

The London Journal of Critical Thought

Volume 1, Issue 1 (June 2016)

How to Cite: Paolo Vignola, “Symptoms and Speed of νοῦς: Toward a Critical Invention of the Future,” *London Journal of Critical Thought* 1 (2016), 38-48

Published: 24 June 2016

Peer Review: This article was peer-reviewed internally by a member of the editorial collective and by an external reviewer.

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Symptoms and Speed of νοῦς: Toward a Critical Invention of the Future

Paolo Vignola

In their *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek suggest that one of the main contemporary issues for a politics of subjectivity could be synthesised by updating the famous Deleuzian-Spinozian question from “what can a body do?” to the question of “what can a modern technosocial body do?”¹ This question could provide both an updating of the ethics of immanence and a new image of a leftist political narrative, indicating a Promethean dimension of politics based on two main assumptions that lead to an immanentist form of an emancipatory and even revolutionary process within capitalism. Specifically, the *Manifesto* claims that capitalism at the same time unleashes and represses technological development, as well as the social, cognitive, and productive capacities that grow through it: “Accelerationism is the basic belief that these capacities can and should be let loose by moving beyond the limitations imposed by capitalist society.”² Hence by acceleration is implied a full deployment of the tendencies developed within the present forms of capitalistic production.

According to both Toni Negri³ and Franco “Bifo” Berardi⁴ one can synthesise the two assumptions lying behind accelerationism: the first assumption is that to accelerate production cycles would make capitalism unstable and would lead it to lose control over innovation; the second one claims that the emancipatory potentialities contained

¹ Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,” in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Armen Avanessian and Robin Mackay (London: Urbanomic, 2014), 355–356.

² *Ibid.*, 361.

³ See Toni Negri, “Some Reflections about #Accelerate Manifesto,” in *Ibid.*, 363–378.

⁴ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body,” *e-flux journal*, Vol. 46, June 2013, <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationism-questioned-from-the-point-of-view-of-the-body/>> (last accessed 16th October 2015).

in the capitalist form would *necessarily* deploy themselves towards a communist means of production and way of life.

Criticising these assumptions with the help of what I characterise as Bifo’s symptomatology, I do not want to completely annihilate the emancipatory narrative offered by Williams and Srnicek. Rather, I attempt here to describe some symptoms of the collective disease. This disease in turn calls for a necessary bifurcation from the current stage of capitalism. In other words, the symptoms of such disease indicate the suffering and even the “lack” of the collective dimension, and hence the need to develop new narratives. These narratives suggest that what must be accelerated is the process of critique—and thus the development of the *nous* as critical thinking—rather than merely the process of innovation or technological evolution.

A brief symptomatology of capitalistic acceleration

With regard to the first accelerationist assumption, Bifo argues that it is impossible to make capitalism unstable, and thus to overcome it, by accelerating technological evolution, precisely because of its ability to empower itself from every kind of shock.⁵ Furthermore, its most recent stage consists in an automatic governance, which has replaced rational government with the mere concatenation of algorithms “running at blinding speed.”⁶ For this reason, “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,” as suggested by Guattari in *Chaosmosis*.⁷

In relation to the second assumption, according to Bifo, Williams and Srnicek underestimate the obstacles that block and divert the process of subjectivation. For him the *Manifesto* seems to ignore the symptoms of both the proletarianisation of cognitive workers with respect to their knowledge⁸ and what has been called the

⁵ See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2008).

⁶ Berardi, “Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body.”

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique I. L’avenir du travail* (Paris: Fayard, 2015).

psychopathologies of cognitive capitalism.⁹ As we will see, these symptoms speak to the failure of collective individuation as social and political project:

The immanence of the liberatory form [...] implies the *possibility* of this deployment, but does not imply the necessity of it. [...] This possibility, indeed, can be hindered and diverted by the cultural and psychological forms of subjective existence. [...] The process of autonomous subjectivation is jeopardized by chaotic acceleration, and social subjectivity is captured and subjugated by capitalist governance.¹⁰

Bifo is aware of the “accelerationist” instance expressed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, when in relation to the movement of the market, a movement of decoding and deterritorialisation, they affirm that the question is not to “withdraw from the process, but to go further, to ‘accelerate the process,’ as Nietzsche put it.”¹¹ Yet Bifo shows that, in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari seem to have already deconstructed their own accelerationist passage when they claim that “[w]e require just a little order to protect us from chaos.”¹²

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. [I]t generates panic before finally destroying any possible form of autonomous subjectivation.¹³

This last statement by Deleuze and Guattari, on which Bifo comments, comes from a self-critique of their own rhetoric of desire, by which they became aware of the new processes of modulation of

⁹ See Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Cambridge: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2009), 102–103.

¹⁰ Berardi, “Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body.”

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin, 1977), 239.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Verso, 1994), 201.

¹³ Berardi, “Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body”.

the brain and soul installed by neoliberalism.¹⁴ Some years later Lazzarato would refer to “noopolitics” as this new activity of capitalism diagnosed by Deleuze in his *Postscript*, meaning the ensemble of the techniques of control exercised on the brain, involving above all attention, desire, memory and protentions.¹⁵ This kind of control aims today, even more than in the 1990s, to neutralise difference, reduce the power of critical bifurcation, and eradicate any possibility of variation, unpredictability, action and behaviour. The modulation of subjectivity, which was the main stake of Deleuze’s *Postscript*, is becoming a neuro-modulation. Therefore, before developing a Promethean politics of subjectivity, it is worth diagnosing the effects of so-called “neuropower,” as Warren Neidich emphasises:

Sovereignty has insinuated its own extended cognitive apparatuses as epistemological agents and trajectories into the cultural habitus in order to call out to the multiplicity. This shift, delineated by a change of focus from the body to the brain and mind [...] is described as neuropower.¹⁶

Hence the question of “what can a technosocial body do?” seems to acquire a dystopian accent, especially if we consider that, according to Neidich, “neuropower concerns the production of people in the future. What they ‘could’ become.”¹⁷ From this point of view it is legitimate to ask, “Who really has the power to accelerate the process?”, and which process, or better which processes? The problem of neuropower is indeed tied to the very process of thought, much like the process of levelling put forward by Nietzsche in his diagnosis of the social manifestation of nihilism. By following the Nietzschean suggestion of accelerating as referred to by Deleuze and Guattari, the hypothesis of this article is that to generalise noopolitics would lead us

¹⁴ See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992), 3–7; Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: an Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Maurizio Lazzarato, “The Concepts of Life and the Living in the Societies of Control,” in *Deleuze and the Social*, ed. Martin Fuglsang and Bent Meier Sorensen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 186.

¹⁶ Warren Neidich, “From Noopower to NeuroPower: How Mind Becomes Matter,” in *Cognitive Architecture. From Biopolitics to Noopolitics. Architecture & Mind in the Age of Communication and Information*, ed. Warren Neidich and Daniel Hauptman (Rotterdam: 010Publishers), 540.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 550.

just to the fulfilment of nihilistic levelling. This seems evident if one agrees with the notion that, just as neoliberal global capitalism is annihilating biodiversity via pollution and the encroachment of habitat, so too cognitive capitalism, as a subset of the former, is accelerating the homogenisation of the cultural field with all the means allowed by neuro- and techno-science and political institutions. These are the two sides of what is called the Anthropocene, probably the best name for the 1887 Nietzschean prophecy concerning the two next centuries.¹⁸

Curiously, accelerationists, who converge very well with the Anthropocene and cognitive capitalism, seem to still have kept a very Fordist image of subjectivity, with little relation either to algorithmic governmentality or to noopolitics, psychopower, neuropower, or in general to the real subsumption of life. Hence what they propose is an accelerationist scenario for a tendential subjectivity whose tendency no longer exists.

Nevertheless, the question about the possibility of a technosocial body still remains a real issue for ethico-political thought and thus the following paragraphs attempt to draw a critical path by which to raise these issues. To begin with, we must start from the social field in general, and in particular with the Nietzschean symptomatology that Deleuze described in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.¹⁹ Today this kind of symptomatology should focus on the decay of the social as the condition of possibility for “the people to come,” which is, according to Deleuze, the main goal of an emancipatory politics. Indeed, we are today witnessing the degradation of the social—as a concept linked to solidarity, to enhancements of inter-generational and collective ties, and to the cooperation and construction of political projects—to its simulacrum: the “social” of digital social networking, as merely the sharing of data. Such simulacrum is producing only social atomisation, in which the dividual represents both the product and the object on which the power of control is exercised.

¹⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and H.R. Hollingdale (New York: Random, 1968), §2.

¹⁹ See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2002).

The fulfilment of nihilism

According to Rouvroy, algorithmic governmentality is the power of anticipating, formatting, and selecting via algorithms the future actions of individuals, through the monitoring of data and metadata from their “profiles.” This kind of governmentality, which synchronises and modulates profiles and preferences, does not allow for the development of subjectivation essentially because it does not consider subjects as concrete agents with deep and complex reasons for their actions: “the only ‘subject’ algorithmic governmentality needs is a unique, supra-individual, constantly reconfigured ‘statistical body’ [that] carries a kind of ‘memory of the future’”²⁰ in order to ensure a precise behaviour, both for consumption, for labour and for social security. From an ethical and political point of view, what should be highlighted is that “algorithmic government frames the future, [...] deprives human beings of their fundamental potency, which is their capacity to emerge as individual and collective subjects.”²¹

Hence, rather than being an active subject, with his or her own will and desires, the individual shaped by this governmentality is purely adaptive to data-driven behaviour. This is so because algorithmic governmentality does not consider subjects as such, but treats them as aggregates of infra-personal data, who are no longer individuals but dividuals.²² What Rouvroy calls ‘data behaviourism,’²³ as the weapon of this governmentality, separates subjects from the capabilities through which they can reach the world, and prevents them from criticising what occurs in their life. Furthermore, while for accelerationists the main issue of subjectivity today could be expressed by the formula “what can a technosocial body do?,” according to Rouvroy, data behaviourism seems to be an answer, from the opposite

²⁰ Antoinette Rouvroy, “The end(s) of critique: data-behaviourism vs. due-process,” in *Privacy, Due Process and the Computational Turn: Philosophers of Law Meet Philosophers of Technology*, ed. Mireille Hildebrandt and Ekatarin De Vries (London: Routledge, 2013), 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

²² Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of ‘dividual’ describes the result of a process of digital codification of social and affective life within societies of control, by which the individuals become nothing but indexable entities.

²³ Rouvroy, “The end(s) of critique: data-behaviourism vs. due-process,” 149: “I will call ‘data behaviourism’ this new way of producing knowledge about future preferences, attitudes, behaviours or events without considering the subject’s psychological motivations, speeches or narratives, but rather relying on *data*.”

side—the side that does not care about subjectivity at all—to another, more pragmatic question: “what could a body do?”. This means that, with its anticipative evaluations of infra-personal data, algorithmic governmentality pre-configures the future of bodies, i.e. individuals, tailoring them on the basis of their profiles, a tendency that bypasses the wishes and affects of their living present.

From a Deleuzian point of view, one could diagnose two signs or symptoms of nihilism. First, just like Nietzschean reactive forces, the ‘force’ of algorithmic government essentially consists in separating subjects from their ability to do or not do certain things—and so in separating subjects from their capacities of willing and of behaving in an active way, that is to say, of individuating themselves.

Second, taking this diagnosis further, one can refer to how ascetic ideals, i.e. the will to nothingness, are actualised by reactive forces “by which life *must* contradict itself, deny itself, annihilate itself.”²⁴ In other words, one could see the rise of a kind of digital nihilism as a de-valuation of the living will and of all living values. Actually, if digital ascetic ideals realise themselves *within* this life and no longer in a life beyond, they are no longer transcendent: they instead become immanent. We should thus consider the relationships between reactive-destructive forces and active-productive forces as a continuing struggle within the immanence of modes of production and everyday life. This essentially means that the same subjects have to struggle not only against the “spectacle of Capital” in Debord’s sense, and therefore to act in a sort of super-egoic dimension, but also and more importantly against the annihilation of every political protention whose causes can be reached in the more and more automatised behaviour of these same individuals, algorithmically modulated and re-shaped in order to be governed. It is only by considering these two tendencies—the reactive forces and the immanentised ascetic ideals—as the symptoms of a nihilistic dimension affecting political and imaginary protentions that it is possible to conceive the disruption linked to machinic subjectivity, and hence to ask: “what can a technosocial body do?”.

²⁴ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 145.

At this point it is necessary to clarify how symptomatology could be a socio-philosophical tool. If, as indicated, Nietzsche's symptomatology offers a way of responding to the accelerationist question of the technosocial body, this is because it allows us to consider all kinds of social phenomena as symptoms reflecting states of forces. Symptomatology leads us to "ask, for any given thing, what state of exterior and interior forces it presupposes."²⁵ Forces and their relationships can be discovered behind every analysis, following a symptomatology that "interprets phenomena, treating them as symptoms whose sense must be sought in the forces that produce them."²⁶

Furthermore, and putting this methodology in relation to what has been called above the immanentisation of ascetic ideals within algorithmic governmentality, it is worth emphasising that Deleuze argued that "any given concept, feeling or belief will be treated as symptoms of a will that wills something."²⁷ Thus, when the will of the citizen, who has become the digital user, is pre-empted by data behaviourism, this very will can even will nothing, collapsing into its previous gestures, which have already been traced and calculated for its future, drive-based behaviour. Discovering the will to nothingness behind data behaviourism and this kind of governmentality represents a way to further analyse the state of fact that the *Manifesto* describes as "symptomatic" of our age:

The future needs to be constructed. It has been demolished by neoliberal capitalism and reduced to a cut-price promise of greater inequality, conflict, and chaos. This collapse in the idea of the future is symptomatic of the regressive historical status of our age, rather than, as cynics across the political spectrum would have us believe, a sign of sceptical maturity.²⁸

Even if we can but agree with this valuable diagnosis, the claim that the collapse of the idea of the future is symptomatic of the regressive status of our age should be the point of departure for a critical thought that takes care of what happens to subjectivity, not the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁸ Williams and Srnicek, "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," 362.

final statement of a Manifesto of a Promethean subjectivity. Finally, what is missed in this uncritical view of acceleration is the subject's capacity to speak and construct narratives starting from his/her own symptoms.

Noology and organology

According to Deleuze, 'Noology' is the study of the images of thought historically wired into society in order to organise its life. This process of social embodiment of the images of thought being always mediated, if not led, by machines and devices that are able to give form to the relations of production, then it therefore seems right to apply noology within the phenomenon described above as algorithmic governmentality, and more generally within digital political economy. If today algorithms *predict* behavioural responses, and more dangerously for criticism, *pre-empt* the *nous* by controlling wishes, desires, and citizens' attention, what is unthought by the *Manifesto* then is precisely the image of thought as it is contained in the acceleration process, and which is too quickly associated with emancipation. Following Bifo's, Rouvroy's, and Stiegler's diagnoses of this new kind of governmentality, we should take the Nietzschean argument seriously—which accelerationism seems to prove correct—that the spasm diagnosed by Guattari, as well as the systematic carelessness of the subject (Rouvroy), and the dividuation of the social (Stiegler)²⁹ are all symptoms of the fulfilment of nihilism.

In short, we need an image of thought able both to *diagnose* the disease afflicting critical thinking created by digital political economy, and to *invent* new relations of production. In other words, we should seek an image of thought that could keep the emancipatory promise while simultaneously recognising the weaknesses of our political subjectivity. A first step towards this goal could be undertaken by combining a noological approach and an organological one, as Stiegler has sketched out.³⁰ This will offer a new image of thought for a philosophy engaged in taking care of social symptoms by denouncing

²⁹ Stiegler, *La société automatique I*, 234.

³⁰ See Bernard Stiegler, *Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Distrust and Disbelief 3*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 45.

the toxic and poisonous effects of consumerism, cultural industries, and the global synchronisation of consciousness. Furthermore, Stiegler's general organology, as the study of how tools, forms of knowledge, bodies, minds and social organisations are interrelated and co-individuate with one another, seems already strictly related to noology both in a productive and in a clinical way.

This relation is productive because according to Stiegler one can affirm that every image of thought is always already a result of a co-individuation of organs, whether they are technical, physiological or social organisations. Nevertheless, it is a clinical relation because a critique of such an image would imply a diagnosis of the health of these organs. The latter can refer only to the health of the co-individuation of the three kinds of organs that together comprise a process involving every aspect of social life, while organological illness brings society to its crises, which in their turn accompany the blockage of psycho-social and technical individuation processes. Organological illness is what seems to be ignored by a large part of socio-political thought, and by accelerationists as well, who underestimate the social and political symptoms of disease arising from the co-individuation of these organs. When processes of individuation and co-individuation are blocked, so too the processes of normativity in place in the whole of society, in Canguilhem's sense, are arrested.³¹ The result is that the creation of any kind of new social form or subjectivity becomes generally impossible. Only in relation to these processes, and not to some abstract process of technical evolution, should we evaluate the question of whether and in what ways acceleration is worthwhile or dangerous.

In conclusion, it should be underlined that to conduct an organological critique of accelerationist rhetoric is not to stigmatise technological evolution as such, since according to Stiegler every technology is a kind of *pharmakon*, simultaneously a poison and a remedy for the very political subjectivity that is at stake in the Manifesto. If "poison" means that critical thought must pay attention to the toxic effects of technological innovation, especially within neoliberal economy, to consider technology as a remedy would be

³¹ Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), 145–170.

instead to attempt to create a new image of thought within the very process of technological evolution. In order to do so, politics needs to transform the symptoms of social disease into new paths of social and technological experimentation. In this sense, just as Deleuze's concept of the "people to come" is described as the ultimate goal of literature as a mission of health, so too the symptomatological perspective of taking care of the co-individuation of organs can suggest a new, pharmacological idea of the "social", according to which noology would be essentially tied to technology.