

Franco Berardi Bifo

Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body

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Is acceleration a condition for a final collapse of power?

Acceleration is the essential feature of capitalist growth: productivity increase implies an intensification in the rhythm of production and exploitation. The accelerationist hypothesis, nevertheless, points out the contradictory implications of the process of intensification, emphasizing in particular the instability that acceleration brings into the capitalist system. Contra this hypothesis, however, my answer to the question of whether acceleration marks a final collapse of power is quite simply: no. Because the power of capital is not based on stability. Naomi Klein has explained capitalism's ability to profit from catastrophe. Furthermore, capitalist power, in the age of complexity, is not based on slow, rational, conscious decisions, but on embedded automatisms which do not move at the speed of the human brain. Rather, they move at the speed of the catastrophic process itself.

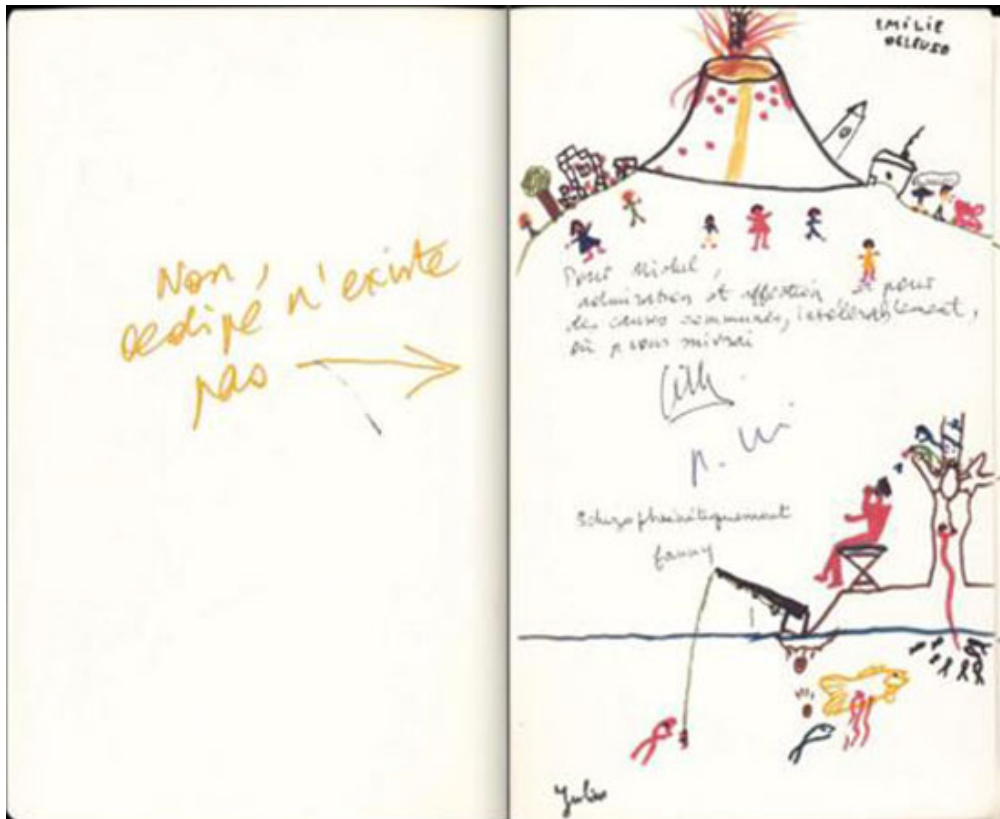
But the accelerationist hypothesis can be read from a different – more interesting – angle, as a particular version of the radical immanence in the philosophical dimension of contemporary Spinozian communist thought.

I can refer to Hardt and Negri's books. Here, the transition beyond the sphere of capitalist domination is conceived in terms of a full deployment of the tendencies implied in the present forms of production and life. Acceleration in this framework can be viewed as the full implementation of those tendencies that lead to the deployment of the inner potencies contained in the present form of capitalism.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri reject the deceptive pretense of an anti-globalist return to national sovereignty, and remark on the analogy between the globalizing empire of post-national politics and the potency of the internet, which can be viewed as the realization of the potency of the general intellect.¹

We can also find this rejection of any nostalgia for the slowness of a pre-capitalist past in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. In *Anti-Oedipus*, the rejection assumes the schizoid perspective: the schizoid is the accelerating pace of the Unconscious. Schizophrenia is all about speed: the speed of the surrounding universe in relation to the speed of mental interpretation. Yet there is no dimension of mental normalcy to restore, and in *Anti-Oedipus*, schizophrenia is both the metaphor of capitalism and the methodology of revolutionary action:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist “economic solution”? Or might it be



Foucault's copy of *Anti-Oedipus* offered by Deleuze with drawings by his two children. Deleuze points to the drawings and notes in yellow, "Oedipus does not exist."



Totem built by the student group known as *Indiani Metropolitani*, Italy, 1977.

to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet de territorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to “accelerate the process,” as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.²

A popular '68 slogan did say: “*Cours camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi!* – Run comrade, the old world is behind you!” But the evolution of Deleuze and Guattari's thought shows a displacement of this point of view: in the last chapter of *What is Philosophy?*, a book they wrote twenty years after *Anti-Oedipus*, we read the following:

We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master.³

What happened between the two books? Is it that the authors aged, their bodies weakening and their brains becoming slower? Maybe, but this isn't where the answer lies. The answer lies in the passage from 1972 to 1992, the two decades separating the publication of *Anti-Oedipus* from the publication of *What is Philosophy?*. During this period, economic globalization and the Info-tech revolution intensified the effects of acceleration on the desiring body.

The final chapter of *What is Philosophy?* concerns the crucial relation between chaos and the brain, and this is the best point of view from which to understand the effects of the accelerating machine on social subjectivity.

The reciprocal implication of desire and capitalist development can be properly understood through the concept of schizo deterritorialization. But when it comes to the process of the recomposition of subjectivity and the formation of social solidarity, acceleration implies the submission of the Unconscious to the globalized machine. If we investigate acceleration from the point of view of sensibility and the desiring body, we see that chaos is the painful perception of speed, and acceleration is the chaotic factor leading to the spasm that Guattari speaks about in *Chaosmosis*.

Acceleration is one of the features of

capitalist subjugation. The Unconscious is submitted to the ever increasing pace of the Infosphere, and this form of subsumption is painful – it generates panic before finally destroying any possible form of autonomous subjectivation.

Immanence/Possibility

The dialectical (eschatological) vision of communism as the final realization of a superior form of society following the abolition of capitalism is the political-totalitarian translation of the Hegelian utopia of *Aufhebung*.

A materialist critique of capitalism is based on the notion that there is no transcendent dimension, and that the historical process has nothing to do with the implementation of an Ideal. The possibilities of the future are contained in the present composition of society. The possibility of a new social form is incorporated in the social relations, the technical potency, and the cultural forms that capitalism has developed. There is no outside.

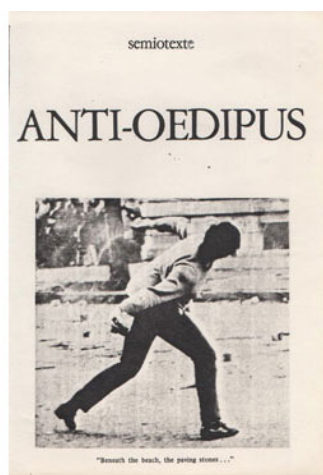
We may call this conception – opposed as it is to the idealistic vision of Hegelian dialectics, which was in turn adopted by Marxist-Leninist ideology – “immanentism.” It marks the difference between, on the one hand, the post-Hegelian brand of Critical Thought that flourished in Italian Workerism of the '60s and '70s, and on the other hand, French poststructuralism.

Not surprisingly, this kind of radical materialism comes with a special celebration of Spinoza. Both Deleuze and Negri, in fact, have emphasized Spinoza's rejection of transcendentalism: God is here, God is everywhere, God is Nature. We just need to see His presence, and to act in a way that allows His infinite potency to emerge.

The radical materialist thinking that illuminated the path of the autonomia movement in the last decades of the twentieth century is essentially the assertion of the immanent force contained in the present social composition, and which needs to be disentangled in order to deploy the potentiality of the general intellect beyond the limits of capitalism. This force is not hidden in the mind of a distinct God, nor in the ideas of philosophers. It is hidden inside the present form of social production. No external force or external project can propel the process of transformation which leads to a new form of social organization, because there is no exteriority. The permanent conflict and cooperation between work and capital is the sphere where the process of deployment happens. This is a common point in Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizomatics and in the multitudinous Spinozism of Hardt and Negri.

Not surprisingly, the reference to Marx's "Fragment on Machines" is crucial to this point of view. In that text, Marx asserts the possibility that communism is contained in the folds of the capitalist present, as a tendency embedded in the technological development of the current organization of work and knowledge. Everything is already here: the potency of the general intellect, the constant intensification of productivity, the tendency towards the emancipation of time from labor.

The tendency implied in the technological organization of capitalism leads to a new concatenation of knowledge and machines. This immanent conception of communism has something to do with the accelerationist hypothesis, but the philosophical danger that I see in such an immanentist stance consists in mistaking the deployment of potentiality embedded in the present composition of work and technology for a necessity.



Cover of semiotext(e)'s magazine with protester and inverted May '68 slogan.

The Accelerationist Hypothesis

The accelerationist hypothesis is based on two main points: the first is the assumption that accelerating production cycles make capitalism unstable; the second is the assumption that the potentialities contained in the capitalist form are *necessarily* going to deploy themselves.

The first assumption is belied by the experience of our time: capitalism is resilient because it does not need rational government, only automatic governance, and because it has no desiring body, being an abstract system of automatism. Governance is exactly this: the replacement of rational government with the mere concatenation of techno-linguistic automatism. Furthermore, acceleration is destroying social subjectivity, as the latter is based on the rhythm of bodily desire, which

cannot be accelerated beyond the point of spasm.

The second assumption totally underestimates the obstacles and limitations that hinder and pervert the process of subjectivation. The immanence of the liberatory form (the immanence of communism if you want, or the immanence of the autonomous deployment of the general intellect) implies the *possibility* of this deployment, but does not imply the necessity of it. Far from being a methodology of liberation, rhizomatics should be viewed as a methodology of the permanent deterritorialization of global financial capitalism. The potency of the general intellect embodied in networked production is subjected to the power of the financial matrix.

The rhizomatic theory is a methodology for the description of capitalist deterritorialization and an attempt to redefine the ground of deterritorialized subjectivation. But it is not (it cannot be) a theory of autonomy. At many points in their work, Hardt and Negri seem to equivocate between the two: they actually promote the expectation that the social potency of the common – the general intellect – is intrinsically ordained to fully deploy itself, and capitalism is intrinsically ordained to culminate in communism. But they do not consider the possibility of a stoppage in the process of deployment, of an entanglement blocking the possible.

Their radical materialism implies the immanent nature of the possibility, but this immanence of the possibility does not equal a logical necessity. Nor does it imply the unstoppable deployment of the richness implied in the present. This possibility, indeed, can be hindered and diverted by the cultural and psychological forms of subjective existence.

The accelerationist stance, in my opinion, is an extreme manifestation of the immanentist conception. Paradoxically, it also seems to be a particular interpretation of the Baudrillardian assertion that "the only strategy now is a catastrophic strategy." The train of hypercapitalism cannot be stopped, it is going faster and faster, and we can no longer run at the same pace. The only strategy, therefore, is based on the expectation that the train is going to crash at some point, and the capitalist trajectory is going to lead to the subversion of its own inner dynamics. This is an interesting proposition to consider, but it is ultimately untrue, because the process of autonomous subjectivation is jeopardized by chaotic acceleration, and social subjectivity is captured and subjugated by capitalist governance, which is a system of automatic mechanisms running at blinding speed.

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See Marx's "Fragment on Machines" in the *Grundrisse* (1858) or Paolo Virno's essay "General Intellect."

2

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin, 1977), 239.

3

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Verso, 1994), 201.

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