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Corbynism's conveyor belt of ideas: postcapitalism and the politics of social reproduction

Frederick Harry Pitts School of Economics, Finance & Management, University of Bristol

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein Department of Social & Policy Sciences, University of Bath

Abstract

In this reflection, we assess the theoretical faultline running through the contested current of Corbynist thought and politics at present. On one hand, we find a techno-utopian strand obsessed with automation and the end of work. On the other, a nascent politics of social reproduction with a foreshortened potential to realise the promise of a continental-style solidarity economics in the UK. Both represent the latest in a series of left attempts to confront the crisis of social democracy that rages across Europe, a crisis to which the British Labour Party has not been alone in succumbing. Deindustrialisation collapsed labour's role in everyday life, and a crisis in the society of work eventually passed over into its representative party's electoral decline. Subsequent financial crisis and subsequent austerity has only made things worse. A poverty of ideas prevails that all sides of social democracy's unsteady compromise seek desperately to solve. However, the recent UK General Election shows evidence that Corbynism has renewed Labour's fortunes to some extent. Surveying the competing intellectual currents behind its rise, we suggest that the politics of social reproduction offer a better route forward for the Labour Party than the popular siren call of postcapitalism, and reflect on what the recent general election result suggests for their future development.

Introduction

Up until the recent UK General Election, the growing body of work around the concept of postcapitalism (Mason 2015a, Srnicek and Williams 2015a) acted akin to a conveyor belt carrying ideas into the mainstream of Labour Party life. Here we will suggest that these ideas too often tend to read what is in fact a crisis of social reproduction (Caffentzis 2002, Bakker and Gill 2003, Fraser 2016, Gill 2016) as the unfolding vista of a world without work. In the collapse of the society of work around which Labour historically took root and thrived, the relationship between the wage and subsistence has weakened. Public sector

cuts and privatisation of commons like water, energy and land have limited the development of alternative ways to meet our needs. This is a situation of human crisis, not opportunity.

This crisis has an upside, stimulating a renewal of radical politics away from where Labour's current focus lies. This generates an alternative politics of social reproduction which has answers the postcapitalist perspective does not. Grassroots activism has converged on projects that plug gaps in social reproduction. Bristol, our home city, is a venue for many such projects, constituting new commons in housing, food and environment that reclaim unused public space for community orchards, for instance, or acquire unused office space to convert into mixed use housing.

Swapping missionary Corbynism for the détourned Leave demand to 'Take Back Control', Corbyn-supporting left grouping Momentum recently relaunched as a grassroots initiative rooted in local communities, with a programme of Syriza-style 'solidarity networks' in provincial towns across the UK (Henley 2015, Hermanns 2017). The new agenda, an organiser suggests, includes 'running food banks, co-operative childcare centres and cinema clubs' and 'sponsoring sports clubs, running pubs and opening spaces for community use' (MacAskill and Hacillo 2017). There is evidence that Momentum's affective politics made a decisive difference in some constituencies in the last general election, using on-the-ground knowledge to direct resources to so-called 'unwinnables' the central party had neglected (Hancox 2017).

Meanwhile, in the most intellectually sophisticated quarters of Corbynism, left dreamers stake their solutions on the unfolding of a technological horizon of an imminent postcapitalist or postwork society (Dinerstein, Pitts and Taylor 2016). The divergence of a politics of care and commons from one of accelerationist singularity suggests that 'Corbynism' is a crowded and contested space. Its leader's rise was a 'crest without a wave'- a premature victory without roots in real struggle or an identifiable set of ideas (Pitts 2016a, Bolton 2016). His leadership a blank canvass, concepts kicking around the radical fringe for years have since competed to seize their chance to shine, a conflict exhibited in Momentum's crisis of identity (Berry 2016, Cruddas 2016), from which the short election campaign focused minds otherwise.

In the flux, we have seen ideas pass from radical theory and action into practical schemes and policy agendas, a process of what might be called ‘translation’ (Dinerstein 2014). Two surprising examples of such translation recent years centre the most coherent and stimulating section of Jeremy Corbyn’s support. Awestruck by the potential for technological progress to deliver an automated post-work society, the ‘postcapitalist’ tendency has acted as a conveyor belt translating radical ideas into the mainstream of Labour Party life.

On one hand, the ‘accelerationism’ outlined in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’ much-hyped *Inventing the Future* (2015a) sees an obscure blog-based philosophy blossom into an increasingly influential practical political programme. On the other, with the release Paul Mason’s bestseller *Postcapitalism* (2015a), Corbynism has segued with the strange afterlife of a slender few pages of Marx’s notebooks, the Fragment on Machines (1993: 704-706)

The blooming of blog philosophy, and the afterlife of the Fragment, tell a tale of translation that defines one side of the contested intellectual project around Corbynism. And, perhaps, it holds broader lessons for how other fringe ideas ‘go mainstream’. We will consider first the techno-utopian visions of the future this tendency offer, and then put forward our own alternative, rooted in the politics of social reproduction. Finally, we reflect on what the success of the recent Labour election campaign, and the composition of the hurriedly-assembled Labour manifesto, suggest about the development of these two co-existing strands of the UK left.

Afterlives of the Fragment

Marx’s ‘Fragment’, long pored over by a succession of postmodern Marxists in the years since their mid-century retrieval and release, today wields an influence way beyond its true textual stature or status (Pitts 2016b, Heinrich 2013). Formerly the preserve of the left’s outer limits, Marx’s ‘Fragment on Machines’ now lurks in commonplaces of the centre-left too. The scenario that Marx presents in the Fragment on Machines pictures a world where the production of goods and services revolves more around knowledge than physical effort, machines liberate humans from labour, and the role of direct labour time in life shrinks to a minimum.

After the translation of Marx's *Grundrisse* (1993) into Italian and English in the mid-twentieth century, the Fragment became a foundational text for *postoperaismo*, which, during the nineties and noughties, sought to analyse capitalism in the context of the New Economy and the liberatory potential of the 'immaterial labour' it saw emerge (see Pitts 2016c). This reception, most notably popularised by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their bestseller *Empire* (2001), wielded tremendous influence on the alterglobalisation struggles of the early noughties (White 2011). Since then, its influence has filtered through to, first, the horizontalist movements around Occupy, and, subsequently, the transition of the Occupy generation to a more state-oriented politics of populism, postcapitalism, 'accelerationism' and so-called 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' (Pitts 2016d).

Of these, perhaps the most impressive and fully-realised is 'accelerationism', an epithet coined by one of its critics, Benjamin Noys (2012). The key introduction to this school of thought, *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Mackay and Avanessian 2015) features Marx's Fragment as one of its founding texts. But there are further processes of translation we can unfold from here.

Accelerationism, left and right

Accelerationism grew out of what David Berry calls the 'first internet or born-digital philosophy' (Berry 2014, p. 104)- Speculative Realism, or 'Object Oriented Ontology'. Members of this loose milieu produced their principal outputs via a daily-updated dialogic network of personal blogs with names like Synthetic Edifice and Larval Subjects, swiftly satirised in an online random name generator.¹

Drawing on the work of continental heavyweights like Martin Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari and Bruno Latour, they delineated a piecemeal philosophy focused on the potential of the 'post-human' and the 'flat ontology' of equivalence between all objects, things, people and relations. As Jeremy Gilbert (2017) recounts in a beautiful eulogy to shared intellectual life, a crucial, but often critical, superintendent of the internet infrastructure holding this community together was the brilliant and sadly missed cultural theorist Mark Fisher.

¹ <http://sparkle.voyou.org/hyperchaos/>

What is interesting is how this determinedly non-political and often obscurantist philosophical scene eventually gave rise to a halfway coherent political programme that now finds itself discussed in think-tanks and party policy seminars- even though, as we go on to discuss, its influence was foreshortened in the Labour manifesto.² The turning point for its uptake the 2013 'Accelerationist Manifesto' (2015b), in which Srnicek and Williams brought together the cyber-philosophical orientation toward the post-human and the machinic with a concrete political platform promoting mankind's propulsion forwards in pursuit of an automated, workless future. Although now largely latent as its ideas are ploughed over in Shadow Chancellor-convened Labour Party policy meetings- an indulgence since replaced by the fevered activity of electioneering- certain philosophical themes carry over: a dispassionately anti-humanist politics that grants as much ontological priority to machines as humans, and a taste for the thrill of the fast, the metallic and the new.

This anti-human pro-machine philosophy, which stakes everything on free money in place of work, plays fast and loose with the fact that we cannot live except through money, received in the form of a wage pitched at the level we need to survive as productive labour. The crisis of social reproduction is not about a lack of money but about a world whereby our access to the things we need to live is mediated by money in the first place. The crisis of the wage cannot be solved by distributing more money. The problem lies in sustaining life under and beyond the abstract form of domination represented in the rule of money-capital (Dinerstein, Pitts, Taylor, 2016). Robot politics will not free us from this world: it will push us into a different form of subordination where the reproduction of human life will still depend on money even as the means by which it is attained is outsourced to robots. As is imagined in the film *Elysium* (2013), the expansion of robots will not bring about a superior form of life but an even more degrading and miserable capitalist one- for most of us.

Despite apparent appeals to a postcapitalist human liberation from work, the tech-addled ambivalence about any kind of human essence worth preserving or saving from capitalist development in the here and now carries some unfortunate ideological baggage. Indeed, it takes on a distorted expression in 'right accelerationism', associated, via one

² e.g. the 'New Economy' Shadow Chancellor's Conference, Imperial College, London, May 2016

of its chief instigators Nick Land, with the so-called 'alt-right' of bedroom-bound neo-nazis- a link made clear in the recent controversy around East London gallery LD50 showing work and hosting talks by hipsterised neoreactionaries (Irvill, Dunn and Koehler 2017, Haider 2017, Untermesh 2017).

On the other hand, left-accelerationist support for Corbyn is a real-life political encounter its adherents may not leave unscathed, their unemotional futurism softened by proximity to Corbyn's feel-good mishmash of rallies and rhetoric, and the standard-issue social democracy that the recent manifesto pulled off with such aplomb.

In return, this philosophical position has segued with the intellectual spirit of the Fragment's afterlife in the thoughts and imaginations of the Corbynist left. It initially percolated through the new media ecology of blogs and online comment sites like Novara Media- unarguably the hub of 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' (Bastani 2015)

By means of the take up of these ideas among a series of media personalities, most notable of which is Mason (2015b), along with others like Owen Jones (2016), John Harris (2016) and Zoe Williams_(2015), accelerationist renderings of the scenario Marx's Fragment depicts have gained a much wider foothold in the popular consciousness, accruing broadsheet column inches either directly or by implication in the enveloping vistas of automation and the basic income.

Postcapitalism in policy and practice

The most unexpected turn has been their take-up in the parliamentary political world. John McDonnell, embracing an economic agenda of tech-savvy 'Socialism with an iPad' (Wintour 2015), has invited the likes of Mason and Srnicek to address seminars, and Corbyn released a future-positive digital manifesto during his re-election campaign (Peck 2016).

The eventual election manifesto was short on such thinking, situating itself safely in an anti-cuts comfort zone of wage hikes and nationalisation- liberated from the strictures of 'economic credibility' by the cross-Commons consensus on Brexit's politics of the abyss, it embraced tax-and-spend with nary a word to say on a world without work. Nevertheless, the same personnel who have disseminated postcapitalist ideas among a

broader public still number among the leadership's higher-profile supporters- a relationship, as we will go on to consider, with transformative potential on each side.

This cross-fertilisation of apparently utopian schemes for a world beyond capitalism, and the calculation of party policy, are the high-water mark for the reception of Marx's Fragment, albeit having wended a strange and unconventional route to prominence in which Marx is too often a silent partner.

The potential party-political uptake of these ideas has dovetailed with an expansion in the kind of practical projects they seek to understand as the harbinger of a new economy, and, possibly, a new society. These include automation and robotisation of production, 'sharing economy' businesses like Airbnb and Uber, the use of big data to make decisions about the use of city space, and the state-supported spread of high-innovation fields like creative industries, augmented reality and 3D printing.

Meanwhile, proposals for a basic income gather apace, albeit silent in the relatively simple messaging of Labour's manifesto and election campaign (see Pitts, Lombardozi and Warner 2017 for a summary). Traditionally issuing from all quarters of the political spectrum, what marks their specificity today is the link with a post-work, potentially 'postcapitalist' society. Inspired by the upswell in opinion behind the popularisation of the postcapitalist ideal through bestselling works like those of Mason and Srnicek and Williams, the Labour itself treads tentative steps towards the policy, as pilots and modelling exercises proliferate in the world of centre-left think-tanks and research institutes (Cowburn 2017, Painter and Thoung 2016, Pearce 2015, Reed and Lansley 2016). The basic income is perceived as the means by which the link between money and subsistence can be maintained in a world where the relationship with the wage weakens, as the scenario painted in the Fragment becomes reality. McDonnell and Corbyn's express commitment to considering the idea will bear fruit in a commission set to report at a later date (Cowburn 2017).

Concrete and abstract utopia

Elsewhere, the techno-futurist vision implied in the postcapitalist imaginary is eschewed for other experiments in building concrete utopias in the present. These include Community Supported Agriculture schemes, food and housing co-ops, a 'return to the

land' and a creation of new commons around life's necessities. These address the aforementioned 'crisis of social reproduction', whereby the link between the wage and subsistence is broken. Basic income, meanwhile, proposes only to defer this contradiction to a higher level of monetary abstraction.

The difference between the vision of the future projected by these interventions, and those of the postcapitalist moment, could not be more stark. We see a local, small-scale and ecological approach to what postcapitalists seek to solve with technology, statist regulation and a consumerist politics of everything on demand. Adherents of accelerationism like Srnicek and Williams dismiss the former as 'folk politics'.

It may be that these 'folk' politics are our best hope. But, like 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' before its Corbynist uptake, this 'folk politics' has no coherent public political or organisational expression. Arguably, the short-lived 'Green Surge' of early 2015 channelled it but burnt out as Corbyn rose. Corbynism itself, whilst having at its helm an allotment-holder, has nothing to say about any practical alternative. Momentum initially promised to replicate the solidarity-building practical activity that sustained left populism in Greece and Spain. But, evangelising for a single, underwhelming man, the project buckled under the burdensome weight of sectarian hacks. Signs of life resound in the planned interventions modelled on the 'solidarity networks' through which Syriza intervened in the everyday life of crisis-ridden Greece by means of foodbanks and community projects. And, following a strong showing in the June election, Project Corbyn seems, for the first time, on a clear upwards trajectory on which these interventions could also travel.

On the further fringes, close relatives of the autonomist Marxism from which postcapitalist Fragment-thinking springs emphasise a left politics of social reproduction more attuned to caring and commoning than robots and machines. Sharing some of the same ideas, standard bearers include Kathi Weeks (2011), Silvia Federici (2012) and Selma James (2016). Promisingly, James featured at Momentum's 'World Transformed' weekend during the last Labour conference in Liverpool. Plan C, a left group laying claim to the social reproduction tradition, also appeared on the bill. But, despite coming out of a similar historical left milieu as the postcapitalist crowd, it is worth noting how these

critical alternatives have experienced divergent paths of translation in the formal political sphere.

Why has the postcapitalist prospectus so gripped the imagination of the UK left? Perhaps it is easier for high-profile public voices and policymakers to fall in line behind fully-automated futurists. It allows claims to be made on a future of no work, free money and fun times without the need to get your hands dirty- politically or practically- to make it happen. Land ownership, care of loved ones, labour relations, decommodified access to food and the means of living: all go unquestioned, the mess and mud and struggle they imply elided. You can have the world on a plate, this says, but nothing else. Free money, but no free lunch.

Srnicek's *After Work: What's Left and Who Cares* (forthcoming, with Helen Hester), promises to address some of the omissions of social reproduction in the postcapitalist prospectus, following through on a transparent concern with mitigating the worst effects of work. But as it is, this prospectus crafts a utopia based on the individual escape from work without an underlying shift in how we relate to things, life and one another. In this sense, its hegemonic status as the left alternative *du jour* is fit for a world withdrawing into itself.

Unreinventing the wheel

It doesn't have to be this way. The accelerationists and assorted others seem too optimistic about the wrong kind of things, and too pessimistic about the right. Keen allotment-holder Corbyn constitutes one potential carrier of a reclaimed 'folk politics' able to get deep down in the nitty-gritty of how we live, eat and put food on the table. Were Corbyn inclined to make hay while the sun is shining, there is, for example, largely unused legal capacity at a council and parish council level, under Section 125 of the Local Government Act 1972, to compulsorily purchase land for use as allotments and community gardens. All too absorbed in abstract platitudes, he might have made concrete political capital from launching policies to encourage councils to repossess land for subsidised access to the means of subsistence for individuals and groups. Meagre though it sounds, such a move might restructure our relationship with the alienating forces of

money and commodification more profoundly than any either state-socialist or postcapitalist vista presently on offer.

Encouraging signs of life emit from Momentum's new interventions into the everyday life of Brexit Britain on the breadline. It remains to be seen to what extent these interventions confront the 'twin crisis of the social': on one hand, the crisis of social democracy, and, on the other, social reproduction. What the postcapitalist school seize upon as a crisis of the society of work is really a crisis in the individual and collective capacity to care for and contribute to the world around us, in work and leisure- a crisis from which what Paul Thompson (2005), in the pages of this journal, once called 'wishful thinking' will not save us. In a time of council cutbacks and the retrenchment of the welfare state, can grassroots politics reinvigorate the 'commons' as a response to the crisis of the social by generating and securing shared resources and spaces of collective activity?

Optimistic vistas geared around accelerationism or postcapitalism are abstract utopias, to which a practical politics of social reproduction poses a concrete alternative. Momentum's reinvention as a grassroots community-building initiative shows signs of the thinking needed to work towards this. But there may be no need to reinvent the wheel: all the makings of a new social democracy addressed to the crisis of social reproduction can already be found outside the Labour movement. Maybe Labour can build on its traditions by looking outside itself to what else is already going on in society today.

Schemes like city farms, Community Supported Agriculture and food and housing co-ops currently meet local needs unmet through more conventionally commodified channels. And by intervening at this level Labour can help communities' unmet needs in an age of reduced public services, bringing a closer sense of class solidarity and self-organisation.

With renewed relevancy to this green, ethical politics of social reproduction, Labour can improve its electoral strength at a local level against the Green Party in cities Bristol, where the latter give political expression to grassroots experiments in living and working. Indeed, in the Green target seat of Bristol West, the Labour incumbent, Thangham Debbonaire, was returned with the biggest majority in the country- perhaps owing to the subsumption of the Green vote by intensified practical work by a Constituency Labour

Party with one of the largest memberships and one of the most active Momentum networks.

By intervening further on the everyday practical political and reproductive terrain occupied by the Greens, Labour can connect the party with a new cohort of socially and environmentally engaged practitioners with knowledge of the materiality of alternatives. In return, it will increase the inclusivity and accessibility of the latter's projects to the working-class communities Labour represents. In this way, the engagement with grassroots movements will embolden the party, the community and activists already locked in struggle in these areas.

Conclusion: The politics of production and reproduction

Addressing reproduction rather than production, worthy projects around food, cooperation and the commons tend not to have a working-class politics. Less well-off or enfranchised groups often face barriers to getting involved. As Labour people benefit in learning from grassroots experiments, the latter will learn in return how to better include a wider cross-section of the community. And, by bringing a realistic everyday politics of social reproduction to Labour, these interventions can help it succeed electorally against the background of a crisis of social democracy.

Up until the recent General Election, Corbynism only incompletely reconciled Labour's historical electoralism with social movementism. Whether Labour owes its strong election performance to Corbynism as a concrete social force or an abstract mediated spectacle is up for grabs. Stories of Momentum's energising effect on the election ground campaign aside, Labour's surge may have owed as much to the media as practical pavement politics. Taking advantage of the obligation upon broadcasters to offer a fair hearing during the period of *purdah*, Labour thrived off the cleverly leaked manifesto, a series of simple policies that set the pace on radio news bulletins, Corbyn's strong debate performances and the regional television coverage of his well-attended city-specific rallies (Forrester 2017). Crucially for the future, June's results showed evident unused capacity to build further in a second snap poll later this year. For instance, Labour ran the Conservative Party close from a standing start in a series of Tory safe seats in the South West like the former Cornish stronghold of Camborne and Redruth.

It is still possible that, outside the duress of an election campaign, Corbynism reverts to an awkward balance of protest and parliamentarianism in expectation of 'one more heave' with little further room to grow past the forty per cent polling achieved in June. Reflexive 'actionism' (see Adorno 1999a and 1999b) abounds in McDonnell's post-election advocacy of the hackneyed tactic of an 'A to B' march to depose the elected Prime Minister, in conjunction with the extra-parliamentary People's Assembly (Sweeney and Landin 2017).

The approach suggested here, on the other hand, may bridge recent divides between the streets and parliamentary seats by reading the possibility of Corbynism along lines more resonant with Labour's own rich traditions. Labour can delve into its own past to see how systems of mutual support can combat inequality, with a rich municipal, cooperative and mutual history of Labour Clubs, leisure groups, reading rooms, institutes and trades councils linking unions, party and communities. This tradition tells us that Labour can find ways of doing this that don't rely on reinventing the wheel. Structures of feeling already present in Labour's DNA can help us apply lessons from the past to the future, in order to reconstitute the social around decentralized self-organised and self-managed means to socially reproduce ourselves and others. This historical mission is also that of a 21st century social democracy that roots its power not only in parliament, and not only in protest, but in human practice itself. This at least has the potential to get to grips with the need to build on-the-ground alternatives.

And where do the machinic ideas of postcapitalism and accelerationism go now? Labour's recent success could well be their undoing. Moving quickly to secure internal unanimity after the election call, the Labour manifesto occupied a leftwards position firmly within the logic of state-driven reformist social democracy. This electorally expedient orientation temporarily squeezed out the techno-utopianism of Corbyn's postcapitalist courtiers, the intellectual and polemical support of which by now taken for granted with no *quid pro quo* in way of policy. Automation and basic income did not feature, where they might have had the party more time to follow through on the growing push for the policy from McDonnell and others.

Even so, with Corbyn's hand strengthened and the viability of the popular appeal of a left-wing platform in less doubt, calls for 'luxury communism' and cognate ideas will

no doubt intensify in the calm before the next electoral storm. What is striking is how passively 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' has accommodated itself to a Brexit-backing brand of social democracy. A Lexit ('Left Brexit') hangover lingers, eagerly awaiting accelerationism in one country. Newly weaned to the mother's milk of social democracy, the brush with party political calculations- especially if, as polls suggest, Labour increases its share of the vote towards a second snap general election in the autumn- may have a transformative effect on the paragons of postcapitalism. Hitched so closely to an electoral project careering towards the centre, their capacity to dream technicolour dreams may well end neutered by proximity to power. With little room for further thought, in their place partisans of other futures might enter the fray, mainlined by Momentum and assuming, like postcapitalism, the green-fingered Corbyn as their carrier. Eschewing productivism old and new, it is with this politics of social reproduction that Labour can come good on its renewal.

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