

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams:
*Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and
 a World without Work*

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In 2013 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams published a short pamphlet with a rather provocative title: *#ACCELERATE: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*. By 'accelerationist policy' the authors meant a policy that is at ease within an abstract, complex, global modernity and in which there is confidence in the propulsive power of technological innovation. However, the term seemed immediately hard to comprehend and lent itself to various (mis-)interpretations. For this reason, in the present book the term postcapitalism has partly replaced the term accelerationism. Around this term the main insights and proposals of this book revolve.

The book can be divided into three parts. In the first part the authors critically discuss the past (and present) of leftist movements. In the second part they present the cultural project they want to propose. Finally, in the third section a more pragmatic approach about the implementation of their project is presented. The first part of the book describes the difficulties faced by leftist movements in most Western countries. Once defeated in the battles of organised syndicalism, the left then had to confront the fragmented and heterogeneous forms of protest that have emerged in recent years. Since the 1980s only centre-leftwing parties that constantly pursue the neoliberal mantra of economic growth have managed to rise to power. A key example was Blair's Labour Party in the United Kingdom. This metamorphosis that the left has undergone is argued to be definitive proof of the imposition of neoliberalism as common sense. Srnicek and Williams's analysis shows how neoliberal thought's greatest quality has been its ability to be hegemonic. And, we would add, to be plastic. Thanks to its ability to adapt

to changing scenarios and different social structures and to evolve, neoliberal thinking has been able to react to the shocks it encountered, to grow stronger on their debris, and to turn the attacks it received (even if weak and limited) to its own advantage. However, in the authors' interpretation, the relationship between ideology and capitalism is analysed as something neutral, ignoring the crucial relationship between method and content: the search for a hegemonic ideology that is the basis of a new social model remains in a specific model of development. In other words, to suppose that to replace capitalism it is necessary to build an anti-capitalism by following the same (anti-) methods underestimates the risk of dependence on the capitalist model itself.

On the other side of the barricade, beyond social democracy, there has been just the confused and inconclusive world of folk politics; 'a set of strategic assumptions that threatens to debilitate the left, rendering it unable to scale up, create lasting change or expand beyond particular interests' (p. 9). Two limits to folk politics are recognised. On the one hand, folk politics is linked to a too limited spatial dimension that tends to ignore the possibility of creating any alternative hegemonic project. On the other, it is confined within an enduring present, with no yesterday, and, above all, with no tomorrow. This does not even allow us to think long term, and it confines every action to short-breath tactics. To this we would add a third problem: to whom are these precise criticisms attributed? Within Western democracies, we are not sure that these issues should be attributed solely and generically to 'movements' or specific experiences. The responsibilities of some sectarian, contingent, and hyper-local choices should also be shared by the great parties of the traditional left in search of a new identity.

Nonetheless, the problems raised by folk politics (which in some respects seem

to follow the definitions of 'populism') are real and cannot be ignored, but they need to be incorporated into a wider process, a global story with a long-time horizon. The central question that is offered to us in *Inventing the Future* is about the inevitability of capitalism and technological progress. If, on the one hand, capitalism seems to have become the shared destiny of all contemporary societies, ignoring social and cultural differences, passing on historical secular paths, there is, on the other hand, the risk of looking at progress alternately with dismay or blind confidence. However, we should not even believe in the intrinsic goodness of progress. 'Visions of the future are therefore indispensable for elaborating a movement against capitalism. Contra earlier thinkers of modernity, there is no necessity to progress, nor a singular pathway from which to adjudicate the extent of development. Instead, progress must be understood as HYPERSTITIONAL.' (pp. 74–75). This concept of hyperstitional progress is one of the most interesting elements of this book. Hyperstition is here defined as a form of dream that aims to turn into reality with concrete acts, a sort of ambitious and pragmatic utopia, perhaps ambitious because it is pragmatic.

Srnicek and Williams are convinced that the current technological revolution will produce an unprecedented population surplus. They define population surplus as the population segment who are out of the labour market according to the current capitalist conditions. Thus, they also include informal workers. Some estimates on US and European labour markets predict that between 47 and 80% of all jobs may be automated in the next three decades. Technological change is only one of the mechanisms through which the population surplus is becoming one of the most worrying elements of capitalism. Technological change is flanked by the effects that globalisation has had on the labour market,

making the world into a reserve of mobile labour available worldwide.

It seems important to emphasise, and it perhaps remains less clear in this book, that globalisation and automation, although they may be inevitable phenomena, have no inevitable outcome. Where in fact there are studies that affirm a very high rate of job replacement, others say the opposite. Automation is not 'neutral' and does not move in the direction of a post-work world in a natural way. Precisely for this reason a radical change of paradigm is necessary, a hyperstition, regarding the positive value commonly associated with work. According to Srnicek and Williams, in order to make sure that there is such a change in mentality, there is a need for a cultural and pragmatic plan that is capable of being as hegemonic as capitalism has been.

Before going any further, we would like to dwell on the relationship between the construction of a hegemonic thought and the analytical and descriptive premises proposed in this book. The authors seem to overlook at least two noteworthy phenomena, though they fill in this gap to some extent with the afterword. In our opinion, there does not seem to be enough emphasis on two of the main forms of resistance to capitalist power that are in action today and that seem to have many of the characteristics hoped for by Srnicek and Williams: migratory phenomena and reproductive work.

For many years, capital has had to come to grips with migratory phenomena, which, by their size and methods, constantly redefine the forms, position, and activities of borders. The 'flows' of people crossing borders pose problems for response, organisation, and management. Thousands of people are moving either in a south-north direction in the world or are moving internally within developing countries and urbanising major cities. In either case, these are not just people who are running away, but rather people who are asking for some-

thing. The opportunity to work belongs to this 'something', as it is seen as the main source of emancipation. Although we agree with the authors that the identification of work as an element of emancipation is the result of determined ideological and culturally colonial pressure, we believe that the authors' approach runs the risk of being similar. How can we thus avoid the illiberal and colonial risks inherent in cultural hegemonies? A reflection on this matter seems even more urgent since it is precisely those who are demanding better living conditions who are giving rise to these forms of resistance, strengthened by the restrictive and inhumane policies proper to populist forms of capital. Srnicek and Williams take into account the problem of reproductive work effectively in both the book and the afterword. However, we think they still underestimate the role of forces of resistance that are already challenging it. A good example is the transnational movement *Ni Una Menos*, with strikes involving millions of women all over the world, who are bringing questions and demands connected with post-work to the surface of the political conversation.

The authors believe that the road to be pursued is, inevitably, that of full automation. They see three practical claims to start with: higher wages, a reduction of the working week, and Universal Basic Income (UBI). A general wage increase, in addition to the direct effect of higher remuneration for those who work, would also have another positive effect—namely, increasing the incentives for companies to invest capital in processes that increase productivity through automation. In fact, the abundant supply of low-cost labour, for the reasons described above, may not offer any incentive for companies to replace work capital with automated processes.

The battle to reduce the work week dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. Lafrague and Keynes imagined a 2030 in which people would work only three

hours a day. However, this perspective changed after the Great Depression and was replaced by policies aimed at increasing participation in the labour market and based on the logic of make work pay. A reduction of the working week could have at least four benefits: the better psycho-physical health of workers, reduced pollution due to decreased commuting traffic, a more productive workforce, and, above all, more free time.

Both the call to reduce the length of the work week and that of UBI start with the provocative subtitle 'IT'S NOT MONDAYS YOU HATE, IT'S YOUR JOB' (p. 114). A form of unconditional income becomes a fundamental prerequisite for being able to enjoy the increase in time freed up for individuals by automated processes. The standard UBI suggested in *Inventing the Future* has three basic characteristics: it is sufficient for survival, it is universal, and it is additional to existing welfare. As regards UBI, we would just like to highlight that the type of UBI they envisage, a transfer that is added (potentially) to labour income, would risk becoming a universal subsidy allowing employers to pay very low salaries.

We want to dwell on what to us seems to be one of the most interesting contributions of this book: that it questions the intrinsic positive value of work itself. To be able to build a counter-hegemonic project, the contemporary left cannot do anything else but move away from the celebration of work and of the working class towards the rejection of work, which is the only post-capitalist alternative. As for the concrete proposals aimed at the realisation of a post-work and post-capitalist world, much was said in the debate following the release of this book and much more can be said. In our opinion, the desire to arrive at concrete proposals risks compromising the good theoretical framework of the text. The urgency to formulate concrete proposals and to respond to the criticism of the pro-

posals themselves may shift attention away from a discussion of a solid theoretical plan to a less effective political strategy.

However, it certainly challenges the appeal to urgently create a post-worker version of the Mont Pelerin Society, capable of creating a long-term ideological infrastructure at the intersection of government power, media, institutions, and think-tanks. The left is therefore called on to develop a socio-technical hegemonic culture, a ferrying technique, cultural development, and social movements aimed at a new paradigm that goes beyond the centrality of wage labour. From this point of view, we were gratified to see the appeal of Srnicek and Williams to the need to escape from a gloomy, pessimistic, and constrictive ideology, trying instead to re-balance the future on the value of beauty and to imagine a reality that goes beyond the aesthetic boundaries of reality. This approach reminds us of when, in 1978, Marcuse, in 'The Aesthetic Dimension', considered art a revolutionary activity: on the one hand as a 'denunciation of the constituted reality' and on the other hand as an 'evocation of the beautiful image of liberation'.

From the point of view of technology and technological development, the best example is provided by logistics. From a Ricardian point of view of comparative advantages, one should be able to exploit increasingly advanced logistic systems to allow production in regions where it is more functional, ecological, and rational for goods to be produced. At the same time, reality tells us that the logistical rationality of capitalist production, the 'just in time, to the point' form of production, has already begun to redefine the mode of production and it is already an instrument in the hands of capital, which has managed to appropriate and extract value from the flexibility and individualisation of production and work.

As already mentioned, while some criticisms of folk politics are presented

clearly, what is beyond them is not explained as clearly. What is the pragmatic, operative difference from folk politics of a populism that is seen as '...a type of political logic by which a collection of different identities are knitted together against a common opponent and in search of a new world' (p. 151)? It seems that some differences between good populism and bad populism are a bit 'forced' and too much in the service of the reasoning that the two authors try to develop. It is not clear why Podemos and Syriza are examples of virtuous populism and to what extent it is true that they are not class movements but rather transversal to society. Where can we place the dividing line between the much-criticised folk politics and the 'organisational ecology' presented as 'a pluralism of forces, able to positively feedback on their comparative strengths' (p. 163)? How can the means of communication be used in a pervasive, radical way and, at the same time, succeed in entering the dominant narrative? How can the long-term ambition be kept separate from the tendency to over-determine phenomena that seem to defy traditional interpretations of society?

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Herbert Obinger, Klaus Petersen and Peter Starke (eds): *Warfare and Welfare. Military Conflict and Welfare State Development in Western Countries*
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While many facets of the nation-state-welfare-state isomorphism have been explored, the role of warfare for building welfare institutions remains conspicuously un-