

# NOVELTY INTERMEDIATION AS ACCELERATIONIST PRAXIS

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## I

It is no exaggeration to state that Nick Srnicek's and Alex Williams' (S&W) *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*<sup>1</sup> served as a major breakthrough for those in support of emancipatory ideals of socially-oriented politics, but who recognized a certain uncanny symbiosis between the ever-deepening entrenchment of socio-pathic politics and localist counter-status-quo movements that were failing to offer any actionable alternative. The glaring lack of an articulated paradigm fit for progressive praxis was filled by S&W's theoretically profound, yet also, highly intuitive and hence powerful, change of perspective.

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1. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by Robin Mackay, Armen Avanessian (Falmouth/Berlin: Urbanomic/Merve, 2014).

Instead of considering the techno-social infrastructure that (re)produces the conditions of a dissatisfying state of affairs intrinsically malign, S&W argue that techno-social innovation exceeds the parameters of any historically contingent and bounded form of economic organization. As a result, instead of disavowing or attempting to disengage from innovation and its products, we should aim to re-engineer the agendas for its/their deployment. The #accelerate meme of “fully automated luxury communism” emerged as a worthy horizon to strive toward in a climate otherwise drenched in disempowering anxiety about the future.

When first published online in 2013 and in print one year later, the Manifesto galvanized communities of left-leaning theorists, cultural actors and activists, to explore and act upon its premises. Debates on accelerationism have been rife, and – as is often the case with new macro concepts – the subsequent emergence of multiple positions and stakes meant that the original concept receded into the background. Even the authors themselves have moved away from the term, and their recently published book, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*,<sup>2</sup> maps a political trajectory for treating full automation as an empowering condition in supplanting the capitalist labour relation, without fore-fronting the idea of accelerationism as such.

This essay is an attempt to add another branch to the ever expanding tree of accelerationist thinking. The focus this time is on the centrality of innovation to progressive praxis. To this extent, I’d like to consider the insights of Giuseppe Longo, Roger Koppl, Stuart Kauffman and Teppo Felin (henceforth, Longo

2. Nick Srnicek, Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015).

et al.) on the role of novelty intermediation<sup>3</sup> in the evolutionary passage of the ecosphere as a means of identifying a potential form of accelerationist praxis. I will briefly assess the implications of Longo’s argument, and draw from the thinking of Gilbert Simondon and more recently, Keller Easterling, to signal a direction for further investigation.

## II

In *Economics for a creative world*, Longo et al. argue<sup>4</sup> that the dominant neoclassical approach to the ecosphere, predicated on a physics-backed model of causality and the ability to computationally predetermine the economy’s evolutionary trajectory, is methodologically flawed. Causality may be a valid description of the ecosphere’s functioning at micro instances, but it is insufficient in accounting for the system at the general level given the unpredictability of future instances of variation, which can’t be computed by observing the past or the present. “The past does not ‘cause’ the future so much as it enables some futures and disables others.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, Longo et al. argue that the structural tendency of the ecosphere is more accurately described by the notion of enablement that characterizes the evolutionary passage in biology, meaning that there are “strong parallels between emergence in the biosphere and emergence in the ecosphere.”<sup>6</sup>

3. Giuseppe Longo et al., “Economics for a creative world,” *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 11/1 (2014): 1-31.

4. For the sake of brevity, the cohort of authors will be referred to as “Longo.”

5. Longo et al., 13.

6. Ibid, 11.

Since biological emergence occurs as a result of a (sensitive) organism's responsiveness to changing external and internal conditions, by analogy, the ecosphere's sensitivity to modifications in time takes centre stage. At the level of societal organization, Longo suggests that intermediation of novelty, which "deals with the process of discovering [...] possibles and turning them into actuals,"<sup>7</sup> is an essential form of agency in (re)structuring the ecosphere. They continue:

There is a structure to the intermediary's knowledge of some changing field and this structure of knowledge allows it to discover the novel possibilities of the adjacent possible, including novel combinations of elements, some of which may be old and others, perhaps, new.<sup>8</sup>

Novelty intermediation straddles the specialized and the general; it is guided by creative rationality, synthesizing what there is with what could be. "Capacity" in this instance entails strategic insight and the ability to streamline something that is just taking shape into existing processes.

Crucially, novelty intermediation does not follow innovation in the sense of *ex post facto* management but is the very process of snapping into relations to make something manifest as a "new unitary appearance."<sup>9</sup> The latter description is offered by Gilbert Simondon as a means of understanding invention in terms of "self-futurizing" actualization rather than just as a reconstitution

7. Ibid, 16.

8 Ibid.

9. Brian Massumi, "'Technical Mentality' Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon," *PARRHESIA* 7 (2009): 40.

of the past that flows into the present.<sup>10</sup> The temporal acrobatics of the future folding into the present<sup>11</sup> are at odds with a system underpinned by causality, whereas they seem to be implied in a system procured via enablement. The latter is akin to an "erudite" bet vis-a-vis the tendentious dynamics of a not yet actualized future.

While the future-present orientation of novelty intermediation appears to be implicit in Longo's argument, the pragmatic undertone of a structured form of "metis"<sup>12</sup> underwritten by access to liquidity that actualizes the "adjacent possible," seems to confine the future in too narrow bounds of profit-maximizing agendas,<sup>13</sup> making the latter appear as the irrevocable basis for

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10. Ibid, 41.

11. The manner in which the restructuring of the "time-complex" defines today's global ordering is discussed in detail by Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik in their forthcoming introduction to the Post-Contemporary issue of *dismagazine.com* and publication by Merve Verlag.

12. Benedict Singleton, "(Notes Towards) Speculative Design," *Shifter Magazine* (september 2015), 4-8, accessed February 26, 2016, <http://shifter-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Sington-Notes-Towards-Speculative-Design.pdf>

13. In "Ontology of Finance" (Suhail Malik, "The Ontology of Finance: Price, Power, and the Arkh derivative," *Collapse* 8 (2014), Suhail Malik argues that "capitalists do not accumulate capital by seeking to maximize profits by increasing production, innovation, and consumption, but that differential accumulation requires compromising production as such" (Ibid., 651). His argument – based on Nitzan and Bichler's non-Marxist heterodox approach to capital as power – is that "financially-set prices are the primary elements for the dynamic organization of capital-power" (Ibid., 656). The enclosing delimitation of financial price-setting on the future is what leads to the self-sabotaging of the capitalist order. As a result, novelty intermediation is not necessarily a tool for capitalist consolidation of power and may in fact be undesirable. This is a slightly different argument to the one voiced by Joseph Alois Schumpeter, whose later work asserts that novelty intermediation stalls/is stalled as a result of the monopolizing tendency of capitalist markets.

engaging in novelty intermediation.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the business-minded acumen of Longo's entrepreneur seems to lead to capitalization on obsolescence as the driving force of invention.

In "Technical Mentality," Simondon attempts to show that capitalizing on strategic obsolescence by leveraging on the future reproducibility of consumer desire and technical possibilities is not the same as producing an "open object" that may be "completed, improved, maintained in the state of perpetual actuality."<sup>15</sup> While the latter insight may very well describe the process of enablement guided by a profit-maximizing logic, looking at novelty intermediation through the prism of open objects indicates that Longo's theorization of novelty intermediation may be too narrow for the framework that the authors set out *vis-a-vis* the centrality of enablement to the econosphere's evolution.

In a way, the implied incongruence appears to be accounted for by this multi-authored argument insofar as shoehorning novelty intermediation into the micro instantiation of capitalist agency would seem inconsistent with the authors' overarching claim that "no laws entail the evolution of the econosphere."<sup>16</sup> Novelty intermediation thus needs to be approached beyond the orthodox conceptions of entrepreneurship, or at least, in a

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14. The examples of novelty intermediaries provided by the authors are venture capitalists and Renaissance art patrons, which in the context of larger neoliberal politics of naturalising inequality and framing the tendency towards entrepreneurship as a biological rather than a socio-economic fact, makes the overall argument seem implicitly aligned with today's hegemonic thinking. However, this is not the only possible implication, and one of the aims of this short essay is to put forward a scenario in which novelty intermediation could be seen as a key site for socially-oriented politics.

15. Gilbert Simondon, "Technical Mentality," *PARRHESIA* 7 (2009): 24-25.

16. Longo et al., 1.

manner that opens it up to other modes of individual, collective, market and institutional behaviors and rationalities.

### III

Longo et al. characterize their argument for shifting from a causality-based framework for the econosphere that derives from computation and mathematics to one based on enablement as a "negative" one.<sup>17</sup> Despite the authors' hesitation to prescribe any positive conclusions and policy implications, it seems that opening up the need (and additional avenues) for reconsidering existing hierarchies that preside over the determination of strategy and functioning of key economic/financial institutions is certainly one of them. If enablement is propelled by intermediation, and the latter exceeds computational determination and *homo economicus* rationalization, the need for a thicker/richer/more transdisciplinary account of what constitutes novelty intermediation as economic strategy must go beyond the mathematized capitalist reductivism of the neoclassical approach.

While this has certainly been the ambition of heterodox theorists for some time, what emerges here is a praxis-oriented dimension that focuses on the reproducibility of form in relationship to its environmental conditions/infrastructures. The emphasis on activated forms rooted in a network, and hence capable of infiltrating the system and becoming normalized, resonates closely with Simondon's "technical mentality" and its more

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17. *Ibid.*, 22.

current framing in Keller Easterling's *Extrastatecraft*.<sup>18</sup> Echoing Longo's point, Easterling draws our attention to the multiplier effect of elements/dispositions that make up globally reproducible systems such as the free trade zone, and the need to think strategically about "hacking" these spaces at various phases of their perpetual reconstruction.

Easterling sketches out a treatise, which – like Simondon's "Technical Mentality" essay decades earlier<sup>19</sup> – elevates the status of architecture and urbanism from the construction of object forms to devising active/networked elements/dispositions, that not only infiltrate the material composition of an ecology at its cross-section but also affect its politico-institutional wiring at the generalizable level of infrastructure:

Architecture makes unique objects – like stones in the water – while a constant flow of repeatable spatial formulas constructs a sea of urban spaces. Architects and urbanists typically characterize this state of affairs as disempowering, but if architecture was indeed killed by [this] book, perhaps it is reincarnate as something more powerful – as

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18. Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014).

19. Simondon's argument is more general than a prescriptive approach to a single discipline, e.g. architecture. He does, however, proffer the Eiffel Tower as an example of what can only be taken as an open architectural form: "Here, the technical mentality successfully completes itself and rejoins nature into a thought-network, into the material and conceptual synthesis of particularity and concentration, individuality and collectivity – because the entire force of the network is available in each one of its points, and its mazes are woven together with those of the world, in the concrete and the particular" (Simondon, "Technical mentality," 22). In a similar vein, while Easterling advocates for an expanded architectural praxis, the conditions that she outlines are as relevant to such diverse but also similar fields as tech, human rights and contemporary art.

information itself. Infrastructure space has become a medium of information. The information resides in invisible, powerful activities that determine how objects and content are organized and circulated. [...] The object of design is not a single form but an apparatus for shaping many forms.<sup>20</sup>

Non-state jurisdictions – such as the free trade zone – function as abstracted and distributed global nodes crucial to the flows of the econosphere. "No longer in the shadow of the global city as financial center (New York, London, Tokyo, Sao Paulo), the zone as corporate enclave is the most popular model for the contemporary global city, offering a 'clean slate' and a 'one-step' entry into the economy of a foreign country."<sup>21</sup> While this form of extrastatecraft is a fertile ground for predatory/uninhibited economic liberalism, it offers something beyond the vilified state-business-finance nexus, which in the context of "regular" nation-states is protected by the veneer of democratic political accountability/autocracy: "the zone is ripe for manipulation, and its popularity makes it a potential multiplier or carrier of alternative technologies, urbanities and politics."<sup>22</sup>

Opening up to extrastatecraft's potential of "new"/non-traditional actors manipulating the dispositions of global ordering is also a wake-up call to transnationally embedded practitioners to finally see themselves as already fulfilling certain functions/dispositions instead of continuing to self-identify as being out-

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20. Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 13, 239.

21. *Ibid.*, 26.

22. *Ibid.*, 27.

side of, in opposition or inconsequential to power/hegemonic forces. Easterling's proposal also serves as an antidote to the libertarian logic of self-determination, insofar as the aim of the "hack" is to produce abstractable system-wide standards that are institutionalized and legitimated: "the aim is to offer not solutions but rather mechanisms for generating solutions."<sup>23</sup>

Extrastatecraft may be seen as a praxis in line with the agenda of novelty intermediation. However, it is more concomitant with axioms of synthetic biology than the implicit determinism of biological enablement. Synthetic biology – as an emerging engineering discipline geared towards harnessing the advances made in the empirical foundations of molecular biology and the instrumentarium offered by coding – might provide a productive model for taking Longo's argument further, imbuing it with a positive imperative, and allowing for the emergence of more directive approaches to accelerationist novelty intermediation. Viewed from another angle, a field like synthetic biology is already being shaped by the ideological formations of its leading intermediaries, which are producing multiplier effects that will inevitably be played out in other areas of engineering, the ecosphere and governance more generally; refusal to engage with these processes or take the strategic role of intermediation seriously will not only fail to stop advancements but will inevitably help to shape their imminent form one way or another.

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23. Ibid, 241.

## THE ARTIST'S BRAIN AT WORK

Peter Wolfendale

What's going on in the artist's brain during the creation of a work of art?<sup>1</sup> Before we can even begin to answer this question, we must recognise that it contains a hidden normative dimension. It is obvious that we aren't interested in every neural episode that occurs during the creative process, but only those that are somehow *relevant* to this process. The threshold of relevance may extend deep below the threshold of consciousness, encompassing nuanced emotional responses and faint traces of memory of which the artist is unaware, but it can't include everything. For instance, even if one acknowledges the importance of synaesthetic effects in the composition of visual works, this

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1. This paper grew out of a presentation given at 'Das Träumen', an event at the Baltic Gallery in Gateshead organised by NEUSCHLOSS in May 2015. The event was thematically organised around this question, precisely because it was spatially situated around Jason Rhoades's 'The Creation Myth', an elaborate model of the artist's mind and creative process. The event is documented in *The Place of Dead Rhoades* (Newcastle: IMT Press, 2015).