

Accelerationism and the Need for Speed: Partisan Notes on Civil War

by ANDREW CULP

Abstract

In a series of theses, Andrew Culp considers the varieties of accelerationism as dialectical responses to capitalism. He identifies three main approaches: the boomerang pattern of the rebound, the fascist addiction to speed, and the techno-scientific dream of a technological fix. The second section is dedicated to critical oversights of the cybernetic approach of recent accelerationists, especially their purported project of Promethean mastery. The piece concludes with a renewed call for Deleuze and Guattari's war machine and an elaboration on how the partisanship of communism is better suited than a political project of global hegemony to defeat capitalism.

Strange Dialectics

History thus appears as the act by which reactive forces take possession of culture or divert its course in their favour. The triumph of reactive forces is not an accident in history but the principle and meaning of "universal history." This idea of a historical degeneration of culture occupies a prominent place in Nietzsche's work: it is an argument in Nietzsche's struggle against the philosophy of history and the dialectics.

Gilles Deleuze¹

1. Accelerationism has kept the peculiar company of sadists, fascists, technocrats, and utopians

The position most commonly attributed to "accelerationism" is that of the *rebound*. And as such arguments go, only after hitting rock bottom is one finally able to rise up. Despite the analytic neatness of associating the very worst with the very best, there are few who advocate such a position other than contrarian provocateurs like Slavoj Žižek,

¹ Deleuze 2006: 139.

whose demystifications wear off with shock.

Fascists have also worshipped speed both metaphorically and literally. The Italian Futurists sang the praises of the *splendor of speed*, dreaming of riding to victory race cars whose pistons fire like machine guns. The Nazis blitzed Europe, riding high on a chemical wave, its junkie army fueled by cocaine, heroin, morphine, and methamphetamines. When asked about the subject, techno-fascist Nick Land downplays his own writing on the subject, instead attributing it to the work of “the clawed embrace of the undead amphetamine god” (Mackay 2012).

Self-professed scientific accelerationism has long filled the heads of Marxists, reformers, and utopians with ideas about *the technological fix*. In the nineteenth century, Edward Bellamy imagined a socialist utopia in which machines did all work. And while Bellamy imagined this society to exist forever, captains of industry took to the idea, eager to find mechanical workers that would never tire – yet humans always remained part of the equation, no doubt because they possess that one commodity that can be acquired at a price that is less than that it produces. Before long, socialist rulers embarked on ruthless modernisation projects meant to set the stage for a transition to communism that never came. More often than not, they have gained a perverse afterlife in authoritarian ideologies like China’s “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and post-Soviet capitalism.

2. The most fundamental distinction between all accelerationists is their relationship to the dialectic

To each accelerationist corresponds a singular image of the dialectic, which is theirs and theirs alone. Thus, different accelerationists have a different image of the dialectic: the rebound follows the path of a boomerang, chemical worship pursues a series of highs, and technophiles the selective isolation of the good from the bad.

What is at stake is nothing short of metaphysics itself – and not, for instance, who is the best Marxist. What follows from dialectics is the notion that all force exist within a whole accord of forces. And even if reality is not dialectical, capitalism certainly is. No force can change without affecting others. Marx’s *Capital* is an accounting of a number of tendencies and their related countertendencies, their interaction he calls “contradictions”. David Harvey is so bold as to claim that there are precisely seventeen contradictions of capitalism. The most paradigmatic of them is “the tendency of the rate of profit to fall”, a tendential result of a range of factors such as the introduction of machines by one firm to temporarily secure super-profits, an increase in the organic composition of capital, and ultimately, a long-term drop in the overall rate of surplus value relative to capital outlays. Deleuze and Guattari subsequently define capitalism as an axiomatic that abstractly embodies this movement, operating as an immanent system that poses its own relative limits only in order to overcome them.

3. Each accelerationist image can be criticised according to its bad side: the boomerang tends toward recuperation, the chase of the high eventually leads to lower lows, and careful selection as technocratic anti-communism

The internet has spawned a whole arsenal of words to denounce the macho aggressiveness of provocation for its own sake: “trolls”, “edgelords”, “shitposters”, and “devil’s advocates”, to name a few. Philosophical writing on the *pharmakon* and digestion reveal how something can serve as both poison and cure, or how something can be internalised but not fully digested. It is impossible to think “selective” accelerationism outside Marx’s critique of “Proudhonism” in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

History advances by its bad side, Marx states, arguing against Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s selective approach to capitalism. For Proudhon, capitalism has both a good and a bad side whereby the good side can be kept while the bad side can be left behind. Such Proudhonism represents the false dialectic: markets without imperialism, profits without exploitation, the state without coercion.

Professing their superior judgment, these dialecticians of the good side of History pride themselves in their ability to identify strengths in everything no matter how terrible it may appear. Liberal socialists, who often rehearse Sweezy and Baran’s critique of monopoly capitalism, praise cooperative production as well as capitalist markets, choosing to criticise capital only when it is tied up in private property. Network enthusiasts, such as Manuel DeLanda, tout the benefits of collective fragmentation and merely call for moderation when mixing hierarchies and meshworks. Celebrants of the commons, seen especially in the becoming-rent theory of capital that emphasises a feudal-like structure of production, value the free labor of postmodern society and ask that the wealth it generates remain shared.

The problem is what Paolo Virno refers to as the “communism of capital”, the tendency of capitalism to leverage communist principles for its own ends – the liberal communism of robber baron philanthropists, the free labor driving the information economy (2004: 110-111). But it also entails the monstrous alliances that support putatively accelerationist policy proposals, such as libertarians itching to privatise the welfare state through the monetisation measures of a basic income.

The New Accelerationists

A science, the general theory of networks and systems – cybernetics – will offer its services, permitting audacious “social engineers” to push back the frontiers of methodological individualism – to conceive scenarios that, not

too long ago, no average man would have dared to dream of ... to conceive of a society without conflict and thus able to do without politics.

Gilles Châtelet²

1. The new accelerationists state that the problems of this world are due to a failure to embrace Prometheanism

In arguing that we have given up on “Prometheanism”, what the new accelerationists mean is that humans no longer pursue mastery – mastery of humanity over itself and its physical environment. A catalogue of the problems that concern the new accelerations includes patriarchy, racism, work, and environmental exploitation. The list probably includes war, colonialism, and illness. What is less clear is how mastery would resolve them.

It is worth noting the strangeness of their use of Prometheus. In a contrasting use of the myth of Prometheus, Bernard Stiegler presents a tragic account of technics. As humans lack the qualities found in animals, humanity is condemned to equip itself with new artifices in order to survive. They are forever locked in conflict over defining those qualities, resulting in a permanent civil war among humanity (1998: 193-194). The lesson of Prometheus from Plato’s *Protagoras* is not that technology does not allow humans to overcome the strife of the gods, but rather, the cost of *technē* is politics and war.

Even at its most basic, the story of Prometheus is not one of heroic mastery but a cautionary tale of hubris. Though impossible to ignore its misogynist tint, it is important to remember Hesiod’s elaboration (Vernant 1990). As revenge for Prometheus’s theft of fire, Zeus bestows humanity its first woman, Pandora – gifted all of the deceitful qualities of Olympus. With her, she brings a jar from which she releases all evil into the world. Those too bullheaded to heed it dismiss technological critics as pessimists. But there is a far more precise logic unveiled in this tale, spanning Plato’s pharmacy to Marshall McLuhan’s extensions of the human: every technical advancement comes at a cost. Here it pays to remember that even Donna Haraway’s cyborg is a creature of compromise, fashioned from techniques born from the military, patriarchal capitalism, and authoritarian socialism.

2. Many accelerationists see technology as the new subject of history, over which, they seek to gain mastery

Marx famously claimed that the proletariat was the subject of history. With the spread of wage-labor as a general condition of most humans, there will be a time in which this class-in-itself will become a class-for-itself and overthrow the capitalists that force them into such a position. A nice idea, but it seems far less plausible now with the changes in

² Châtelet 2014: 68-69.

class composition in the many intervening years.

Accelerationists instead seem to follow the ideas of Paul Virilio, who argues that speed rather than class serves as the new motor of history (2006). By at least the early twentieth century, he argues, the industrially-charged “proletariat’s motor” is overtaken by the new swift advance of the military, whose cars, tanks, rockets, and flying machines now ruled the earth. War then cast its shadow across all of society with the full mobilisation of all the nation, as farms, factories, universities, and everything at home all directed toward the war effort. And even if the war ended, the underlying dromological logic of speed persists.

Eager to sit in the pilot’s seat of this new dromological machine, these new accelerationists seek to replace the general’s command of the battlefield with a different mastery. As fascists became so addicted to speed itself, they proposed riding its highs wherever it took them. A group priding themselves on prudence returned to Plato’s metaphor of the ship of state that sails atop a sea of forces. Unsurprising for those who associate the birth of neoliberalism with the turn toward behavioral modes, the image has been proposed as a model for thinking contemporary governance. But the new accelerationists want to reclaim an alternative socialist history embodied in the fantasy world of Cybersyn. Never really operational, it imagined how the control room could serve as the helm of the socialist state. Sealed away in a room filled with a giant array of tickers, flashing lights, and moving graphs, it took socialist to be in large part an issue of flipping the correct switches at the right time. Understanding their job as the technical management of the relative speed of flows, its peers are the stock trader, urban planner, and electoral campaign manager.

3. It is unclear what accelerationists would dislike about capitalism if it did not impede the development of the science and technology they desire

Not only is accelerationism usually presented as an alternative to class antagonism, the new accelerationists seem to live in an entirely bloodless world. For claiming to be the heirs of Prometheus, they seem far too reticent to get their hands dirty. They bear open disdain for the simple “folk” who oppose capitalism in the streets. The image they cultivate for themselves is as scientific philanthropists who will direct the growth of the productive forces to lift the dispossessed out of poverty. They are not shy about proclaiming that they need funding; but with money, they will do the rest.

The terms of critique used by the new accelerationists reveal a lot about their politics. In a popular manifesto, even as they claim affinity to Marxism, its terms either do not appear or are downplayed (Williams and Srnicek, 2013). Exploitation is only mentioned twice, once to diminish the importance of labor exploitation, and the other time to lament technology that remains unexploited. Imperialism is nonexistent. To the extent they claim a criticism of capitalism, it is not actually in Marx’s critique of production and its resulting class society, system of private property, or theft of labor – it hints only of Weberian

concerns over distributionism, as in a fair allocation of resources.

4. If “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”, then the only catastrophe left is political and not scientific or technological.

The oft-repeated phrase from the 1970s has a very specific meaning. Even if a cataclysmic event ends the world as we know it, it is easy to imagine that capitalism continues to reign over its smoldering post-apocalyptic remains. The cynical read would be that capitalism is here to stay. But the conclusion we are meant to draw is more pointed: capitalism operates by transforming crisis into opportunity.

Important here is Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), which imagines a world in which capitalism is no longer at the mercy of ecological limits. Subtitled “an ambiguous utopia”, we are shown a world where the cost of freedom from capitalism is life on a barren moon. Its technologically-supported anarchist communism is presented as an alternative to liberal capitalism and state socialism. The defining features of the commune on the moon are its culture, which has abolished private property and coercion. Its science and technology are not hyper-advanced, for such communism does not require incredible sophistication. It asks us to consider the end of capitalism, not as a grand showdown (between classes, machines, or whatever), but as a form of cultural-political exodus.

An Alternative Acceleration

I’m not a philosopher, I’m a strategist.

Guy Debord³

1. Accelerationists claim that speed can be confused with acceleration. But there is no accelerationism worth its name without speed

The original proposal to “accelerate” is made by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, in which revolutionary project follows a maxim taken from R. D. Laing: provoke a “breakthrough not a breakdown”. Their urging to “accelerate the process” is presented as an alternative to an economic solution (240). What is to be accelerated is the process of destabilisation also undertaken by capitalism’s flows, done so until it reaches a revolutionary point of transformation.

The two most popular forms of accelerationism are each born out of a strange reinterpretation of the passage. On the one hand is the techno-junkie fixated on the *jouissance* of the breakdown. On the other is the technocrat who is obsessed with remaining in control. The former’s burnout was guaranteed from the start, whereas the

³ Quoted in Agamben 2002: 313.

latter's promise of stability can be drawn out indefinitely. Forever claiming to act in the name of prudence with the steady hand of compromise, it argues that its lack of revolutionary ambitions is a strength rather than the ultimate betrayal.

2. The alternative is to accelerate the process of breaking through politics itself

Still with us today is the ancient myth of sovereignty bearing two heads: the terrifying warrior-magician and the benevolent jurist-priest. They have been modernised as the two wings of politics – right and left – authoritarianism and liberalism. Perhaps the greatest trick of statecraft is its ability to make the two appear as irreconcilable adversaries while simultaneously claiming that all politics exists as some mixture of the two. The defining feature of the last century's critical philosophies of the subject is how it thinks politics outside these two poles: "the Outside" (Blanchot), "the partisan" (Schmitt), "the stranger" (Derrida), "blackness" (Fanon), "the jew" (Lyotard), "the nomad" (Deleuze and Guattari), "the subaltern" (Spivak), "being human" (Wynter), "queer" (DeLauretis), "the refugee" (Agamben), "the part that has no part" (Rancière), and "social death" (Wilderson) just to name a few. Perhaps, then, we should then take *accel at the word that they want to build a left politics, ... which, in so many words, is the project of including those who refuse inclusion.

Le Guin's *Dispossessed* once again offers a refined model for thinking breakthrough. In it, she shows how the people inhabiting the anarcho-communist moon of Anarres left behind both capitalism and socialism, the two forms of government still ruling their former planet Urras. In allegorical form, it makes concrete the argument that "socialism is just another path to capitalism". To extend the metaphor, the escape velocity of communism must be calculated in terms of both capitalism and socialism.

Such a breakthrough should not be confused with edge-obsessed "pushing boundaries". More often than not, these self-professed outsiders are predators using their impish affectation as cover to bully others. At the very least, genuine breakthroughs should never be cheapened with fringe beliefs or esotericism, which are a substitute for novelty and the difficulty of thought. Helpful to understand the process is Sartre's writing on anti-Semitism,⁴ which reveals the rot of bad faith and the pollution of conspiracy theory.

3. The subject of such an alternative politics is the partisan war machine

Perhaps Virilio is right that the subject of history should no longer be derived from the economic tables of *Capital* but a new equation determining the physics of speed and war. Where he falls short is in how literal he takes war, documented through details about Goebbels, the Allies, and the Maginot Line. Instructive here is Michel Foucault. In a section proposing a method for analysing power in *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, he

⁴ *Réflexions sur la question juive*, published in English as *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate* (Sartre 1948).

suggests that relations of force can be coded two ways – each representing a strategy for managing “unbalanced, heterogeneous, unstable, and tense force relations” (93). Those two codes: politics, and war.

Politics and war begin from two different starting points. A similar distinction underwrites *A Thousand Plateaus*. In it, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish “royal science” and “nomadology”. The royal perspective is that of the state, which begins from axioms that establish its operations on rational principles – whether they be liberal capitalism, authoritarian socialist, or suicidally fascist. Nomads, in contrast, seeking out new problematics never really meant to be exhausted through a definitive solution. As such, we can understand state politics to be the offering solutions while nomadic war being the production of problems.

Politics presents itself not as a subject but as a series of solutions. Shrewdly, Foucault found that politics, policy, and the police were once one-in-the-same. A new clarity has emerged in today’s era of crisis management, where crises are provoked in order to manage them. Immigration, detention, security, and military occupation: all solutions parading as causes. “To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace” (Tacitus 2013).

The partisan war machine never adopts the universal perspective, a position usually inhabited by those trying to offer a solution to everyone. Rather, the partisan refuses the role of governance altogether. The partisan instead presents itself as challenge to politics because it appears in a way that politics itself is not able to resolve. As an embodiment of problematics, the partisan war machine echoes the words of W. E. B. Dubois, “what it feels like to a be a problem?” It finds itself in history in “the Woman question”, “the Negro problem”, and other “problems”.

The image of an accelerationist politics is that of the world picture, a desire to control the whole globe. The partisan war machine is a politics without an image. In its cry, “you ain’t seen nothing yet”, it promises the only true image of revolution: a future so different that it no longer resembles the present.

4. If we are to believe that acceleration and speed are to be distinguished, then it is on the basis of the distinction between tools and weapons

The objectification of acceleration and speed are tools and weapons. Each has their own relation to force and movement.

Tools are introceptive, as they centripetally draw forces inward toward the center like a net. The movement of a tool is relative to the substance it seeks to dominate, and that movement is always limited. Weapons are projective, as they send forces outward and away like a missile. The movement of a weapon is unlimited because it is unpegged and free to pursue speed for its own sake.

Politics functions by transforming every object into a tool whereas the nomad war machine functions by transforming tools into weapons.

With tools, politics is able to construct introceptive compositions of desire that expand subjects' capacity for sending and receiving direction. Tool thus establishes gravitational centers, and from those points of power, not only directing flows but also puts them to work. Unlike free action, which powers the conceptual motor of weapons, work uses tools to capture and direct force.

Freeing tools from the chains of productivity creates weapons. Free activity is powered by perpetual mobility and thus does not overcome resistances, as it joins with already present forces to orient and provoke additional speed, exceeding their life as tools. Weapons are thus the effect of unworkable flows.

Tools are unable to resolve four flows: matter-energy, population, food, and the urban. Weapons are the consequence of assemblages that frame unresolvable problems as reservoirs of free activity. Behind the doomsday scenarios of energy crisis, sobering analyses of social stratification, forecasts of spreading food riots, and lament over the explosion of global slums lies a motor perpetually inventing new weapons against politics.

The politics of tools and the weapons of war can ultimately be contrasted in terms of rhythm. Whereas tools are used to produce resonance, the harmonious accord that brings more elements into coordinate, the explosive power of weapons throw forces out of joint, clearing a path for escape.

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