



What's wrong with accelerationism

Description

You can't always get what you want is the puzzling refrain that echoed out over the PA at the end of Trump rallies, and was repeated at his subsequent post-victory reprieve rallies. The less audible punchline of the song is, You just might find you get what you need. Getting what you need is more important than fulfilling an immediate and transient desire.

You might think the rally organisers were surreptitiously preparing followers for an election loss. More likely, it was a message to the rest of us: what we offer may not be what you want, but it is what you need.

The words of the song are arguably emblematic of a strategy about delayed gratification. The use of the sentiment is predicated on the proposition that what the US and the world need is a shock, a wakeup call, that a push to the extreme brings. You may not have wanted him to win but the world will be better for it in the long run, and not due to the advent of some stable and sensible state, but whatever follows the disruption.

We don't need to assume that the man himself had any profound insight into, or agency for, whatever strategy was or is in play. It could be the strategy of some other forces that put him there. See the first section of post: [Deconstructing the curriculum](#).

Trump played to the alt.right, but advocates from both right and left of politics have had something to say about strategies of shock and awe. Karl Marx opined on such a theme when, in the midst of his strident condemnation of capitalism, he endorsed its trajectory. Let capitalism get as extreme as it can, and run its course. Then there's a chance for brutal contradiction, the shock of body against body, as its final *dénouement* (215). Marx thought capitalism had within it the seeds of its own destruction. Displaced labour would inevitably generate armies of unrest. Capitalism needed to be allowed to run its course in order for the socialist revolution to occur.

Such a swing to an extreme may just clear the air for a return to something closer to what you need, or something better. Whether of necessity or as consolation, acceding to whatever it is you object to is one way to encourage, or hope for, a suitable transformation if you have the patience, and the costs

are worth it.



Accelerationism 101

Some commentators see this fatalistic endorsement of extremes as a kind of contemporary philosophical position — *accelerationism*, revived from the 1990s, but with its seeds in various earlier movements, including Marx's brand of socialism, and the right wing [Futurist movement](#). See yesterday's Guardian article by Andy Beckett: [Accelerationism: How a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in](#).

Advocacy of the extreme, and even the vile and obnoxious, can come from the right or the left of politics. Hence, left wing intellectuals such as Slavoj Žižek advocated for victory by Trump to shock the country and revive the left. See post: [Politics as art](#).

According to its [Manifesto](#), accelerationism does not presume that democracy is the best model for government: —The overwhelming privileging of democracy-as-process needs to be left behind. The fetishisation of openness, horizontality, and inclusion of much of today's —radical— left set the stage for ineffectiveness. Secrecy, verticality, and exclusion all have their place as well in effective political action (though not, of course, an exclusive one).•

The accelerationist *movement*, if that's what it is, draws on machinic metaphors. Machines not only speed things up, but they get faster and faster. It's obvious. An engine that accelerates and doesn't decelerate or reach a constant speed will eventually exceed some limit, go out of control, or burn out. Thanks to design and engineering advances, technology on the whole too develops, and at a rate that seems to increase — appearing out of control to some people.

Lest we think that this ambiguous movement is all about technology, the [Accelerationist Manifesto](#) implicates alterations to nature in this spiral into crisis.

—Terminal resource depletion, especially in water and energy reserves, offers the prospect of mass starvation, collapsing economic paradigms, and new hot and cold wars. Continued financial crisis has led governments to embrace the paralyzing death spiral policies of austerity, privatisation of social welfare services, mass unemployment, and stagnating wages. Increasing automation in

production processes including intellectual labour is evidence of the secular crisis of capitalism, soon to render it incapable of maintaining current standards of living for even the former middle classes of the global north.â•

Anti-accelerationism

So, accelerationists conflate resource scarcity, climate change, disruptive technologies, putative advances in artificial intelligence, big data, cyber-warfare, social media messaging and manipulation, and extreme political circumstances and movements, as ushering in some as yet unspecified political, social and technological [singularity](#), i.e. a tipping point when things really shift, analogous to the way a star might eventually collapse under its own weight.

Iâ•m yet to be persuaded of the utility of the breathless polemic of accelerationism. Itâ•s born of a romance with technologies and political systems, dispensing with detailed and specialist understanding of particular circumstances. It falls prey to the charge I and many others level at all supposed *Zeitgeists*. Such claims of an overarching movement overgeneralise, and assume everyone, everywhere, is affected in the same way by the same systems. (See post: [Zeitgeist busters](#).)

To submit to, or encourage, some spiral of extreme inevitability is at best risky. If needed, we can bring other helpful machine metaphors into service: pendulum swings, equilibrium, resilience. See post: [On being unbalanced](#).

In so far as it has its representative in the current US White House, the alt.right seems to be in some kind of self destructive spiral. But itâ•s the old-fashioned incompetence, dishonesty, corruption and bloody-mindedness of its leadership that is the motor of acceleration and crisis, not yet some inevitable acceleration of extreme policies and actions (however objectionable to right thinking people).

Accelerationism is like a Rorschach inkblot. What you take from its ambiguous musings says as much about the interpreter as it does about the world we inhabit, and what it is we want. But then, accelerationism weaves its unspecified wants into a plan.

â•?â•? we propose that the problems besetting our planet and our species oblige us to refurbish mastery in a newly complex guise; whilst we cannot predict the precise result of our actions, we can determine probabilistically likely ranges of outcomes. What must be coupled to such complex systems analysis is a new form of action: improvisatory and capable of executing a design through a practice which works with the contingencies it discovers only in the course of its acting, in a politics of geosocial artistry and cunning rationality. A form of abductive experimentation that seeks the best means to act in a complex world.â•

Bibliography

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