Left Accelerationism, Transhumanism and the Dialectic: Three Manifestos

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ABSTRACT: Left accelerationism and the transhuman subject who embodies this movement's political potential have multivalent relations to Marxism. Whilst recent interventions such as Srnicek and Williams' *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* and Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC)* situate themselves within the Marxist tradition (typically relying heavily on the "fragment on machines" section of the *Grundrisse*), immediately apparent is a problem of both politics and epistemology. In positing a transhuman subject that resolves ontologically the antagonism between labour and capital, left accelerationism flattens and dehistoricizes the specific and contingent historical and material conditions that make possible the thinking of this subject at all, and lapses from a properly dialectical mode of thought in its breathless rush to adumbrate the "inevitable" conditions for this subject's emergence. Here, we are close to Althusser's notion of history as a "process without a subject" (Althusser 1969), and a similar lack of dialectical rigour can be discerned. E.P Thompson's polemic against Althusser reminds us of what is at stake in a Marxism that is fundamentally antagonistic to a thorough engagement with – and immersion in – history, specifically history as lived and made by real human subjects, and we can likewise trace in left accelerationism's idealised transhuman a subject for whom history offers no socially embedded place, only an abstract theoretical subject-position. In short, despite the inventiveness and optimistic constructivism evident in Bastani and Srnicek and Williams' manifestos, these very qualities speak to the lack of a properly and consistently dialectical epistemic framework: they thus implicitly reject what Jameson describes as "the austere dialectical imperative" necessary to think capitalism as "progress and catastrophe all together" (Jameson 2000, 226). Drawing on Noys, Brassier, Wood, Thompson and Jameson, this paper will critique left accelerationism's consistent divergence from a materialist dialectic, and show how these lapses elide the contingent and always in-process nature of the political struggles that determine who the subject/s of any future historical period will be or can be. Left accelerationism contains seeds of radical political potential, however the lapses into idealism and techno-utopianism to which it is so prone result precisely from an abandonment of dialectical materialism in the very instances where a generic transhuman subject is articulated: in conceiving class relations thus, an inattention to "the hard lesson of some more genuinely dialectical way to think historical development and change" (Jameson 2000, 225) is revealed. The paper will contrast Srnicek and Williams and Bastani's manifestos with the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, arguing that this latter offers a more promising basis for an emancipatory class politics precisely because it demands serious and sustained engagement with the forces and relations of production at the level of their bounded and contingent historical specificity. It is only by resisting the abandonment of the dialectic in order to imagine the future that we might seriously arrive at a useful picture of our destination.

KEYWORDS: Left accelerationism, Transhumanism, Marxism, labour, subjectivity, Xenofeminism, ontology.

In the kitchen he fished in his various pockets for a dime, and, with it, started up the coffeepot. Sniffing the – to him – very unusual smell, he again consulted his watch, saw that fifteen minutes had passed; he therefore vigorously strode to the apt door, turned the knob and pulled on the release bolt. The door refused to open. It said, "Five cents, please." He searched his pockets. No more coins; nothing. "I'll pay you tomorrow," he told the door. Again he tried the knob. Again it remained locked tight. "What I pay you," he informed it, "is in the nature of a gratuity; I don't have to pay you." "I think otherwise," the door said. "Look in the purchase contract you signed when you bought this conapt." In his desk drawer he found the contract; since signing it he had found it necessary to refer to the document many times. Sure enough; payment to his door for opening and shutting constituted a mandatory fee. Not a tip. "You discover I'm right," the door said. It sounded smug. From the drawer beside the sink Joe Chip got a stainless steel knife; with it he began systematically to unscrew the bolt assembly of his apt's money-gulping door. "I'll sue you," the door said as the first screw fell out. Joe Chip said, "I've never been sued by a door. But I guess I can live through it."

Philip K Dick, *Ubik.*

Transhuman Futures? Kurzweil and Marx

At the turn of the millennium, transhumanist theorist Ray Kurzweil described a utopian experience of future consumerism in his foreword to *The Eternal E-Customer: How Emotionally Intelligent Interfaces Can Create Long-Lasting Customer Relationships.* Kurzweil (2000a, xi) predicted that within ten years:

> going to a website will mean entering a virtual reality environment … where we can directly interact with products and people, both real and simulated. Although the simulated people will not be up to human standards … they will be quite satisfactory as sales agents, reservation clerks and research assistants.

Although not all elements of this claim have been borne out 20 years later, the "simulated people" Kurzweil claimed would replace real humans and their labour have certainly appeared. On many web-sites, common consumer questions are answered by chatbots, who are also able to accurately "store the customer's purchasing history" (Finextra 2019). More importantly, bots provide "customer service that is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week" (Finextra 2019). These labour-saving algorithms are anodyne compared to Kurzweil's more radical predictions, however:

> Intelligent nanorobots will be deeply integrated in our bodies, our brains, and our environment, overcoming pollution and poverty, providing vastly extended longevity, full-immersion virtual reality incorporating all of the senses (like *The Matrix*), "experience beaming" (like "Being John Malkovich"), and vastly enhanced human intelligence (Kurzweil 2005).

The contrast between such utopian futurism and the prosaic, individually-tailored consumption prophesied in the initial passage reveals contradictions and elisions in the project of theorising the transhuman. Despite the breathless claims of accelerationists like Kurzweil, the emancipatory potential of transhumanity – the unleashing of utopian possibilities via the merging of human and machine – remains largely unrealised bar the avant-garde experiments of a privileged few.

Kurzweil would not identify as an accelerationist, however despite distinct theoretical lineages accelerationism and transhumanism have many points of conceptual overlap. Both are ahistorical and tend towards determinism, and both position an ideal subject – implicitly or explicitly transhuman – that emerges once certain technological thresholds are crossed. As Moishe Postone notes, however,

> any theory that posits an immanent logic to history … without grounding this logic in a determinate process of social constitution … *projects as the history of humanity the qualities specific to capitalism.* (Postone 1993, 306, italics mine).

Just as accelerationism positions a collective subject who emerges once enough fetters are removed from the forces of production, so Kurzweil imagines the inevitable becoming of the transhuman at a (near) future juncture. Following Hegel, we find a "negative

unity tying … together … the simple point empty of content" (Hegel 2010, 462), and these apparently distinct theoretical forms are filled with content that elides the potentiality of agential human labour to transform what it means to be human. For both accelerationism and transhumanism, a non-dialectical process of subjective transformation is posited, either by a "'fetters' view of history" that has "the effect of suggesting capitalist social relations impose themselves upon an otherwise natural socialism expressed in the forces of production" (Cruddas and Pitts 2020, 4), or by an inevitable techno-embodiment which functions as a techno-utopian 'TINA'.[1] There is perhaps less genuine promise of emancipatory transhumanism in 2021 than there was for the merging of human and machine celebrated by the futurists or early-internet cyber-punks, however.

In our current conditions, such a merging is more likely to lead to the vanguard of alienation than a reciprocal integrated enhancement: Benjamin Noys describes how this integration "reshapes the proletariat from subject of history into disappearing vector of acceleration" (Noys 2014, 58). Noys (2014, 59) further problematizes a Kurzweilian integration in pointing out that "the merging of humans and computers in a new technological synthesis" results not from a voluntarism whereby humans go beyond our bodily or cognitive limits but rather a failure of human agency. Indeed, within Kurzweil's utopian accelerationist epistemology, we find a flat and static submission to determinist and abstract necessities that elude human control, or perhaps even conception. There exists no dialectical process via which the transhuman might emerge, and we as human subjects are not partners in the dance of transhuman becoming. Rather than the dialectical materialist insight that "only what has become can be retrospectively considered essential" (Brassier 2019, 102), we find the essential projected into an "inevitable" future that will reshape our selves and our social conditions, with little scope for human reciprocity.

Marx would likely agree with Kurzweil's (2005) declaration that "some observers define humans based on our limitations. I prefer to define us as the species that seeks – and succeeds – in going beyond our limitations"; recall the famous passage in the Manifesto where he marvels at how a capitalist mode of production has meant "wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts and Gothic cathedrals" (Marx and Engels 2015, 6). Humans tendentially exceed what we conceive of as our current limits, and this accelerationist drive is arguably ontologically-constitutive for us as species-beings, although it does not necessarily lead to a more enlightened or rational society. Whatever Kurzweil understands as our limitations, these *are* eminently transcendable, as Marx notes in his discussion of the progression from a feudal to a capitalist mode of production:

> Limits became barriers only after the forces of production and the relations of intercourse had developed sufficiently to enable capital as such to emerge as the dominant principle of production. The limits which it tore down were barriers to its motion, development and realization (Marx 2013, 650).

It is important to remember, however, that in turning limits into barriers and then tearing these down, Marx is not positing any kind of technological determinism. Rather, he highlights the fundamental shift in social relations necessary for capital to emerge from and structure such relations. Brassier is again useful to bolster Marx's thinking here. He notes that "a genus-being must harbour a transcendent potential" (Brassier 2019, 100): the very stuff of our subjectivity contains the germ of overcoming what *is*. However, there exist radically different understandings of the *process* of going beyond, or transcending, our limitations. Witness the contrast between Kurzweil's faith in human subjectivity being (deterministically) remade by technologies that may overtake humans' capacity to control them, and Marx's dialectical understanding of collective emancipation *from* the exploitation inherent in capitalist social relations as made *possible* by capital *as* a social relation.

Not all limitations are created equal, and throughout history antagonism between classes has functioned as motor. Class struggle's "terrain is

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1 Theorising the posthuman, which materially becomes after a transitional period of transhumanity, explicitly involves "disengaging … from critique defined as negativity" (Braidotti 2013, 35).

the social organisation of production which creates the material conditions of existence itself" (Wood 2016, 108). However more subtle class antagonism may appear in an era where "the core of capitalist production … is not the production of commodities but of their cultural-informational content – standards, norms, tastes" (Puar *et al.* 2012, 175), human limitations, including barriers of access to technologies of personal transformation, remain profoundly and structurally asymmetrical in their distribution. This reinforces the necessity of "debate on the Left … between accepting 'existing resources' as a challenge to struggle and submitting to them as a limit upon it" (Wood 2016, 107). In light of this insight, we can see how even explicitly progressive variants of accelerationism can fall into the error that structures Kurzweil's project of theorising transhuman becoming. Submission to our "existing resources," even and especially via Deleuze and Guattari's (2019, 162) oft-quoted prescription "to go further, to accelerate the process," means that left accelerationism abstains from turning limits into barriers, and therefore affirms that "the relation between class and the relations of production is fixed" (Wood 2016, 100). In *The Persistence of the Negative,* Noys (2010, 7) presciently highlighted the problem of subjectivity in accelerationist discourse, wherein "a figure of revolution or revolt traced along existing tendencies of capitalism" becomes "increasingly detached from any actual social or political agency." To achieve emancipation from capitalism via accelerating our existing resources leaves capital itself – and crucially, capital as an exploitative social relation – as the horizon of our struggle.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx (1963, 157) wrote that "as society produces man as man, so it is produced by him." This impeccably materialist logic allows for a dialectical interplay between real human subjects in their specific historical conditions and the structures and technologies that they shape as these in turn shape them. By contrast, Kurzweil's "human standard" sales agents, reservation clerks and research assistants fall out of the materialist realm as an epistemic and political divide sunders "the consumer" from former wage

labourers replaced by simulations.[2] These labourers appear not as enhanced transhumans but as expendable and disposable. Indeed, their potential transhumanity arises only in a negation of their use value for capital: to remain viable in the hyper-competitive labour markets of the near future, many generic skill-sets necessitate techno-embodiment. The progression from "*external* computers that help us conduct our business and access information, to the next level where computers gradually become *part of us*" (Grossman 2001) echoes the movement of neoliberal human capital from a "working self to a self as work" (Hearn 2012, 27). Transhuman subjectivation is inherently a project of transcending human limitations; however in accelerating past such limitations it is easy to lose our critical footing, as well as any potential for a socially embedded – let alone empowered or emancipated – subjectivity. Kurzweil (2001) notes that relinquishing technological advancement would be "economic suicide for individuals, companies and nations," although it is difficult to imagine equitable access to technological advancements, let alone the technologies for volitional transhuman transformation, amongst surplus labourers within 21st century neoliberal capitalism. How then might this surplus population avoid "economic suicide"? They may be capable of making appropriate investments in themselves as competitive human capitals who "decide on their education, training, medical care, and other additions to knowledge and health by weighing the benefits and costs" (Becker 1996, 145), but enhancing one's individual personhood in order to remain economically competitive sees the utopian promise of transhumanity run aground on the reef of capitalist social relations.

Transhuman Futures? Left Accelerationism

Left accelerationism attempts to address the political problem that Kurzweil evades – or at best abstracts – with his claim that "exponential progress in com-

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2 We should note here that labourers are also consumers: as Marx describes, "the continuous existence of the labouring class is necessary for the capitalist class, and this requires the individual consumption of the labourer" (Marx 1913, 85). Capitalists are obviously individual consumers as well: "the accumulation of wealth, does not exclude an increasing consumption on the part of the capitalist … on the contrary, it promotes such an increasing consumption" (Marx 1913, 78).

putation and communications technology is greatly empowering the individual" (Kurzweil 2000b). Under the social divisions of neoliberal capitalism, of course, the technological advances about which Kurzweil waxes lyrical commence from and return to a grounding in exploitation, just as in the circulation of capital "every element appears as a point of departure, transit and return to the starting point" (Marx 1913, 114). Quotidian human being is tendentially precarious and atomised in our present economic and ecological conditions, and an emancipated and *collective* transhuman subject is neither currently evident nor inevitable. Regardless, in his left accelerationist manifesto *Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC)*, Aaron Bastani insists that technological acceleration will ultimately determine the subjects that emerge: "our technology is already making us gods – so we might as well get good at it" (Bastani 2019, 189). Contrary to such ahistorical claims, Brassier rightly reminds us that "If Marx succeeds in materializing dialectics, it is precisely to the extent that he refrains from positivizing the potentiality he construes as generically human" (Brassier 2019, 103).

Our transformative, transhuman potential is necessarily and inherently latent in us as historical subjects: ontologically constituent yet always contingent.

Contra Kurzweil, Bastani does register a warning about the asymmetry of access to the means for individuals to remain competitive in labour markets with his allusion in *FALC* to "a growing surplus of global poor who form an ever-larger 'unnecessariat'" (Bastani 2019, 23). Bastani's text is notable for the conceptual oscillation that occurs as he sets out the epistemology and politics of left accelerationism, however. In *FALC,* we find a future that is "a departure from all history before it … dramatically different from our own … inevitable and near at hand" and an insistence that *FALC* is "a politics rather than some inevitable future … outlining the world as it could be" (Bastani 2019, 14-15). Although this politics is an attempt to adumbrate an economically and ecologically just future, *FALC's* conceptual slippage between inevitability and contingency is indicative of a problem that left accelerationism shares with

Kurzweil's bourgeois techno-utopianism. In the rush to theorise a transcendence of our current human limits, the "exploitation, oppression [and] humiliation" (Lefebvre 2020, 91) that define these limits are understood in an ahistorical fashion. Bastani demands a future where each individual can "be who you want, rather than your life being shaped by forces beyond your control" (Bastani 2019, 192), however as species-beings whose potential for becoming is inextricably bound up with the being and becoming of others (and the products of others' past and present labour), we are not able to subjectivate in such an individualist, atomistic and linear fashion. Here Bastani is alarmingly close to theorists of human capital, for whom subjects are merely "a produced means of production, the product of investment" (Schultz 1961, 3). We must further note an ironic contradiction in Bastani's proposed emancipation from "forces beyond … control": whilst "an appropriate politics" for an accelerationist future "remains unclear," "the forces underpinning it are already present" (Bastani 2019, 11). It seems, therefore, that forces beyond our control *will* determine and structure our social relations, and thus our politics and who we want to be, and also that a politics adequate to controlling these forces may not even be predicated on changing our social relations. This underpinning theoretical idealism means that *FALC's* "inevitable future" relies on either the continuation of capitalist social relations or their overcoming via a one-sided technological determinism.

In *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,* Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams offer a more sophisticated account, noting that "technology and the social are intimately bound up with one another, and changes in either potentiate and reinforce changes in the other" (Srnicek and Williams 2019, 356). This dialectical understanding is more tenuous in *Inventing the Future*, however. Discussing a universal basic income (UBI), Srnicek and Williams (2016, 120) propose that such a measure will "overturn … the asymmetry of power that currently exists between labour and capital. … A UBI … transforms the political relationship between labour and capital." Is it from such a transformation that a *democratic*

transhuman project, or a collective transhuman subject, might emerge?

First, we must raise a problem of method. Obviously the asymmetry of power between labour and capital is not something that exists only currently, although it is possible that a well-implemented UBI accompanied by an increase in automation could set us on the road to the world Keynes (1963) described in *Economic Possibilities of Our Grandchildren*. With wage-labourers empowered by a UBI to resist the austerity and alienation imposed by neoliberal capitalism, a transformation of capitalist social relations could perhaps be achieved. Again, however, the ahistorical thrust of left accelerationism leads to what Noys (2010, 17) has described as the "fatal slackening of thought" that results from a "departure from the tension of dialectical difference." The history of capitalism reveals constant shifts in the power asymmetry between labour and capital – as Stuart Hall (2011, 727) noted, "hegemony … is a process, not a state of being" – yet this asymmetry *as process* is inherent to capitalism as a mode of production. To overturn the asymmetry would be to overturn capitalism itself: a disruption of capitalist social relations via the deployment of a UBI and an acceleration of productive forces glosses over how "the process of production and the fundamental social relations of capitalism are interrelated" (Postone 1993, 23), simultaneously in tension and mutually constitutive as they structure each other's ongoing being and becoming. Technological development is certainly socially transformative, "but if societies were not ready to accept it, to control technology … then the worst consequences would result" (Lefebvre 2020, 103). A social readiness to accept new technologies does not inevitably or unilaterally reinforce emancipatory tendencies or produce material changes in structures of power: indeed, it may potentiate existing asymmetries. Acceleration may likewise alter processes of capital accumulation, yet the current complexities and historical volatility of capital as *moving* contradiction are necessarily downplayed in accelerationist accounts: by what processes will staggeringly unequal societies control technologies of economic democratisation?

If we historicize the theoretical potentialities of automation, for example, we find that

> automation theory may be described as a spontaneous discourse of capitalist societies, which … *reappears* in those societies time and again as a way of thinking through their limits. (Benanav 2019, 11-12, italics mine)

Equally, a UBI is not sufficient to emancipate subjects from the exploitation inherent in capitalist social relations. Even if we accept Srnicek and Williams' claim that a UBI and automation will disrupt the labour/capital antagonism, we still need to know who the subject that arises from the flux of this disruption might be, and how they might embody the sublation of the antagonism. If a UBI does indeed "unbind … the coercive aspects of wage labour" (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 120), then we are free to direct our labour-power towards utopian projects of self-development and enhancement, for which the transhuman – as transitional subject towards the posthuman – is indeed an ideal-type. But does a UBI function thus? Following Martin Hagglund, we see instead that "no form of universal basic income can free us from capitalist exploitation, since only wage labour in the service of profit can generate the wealth that is distributed in the form of a UBI" (Hagglund 2019, 287). A UBI and automation are posited as preconditions for transhuman subjectivation, yet in left accelerationism they appear as one-sided, disembedded from the historicity that is necessary to rigorously think the possibilities of their becoming. This is not by any stretch to reject utopian thinking, but to note that the utopianism particular to a UBI (and current automation discourse) has a history; Frederic Jameson, the theorist of utopia *par excellence,* could be speaking specifically about a UBI when he dryly notes how

> in the Roman style of bread and circuses … the excess wealth of the state … is sensibly and tactically motivated in order to produce the consumers required to keep the system functioning and to absorb production. (Jameson 2006, 21)

Second, we can easily imagine a Polanyian "double movement" against a UBI. As "the action of two organizing principles in society" is set in motion, "each of them setting itself specific institutional aims, having the support of definite social forces and using its own distinctive methods" (Polanyi 2001, 138), the reactionary wing – organized capital as organizing principle – might deploy methods like the expansion of credit markets and innovation in exotic financial products in support of its institutional aims, as well as an increase in commodification entirely congruent with the rampant immaterialization of labour in our historical moment. Indeed, such neoliberal counter-measures have a long and productive history,[3] which suggests that a UBI and the full automation with which it forms a "positive feedback loop" (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 122) could provide numerous avenues for financialization. In late neoliberal capitalism, the institutional embedding of a UBI would effectively serve to increase the consumer base for investment in both the real and financialized economy: here capital's circulation expands and adapts in tandem with a UBI, further cementing capitalism as epistemic horizon. Investment is not merely a matter of purchasing commodities; it also defines the contours of subjectivities via both individual and collective participation in the wage-labour and consumer rituals that maintain the system and (perhaps) enable immersion in its *jouissance*. Via automation and a UBI, left accelerationism promises to redirect the abstract and atomised enjoyment that capitalism allows as a trade-off for the sale of labour-power, so that "the pursuit of leisure for some" no longer means "making others work harder" (Bastani 2019, 241). Indeed, Srnicek and Williams (2016, 92) claim that "the very social basis of capitalism as an economic system … is crumbling"; a UBI and automation should therefore accelerate this collapse and transform our subjective

possibilities. Although left accelerationism cannot be critiqued for not taking Covid-19 into account, such claims are nonetheless detached from the real social relations of our current historical moment: Amazon hired an average of 1,400 new workers a day in 2020, for example. Martin Hagglund points out that a UBI and automation remain "altogether dependent on the social form of wage-labour" (Hagglund 2019, 287); they also propel a techno-utopianism that neglects what Jameson has called "the hard lesson of some more genuinely dialectical way to think historical development and change" (Jameson 2000, 225).

Technological determinism therefore prevails in both Kurzweilian futurism and left accelerationism. An idealist faith in the smoothing over of social tensions via technological advancement is par for the course in bourgeois theorising, however Williams has recently described left accelerationism as "a theoretical and political project broadly seeking to resuscitate a Marxian tradition of rationalistic hegemonic politics" (Williams 2019, 15). A would-be hegemonic project must seek "the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied" (Gramsci 1999, 209), yet the valorisation of relentless technological advancement – and crucially the consequences for those subject to it – tendentially erodes much of the agency of "surplus humanity" *vis a vis* hegemonic contestation. Marx perhaps alluded to this in the *Grundrisse*, although left accelerationists typically do not register the ambiguity evident in the passage:

> Nature builds no machines. … These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand;* the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. (Marx 2005, 706)

Although such development means "material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high" (Marx 2005, 706) are evident, as Bastani echoes in *FALC,*

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3   We might even posit that neoliberalism, as a project of defensive constructivism, is a response to the ascendancy of collectivist political economic organisation after WWII. See Mark Fisher in *Acid Communism*: "neoliberalism is best understood as a project aimed at destroying – to the point of making them unthinkable – the experiments in democratic socialism and libertarian communism that were efflorescing at the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies (Fisher 2018, 754).

history has borne out that the transformation of "the conditions of the process of social life" by the "general intellect" is not unidirectional nor necessarily emancipatory. We need not unconditionally expand classical Marxist categories like alienation, or the exploitation of labour inherent in generating surplus value, to register their pertinence today: the "gig economy," zero hour contracts and the preponderance of unpaid internships are vanguard processes of exploitation, to focus merely on the Global North. Additionally, the "immaterial labour" performed around the clock on social media platforms bears out the common-sense neoliberal insight that "the man of consumption … is a producer … he produces his own satisfaction" (Foucault 2004, 226). The production of an online persona, for example, necessitates and propels a constant distillation of the "general intellect." Micro-targeted consumer opportunities then propel further productive consumption,[4] subtly but definitively alienating the consumer from this general social knowledge as they participate in its ongoing becoming. Likewise, the unpaid labour involved in social reproduction, or even non-abstract labour performed outside of the wage relation, remains mired in the totality of capitalist social relations: "even my concrete labour … is not performed during and for a time of my own choosing or in forms that I can determine" (Bhattacharya 2017, 10). As Ray Brassier eloquently notes, "the ensemble of social relations harbours a potentiality to become that is at once enabled and disabled by the social divisions of labour and class that they have generated" (Brassier 2019, 99). Under neoliberal capitalism, "agency disappears into a fundamental passivity – becoming agents of capital" (Noys 2010, 8). Such agency must be materially re-constituted before we can begin to dream of transhuman subjectivation or fully automated luxury communism. We cannot invent the future without organising to change the present.

Srnicek and Williams lament that "since the end of Fordism, we have witnessed the "enslavement of technoscience to capitalist objectives" (Srnicek and Williams 2019, 355), but how might we emancipate technoscience without emancipating ourselves from neoliberal precarity? Enslavement implies a fundamental and pervasive passivity, which obscures how capitalist objectives, as moves towards hegemony, are always evolving and in various degrees of contestation; Polanyi's double movement continues to structure how processes of surplus-value extraction proceed. Despite the weakness of the left in our recent past, the "enslavement of technoscience" posits the need for an historical rupture to bring a more rational set of social objectives into being. Srnicek and Williams have spent plenty of time analysing neoliberalism,[5] including calling for "mimicking the Mont Pelerin Society" (Srnicek and Williams 2019, 359), so it is surprising to note periodic elisions of the dynamic, historical struggles that establish and transform the conditions that underpin technological change in their work.

Moishe Postone calls into question the contemporary usefulness of Marxist and Marxist-derived theory whereby socialism (or post-capitalism) "is thought to be a social form of distribution that is not only more just but more adequate" (Postone 1993, 9). Left accelerationism largely concurs that it is merely capitalist political economy that is holding back the socially transcendent potential of technology, however. Bastani highlights this tendency in an already-quoted passage: with the forces necessary to move beyond capitalism "already present," an Althusserian epistemic break beckons as soon as an "appropriate politics" arises. An appropriate politics would unleash these forces, yet with an inconsistent dialectical understanding of the dynamic tensions between classes that propel and repel vanguard processes of capital accumulation, in left accelerationism the actual agency of subordinated subjects to collectively contest their class position is elided. By contrast, the *Xenofeminist Manifesto's* (Cuboniks 2018, 33) call to "redeploy existing technologies and invent novel cognitive and material tools in the service of common ends" remains ontologically grounded in our current social relations as it simultaneously highlights the

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4   This productive consumption is two-sided: we produce and reproduce ourselves as human capital, unique and precarious commodities, as we consume. Transhuman subjectivation is arguably the apotheosis of atomised productive consumption.

5   See Chapter 3 of *Inventing the Future* and the "Introduction" and "Interregnum" sections of *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics.*

dialectical process by which we might overcome the exploitation inherent in these, thus delineating a concrete yet contingent telos via which the conditions for collective transhuman subjectivation might arise.

Left accelerationism also elides exactly how surplus humanity might appropriate technologies for non-market purposes, or organise around the goal of a universal basic income. Again, contrast the *Xenofeminism Manifesto,* which highlights how

> there are incessantly proliferating tools to be annexed … This is not an elision of the fact that a large amount of the world's poor is adversely affected by the expanding technological industry … but an explicit acknowledgement of these conditions as a target for elimination. (Cuboniks 2018, 35)

Any project of accelerationist *emancipation* must be immanent, grounded in the real social relations of late neoliberal capitalism, however such a grounding of course forecloses the technological determinism that left accelerationism needs to get underway at all. Although often alluring, Srnicek and William's prescription of full automation and a universal basic income in order to support the concomitant mass of surplus humanity thus proceeds from a serious overestimation of the teleological progressivism of technology, and a serious underestimation of one's opponent. Surely *capital's* response to any increased social power of the "unnecessariat" – in an era where neoliberalism has systematically rendered the organised left catastrophically weak – would take into account this history. As Bastani (2019, 22) notes, "capitalism's staunchest advocates draw strength from knowing similar problems have been dealt with before." If technological advancement means transhumanism is our future, how will we unnecessarians organize struggles against capital to equitably and adequately enhance our selves thus? How might we wrest control of transformative technologies from corporate actors – can we direct state power to such ends? What lessons can we draw from recent history to develop movement cohesion in the face of realised structural adjustment and exponential increases in computing power? As Ellen Meiksins Wood notes,

any overcoming of capital as organizing principle is possible only because

> production relations are experienced by subordinate classes in their own particular ways that … come into contradiction with the 'common sense of power' … it is such contradictions that produce the struggles which determine the reorganization and transformation of the modes of production (Wood 2016, 65).

Is it perhaps the case that for left accelerationism capital is understood less as a fluid constellation of concrete social relations – a "moving contradiction," "value in process" – and more as an abstract and determinist force of technological innovation? Such an understanding is useful for making futurist predictions, but is ultimately an unpromising ground for a radical materialist politics. There is little scope in left accelerationism for subjects to make their own history, which even in our neoliberal era surely remains the ontological kernel of any project of emancipation. Left accelerationism's departure from a properly Marxist dialectical method means that the capacity of our collective labour to force a radical change in capitalist social relations is obscured. Obscured also are how new modalities of subjectivation might occur. The radical individualism represented by Kurzweil's bourgeois transhuman – the enlightened consumer who can dream of living forever in conditions that blur simulation and the real – is merely the other side of the coin.

The most significant commonality between Kurzweil and left accelerationism, however, is the elision of the position and potentiality of *labour*. Whilst we can agree with Jameson that the injunction to historicise should always underpin theoretical interventions, we can locate in labour a grounding ontological category that is *formally* transhistorical:[6] "the first historical act is thus the production … of

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6 Bakker and Gill (2019) make the case for using "the concept of work as a primary category of social ontology." There is "an important distinction between work and labor – *work* is the broader category, defined as a process which 'broadly mediates relations between social and natural orders and combines the theoretical and practical activity of human beings in an understanding of movement and change'. *Labor* … is more narrowly understood as 'a particular aspect of work which in a capitalist social formation is that part which is appropriated and controlled by capital in the labour-capital relation'." Whilst I concur with the distinction they draw, I will persist with "labour" here, with the understanding that it can signify very different conditions and processes via which humans interact with their environment.

material life itself" (Marx 1998, 47), and thus without labour there is no history, although labour as *content* is of course historically specific. Postone has highlighted how "labour in capitalism plays a historically unique role in mediating social relations … labour's specificity in capitalism … is inextricably related to, and molded by, the basic social relations of that society" (Postone 1993, 16). As capitalist subjects, we make ourselves and our world by our labour, just as this dialectical process makes and remakes us. We therefore enhance ourselves and integrate with our technologies as we labour to transform and advance the social conditions created by this same enhancement: "as society produces man as man [sic], so it is produced by him [sic]" (Marx 1963, 157). The ontological primacy of the dialectic of being and becoming reveals a simple but profound insight: we have always been transhuman. Or rather, under capitalism – as "life creating life" (Marx 1963, 127) – we have always *had* and necessarily *have* the capacity to act, think and understand ourselves as such.

Capitalism has accelerated and proliferated processes of becoming radically other, yet the capacity of subjects to conceive of their subjectivity as profoundly changeable – and as integrated and coterminous with technological advancement – is constitutive of capitalism as a social formation and capital as a social relation. Subjectivation into neoliberal human capital heightens such conceptions, however we can trace throughout the history of capitalism various ideological projects of thinking beyond the human: both as an elite preoccupation (futurism is an obvious example) and a taxonomical process of ascribing raced and gendered (sub)humanities. Capitalism grounds us ontologically in such transformative potentiality via the collective social abstraction of our labour-power, "the alienated structures constituted by (abstract) labor itself" (Postone 1993, 325). Our capacity to labour cannot be neatly abstracted from the concrete totality of a capitalist mode of production to produce new subjective categories that experience material life, but it can be (re)organized to shatter ontological categories that are reified under capitalism. Between these fragments now close at hand, and the emancipatory labour that "capital must always obstruct: the

collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy" (Fisher 2018, 753), a dialectical process can propel the emergence of radically new subjectivities that collectively pose an existential threat to capitalism. Conversely, the elision of such labour's potential ensures that subjects – even those transforming "from creatures of flesh and bone to being mostly machine-made" (Grossman 2001) – remain enmeshed in capitalist social relations.

Synchrony and Diachrony

How then can we know that we are always-already transhuman? Great care must be taken here lest we slip into the same technological determinism and ahistoricism that left accelerationism has been charged with. If we can accept labour as ontologically primary for human subjects – whilst recognising that an elision of labour's potentialities is necessary in order to theorise the transhuman – then two distinct modes of understanding our capacity for transhumanist subjectivation emerge. For the sake of brevity, the contrast between a synchronic and a diachronic understanding of historical change can be posited as blooming into two very different epistemological frameworks for inventing the future. Further, the contrast between the synchronic and the diachronic – between Marx and a certain strain of the Marxist tradition, and Kurzweil, left accelerationism and a different strain of the Marxist tradition – reveals two very different frameworks for understanding the motion of history, technological change, and the subjects produced and reproduced in the dialectical processes of social development.

Why might this division be relevant to an analysis of left accelerationism and transhumanism? At the risk of an initial digression, recall how Frederic Jameson reminds us of "the austere dialectical imperative" necessary to think capitalism "as catastrophe and progress" all at once (Jameson 2000, 226). Crucially for the question of transhuman subjectivation, and the implications of developing such a project on the radical left, Jameson's analysis also highlights the immanent movement that structures any possibility of becoming for subjects of capitalism. As species-beings, the transhuman is always-already

latent in us; the accelerationist rush to transhuman subjectivity in fact posits a rather emaciated vision of human potentiality, entirely congruent with the radical individualism of post-Fordist neoliberal capitalism. We can trace a genealogy of the thinking of such a subject – who is the static bearer of a structure, a locus of power but not of agency – from Althusser via Foucault through to Bastani and Srnicek and Williams. With Althusser, we find a subject whose social position is determined in advance by impersonal and overarching structures in which they are always-already enmeshed:

> The structure of the relations of production determines the *places* and *functions* occupied by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places. … The true 'subjects' … are not … the 'obviousness' of the 'given' of naïve anthropology, 'concrete individuals,' 'real men' … (Althusser 2009, 198).

Althusser's student Foucault takes this further, proclaiming in *The Order of Things* the fundamental irrelevance to "contemporary thought" of "the intermingled promises of the dialectic and anthropology" (Foucault 1994, 263). Here we can locate the birth of the transhuman subject, and see how a synchronic conception of history and epistemology – admittedly richer than Althusser's – leads directly to the eclipsing of the collective subject that Marx called a species-being. The ontological legitimacy of such a subject is revoked by highlighting how this same subject emerges only via historicity being "superimposed exactly on the human essence" in "stony immobility" (Foucault 1994, 262). Undoubtedly the positionality of the taken for granted subject of history, particularly in the late Fordist period when Foucault was writing, needed and continues to need addressing. Displacing the white, patriarchal and hetero-normative subject who occupied a "universal" subject position is a project to be celebrated and continued. But there is a troubling elision in Foucault's project: Wendy Brown (2015, 75) has noted how he "averted his glance from capital itself as a historical and social force," and in slipping free of oppressive anthropological categories the transhuman subject is condemned from its

birth to subjectivate with capital as epistemic horizon. In attempting to cleanse radical thought of a diachronic bias, the subject whose becoming blooms in a thousand potential directions remains trapped in synchronic stasis. The space opened up by the synchronic turn was doubtless needed, however in abandoning the dialectic we all too often find an "atomism … foundational to … conceptual outlook[s]" (McNally 2017, 94).

E.P Thompson's critique of Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory* is pertinent here. Thompson's unveiling of Althusser's structuralist method shows how within such modes of analysis

> the diachronic is waived away as mere unstructured narrative. … Only the stasis of structural analysis can disclose knowledge. The flow of events ("historicist time") is an empiricist fable. The logic of process is disallowed. (Thompson 1978, 263)

We can discern a similar stasis – a lack of dialectical motion – in many of the claims made by Bastani and Srnicek and Williams. The capacity of humans to make their own history – "how human agency gives rise to an involuntary result … at one and the same time … 'we make our own history' and 'history makes itself'" (Thompson 1978, 279) – disappears in synchronic accounts. Brassier, who occupies an ambiguous position relative to left accelerationism – certainly his reading of Marx is richer and more committed to the complexity of Marx's thought – echoes Thompson's point in what might also be read as a critique of the stunted dialectics evident throughout left accelerationism:

> History is at once something we make and something that happens to us. … History dispossess us even as it provides us with the sole resource for becoming free. (Brassier 2019, 104)

Left accelerationism ultimately departs from a properly Marxist dialectical method in projecting the future and engaging with history; its idealism and techno-utopianism, which freeze subjects in abstract theoretical categories, thus logically follow. A significant consequence is that class antagonisms tend to be downplayed, engaged with only so far as they

conform to a pre-given theoretical structure: precisely what Noys identified as "the abolition of friction in the name of immersion" (Noys 2014, 102). The class position/s of the transhuman (and thus the posthuman), in both being and becoming, are tendentially evaded, as politicised social solidarities do not emerge from conditions found close at hand (Marx 2009, 9). Rather, they are determined in advance by predetermined social, cultural and economic structures. R.W. Cornell's critique of Althusser's functionalist class categories allows us to see the one-sidedness of transhuman class assignations:

> People, in other words, form classes only insofar – exactly insofar – as they are the "agents" of the system, the bearers of a structure which defines class places for them and distributes them among these places. (Connell 1979, 317)

The transhuman subject can thus only come to be, or act as a bridge to the posthuman, as part of a broader political project of idealist utopian acceleration. It can only be thought as part of an epistemology that dissolves class antagonisms and tacitly validates technological determinism.

In her discussion of Althusser, Connell notes that "the ideological apparatuses in Althusser, are … theorized in terms of the function they perform in a social order *whose class nature is known a priori*" (Connell 1979, 333). Similarly, understanding a UBI and automation as preconditions for transhuman becoming posits an emancipation from capitalist social relations as inherent in the development of capitalist productive forces, regardless of historical specificity. Srnicek and Williams' inconsistency on this point is worth noting: first, they underscore that "without a simultaneous shift in the hegemonic ideas of society, new technologies will continue to be developed along capitalist lines, and old technologies will remain beholden to capitalist values" (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 153). Second, they claim that "if deindustrialisation is a necessary stage along the path towards a postcapitalist society, then the industrial working class could never have been the agent of change" (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 157). Here, we can see technological determinism in tension with a

more dialectical understanding of historical change: determinism continues to rupture the historical fabric in the process of its knitting. Much like Althusser's static class categories, a linear teleology is imposed to legitimate a structuralist and synchronic epistemology; a rupture then becomes both discursively and historically necessary in order for profound social change to occur. Althusser's epistemic break is also a break with a dialectical understanding of history, and left accelerationism likewise posits an emancipatory rupture that floats free of the conditions via which it might arise. Noys has highlighted how the abandonment of the dialectic, common to historical variants of accelerationism, results from accelerationism's "difficulty in engaging with the problem of labour" (Noys 2014, 23). Similarly, Diane Elson's seminal essay on the labour theory of value highlights the inadequacy of Marxist accounts that take for granted

> that any theory requires separable determining factors, discretely different from what they are supposed to determine. … Such a method can only identify static structures, and is forced to pose a qualitative change as … a quantum leap between structures; and not as a process. (Elson 2015, 131-141)

Left accelerationism implicitly yet consistently posits exactly such an understanding of historical change. In *Inventing the Future*, "no answer readily presents itself" as to who "the transformative subject today" might be (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 158), or how they might emerge, yet the "power asymmetry between labour and capital" (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 120) stands waiting to be overcome. Left accelerationism offers much rhetoric about moving beyond, however its theoretical iterations evince a distinct lack of movement. Noys again is the critical voice *par excellence*:

> The irony is that accelerationism, which is relentlessly directed towards the future, turns out to be nostalgic … The nostalgia is … a desire for something, anything, to generate enough energy and momentum to break the horizon of the present. (Noys 2014, 23-97)

The genealogy of the thinking of such a break shows that "the lonely hour of the last instance never comes" (Althusser 1962), of course, and likewise we can see that a subject who might embody the enhancements of a liberated technoscience can only come to be *after* this break has occurred; they cannot participate in a break's becoming because a break offers no reciprocal positionality for a subject with transformative potential. The transhuman subject, although expanded beyond its "immediate bodily form" (Srnicek and Williams 2019, 361), commences life in – and as – a category of stasis (Thompson 1978, 287).

Just as class is only visible as a phenomenon in process (Wood 2016, 81), likewise any realistic picture of a transhuman subject, or crucially of a process of transhuman subjectivation, must be both grounded in and inherently responsive to the dynamism and diachronic thrust of history. If human emancipation seemed more possible for a subject producing society as society produces subjects (regardless of their production by an anthropological dialectic), or from within the labour/capital compromise of Fordism, than under our current conditions, the desire to accelerate out of these so that a democratic transhuman subject can emerge is understandable. But without a grounding in the real social relations of late neoliberal capitalism, such a subject remains the idealized embodiment of a vanguard techno-bourgeoisie. The political *cul de sac* of structuralist thinking, epitomised by the too-premature death of the human in Foucault, is similarly evident in the Kurzweilian transhuman, glimmering yet stranded in a future that our present cannot reach. As we cannot merely accelerate from one structure to another and assume that emancipation will follow, inventing the future must involve "struggles over the state and condition of labour" (Noys 2014, 98) in the here and now.

The Transhuman Labourer

As transhumans, Kurzweil prophecies that

> we'll have a full understanding of the methods of the human brain. One benefit will be a deep understanding of ourselves, but the key implication is that it will expand the toolkit of techniques we can apply to create artificial intelligence (Kurzweil 2005).

This prediction could have been made at any point in human history. It posits a transcendent beyond, where the ultimate destination of subjectivity is the capacity to replicate our most advanced understandings of what is "human" in technology. The necessity and capacity of humans to move themselves into new conceptions of what it is to be human, however – a queen, a slave, a philosopher, a prophet, a wage-labourer, a revolutionary, a transhuman – *is* the very movement of history. Similarly, for all left accelerationism's valorisation of "moving beyond," the starting point for such a movement is always-already deferred, existing in a static future social structure. The movement is not *immanent*; it does not and cannot originate in our current social conditions, as these must be somehow transformed before the emancipatory thrust of an accelerationist future can be unleashed. This is precisely "the lack of any instantiation of 'acceleration' in the present moment" that Noys has described (Noys 2013, 4).

Whilst neoliberalism may be fracturing socio-culturally, processes of capital circulation, financialization and surplus-labour extraction continue to proliferate. As Wood describes, "there is no historical necessity for less productive 'economic structures' to be followed by more productive ones" (Wood 2016, 119). The capacity of species-beings to collectively transcend wage-labour – and direct the ontologically-primary capacity *to* labour towards overcoming capitalism – remains, in our current conjuncture, unfortunately remote. We will always perform some variety of labour, of course, but as long as capitalism persists we will also always need to sell our labour-power. Under neoliberal capitalism, transhuman subjectivation will therefore tendentially reproduce a techno-elite whilst reifying the competitive "potential" of such subjectivation for surplus humanity. The possibility of becoming radically other – a transhuman on the way to posthuman-hood, for example – is always a moment in the dialectical process of capitalist subject-formation, thus transhuman becoming seemed viable, indeed imminent, for proto-accelerationist subjects like the futurists. As futurism celebrated man disappearing into the machine, they "aestheticize[d] the destructive turn of the productive

forces because they cannot truly grasp the possibility of redeploying these forces" (Noys 2014, 17). Similarly, left accelerationists and transhumanists alike see the utopian possibilities of technology as definitively liberating subjects from the burden of a mortal body – or from the burdens of an assigned position in a social body – precisely because they do not ground historical motion in capitalist social relations: instead, contingent ontological possibilities are projected as inevitable and a transhuman subject hypostatized. Transhuman becoming, however, is arguably a more distant possibility in our own historical period – despite the technological possibilities our era offers – than in earlier periods of capitalist development.

The transhuman may well become, but such a subject does not embody a collective emancipatory political potential. The sales agents and reservation clerks to which Kurzweil refers above may develop innovative new means to sell their labour power in the Global North, where neoliberal meritocracy will reward *some*, and a transcendence of wage-labour via transhuman subjectivation will remain a possibility, however remote. In the Global South, and in online retailers' vast warehouses, a transhuman future seems significantly less likely for those labourers who sustain global supply chains, powering the e-commerce Kurzweil extolled two decades ago.

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