

#Celerity: A Critique of the Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics

McKenzie Wark

0.0 You have to love any manifesto which gets to climate change in only its second paragraph. It shows a keen attention to the actual agenda of the times. This is not the least merit of *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*. It has at least some grasp of contemporary conjuncture in which we find ourselves. But the grasp is in my view, only partial. In some ways it's a rather old-fashioned text. Of course, one is always drawing on the past to imagine a future. But this process – some would call it *détournement*, some would call it hacking – has to be done with a little more historical depth and breadth. What follows, then, is a friendly commentary and critique of *#Accelerate*. The numbering of these counter-theses match those of the original document.

1.1 The widening gyre of the commodity economy is a series of what, after Marx, we can call *metabolic rifts*. In the division between exchange value and use value, commodity exchange severs objects from the matrices of their engendering. Only one side of the double form of value is subject to a quantitative feedback loop – exchange value. Its vestigial double – use value – or the mesh from which things are

extracted, is not so easily quantified. And so rifts open up in the metabolic process. Rifts which political systems borne of the successive eras of commodity economy cannot even recognize as problems, let alone solve.

1.2 Climate change is the most troubling of these rifts, but there are many others. The problem with the dynamic of the commodity economy is that the struggle within it of subordinated classes tends, among other things, to force the ruling class toward substituting technology for direct labor. But each of these substitutions draws in turn on more energy and more material resources. The whole infrastructure of the global commodity economy has by now committed itself to the consumption of more resources than may even exist. The ruling class, when not deluding itself with various ideological ruses, surely knows that maintaining a commodity economy on full speed ahead can only worsen various metabolic rifts, climate disruption among them. One suspects it is quietly preparing for this, arming itself, building its private arks.

1.3 Against this hideous prospect, its high time for a new imaginary, a new space for thought and action. Such an imaginary already exists, but in fragments. The difficulty for subordinate classes is always the

project of the totality, the very thing over which they have no power. Well, nobody has power over the totality as totality any more! The biosphere is in decline as a result of a mass of private interests competing to chop it into bits of exchange value. The challenge is to claim the totality, to open it, to put modernity back in play as a space affording more than one path to a viable future.

1.4 The ruling class would like us to imagine that the 'neoliberal' future is the only one. This term needs to be challenged on a number of fronts. Firstly, this is not a restoration of a liberal order. It's something new. It was not a turning back of the clock to a form of commodity economy prior to the welfare state and all the other compromises wrested from the ruling class by organized labor and the social movements. It's a new stage, based on new technical infrastructures, new forms of control. Secondly: what makes anyone think capitalism was ever 'liberal' in the first place? The autonomy of the economic sphere is itself an ideological proposition. The 'liberal' economic sphere was achieved through massive state violence against premodern peoples and their ways of life. So: there was no liberal capitalism; there is no neoliberal capitalism. But there is a new stage of the commodity economy whose contours are rather undefined

theoretically, and not least because the left buys into the 'neoliberal' myth as much as the right.

1.5 In the overdeveloped world of Europe, the United States and Japan, class composition has changed significantly. Manufacturing has declined within the composition of labor. The pressure points that organized labor used to have at which to struggle for its interests are no longer within reach. Even if we could shut down all the hair salons it would not have the same effect as shutting down a strategic industry like steel. Now that such strategic industries are often not located in the overdeveloped world, the ruling class has less and less interest in maintaining the conditions of reproduction within the space of the old overdeveloped nations. If your big investments are not there, then why care about the health or education of those workers? The old Keynesian solutions to the current crisis would in fact work very well, but there is no coalition of interest for them, and significant ruling class pressure to use the crisis to reduce the reproductive functions of the state. In any case, the emerging forms of commodification take aim at precisely the affective labor and informational labor that the state usually still provides, in health and education. The overdeveloped world offers few new domains for commodification, so these old socialized ones become targets.

1.6 The diffusion of commodity relations throughout the whole domain of the overdeveloped world fragments and renders more and more molecular the points of conflict and struggle. Local and specific forms of challenge arise, from Occupy Wall Street to the quiet, passive 'Bartleby' tactics of not doing anything at work you don't really have to do. The problem is finding forms of semantic glue to stitch such actions together rhetorically. This need not be a radical language, it just needs to be a plausible one. A popular poetics of the open totality, of there being more than one possible future, and more than one possible path out of the present.

2.0 Celerity

2.0 Not so fast, you may say. Let's not get caught up in too quick a dismissal of existing forms of theory and praxis. While the manifesto form thrives on the pure annihilation of the past, let's proceed with all deliberate speed, but not too haphazardly.

2.1 To begin with: while the commodity economy presents itself as forward-moving, even as 'progressive', let's challenge that myth. It seems that a large part of what the ruling class is now doing in the overdeveloped world is cultivating and defending

quasi-monopoly conditions. Using the archaic patent system to shut out any whipper-snappers, or to joust with each other for turf. Meanwhile, what the ruling class seems to be doing in the so-called underdeveloped world is rolling out the old industrial paradigm of the nineteenth century on a massive scale. It encounters there in modified form the recalcitrance of labor, and responds with the same spectacular offerings, which are met with the same boredom, again, on an expanded scale. The relations of production of the commodity economy seem more a fetter on the free development of new social and technical arrangements, new kinds of future, than their custodians. The commodity form itself is out of date.

2.2 There's something to be said for the thought exercise of imagining where the commodity form, left to accelerate according to its own one-track mind, would end up. Its replacement of recalcitrant labor by capital would become absolute, making labor obsolete, like a vestigial organ. If only there were enough energy and resources left. It might even make not only labor but the ruling class obsolete. A whole planet ticking over via silicon encrusting bits! But this is only a thought exercise, a fatal strategy in theory. In practice there's not enough planet left to entertain such an idea. Besides: technology may have agency

but it isn't absolute. It is pressed this way and that by competing class interests. Even when it seems like alternate paths to the future are foreclosed, there's always struggle, internal differentiation. There's always points that can be prized open.

2.3 Opening the path to other futures means reopening the qualitative dimension of modernity, its aesthetic dimension. This was the chosen terrain of its avant-gardes: the futurists and constructivists, the surrealists and situationists, the accelerationists and schizomaniacs. All of which opened up futures that have now been foreclosed. But: to make three steps forward, two steps back. There are many resources in the aesthetic alter-modern spaces of the past via which to experiment with steps forward.

2.4 All these qualitative avant-gardes met their Waterloo: the quantitative rear-guard. The path to sustaining the commodity economy after the challenges of organized labor and the social movements reached its peak was a new kind of quantification, a new logistics, a new mesh of vectors for command and control. Initially it was crude and dealt only with aggregates and proxies, like the early computer simulations of the cold war. But what really led to its dominance is the embedding in everyday life itself of the production of the quantitative data for

its expansion to the whole of life. Thus, the qualitative avant-gardes have to re-imagine possible spaces for alter-modernities based on this transformation of everyday life in all its forms into a gamespace of quantified data. Just as the situationists imagined a space of play in the interstitial spaces of the policing of the city via the *dérive*, so too we now have to imagine and experiment with emerging gaps and cracks in the gamespace that the commodity economy has become. The time of the hack, or the exploit, is at hand.

2.5 Here we can follow in the path of Marx, but not by treating him scholastically. Rather, one has to reinvent his practice: his use of conceptual tools as tools, his use of the best empirical data, his attunement to the struggles around him, his deployment of the communicative strategies of modernity itself. Moreover, we need to recover Marx's version of the Nietzschean slogan: "god is dead." For Marx, history is not transitive. There's no going back. There's only forward. It's a question of struggling to open another future besides this one which, as he himself intuited, has no future at all. So: let's look not at what Marx says, but what he does. Let's align ourselves, as he did, with the avant garde of the times.

2.6 There's little to be gained from re-hashing the various experiments in twentieth century revolution. Lenin and Mao have little to teach us. Their situation is not our situation. The rest is moot.

2.7 Who are the forces for social change? Marx asks this in his *Manifesto*. And his answer: those who ask the property question. It turns out that putting all property in the hands of the state is not the right answer to the property question. Goodbye Lenin; goodbye Mao. But the *question* remains a valid one. Who are the agents struggling in and against the emergent productive forms who can shape the affordances of those technologies and labor processes? One of the answers is: the worker. But another is: the 'hacker'. The worker is the one who struggles in and against a productive regime. The hacker is the one who contributes to designing new ones, or at the very least populating the existing ones with new concepts, new ideas – recuperated by the new property forms of so-called 'intellectual property'. These are the accelerators of modernity: those who labor in and against it. These are the ones for whom the regime of the commodity economy is as much fetter as enabler. The relation between these classes, and with other subaltern classes, becomes the key tactical issue. An issue of not just a poetics of an open future, but modes of coordination.

3.0 Futurity

3.1 The task is one of coordinating the latent energies of a people bored with what the commodity has to offer with the awareness of what shaping powers remain to us to open cracks towards new futures. It's not either or. 'Folk politics' and technical politics need to talk to each other. To do otherwise is to lapse, on the one hand, into local and specific grievances, or purely negative energies, or a refusal to confront the larger picture of metabolic rift. On the other hand, to ignore folk politics is also a danger, the danger of the technocratic fix. It's to base decisions on a refusal to acknowledge folk struggle and demand, but also insight and information from the popular struggles in and against commodity economy. What we need is neither abstraction nor occupying, but *the occupying of abstraction*.

3.2 It's a question of whether boredom with the commodity economy will work fast enough, as it spreads from the overdeveloped world to the underdeveloped, to open up a new path before metabolic rifts like the climate crisis forces the planet toward more violent, disorganizing, and frankly fascist 'solutions' to its problems. Already in China factory workers are starting to get restless. Beyond that, there's only so much cheap labor left on the planet to exploit. Meanwhile, in the overdeveloped

world, a rather novel regime of value extraction is finding ways to extract value from non-work. Search engines and social networking find ways to extract value from activity regardless of whether it is 'work' and without paying for it. It's a kind of *vulture industry*, parasitic on frankly successful popular struggles to free vast tracts of information from the commodity form and circulate it freely. But having beaten back the old culture industries with this tactic, the social movement that was free culture finds itself recuperated at a higher level of abstraction by the vulture industries and their 'gamification' of every aspect of everyday life. So: any alter-modernity project has to bypass the expansion of the old commodification regimes across the planet, but also these curious new ones, dominant in the overdeveloped world, but tending now to transform information flows everywhere.

3.3 Of course, part of the old ruling class still insists on increasingly repressive and global measures to restrict information to the old property form, whether of patent or copyright or trademark. But the current productive regime respects no such antiquated embedding of information into particular objects. "Information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains." But it has in part been sidestepped by another faction of the ruling class itself, which finds

ways to extract value from the spontaneous, popular gift economies of information that have sprung up. New tactics are called for now, to work against the new forms of commodification as well as the old. Perhaps it would even be possible to design more efficient and useful technical and social relations, no matter how lo-tech, precisely because they would not require the cumbersome 'digital rights management' and so forth of the old fettered regime.

3.4 While there may be no going back to the old Fordist models of production, the partial socializations of the surplus that were the fruit of struggle of that time have much to recommend them. It really is the case that these 'socialist' systems of housing, healthcare and education outperformed their profiteering cousins. The ideology of the times denies this, but it's the case. These efficient systems are being carved up in the overdeveloped world for no better reason than to produce inefficient copies of them which enable the ruling class to extract a surplus from *something*. Let's never forget: it may not have been utopia, but socialism succeeded, *in the west*, in these domains.

3.5 Building better futures will take all the technical infrastructure we can get. But it's not as simple as repurposing existing infrastructures, all of which are

based on ever-expanding resource use and labor exploitation as design gives. The first step forward is to get out of either/or language about technology. So much discussion either sees it as panacea or curse. Technology, as Stiegler says, is a *pharamakon*: its both, and everything in between. A technology is not what it does, it is also what it might do. We need an open-ended, experimental approach, a critical design approach. Being 'for' or 'against' it is one of the old problems of an unhelpful discourse of modernity.

3.6 One of the best of the 'socialist' systems of the west was publicly funded big science. Science was always subordinated to national security and industrial development goals, but it was not identical to them. The internet was invented more or less by accident. Most of the breakthroughs happened before science was narrowly constrained to producing value for the commodity economy or specific defense needs. We need to recover a sense of the possibility of science. Most of its failures were not failures of science, but failures of politics. Pesticides like DDT cause damage because of a failure of the feedback loop from folk politics to technocratic decision making. The same is true of so many toxic disasters today. Indeed, one needs science to know when the product of a science is being misapplied. Climate science is the reason we know so much of applied

science in industry is causing problems. We need more science, not less. Including a science of popular knowledge of the effects of applied industrial science.

3.7 Even a little techno-utopianism might not be a bad thing from time to time, to imagine possible spaces, even if only conceptual spaces, like in the work of Constant. But if we acknowledge that tech on its own can't save us, then we need to be attendant also to experiments in 'social' technology. Horizontalism, for example, as practiced in Occupy Wall Street and elsewhere, is also a technology. Whether it's a techno-utopia one is embarked upon, or a new social practice, one has to pay attention to how the social inhabits the former and the technical permeates the latter. Tech and the social (or the political) are not separate things. The phrase "the technological is politically (or socially) constructed" is meaningless. One is simply looking at the same systems through different lenses when one speaks of the political or the technical. But among intellectuals, the social, the political (and we can add the cultural) are something of a fetish. There's something tactically useful in stressing the technical bases of all such perspectives. Among engineers and designers, of course, the opposite thinking strategy applies. Accelerating technical evolution requires a conversation that is

sophisticated in such matters, and which includes all perspectives, including 'folk' ones.

3.8 There can be no return to 'planning' as a panacea, however, as it always implies asymmetries of information. The excluded parties and their knowledge, their struggles, always turn out to be relevant. We need only look at the ecological disasters of Soviet planning for examples. The challenge is to coordinate qualitative knowledge as well as the market coordinates quantitative knowledge – and better.

3.9 New kinds of quantitative measure can also help. Let's use that weapon against the ruling class! But we also need new visualization tools, new narratives, new poetics. And ones which do not exclude 'folk politics' but rather include them. The question to ask about any new 'cognitive mediator' is: *whose cognition is it mediating?*

3.10 The emphasis for an alter-modernity at this point has to be on its *experimental* practices. This means a synthesis not just of the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of modernity but also threading back together its critical, negative tendencies and its affirmative, design-based ones.

3.11 All this calls for a gathering of social forces. It requires cross-class alliances, of workers and hackers. It requires transnational networks, spanning the overdeveloped and underdeveloped worlds. It's not simply a matter of 'reprogramming' existing technical infrastructures. It's a question of aligning the tendencies which struggle within it at all its points.

3.12 It is no longer enough to say what an ideal 'politics' might be. Perhaps 'politics' itself needs to become an object of sever critique. Intellectuals like to imagine an ideal version of politics, but are less keen on the actually existing ones. It's a question of finding the right job for those of us who talk and write and don't do much else. Perhaps as agents of a *low theory*, which tries to link up particular struggles, rather than plan it, top down. Let's talk no more of what politics 'ought' to be like. Comrades, roll up your sleeves!

3.13 Certainly let's not retreat too far back towards the secrecy, verticality and exclusion which got us into this mess in the first place. Planning has its place. Every economy plans. But too much closure just leads to information deficits.

3.14 Neither the command of the plan nor the purely horizontal participatory model works on its own. They exist in tension with each other, and with many

other social forms. Let's play with a full deck of social forms.

3.15 There is always an ecology of organizations, of a sort. But the problem with the current one is that it does not reproduce its own conditions of existence. It destroys them. This must be a central object of both critique and experiment at all levels.

3.16 Retreating to the mountain, equipping some ruling elite with a new ideology and a few cognitive tools – only prolongs the crisis. Let's not dally with the fantasy of a new prince of Syracuse.

3.21 The Promethean mythology of the futurists might work for some, but a more capacious and global deployment of the mythic stock of images and stories is more what the times call for. Besides, what happened to Prometheus?

3.24 The prospect of a future does however need reconstruction. It might begin with a synthesis of various strands of modernity that are now fragmented into separate realms, all under the reign of the commodity and its quantitative equivalence. But such a prospect means nothing without identifiable social actors. It calls for a popular, and populist, struggle, in many languages, drawing

different modes of thought and experiment into common projects. It may not need an over-arching image or metaphor. Fordist models even in ideology seem a thing of the past. The task is not political rhetoric but an actually political one, of finding the *modus vivendi* for different forces in struggle, acting now with the utmost celerity.

4.0 Personal Concluding Thoughts

4.0 So: Two cheers for *#Accelerate*. But only two. It successfully develops the provocative writing of Nick Land, and to his left. But if Land is a 'right-accelerationist', *#Accelerate* ends up being something of a centrist-accelerationist position. It defaults to planning, to the intellectual retreat up to the mountain, rather than engaging with new forms of struggle. Still, its reanimated futurism, its openness toward technology, to thinking problems at scale, these are positive features. What remains is to push it a little toward a more 'left-accelerationist' position, without lapsing into the sins of the left: the fetish of politics as the magical solution to everything high among them.

4.1 To the extent that personally I find common ground here is that *#Accelerate* overlaps with a position I started to stake out ten years ago now, in A

Hacker Manifesto (Harvard UP 2004) and *Gamer Theory* (Harvard UP 2007). Those texts reflect the positive and more pessimistic dimensions of accelerationism respectively. I drew on different modernist avant garde resources, the genealogy of which I then sketched out in *The Beach Beneath the Street* (Verso, 2011) and *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (Verso 2013). In short: there's other paths to the same territory besides the strange one that wends from Karl Marx via Georges Bataille to Nick Land. (Deleuze, however, we have in common). Perhaps the collective project is remap that territory, so we know better what our options are in what resources can be drawn from the past. Otherwise: damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.