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- 1 In May 2013, the British website Critical Legal Thinking published a “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,” composed by a pair of young British intellectuals named Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. Although dotted with expressions and allusions that reflected the authors’ formal training in British doctoral programs, the text was not a scholarly project. Like its more famous model, the manifesto clearly set out to change the world rather than to interpret it. Srnicek and Williams’s MAP, as it is now commonly designated, exhorted fellow leftists to “take advantage of every technological and scientific advance made possible by capitalist society,” including quantification, economic modeling, social network analysis, and big data analytics, and to claim “the materialist platform of neoliberalism” as a “springboard to launch towards post-capitalism.” Rejecting what it characterized as a backward-looking “folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism,” in favor of a “politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology,” the manifesto cast its lot with Prometheus, sloughing off decades of leftist suspicion and discomfort (especially, one might add, among feminists and environmentalists) toward projects of mastery and domination.¹
- 2 The impact of this exhortation on leftist politics within or beyond the United Kingdom is hard to discern, but the authors’ insistent comfort in the face of technological change seems broadly shared, not surprisingly, within a certain region of the blogosphere, and might even represent a growing political sensibility. Such a sensibility probably reflects, among other things, the reconciliation of radical critics of capitalism to their own dependence on consumer gadgets and the need for dissenters from the prevailing neoliberal creed to secure a seat at tables where the discourses of finance and digitization have become the *lingua franca*. The specific keyword in the MAP’s title, however, gestured to what now appears, at least to observers in the UK, as more than just a sensibility. Calls for “accelerationist politics” seemed to summon a critical or philosophical movement related to acceleration itself, with its implications of both speed and progress. And indeed, a number of critics and scholars have sought to construct an intellectual movement to match, frame, or anchor the political posture that Srnicek and Williams proclaimed. In the short time since the Manifesto’s

publication, several books and numerous blog posts in English (written mostly by Englishmen) have taken stabs at elaborating something that might be called *accelerationism*.

- 3 Accelerationism remains an elusive term, even (or especially) in the wake of recent attempts to define it. The MAP's call for accelerationist political stances and strategies did not elaborate an *accelerationism*, and Srnicek and Williams's newest book, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (2015), pointedly avoids the label, citing the "the miasma of competing understandings that has risen around the concept" of accelerationism.² Their latest collaboration intervenes in debates about automation and capitalism, which can proceed without much reckoning with theories of accelerationism. Still, while Srnicek and Williams may have migrated to other metaphors, the discourse of accelerationism carries on in their absence. Three publications have found philosophically serious content in the notion of accelerationism and have sought to construct lengthy genealogies and rich pedigrees for current thinking about everything from the autonomy of technology to the relationship between humans and machines, from the nature of capitalism to the trajectory of history. Benjamin Noys, in *Malign Velocities* (2014), provides the most systematic attempt to present (and reject) accelerationism as a philosophical movement. Noys, a specialist in critical theory and continental philosophy, had in fact introduced the term in a 2010 book (though the earliest appearance of the noun accelerationism dates to Roger Zelazny's 1967 fantasy novel *Lord of Light*) to link and diagnose a set of fundamentally nihilist impulses in the writings of Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, and various other post-1968 Nietzschean engagements with capitalism. The most emphatic recuperation of the term accelerationism as the banner for a philosophical position appears in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (2014), edited by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, which finds (not without some strain) surprising antecedents (including Thorstein Veblen and Shulamith Firestone) for a movement that gathered steam around the anti-humanism of Nick Land and his Warwick-based Cybernetic Culture Research Unit in the 1990s. Somewhere in the middle lies *No Speed Limit* (2015) by the American scholar Steven Shaviro, who expresses sympathy for the political goals of the MAP, distances himself from its Promethean confidence and its technophilia, and seeks to redeem a form of accelerationist aesthetics best captured in science fiction.³
- 4 Taken together, the three books give a sense of the diverse positions and thinkers that could fit under the capacious rubric of accelerationism, as well as the quite different genealogies that might connect Marx, through Deleuze / Guattari, to something like the MAP. Shaviro's lucid account presumes accelerationism to be a leftist project, but Noys's critique pays attention to the affinities between accelerationism and the fascist-friendly elements of Italian Futurism, while the *#Accelerate* anthology suggests a spectrum of political agendas (especially anti-humanist ones) that might converge around a celebration of the productive capacities of capitalism. The various versions of accelerationism fasten on distinct strains of Marxist thought that do not necessarily point in the same political direction: Marx's forward-looking orientation, his suggestion that progress toward communism would take place through capitalist expansion, and his fascination with the disruptive, revolutionary tendencies of capital itself.

- 5 But whereas the political polysemy of accelerationism's flaunted ease with brave new technological worlds might make the phenomenon more interesting, the ambiguity of the term itself gives pause. Accelerationism implies two quite different things, one prescriptive and one descriptive, one rooted in the transitive use of the English verb and one rooted in the intransitive. For some proponents, acceleration is something that political actors ought to do – or at least root for. Accelerationism on this model means accelerating (in the transitive sense) a historical process of capitalist development, with all of its dislocation and disruption, in order to hasten the arrival of a postcapitalist order. But at other times acceleration describes what is already happening (intransitively) in the current capitalist order. Accelerationism on this second model identifies, privileges, and embraces a particular feature of the world we inhabit and a particular disruptive tendency of capitalism – acceleration rather than speed or velocity (which are closely related to acceleration, of course, but not quite the same), but also acceleration rather than commodification, abstraction, deterritorialization, decoding, alienation, and annihilation.
- 6 Whenever acceleration means hastening or expediting an historical process, accelerationism amounts to a call for revisiting familiar strategic debates among those who wish to defeat or transcend capitalism. But if acceleration is itself the social force with which we are being asked to grapple, accelerationism invites us to reconsider the state of capitalist society in that light. In subtle ways, much of the recent writing appearing under the accelerationist banner seems to link or merge these two distinct understandings of acceleration, as if to suggest that the impulse to “accelerate the process” (to quote Deleuze and Guattari's innovation of Nietzsche) would naturally accompany the perception that the defining feature of contemporary capitalism is its accelerative impact. But the two accelerationisms may not be that connected, except inasmuch as enthusiasm about the latent political potential of new technologies tends to incubate with greater frequency and fervor among those who imagine that the ever-increasing speed of some of those technologies constitutes the hallmark of our age.
- 7 The claim that acceleration, in the descriptive and intransitive sense, characterizes and even defines the current phase of capitalist development, goes largely unscrutinized in accelerationist discourse. It might seem incontrovertible to assume that technical changes in communications devices have dramatically increased or intensified the pace of commercial and social exchange over the course of twenty years (though it is worth observing that from the perspective of transportation technologies those years do not seem equally characterized by acceleration). Still, it does not follow that ours is an age of acceleration. On the face of it, one might as plausibly define the current communications landscape in terms of information glut, the collapse of temporal boundaries, or the further annihilation of space by time. Or one might reasonably compare our own experiences and perceptions of simultaneity, instantaneity, velocity, and temporal compression to those of North America and Western Europe a century earlier, when (as Stephen Kern argued influentially in *The Culture of Time and Space*) new thresholds and standards of speed prompted revolutionary talk in such diverse fields as music, literature, physics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis.⁴ Yet the assumption that life is accelerating beyond recognition in distinctive, rule-changing, barrier-breaking ways dominates cultural and political criticism.
- 8 Such an assumption is shared by both the giddy accelerationists who embrace current developments and the despondent voices on the anti-Promethean left who mourn

them. Mark C. Taylor's *Speed Limits: Where Time Went and Why We Have So Little Left* (2014) appeared as if on cue to defend accelerationism against the charge of having created a straw-man version of the miserabilist and nostalgic left. Taylor, a religious studies scholar at a major U.S. university, offers an oddly simplistic account of the history of his subject, but his conviction that the last few decades have witnessed "a pace of change...accelerated" beyond both precedent and expectation – and his impulse to substantiate that conviction by pointing to the speed of new communications media – undoubtedly resonates with many humanist readers.⁵

- 9 Are we, in fact, living in age of profound and straining temporal acceleration? Accelerationist criticism leaves this question largely unanswered, and historians have barely begun to provide the kinds of studies of the pace of life that would help contextualize our current predicament. Scholarly inquiry into temporal acceleration and compression has been dominated for a long time by German authors, and especially by sociologists (both empirical and theoretical).⁶ Hartmut Rosa's *Social Acceleration* (originally published in German in 2005) represents the most comprehensive recent attempt to analyze from a sociological perspective the proposition that accelerationists and Luddites take for granted: that technical speedups in production, communication, and circulation produce profound social changes. Rosa's conclusions reinforce the conventional hypothesis that things are speeding up all around us, as well as the familiar Marxist notion that "the contraction or annihilation of space by... acceleration is a constitutive feature of modernity."⁷ But by distinguishing the issue of how quickly something is produced, transported, or communicated from the larger experience of time moving quickly, he is able to make the familiar hypothesis seem less straightforward and self-evident. One of the virtues of Rosa's book is that it leaves the subject of acceleration more fragmented than it found it. Whether the new interest in accelerationist politics will provoke further inquiry into the phenomenology of speed and the multiple meanings of acceleration seems doubtful. Instead, accelerationism may help specify and clarify the historically shifting lines that divide the optimists among us from the pessimists.

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NOTES

1. Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, “# Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,” reprinted in Robin Mackay and Armen Avenassian (eds.), *# Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 349-362.
2. Quoted in “Accelerationism without Accelerationism,” <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2015/11/03/>.
3. Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014); Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
4. Kern, *The Culture of Time & Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).
5. Taylor, *Speed Limits: Where Time Went and Why Have So Little Left* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). Quotation appears on p. 9. Other jeremiads from the decelerationist left, like the sanctimonious but sophisticated *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014), by the art historian Jonathan Crary, bemoan the current temporal crisis without reducing it to the question of acceleration.
6. Max Weber and Norbert Elias stand at the head of this tradition, but more recent contributors include Reinhart Koselleck and Hartmut Rosa, as well as the British sociologist Anthony Giddens.
7. Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. Quotation appears on p. 216.

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