

Remembering the Future¹

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For the last forty years the vision of our societies as progressive and heading in a better direction has been systematically eroded. Under the permutation of capitalism that began in the 1970s, gained traction in the 1980s, appeared victorious in the 1990s, and faced serious problems in the late 2000s – the future has been cancelled. Today, it is common sense to presume that climate change and its effects will wreak havoc on the environment, that real wages will continue to stagnate, that jobs will become more precarious, that retirements and pensions will be eliminated, and that inequality and the exploitation of society's weakest will only worsen. This is the future offered by the variants of neoliberal political economy that dominate the developed world today.

We see this erasure of the future in the political left as well – much of which has been reduced to a conservatism which desperately seeks to merely retain the remaining parts of the welfare state and social democracy. “Against austerity!” is the rallying cry of this mainstream conservative left today. This is to say that in the leading European nations much of the established left has been reduced to trafficking in the politics of fear, rather than the politics of freedom and the project for a more just society. All the while, the long-term prospects for social democracy are slowly eroded through technological innovation, financial engineering, and ever-more flexibilised job markets. While attempts to safeguard the gains of social democracy are to be lauded, they also remain totally inadequate. Faced with the newfound rapaciousness of neoliberalism after the 2008 financial crisis, such politics might be capable of minor victories, but the recent tide of history appears to flow in the opposite direction only.

And yet, in the mobilisations of the masses across the world – from Greece to Spain, from the US to the UK, from Brazil to Turkey, and from Sudan to Egypt – there is a real sense that the future doesn't have to be over, and that a new and very different future must be constructed. It is this desire which we have attempted to give a name to with the term ‘accelerationism’ – to begin to aid the project, still inchoate, unborn and implicit, to reclaim the future for a left politics. In other words, what we have called accelerationism is the attempt to consider what a left politics of the future might look like. This remembrance of the future is what the mainstream left of parliamentary political parties often finds difficult to see. For commentators in the media it would seem that accelerationism must be reducible to the old categories: either the horizontality of networks or the verticality of the old Stalinist or trade union left; either parliamentary democracy or authoritarianism; either technological utopia or primitivism.

Other commentators have taken accelerationism's surging popularity as a sign that it is merely fashionable nonsense, an academic game designed to please the enervated minds of intellectuals far from the concerns of day-to-day politics. But it's a curiously elitist position

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that lies behind this argument – it presumes that any political idea which mobilises the passions of the people must be fashionable and empty, by definition. By that measure, the staid, boring form of parliamentary politics would have to be seen as the model of success – with its rising voter apathy, and declining party memberships.

The passion that accelerationism mobilises is the remembrance by the people that a future is possible. In disparate fields – from politics to art to design to biology to philosophy – people are working through how to create a world that is liberated from capitalist incentives. Perhaps most promisingly, the classic dream of Keynes and Marx for the reduction of work and the flourishing of positive freedoms, is making a comeback. In the push for universal basic incomes, and the movements for reduced working weeks, we see the people themselves beginning to carve out a space separate from the wage relation and outside of the imperatives of work. When the media stops reporting the automation of jobs as being a tragedy and starts reporting them as being a liberation from mundane work, we will know that the accelerationist disposition has become the new common sense. We have reached a point in human history where vast amounts of jobs can – and should – be automated. Work for work's sake is a perversity and a constraint imposed upon humanity by capitalism's ideology of the work ethic. What accelerationism seeks is to allow human potential to escape from the trap set for it by contemporary capitalism.

A recent study by Oxford University has calculated that the likely impact of automation in the next twenty years in the United States will possibly lead to 47% of current jobs being replaced by automated systems. We would be foolish to believe the situation will be substantially different in the rest of the developed world. The results of this process are unclear, but a serious crisis in the ability of consumer capitalism to continue to function in anything approaching its current form appears likely. The results of this crisis will depend on political action, on the ability of groups to hegemonise around the new technologies. If another world is possible, then one task of a new left will be to embrace this technology and the potential it offers to undermine capitalism, reposing questions about the nature of value, work, and the distribution of technical gains amongst different sectors of the population.

In this sense, accelerationism argues that the left must disconnect itself from a defensive and conservative politics of preservation, whether embodied in parliamentary politics seeking to preserve social democracy from the tidal force of neoliberalism or more radical movements proposing a 'localist' or organic solution to our current ills. What the left must reconnect to is its roots in the Enlightenment, in a rationalist and universal vision of collective human self-construction. This would be to lay claim to a positive vision of the future, capable of supplanting our current economic and political systems with ones which enable, rather than suppress, a generalised human flourishing. Against those across the political spectrum who indulge in the fantasy of local, small-scaled solutions to our many crises, this requires us to re-engineer our complex, abstract, and multi-scalar world without seeking to simplify it according to some pre-conceived schema. In place of folk political solutions, we should be pushing for full automation of work, reduction of the working week, and a universal basic income for everyone. It is these proposals which can lead us away from the conservative stance of anti-austerity, and rejuvenate the future-oriented and progressive politics of the left. For it is only once the left takes command of the future, and modernisation once again becomes synonymous with radical left politics, rather than neoliberalisation, that we can collectively come to grasp our world such that we might change it.