

Introduction

Marxist Transhumanism or Transhumanist Marxism?

James Steinhoff and Atle Mikkola Kjøsén
Guest Editors

This special issue of *New Proposals* explores how Marxism and transhumanism might be brought into conjunction. These two fields are rarely discussed together, and when they are, it is typically in the mode of one critiquing the other: Marxists against transhumanism (Rechtenwald 2013; Noonan 2016) or transhumanists against Marxism (Kurzweil 2012; Istvan 2018). We argue, contrary to this tendency, that there is much to gain from bringing these two fields together. Both of us have previously experimented with combining the two around a decade ago: by subjecting Marx's theory of value to a transhumanist vision of an android future (Kjøsén 2013; see also 2018) and by teasing out philosophical connections between conceptions of nature, humanity and machines in Marxism and transhumanism (Steinhoff 2014). More recently, with Nick Dyer-Witheford, we considered the future of artificial intelligence, a quintessential transhumanist technology, through a Marxist lens (Dyer-Witheford, Kjøsén & Steinhoff 2019). In this special issue, we sought to elaborate the idea that the opposition between Marxism and transhumanism is not necessary or inherent, but rather contingent and historical. While not all the papers collected here agree with this assertion, their

various trajectories all orbit around a central question: could there be a Marxist transhumanism or a transhumanist Marxism?

Marxism is the vast body of work descended from Karl Marx. This being a journal explicitly devoted to Marxist scholarship, we leave it to the reader to define the field more precisely for themselves. Transhumanism, however, requires some introduction amid the proliferation of similar terms such as antihumanism, metahumanism and posthumanism (for a disambiguation, see Ranisch and Sorgner 2015). Transhumanism is defined by its proponents as an “intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities” (Humanity+ n.d.). While this description says nothing about politics, most recent transhumanism has been deeply pro-capital following its techno-libertarian manifestation in 1990s “extropianism” (More 1990) and subsequent popularization by entrepreneur-futurist Ray Kurzweil (Kurzweil 1999). Because of this, the pro-

methean project of improving the human condition by technological means tends to be joined with, and confused for capital accumulation. Some of the most radical transhumanist thinkers tend to assume the continued functioning of capital amid cataclysmic, and even cosmic, socio-technological change. For example, although Kurzweil argues that the coming technological singularity (the moment when machines exceed human capacities in all respects) will irreversibly transform every aspect of human life, and even “death itself,” he still expects there to be a need for “business models” (Kurzweil 2005, 7).

In addition to such explicit boosters of capital, contemporary transhumanism is tacitly represented in the operations of the world’s most powerful capitalist firms. The turn to AI research since 2015 by all of the world’s largest technology companies is emblematic of this practical transhumanism. Take for instance, the British company DeepMind (acquired by Alphabet/Google in 2014) which aims to produce human-level artificial general intelligence (AGI), or in their own words, “solve intelligence” for the betterment of humanity. Consider also Elon Musk’s brain-computer interface Neuralink which was recently demonstrated to allow a monkey to play the video game Pong via an interface wired directly to its motor cortex (Flaig 2021).

However, while transhumanism today appears as a capitalist project, its historical lineage can be traced back to early twentieth century socialist thinkers such as the philosopher-physician Alexander Bogdanov and the biologists J. B. S. Haldane, and J. D. Bernal (Bostrom 2005; Stambler 2010; Hughes 2012). Marx himself has many what we might call *high modernist* moments in which he argues for overcoming human and natural limits and advocates the socialized use of technology to achieve freedom from necessity for all humans (see, for instance, Marx 1991, 958-959). The high modernist Marx can be read as a transhumanist. Despite this, and a history of Marxist technological fascination, by and large, contemporary Marxists show little interest in transhumanism. One prominent exception are the left accelerationists/postcapitalism theorists, who draw on transhumanist motifs, such as cyborg augmentation, terraforming

and full automation (Srnicek and Williams 2015; Mason 2016; Bastani 2019). Left accelerationism has, however, picked up transhumanist motifs while dropping the capital/labour antagonism central to Marxist thought (Brown 2016; Gardiner 2017), glossing over much of the difficult question of how exactly capital is supposed to come to an end. We suggest that left accelerationism forgets its Marxist roots as it is blinded by transhumanist futures. “Accelerating the process” could, after all, lead to Kurzweil’s dream of superintelligent business models. However, new varieties of left accelerationism continue to emerge, such as xenofeminism, which is held by some of the contributors to this special issue to be an ideal combination of Marxism and transhumanism, so perhaps our evaluation will need to be revised in the future.

In any case, our argument is that the issues central to transhumanism should not be the purview solely of the representatives of capital, nor of the left accelerationists. Neither should Marxist thought consider itself wholly distinct from the transhumanist movement. Instead, we hold that Marxist thought should seriously engage with transhumanism in order to “decouple it from its blindly capitalist trajectory, reflect on Marx’s own high modernist tendencies, and delineate a social project to embrace or escape” (Dyer-Witheford, Kjosen & Steinhoff, 2019, 161). To this end, we now present the following collection of papers, which present original and exciting views on the conjunction of Marxism and transhumanism.

The first section of the issue, “Towards a Marxist Transhumanism” includes papers which aim to produce a synthesis of Marxism and transhumanism or argue for the impossibility of that synthesis. Working towards a Marxist transhumanism, Sam Popowich problematizes existing transhumanist conceptions of identity and individuality and develops an alternative drawn from autonomist Marxism’s notion of general intellect. Santiago Javier Armesilla Conde aims to develop a Marxist transhumanism by revealing actually-existing transhumanism as “transcapitalism” defined by a combination of anatomopolitics, thanatopolitics, and biopolitics. Andrey Maidansky and Nikolai Biryukov examine historical connections between Marxism and transhumanism in the

Russian context. They argue that transhumanists have neglected Marxian and Russian cosmist precedents of their ideas, focusing especially on Marx's idea of the inorganic body and his materialist conception of human essence. James Steinhoff argues that Marxism is inherently transhumanistic because it entails a drive to de-reify nature, including the human being. He argues that Marxism necessitates a temporal inversion of its historical materialist perspective, entailing a transhumanist orientation towards the future of the human. Taking a contrary position to the above arguments, Jeff Noonan holds that there cannot be a Marxist transhumanism because these two fields have incommensurable goals; transhumanism aims to overcome the finitude of organic life, while Marxism aims to overcome the oppression of class society.

The second section, "Transhumanist/Marxist Explorations" contains papers which aim to cross-pollinate Marxist and transhumanist ideas. Iain Crinson questions whether transhumanism and Marxism's fundamental drives are really at odds via an interrogation of the ontological dualism between nature and the human. Lachlan Ross argues that transhumanist aspirations, including a blissful post-singularity life, are better understood via an adaptation of Marx's notion of real subsumption

to the body of the worker and capital's desire to produce therein a state of "constant unremunerated value creation." Jens Schröter tackles the aesthetic dimensions of transhumanism and Marxism, considering Marx's notion of capital as the automatic subject as grasping the always-already transhumanist character of capitalism via several case studies of contemporary art.

The final section "Marxism + Transhumanism = Xenofeminism?" unsurprisingly contains papers which argue for the xenofeminist strand of accelerationism as a resolution of disjunctions between transhumanism and Marxism. Peter Heft positions xenofeminism as the fusion of Marxism and transhumanism and argues that it should be understood as the "corrupted heir" to what he terms "transhumanism." Paddy Gordon critiques the transhumanist subject of left accelerationism for its abstractness and argues for xenofeminism as a better way to engage with the transhumanist future in a grounded and historical way.

We would like to thank the contributors for their efforts and for their patient endurance of the lengthy, pandemic-beleaguered editorial process. We would also like to thank Charles Menzies, editor of *New Proposals*, for his guidance and essential work in bringing this special issue to completion.

References

- Bastani, Aaron. 2019. *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. Verso Books.
- Bostrom, Nick. 2005. "A History of Transhumanist Thought." *Journal of Evolution & Technology* 14:1.
- Brown, Nathan. 2016. "Avoiding Communism: A Critique of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' Inventing the Future." *parrhesia* 25: 155-171.
- Dyer-Witheford, Nick, Atle Mikkola Kjosén, and James Steinhoff. 2019. *Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Flaig, Joseph. 2021. "‘Monkey Mindpong’ demonstration shows transformative power of brain-computer interfaces." *Institution of Mechanical Engineers*. July 6. <https://www.imeche.org/news/news-article/'monkey-mindpong'-demonstration-shows-transformative-power-of-brain-computer-interfaces>
- Gardiner, Michael E. 2017. "Critique of Accelerationism." *Theory, Culture & Society* 34 (1): 29-52.
- Hughes, James J. 2012. "The Politics of Transhumanism and the Techno-Millennial Imagination, 1626–2030." *Zygon* 47(4): 757-776.
- Humanity+. n.d.. "What is Transhumanism?" <https://whatistranshumanism.org/>
- Istvan, Zoltan. 2018. "Transhumanism is Under Siege from Socialism." *The Maven*. <https://www.the-maven.net/transhumanistwager/transhumanism/transhumanism-is-under-siege-from-socialism-UzA2x-HZiFUaGOiUFpc0n5g/>
- Kjosén, Atle Mikkola. 2013. "Do Androids Dream of Surplus Value?" https://www.academia.edu/2455476/Do_Androids_Dream_of_Surplus_Value
- Kjosén, Atle Mikkola. 2018. "Träumen Androiden vom Mehrwert?" *Maske und Kothurn. Internationale Beiträge zur Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft* 64(1-2):144-181
- Kurzweil, Ray. 1999. *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*. Viking.
- Kurzweil, Ray. 2005. *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Penguin.
- Kurzweil, Ray. 2012. "Kurzweil: Technology Will Achieve the Goals of Communism." Interview at the World Technology Summit and Awards. Dailymotion. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xm7xnn>
- Marx, Karl. 1991. *Capital Volume III*. New York: Penguin.
- Mason, Paul. 2016. *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*. Macmillan.
- More, Max. 1990. "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy." *Extropy* 6 (6).
- Noonan, Jeff. 2016. "The Debate on Immortality: Posthumanist Science vs. Critical Philosophy." *The European Legacy* 21 (1): 38-51.
- Ranisch, Robert and Stefan Sorgner. 2015. *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Rechtanwald, Michael. 2013. "The Singularity and Socialism." *Insurgent Notes*. <http://insurgentnotes.com/2013/10/the-singularity-and-socialism/>
- Srnicek, Nick, and Alex Williams. 2015. *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. Verso Books.
- Stambler, Ilia. 2010. "Life Extension – a Conservative Enterprise? Some Fin-de-siècle and Early Twentieth-Century Precursors of Transhumanism." *Journal of Evolution & Technology* 21 (1): 13-26.
- Steinhoff, James. 2014. "Transhumanism and Marxism: Philosophical Connections." *Journal of Evolution & Technology* 24 (2): 1-16.