposal that a superior mode of productivity will arise through the “bad side” (i.e. capitalism) reflects Marx’ teleology of capitalism’s self-destruction leading to communism (7). For instance, Marx wrote on how the destructive industrialism of colonialism in 19th-Century India was a necessity for “shattering the old ways”, claiming this destruction would bring about the conditions for a just society (Noys 7). However, Noys identifies a theoretical gap between Marx and accelerationism. While Marx saw value in new modes of production “maturing” within an old, unjust framework, he does not claim these frameworks should be embraced and accelerated. Instead, Marx argues that these unjust capitalistic societies should form sites for political struggle (Noys 7). Noys described how

Marx welcomed worker struggles to reduce the working day and to struggle against the despotism of the factory; he did not argue that it would be better if factory conditions got worse so workers would be forced into revolt. (Noys 7)

Therefore, Noys labels accelerationists “heretics to Marx” (7) for doing nothing less than fetishize capital, and not resisting but intensifying capitalism with the conviction that it will automatically “lead to the ‘implosion’ of capital” (8). As such, for Noys the accelerationist take deterritorialization to its extremes, not aiming to reterritorialize value upon the family or other actors, but letting capitalism free flow into abstraction. He argues that accelerationism pushes “into the domain of abstraction and speculation which, with the financial crisis, is evidently the space of our existence” (Noys 8). For Noys, this indicates the abstracting of value which brings forth dehumanisation as it is “answering deceleration with the promise of a new acceleration, driven by faith in new productive forces that come online and disrupt the ideological humanism” (8). With it, Noys positions accelerationist thought as fetishizing capital and abstractness, intensifying rather than resisting capitalism, and dehumanising and deterritorializing.

Accelerationism in the Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics

While Noys' *Malign Velocities* mainly focused on the origins of accelerationist thought, recent accelerationist texts reinvigorated scholarly attention to accelerationism. Notably, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics" (MAP) embodies a guide for what "Left Accelerationism" should entail. Their manifesto opens claiming that "accelerationism pushes towards a future that is more modern, an alternative modernity that neoliberalism is inherently unable to generate" (Srnicek and Williams). They argue how capitalism has failed to answer to today's big issues, most notably "environmental disaster, mass starvation, collapsing economic paradigms, and new hot and cold wars" (1.2). These problems rose during the emergence and subsequent deepening of the main political ideology of today, neoliberalism. For Srnicek and Williams, the neoliberal right has unleashed innovation through free market competition (2.1), but instead of tackling the most daunting issues of modern-day society, it has been concerned with superficial progress such as developing "marginally better consumer gadgetry" (3.3). To the authors, this constraint is due to an "enslavement of technoscience to capitalist objectives" (3.6), which not only leads to a "simple brain-dead onrush" (2.2) towards meaningless competitive goals but is also "accompanied by social dislocation" (2.1).

Here, the "enslavement to capitalist objectives" directly echoes Deleuze and Guattari by arguing that capitalism abstracts and constrains (deterritorializes and reterritorializes), whom Srnicek and Williams also directly cite:

As Deleuze and Guattari recognized, from the very beginning what capitalist speed deterritorializes with one hand, it reterritorializes with the other. Progress becomes constrained within a framework of surplus value, a reserve army of labour, and free-floating capital. Modernity is reduced to statistical measures of economic growth and social innovation becomes encrusted with kitsch remainders from our communal past. Thatcherite-Reaganite deregulation sits comfortably alongside Victorian 'back-to-basics' family and religious values. (Srnicek and Williams 2.3)

As such, Srnicek and Williams see capitalism as a constraining framework, worsened by the undoubted trust in "capitalist speed" as the only vehicle towards technological progress (2.2). This trust is apparent in Land's right-wing accelerationism, which considers capitalism as an unstoppable force moving towards hyperintelligence and

singularity (Land), a vision in which humans can be “discarded as mere drag to an abstract planetary intelligence rapidly constructing itself from the bricolaged fragments of former civilisations” (2.2) However, even when recognising this capitalistic constraint, Srnicek and Williams argue that the left, paralyzed by ongoing right-wing dominance, has only been able to propose either overly subtle or highly unattainable reforms (e.g. by proposing a return to Keynesian capitalism, 1.5). As such, instead of “achieving victory over capital” (3.21), the inability of the left leads Srnicek and Williams to claim that the that the propulsion of the right is an irresistible tide (1.6).

If this right-wing tide cannot be countered with left-wing resistance, Srnicek and Williams propose that a “new left global hegemony” should accept an accelerationist politics, which they propose to be “navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a universal space of possibility” (2.2). As such, the MAP proposes an accelerationist society that can still “navigate” in terms of how production of value is appropriated and therewith dismisses the view of capitalism as an unstoppable and unavoidable force for technological progress. A leftist, navigational accelerationism requires a “politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology” (3.1) instead of primitive nostalgia or technophobia. Indeed, Srnicek and Williams repeat that Left Accelerationism should not be antithetical to experimental technology and technosocial change, but instead make society legible through mathematical and economical models that interpret and shape society:

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. (Srnicek and Williams 3.5)

In order to achieve this goal, Srnicek and Williams make the (perhaps rather vague) call to build technosocial platforms that are not geared towards capitalist goals but rather to post-capitalist ends.

Three Theoretical Discrepancies

Three theoretical discrepancies regarding the conceptualisation of accelerationism arise when comparing Noys to Srnicek and Williams. Firstly, the MAP does not “fetishize capital” and the unavoidability of capitalist innovation, but rather considers

capitalism as a temporary necessary evil to create the right conditions for moving towards post-capitalism. Noys, referring to 1970s accelerationist writing, argues that accelerationism only emphasises the inevitable self-engendering of capitalism that will lead to the “violent moment of creative disruption” (7), framing the accelerationist as the “archetypal instance of the fetishists of capital” (8). Deleuze and Guattari indeed called for reaching “absolute deterritorialization” to bring about a violent implosion of capitalism (Noys 3). However, this fetishizing of absolute deterritorialization is less apparent in the MAP. Srnicek and Williams do argue for a deterritorialization of value detached from capital, for instance in stating that accelerationism entails a belief that innovation “can and should be let loose by moving beyond the limitations imposed by capitalist society” (3.22). However, the MAP’s call to deterritorialize is not intended to set loose capitalist innovation, but rather to “shift beyond a world of minimal technical upgrades towards all-encompassing change” (3.22), for instance by decreasing working hours or increasing extra-terrestrial exploration. Therewith no proposal is made for an absolute deterritorialization – rather, the appropriation of capitalist infrastructure towards socialist ends is promoted. This makes Left Accelerationism not heretical, but aligning with Marxist thought, as evident in the following quote by Marx himself:

No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. (Marx in Noys 7)

Here, Srnicek and William’s proposal of using capitalism’s “existing infrastructure” as a “springboard to launch towards post-capitalism” falls into the same line as Marx’ theory the forces of production need to mature to re-purpose them and progress the societal structure. As such, the MAP does not necessarily call for an intensification of capitalism as much as to re-purpose its achievements. Whether this makes the Left Accelerationism truly “accelerationist” is debatable, but it nonetheless reveals a sharp distinction with the early accelerationist thought as identified by Noys.

Secondly, contrary to Noys’ conceptualisation of accelerationism, Srnicek and Williams recognise progressing towards a post-capitalist society requires complex struggle and planning within capitalism itself, instead of a prophesying capitalism as an inevitably self-imploding system. For Noys, what makes the accelerationist

“heretics to Marx” is the emphasis on destruction and implosion instead of the recognition of capitalism as “the ground on which we struggle, which must be negated to constitute a new and just social order” (7). For the accelerationist, then, “in place of the just society generated through struggle, it is acceleration that becomes the vehicle of disenchanting redemption” (7). However, the MAP deviates from this characterisation of accelerationism as Srnicek and Williams lay the emphasis exactly on constituting a just society through struggle. They illustrate how after anti-capitalist revolt, trusting that “the people will spontaneously constitute a novel socioeconomic system that isn’t simply a return to capitalism is naïve at best, and ignorant at worst” (3.8). As such, the MAP states that “post-capitalism will require post-capitalist planning” (3.8), taking advantage of “every technological and scientific advance made possible by capitalist society” (3.9). Additionally, Srnicek and Williams state that “the movement towards a surpassing of our current constraints must include more than simply a struggle for a more rational global society” (3.22). If for Noys the negation of societal struggle within capitalism divides Marxists from accelerationists, Srnicek and Williams fall into the former group. This aspect again sets them apart from Landian accelerationism, which to Srnicek and Williams indeed does not argue for resistance to capitalism because of the conviction that “capitalist speed alone could generate a global transition towards unparalleled technological singularity” (2.2). The form of accelerationism proposed in the MAP is thus less “violent” and disruptive than sketched in Noys’ text, limiting their manifesto towards a call for repurposing capitalistic platforms to more social and ethical ends.

Thirdly, Noys’ reading of accelerationist thought claims it aims for “absolute deterritorialization”, while Srnicek and William’s accelerationism calls for a reinvigorated attention to materialism instead of deterritorialized abstractness. Throughout the MAP, Srnicek and Williams note how the materialism of digital technology should be made legible and repurposed towards just goals; mathematical and economic modelling should not be considered unnecessarily abstract tools, but rather crucial methods for “making intelligible a complex world”, claiming that “the accelerationist left must become literate in these technical fields” (3.9). Elsewhere, they argue that the materialism of digital platforms is crucial in constituting the “transcendental” aspects of society:

The left must develop sociotechnical hegemony: both in the sphere of ideas, and in the sphere of material platforms. Platforms are the infrastructure of global society. They establish the basic parameters of what is possible, both behaviourally and ideologically. In this sense, they embody the material transcendental of society: they are what make possible particular sets of actions, relationships, and powers. (Srnicek and Williams 3.11)

In doing so, contrasting with Land and Noys, Srnicek and Williams do not consider accelerationism as promoting abstraction and dehumanisation, but rather see it as increasing understanding and awareness of technological matter, and as such attempt to ground digital technologies by emphasising its materialism. Antonio Negri underpins this points by arguing that the MAP draws from a Marxist appreciation to fixed capital. Indeed, as the MAP tries to accept a vision in which technology is not dismissed but repurposed, Negri argues that “with an attitude that attenuates the humanism present in philosophical critique, the MAP insists on the material and technical qualities of the corporeal reappropriation of fixed capital”. This reterritorialization of value onto the material body lead Negri to argue that “without a doubt there is a strong reliance on objectivity and materiality” apparent in the MAP. While for Negri, a corollary to this is an underestimation of the social, political and cooperative elements, he agrees with Srnicek and Williams that this material focus will lead to

“recognizing the importance of acquiring the highest techniques employed by capitalistic command, as well as the abstraction of labor, in order to bring them back to a communist administration performed “by the things themselves.” (Negri)

In this sense, Left Accelerationism stands in line with Marx’ thoughts on the materialism of the means of value production, as he claims that “machinery does not lose its use value as soon as it ceases to be capital” (Marx 699). It is dismissed by both Marx and the MAP that “use value - machinery as such - is capital, or that its existence as machinery is identical with its existence as capital” (Marx 699). Instead, the claim is made that capitalism reterritorializes value towards capitalist goals. Indeed, this way Srnicek and Williams seems to align with what Pasquinelli denotes as “Marxist accelerationism”:

Marxist accelerationism appears to be not about a mere catastrophic acceleration of capital (as in Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, Nick Land) but

about an epistemic acceleration and reappropriation of fixed capital as technology and knowledge (a sort of Epistemic Singularity) (Pasquinelli 7)

By sharing these Marxist aspects, Srnicek and Williams' accelerationism does not align with Noys' identification of accelerationism as "pushing into abstraction and speculation" (8) and its "embracing of dehumanization" (8).

Conclusion

This text sought to trace the intellectual lines of accelerationism, departing from Benjamin Noys' conceptualisation towards Srnicek and Williams' accelerationist manifesto. Noys illustrates how in the 1970s, early accelerationist thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari denote how capitalism dehumanised and deterritorialized and subsequently attempted to theorise an escape from capitalist constraint in the form of desire-production. Baudrillard noted that death forms a way out of capitalist commodification, and Lyotard argued that human pleasure and desire can only exist through capitalist suffering. Despite their differences, a recurring theme in these early accelerationism is the dehumanizing and abstract characteristic of capitalism and the quest for "absolute deterritorialization" in order to overcome capitalist constraint through its own intensification. In recent years, accelerationism has found reinvigorated scholarly attention, most notably by right-wing writing of Land and left-wing writing by Srnicek and Williams. The latter propose a post-capitalist future that shies away from the restraint of value onto capitalistic goals. The MAP proposes to reach a globalised post-capitalism that aims not to move beyond limited capitalistic technical upgrades in favour of an upgrade to all-encompassing change. While both Noys and Williams and Srnicek use one common denominator, three theoretical discrepancies between the two conceptualisations of accelerationism arise. Firstly, instead of "fetishizing capital", the MAP describes capitalist achievements as "springboards" that can be repurposed to move towards a post-capitalist society, evading "absolute deterritorialization" in favour of a more gradual appropriation of technology towards non-capitalistic goals. Secondly, Srnicek and Williams consider current-day capitalist society as a site for struggle to reach post-capitalism, stating that complex planning will be needed to move away from "mindless" neoliberalism. This differs from Noys' claim that accelerationism is inherently teleological for claiming that capitalism, after thorough acceleration, will

inevitably collapse. Thirdly, throughout the MAP, Srnicek and Williams emphasise the relevance of the materialism of technology and propose to humanise its conceptualisation and use. This differs from Noys' reading of early accelerationist thought as "pushing into the domain of abstraction" and embracing dehumanisation (8).

Naturally, this text has severe limits. It only considered two (albeit influential) readings, so any general claims about accelerationism are limited to the authors cited in this text. Arguably, right-wing Landian accelerationism is closer to Noys' conceptualisation of accelerationism because it does propose a teleology ending in "Techonomic Singularity" through unavoidable capitalistic acceleration (Land). Unfortunately, investigating the right-wing accelerationism fell outside the scope of this text. Additionally, at some points this text might have attacked a straw man as Noys conceptualises accelerationism according to early accelerationist thinkers and does not take into account the more contemporary writing of Srnicek and Williams. Therefore, it should be noted that this was not an attempt either to debunk Noys' understanding of accelerationism, but rather to gain a more nuanced and complex insight into the multitudinous facets of accelerationism through a theoretical comparison.

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