

**avoiding communism: a
critique of nick srnicek and
alex williams' *inventing the
future* (verso, 2015)**

nathan brown

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' *Inventing the Future* advances a two part agenda. The first half of the book attempts a critique of what the authors call “folk politics”: “a constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common sense ways of organising, acting and thinking politics.”¹ They see “the left” of today as embroiled in “attempts at prefiguration, direct action, and relentless horizontalism” (69)—hallmarks of “folk political” thinking which render political movements incapable of overcoming state repression or of “scaling up” to a global level (37). Claiming that “numerous protests and marches and occupations typically operate without any sense of strategy, simply acting as dispersed and independent blips of resistance” while “there is far too little thought given to how to combine these various actions, and how they might function together to collectively build a better world” (49), Srnicek and Williams claim that “leftist movements under the sway of folk politics” (10) are “content to remain” at the level “of the transient, the small-scale, the unmediated and the particular” (12) and thus “incapable of turning the tide against global capitalism” (85).

Following this critique, the second half of the book proposes a “political project for the twenty-first century left” (104). Here, Srnicek and Williams “advance some broad demands to start building a platform for a post-work society” (107). These include “full automation,” a reduction of the work week, and the universal provision of a basic income attended by “a diminishment of the work ethic” (127).

Toward these goals, they urge a “counter-hegemonic project” (174) to “compete against the neoliberal and social democratic options” (127), featuring “an ecology of organisations” (169) that would include networks of think tanks, political parties, media organisations, and a mass movement supported by “broad populist unity” (163), capable of carrying out disruptive actions at “points of leverage” (169). They argue that their key demands—reduction of working hours and a universal basic income—could be financed through “some combination of reducing duplicate programs, raising taxes on the rich, inheritance taxes, consumption taxes, carbon taxes, cutting spending on the military, cutting industry and agricultural subsidies, and cracking down on tax evasion” (123). Viewing these proposals as “non-reformist reforms” (108), Srnicek and Williams see their fulfillment as a “project that must be carried out over the long term: decades rather than years, cultural shifts rather than electoral cycles” (108). With this long-term programme of non-reformist reform in mind, they state preferences—“our preference is for a three-day weekend, rather than a reduction of the working day” (116)—and offer suggestions for realizing them: “this demand can be achieved in a number of ways—through trade union struggles, pressure from social movements, and legislative change by political parties” (116). Finally, looking beyond their preference for a three-day weekend, they argue that the “twenty-first century left” should “mobilise dreams of decarbonising the economy, space travel, robot economies—all the traditional touchstones of science fiction—in order to prepare for a day beyond capitalism” (183).

Perhaps my lack of enthusiasm for *Inventing the Future’s* attempt to “reignite a utopian imagination” (150), its “vision for a better world” (174), is already implicit in the detachment of the summary above. But why not be enthused? Who doesn’t prefer a three-day weekend? Surely a Universal Basic Income that would “transform the political relationship between labour and capital” (120) would be good thing? It would be soothing to “slow down and reflect, safely protected from the constant pressures of neoliberalism” (121). Who wouldn’t welcome the prospect of a world with “machines humming along and handling the difficult labour that humans would otherwise be forced to do” (151)? Why not just nod one’s head, like a relic of the cybernetically tuned-in Bucky Fuller counterculture of yesterday, to “an attempt to reorganise technological development away from marginal weapon improvements and towards socially useful goods” (148)? After all, while insisting that “the left can neither remain in the present nor return to the past” (181), what Srnicek and Williams have to say is not much different than what Fuller urged back in the day:

It is a matter of converting the high technology from weaponry to livingry. The essence of livingry is human-life advantaging and environment controlling. With the highest aeronautical and engineering facilities of the world redirected from weaponry to livingry production, all humanity would have the option of becoming enduringly successful.²

Sounds pretty basic. So what's the problem?

In what follows I offer a critique of *Inventing the Future's* guiding premises across the critical and prescriptive sections of the book. My argument is, first, that the book's criticisms of what authors call "folk politics" apply better to their own mode of political thought than to the would-be objects of their critique; second, that by articulating a program for a new phase of capitalist accumulation, Srnicek and Williams merely evade, rather than confront, the problem of how forces of production will be reproduced beyond the reproduction of the class relation. It is not only the superficial, uninformed tendentiousness of the critique leveled in the first half of the book, or the incoherence of the utopian prescriptions offered in the second half, but also the unwillingness of the authors, throughout, to openly address simple conceptual difficulties that makes this book so dull. At minimum, one expects from the authors of a book a genuine interest in the problems it poses, an effort to confront those problems openly and to reckon with their difficulties. While turning the pages of *Inventing the Future*, one hopes that an honest attempt to grapple with the contradictions its prescriptions present will eventually be forthcoming. It does not happen.



In order to distinguish their political programme from innumerable well-worn utopian socialist fantasies, Srnicek and Williams must offer the veneer of a conjunctural analysis. Thus, the book opens with a diagnosis of a contemporary disease, which the authors call "folk politics." The disease is serious, because "leftist movements under the sway of folk politics are not only unlikely to be successful — they are in fact incapable of transforming capitalism" (10). For Srnicek and Williams, "folk politics names a constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common sense ways of organising, acting and thinking politics" (9). At its core is "the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the corollary being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation" (6). They "detect traces of folk politics" in the Occupy movement, Spain's 15M, student occupations, Tiqqun and the Invisible

Committee, the Zapatistas, “contemporary anarchist tinged politics,” political localism, the slow food movement, ethical consumerism, the 100-miles diet, local currencies, “veneration of small-scale communities or local businesses,” and “general assemblies and direct democracy” (11-12). The problem with what they call “folk politics” is that it “remains reactive,” “ignores long-term strategic goals in favour of tactics,” “prefers practices that are inherently fleeting,” and “chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknowns of the future” (11). Finally, it is characterized by

a preference for the everyday over the structural, valorising personal experience over systemic thinking; for feeling over thinking, emphasising individual suffering, or sensations of enthusiasm and anger experienced during political actions; for the particular over the universal, seeing the latter as intrinsically totalitarian; and of the ethical over the political, as in ethical consumerism, or moralising critiques of greedy bankers (11).

Already one notices, several pages into the first chapter, that Srnicek and Williams are more interested in caricature than credible analysis of recent social movements. How much do student occupations really have to do with the slow food movement or the 100-miles diet? In exactly what sense does the wave of student movements that swept across Europe and the United States following the 2008 economic crisis prefer “the everyday over the structural” or “feeling over thinking”? Is it really feasible to say that those movements generally valorised the personal over the systematic? Is it true that they tended to view the universal as totalitarian?

Consider, for example, the prevalence of the general assembly as an organisational form in those movements. In many cases, the strongest proponents of those assemblies and their particular form of direct democracy were also the strongest proponents of long-term strategy over “adventurist” actions, and they often relied upon universalist principles to support the procedural formalism of the assembly. Indeed, partisans of the general assembly were likely to espouse many of the same principles and critical perspectives as Srnicek and Williams. This was the case, for example, in the 2009 student occupation in Zagreb, Croatia, where collective deliberation by a democratic plenum was aligned with a particularly strong universalist orientation, a rhetoric of political rationalism, an emphasis on systematic analysis and long-term strategy over emotional spontaneity, and an insistence on the necessity of unified goals rather than particularist fragmentation.³

This was surely the case throughout many student occupations in Europe and the U.S., which were not oriented by political localism but rather by the sense of a shared global struggle that united different locations around the widespread goal of free education. Indeed, the sort of populist inclusivity and emphasis upon unified goals that Srnicek and Williams endorse was precisely the political rationale behind the organisational formalism of the GA within those movements, while Marxists and anarchists, seeking to orient these movements toward revolutionary horizons rather than reformist consensus, often argued against the proceduralism of the GA or organised direct actions outside of direct democratic channels. Yet it was also the case that such efforts to bypass democratic proceduralism often appealed to systematic and structural analysis (rather than “feeling over thinking”) in order to criticize reformism.

As soon as one considers the alignment of forces and organisational forms internal to the movements Srnicek and Williams merely caricature, the critique of folk politics leveled in *Inventing the Future* is exposed as a tissue of false oppositions that becomes a misleading hindrance rather than an effective analytical or even polemical tool. Srnicek and Williams gesture critically toward recent struggles, but their own perspectives were already represented within them. It is simply false that international student movements or the Occupy movement, in general, “preferred” tactics over strategy, the particular over the universal, or the everyday over the structural. Rather, ongoing debates about such questions were the very substance of those movements. What the discrepant groups participating in those movements had in common was not at all a collective tendency toward what Srnicek and Williams characterize as “folk politics,” but rather the fact that they *actually participated in political struggles*. If Srnicek and Williams deigned to do so, they would just be two more wonks bleating about unity and rallying for a medley of desiderata: engagement with political parties, propagation of think tanks, funding for space travel, three day weekends bolstered by Universal Basic Income. There were plenty of such people around the squares during Occupy; they would have fit right in.

Srnicek and Williams probably anticipate that their critique will miss the mark for those more familiar with the struggles they criticize, so they choose not to aim very carefully in the first place. “Folk politics does not name an explicit position, but only an implicit tendency” (12), they tell us, and they claim that “existing tendencies in the mainstream and radical left are moving towards the folk political pole” (22-23). Meanwhile, the collective subject of this critique—“the left”—is

acknowledged to be “an ultimately artificial if useful term, used to describe an incredibly diverse and potentially contradictory set of political and social forces” (187). Since they grant that “any consistency these forces might have is a matter of construction and articulation” they offer the following “point of clarification”:

we consider ‘the left’ today in the broadest sense to consist of the following movements, positions, and organisations: democratic socialism, communism, anarchism, left-libertarianism, anti-imperialism, anti-fascism, anti-capitalism, feminism, autonomism, trade unionism, queer politics, and large sections of the green movement, among many groups allied or hybridised with the above (188).

The 100-miles diet must fall into that last category.

Let us try out this particular construction and articulation of the collective noun, “the left,” as it functions in the rhetoric of Srnicek and Williams. If we test its extension by substituting their litany for its collective noun we find them proposing that: “[democratic socialism, communism, anarchism, left-libertarianism, anti-imperialism, anti-fascism, anti-capitalism, feminism, autonomism, trade unionism, queer politics, and large sections of the green movement, among many groups allied or hybridised with the above]” have “rejected the project of hegemony and expansion” (23). Is this a useful or intelligible claim? Has left-libertarianism itself rejected the project of hegemony and expansion, or has it just failed to form a hegemonic bloc with democratic socialism? Have trade unions really rejected the project of expansion? — or are they just...not expanding? Have queer politics or feminism really “rejected the project of hegemony and expansion” because they have not yet abolished patriarchy or the heterosexual matrix? Does the achievement of hegemony on certain reformist fronts (e.g. gay marriage) really mean that queer politics, in general, has given up on more radical goals? What about the many groups that urge and enact commitment to more radical measures? What about democratic socialists? Have they rejected hegemony and expansion? Didn’t we just find them rejoicing at the electoral victory of Syriza, along with many people who consider themselves communists, precisely on the grounds that Syriza’s victory seemed (to them) a harbinger of hegemony and expansion to come? I am not sure if it makes sense to think that anti-imperialism, or anarchism, ever really accepted “the project of hegemony and expansion,” in which case it would be hard for them to reject it. But perhaps none of these groups in particular have done so; rather, maybe it is the “many groups allied or hybridised with the above”

that have tipped the balance on “the left” against hegemony and expansion?

Maybe Srnicek and Williams think such claims will be granted without much scrutiny (“the left has abandoned the project of hegemony and expansion”) because they are clichés. After all, this is the sort of thing people say all the time. If there is one thing “the left” has never rejected, it is complaining that its own ranks have supposedly rejected the project of hegemony and expansion. Srnicek and Williams wallow in such clichés, which are the substance of their putative analysis. They really seem to think that “the left” is not hegemonic because it doesn’t sufficiently *want* to be hegemonic. In their opinion, the problem is ideological, or just psychological. It results from “a defeatist attitude” and a “series of judgments that are widely accepted” by “a broad range of the contemporary left”: “small is beautiful, the local is ethical, simpler is better, permanence is oppressive, progress is over” (46).⁴ In the case of the Occupy movement, they recognize that “the proximate cause for the movement’s failure was state repression, in the form of police clad in riot gear ruthlessly clearing the occupied spaces across the United States” (36), “but,” they judge, “the structural causes were built into the assumptions and practices of the movement,” since “the organisational form of these movements could not overcome the problems of scalability and construct a form of persistent power capable of effectively resisting the inevitable reaction from the state” (36). Srnicek and Williams will eventually argue that the solution to these problems of scalability is “a healthy ecosystem of organisations” (155), including parties and governments. So, what about Syriza’s collapse into the status quo last year? Syriza evaded “the inevitable reaction from the state” by becoming the state, and by mobilizing the sort of populist support Srnicek and Williams envision. This did not, however, protect their political programme from being crushed by the Troika. Several months after being elected they were not being attacked by police clad in riot gear—because they were the ones sending riot police into the streets to disperse anyone who rejected their swift conversion into lackeys of the capitalist powers they promised to oppose.

Inventing the Future ignores such examples in order to characterize whatever struggles it deems “folk political” as failures while touting the history of its own tired proposals as a story of near-success. Srnicek and Williams lament that “nothing changed, and long-term victories were traded for a simple registration of discontent” after the “spectacular political confrontations” they criticize (6). But later, they will tell us that Universal Basic Income “very nearly became a reality in the 1970s” because “Nixon and Carter attempted to pass legislation to achieve

it” (118). Nixon’s failure to pass a piece of legislation, which they support, is an encouraging story of virtual success, while the history of the political movements they caricature is a story of discouraging futility. If Syriza is no longer tenable as a source of inspiration, they can always fall back on Podemos, “which has aimed to build mechanisms for popular governance while also seeking a way into established institutions” (169). Srnicek and Williams do not have time to worry about the ugly precedent just set in Greece by exactly that strategy, committed as they are to spending half their book shadow boxing with the bogey of “folk politics.”

What is ironic about predicating a critique of “folk politics” upon the supposed *beliefs* of a collective agent called “the left” is the degree to which this maneuver relies upon “folk psychology.” For Srnicek and Williams, the term folk politics “evokes critiques of folk psychology which argue that our intuitive conceptions of the world are both historically constructed and often mistaken” (10). In a footnote, they stipulate that “while we want to draw a somewhat loose analogy with the neurophilosophical tradition here, we do not mean to argue that folk politics is in any sense *grounded* in folk psychology” (186). What they do not recognize is that their own critique of folk politics *is* grounded in folk psychology. This is what makes their “somewhat loose analogy” with the neurophilosophical tradition a very bad analogy. The two neurophilosophical sources they cite are books by Stephen Stich and Patricia Churchland, both of which characterize the attribution of belief-desire states to intentional agents as folk psychological, arguing that these should be eliminated from a rigorous understanding of mental events and processes. Indeed, the rejection of belief-desire attribution is the central argument of the critique of folk psychology in neurophilosophy. Yet the attribution of belief-desire states as a framework of causal explanation for the “failure” of a collective agent called “the contemporary left” is the primary strategy of the critique of “folk politics” in *Inventing the Future*. An appeal to belief-desire models of agency is also central to the book’s counter-hegemonic political programme, which depends upon the effort to “revive a utopian social imagination” (153). Srnicek and Williams think of political mobilization in terms of “enticing and expansive visions of a better future” (83), and their “counter-hegemonic project,” they write, “can only be achieved by imagining better worlds” (175). Just as they attribute the impasses of “the left” to erroneous beliefs and modest desires, they project its future success as a matter of better beliefs and more ambitious desires. In order to criticize folk politics and propose a way beyond it, they evidently have to rely on folk psychology.

Unlike Srnicek and Williams, I have no interest in applying, or misapplying, “a somewhat loose analogy” with folk psychology to a critique of “the left.” But I do have an interest in the Marxist critique of political economy. Srnicek and Williams call for a politics “comfortable with complexity and abstraction,” but when it comes time to practice what they preach in the second half of their book, they prove unequal to the task. It was Marx who initially introduced the critical tools to debunk utopian socialism through superior powers of abstraction enabling him to understand the contradictions of capital rather than merely appealing to voluntarist desires for a better world. But rather than taking up these tools, Srnicek and Williams resort to the immediacy of proposals for social democratic legislation.



Our first indication that things will not go well for *Inventing the Future* as it turns from critique to utopian prescription arrives in the transition between chapters titled “Why Aren’t We Winning” and “Why Are They Winning” — as if history were a football match in which the sides are equal, but in which “their” coach happens to have a better strategy. In the latter chapter, Srnicek and Williams “call for a Mont Pelerin of the left” (67), taking the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS), founded in 1947, as an exemplar of counter-hegemonic construction. For them, the capacity of Mont Pelerin’s neoliberal position to eventually displace the mid-century Keynesian consensus exemplifies the import of “full-spectrum infrastructure” to develop and promulgate ideas, as MPS’s “think tanks and utopian proclamations organised long-term thinking” (60). The key aspect of their argument is an insistence that neoliberalism did not just become a hegemonic ideology through the inevitability of capitalist logic; rather, its victory over Keynesianism and subsequent global hegemony were won by long term planning and arduous organisational labour. Thus, the organisational foundations of neoliberalism serve as a key example of why “they are winning,” while the failure of the left to construct such an organisational foundation is why it is not “winning.”

It is surprising that, in the course of this argument, Srnicek and Williams do not pause to consider the consequences of the fact that Keynesianism and neoliberalism have something important in common: they are *both* capitalist ideological frameworks. Srnicek and Williams portray the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s as a great victory of voluntarist hegemonic construction, pointing out that following the economic crisis of 1973, “multiple interpretations of the economic problem were possible” and “neoliberalism was not the only possible solution” (61). “That the neoliberal story won out,” they argue, “is in no small measure because

of the ideological infrastructure that adherents to its ideas had constructed over decades” (61). In thinking about the construction of rival political possibilities during this period, they don’t mention the fact that, over those same decades, the CIA and FBI systematically crushed any sign of communist thinking or organising that might eventually pose a threat—just as federal authorities crushed the Occupy movement in coordinated sweeps as organisational expansion, strikes, and port blockades became serious problem. The Occupy movement—to cite just one recent example—was crushed by coordinated state repression because it *did* have broad populist support, and because it *was* expanding, not because it had rejected hegemony and expansion. Indeed, it had expanded to every major city in the United States and to hundreds of smaller locales. Likewise, in the late 1960s, waves of assassinations undermined the increasing radicalism of civil rights leaders and the developing infrastructural network of the Black Panther Party, while widespread infiltration of leftist groups encouraged fragmentation and dispersal. This history does not seem worth considering alongside the paean to organisational integration offered by Srnicek and Williams, who portray the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s as the triumph of an improbable underdog that was just one among many possibilities. “Capitalists,” they say, “did not initially see neoliberalism as being in their interests” (55). Yet they do not even pose the simplest question: if the success of the Mont Pelerin Society was predicated upon its ability to propagate think tanks and gain positions of government power, why was it possible for MPS to do this in the first place, while the merest flicker of communist organising was snuffed out? Perhaps MPS was able to expand its networks of influence so fluently because, although their ideas were different than those of Keynesians, and although those ideas were not yet hegemonic in the late 1940s, they were nevertheless capitalist ideas that offered capitalist solutions to capitalist problems. The spread and political integration of *anti-capitalist* or *communist* ideas and organisational structures in the West faced rather different challenges—like bullets in the head—than MPS. They still do. Meanwhile, networks and structures of ideological dissemination were quite well established in the U.S.S.R. in the 1950s and 1960s. Why didn’t their ideas win over the U.S. or the U.K. in the wake of the 1973 crisis, or eventually establish global hegemony? Was it because the neoliberals of the Mont Pelerin Society were just better organised?

Srnicek and Williams do not even try to grapple with the first difficulty of the problem of organisation: that within capitalist social relations, it is easy for capitalist organisations to “scale up,” while the difficulty of doing so for communist or anti-capitalist organisations is not just a matter of misplaced priorities. The

real contradiction involved in communist organising is that as anti-capitalist organisations grow larger and more integrated within established political structures, they tend to become increasingly capitalist. That contradiction does not result from a defeatist attitude, and addressing it is not just a matter of having the bright idea that bigger is better and that “full spectrum infrastructure” would be desirable. One does not need to think that “small is better” in order to recognize that the contradiction between capitalist social relations and communist organisation radically affects the prospect of integrating organisational structures into capitalist political and economic frameworks while remaining anti-capitalist. For one thing, such organisational integration requires volumes of funding that is forthcoming for capitalist think tanks like the Manhattan Institute, but, given the class relation, is rather less forthcoming for anti-capitalist organisations. Srnicek and Williams can’t even be bothered to mention or consider such factors.

The blindspots of the Mont Pelerin chapter suggest that Srnicek and Williams cannot really see history from the side they say they’re on, and this continues to be a problem as they proceed to lay out a series of proposals for the extension of capitalism beyond neoliberalism. Chapter 5 covers deindustrialization and the growth of surplus populations—a topic familiar to readers of communist theory from the treatment it received in Volumes 2 and 3 of the journal *Endnotes*.⁵ Srnicek and Williams dutifully conclude that “there is a growing population of people that are situated outside formal, waged work, making do with minimal welfare benefits, informal subsistence work, or by illegal means” (103-104) and that further automation is likely to exacerbate the growth of surplus populations. They argue that “these trends portend a crisis of work, and a crisis of any society based upon the institution of wage labour” (104). On this basis, they reject the feasibility of campaigns for full employment and propose instead a post-work politics predicated upon “full automation” and the provision of a Universal Basic Income that would give “the proletariat a means of subsistence without dependency on a job” (120). Surplus populations displaced from employment by automation would thus be saved from immiseration by UBI, thanks to which “the amount of time spent working for a wage can be modified to one’s desire” (121).

How do Srnicek and Williams imagine this coming about? They argue that “the classic Leninist strategy of building dual power with a revolutionary party and overthrowing the state is obsolete,” while “the recent history of revolutions—from the Iranian Revolution to the Arab Spring—has simply led to some combination of theocratic authoritarianism, military dictatorship and civil war.” They

note that “the electoral reformist approach is equally a failure” (131). Yet the electoral reformist approach is what they have in mind when it comes to instituting UBI and full automation. Capitalist barriers to full automation, they argue, could be overcome “through measures as simple as raising the minimum wage, supporting labour movements and using state subsidies to incentivise the replacement of human labour” (113). Meanwhile, they urge that Universal Basic Income “would be relatively easy to finance through some combination of reducing duplicate programmes, raising taxes on the rich, inheritance taxes, consumption taxes, carbon taxes, cutting spending on the military, cutting industry and agricultural subsidies, and cracking down on tax evasions” (123). Elsewhere they point out the obvious: that nostalgic appeal to social democratic measures is not a viable politics today, given the erosion of the economic conditions upon which social democratic consensus was predicated during the postwar period. But here, they ground the possibility of a “post-work consensus” upon social democratic legislation, without giving any account of why the latter would be “relatively easy” to achieve given the real links between austerity measures and declining capitalist profitability. While avowedly rejecting both social democracy and democratic socialism, the path from “neoliberalism into something else” (12) Srnicek and Williams describe is in fact a social democratic transition toward democratic socialism. They merely replace an emphasis on full employment with an emphasis on liberation from work, which is hardly an original contribution to the history of democratic socialist thought.⁶

Srnicek and Williams emphasize the long-term nature of this transition: “decades rather than years, cultural shifts rather than electoral cycles” (108). Despite their critique of prefigurative politics, they argue that:

if full transformational change is not immediately possible, our efforts must be directed towards cracking open those spaces of possibility that do exist and fostering better political conditions over time. We must first reach a space within which more radical demands can be meaningfully articulated, and must therefore prepare for the long term if we wish to alter the terrain of politics substantially. (130)

What (or where) is this “space”? The proposals that Srnicek and Williams actually make—raising taxes on the rich or cutting military spending to fund UBI—are indeed dependent upon electoral cycles. But since even these modest proposals have proved difficult, not easy, to implement, they need to imagine some “space”

from which “more radical demands” could be articulated. This is apparently the space of the think-tank, where a “counter-hegemonic strategy” can be brewed to “overturn the dominant neoliberal common sense and rejuvenate the collective imagination” (131). So, the non-reformist reforms that will inaugurate a post-neoliberal transition to postcapitalism will require, as a precondition of their initial feasibility, preparatory work that “builds up support and a common language for a new world” (132). Again, this is a very common and familiar perspective: reformists always say the horizon of *their* reforms is non-reformist, and that we need organizational cohesion and long-term planning to bring them about. Indeed, reformists hardly ever say anything else.

Since this is not exactly an “inventive” line, what makes this iteration of it so special? Should we have confidence in the capacity of this not-so-particular non-reformist reformism to foment a new hegemony and “a common language for a new world?” One indication this may not go well for Srnicek and Williams is their rapid abandonment of the term for which they previously wrote a manifesto: “accelerationism.” In *Inventing the Future*, they “largely avoid using the term ‘accelerationism’...due to the miasma of competing understandings that has arisen around the concept, rather than from any abdication of its tenets as we understand them” (189). In theory, the authors do not abdicate the tenets of “accelerationism.” But, in practice, they have abandoned the term that named their political programme because it breeds disagreement. In theory, it is easy to call for organizational cohesion, for a new language, for broad cultural shifts; in practice, Srnicek and Williams can’t even transmit the coherence of a word. But as long as “accelerationism” holds a place in their hearts—regardless of its evident unsuitability for communicative transmission—they can always blame the “miasma of competing understandings” to which it gave rise on folk political thinking, and thus redouble their folk psychological struggle against the latter.

This early instance of terminological collapse notwithstanding, Srnicek and Williams imagine the emergence of “a mass unified movement” (170) constructed around their demands that would draw together feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial and indigenous struggles (161). Is their critique of “folk politics” rhetorically well-positioned for building a unified movement appealing to postcolonial and indigenous movements? I find that unlikely, but I suppose time will tell. Shortly after gesturing toward feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, and indigenous struggles, they note that “in the end, while a post-work project demands that centrality be given to class, it is not sufficient to mobilise only on the basis of class interests”

(161). I wonder if this gets us very far with respect to antagonisms so often arising within the integral relation of class struggle to feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, indigenous struggles: class comes first, is central, but—don't worry—patriarchy and white supremacy also matter. This approach tends not to work so well in practice, but, again, only time will tell whether the brand of magical thinking in which Srnicek and Williams specialize will draw together a unified global mass movement around their set of demands.

As *Inventing the Future* draws to a close, it finally turns for six pages toward the “points of leverage” that would have to be attacked to bring about postcapitalism. Srnicek and Williams acknowledge that “if a populist movement successfully built a counter-hegemonic ecosystem of organisations, in order to become effective it would still require the capacity to disrupt” (169-170). Here we come full circle, as the tactics advocated are precisely those elaborated by the struggles criticized in the first half of the book: primarily, blockades of logistical choke-points and distribution channels, like ports and freeways. Since folk politics is “necessary but not sufficient,” Srnicek and Williams merely add that such tactics must be linked to long term strategy, and that “on-the-ground knowledge must be linked up with more abstract knowledge of changing economic conditions” (174), as if these were fresh insights rather than the perennial content of discussions concerning the relation between strategy and tactics within social movements—as if Marxists involved in concrete struggles have not previously made it a habit to emphasise the importance of “abstract knowledge of changing economic conditions” as well.



The central issue with which *Inventing the Future* pretends to be concerned—the problem of what is to be done with the technical infrastructure of modernity—is among the most serious and difficult questions with which communist theory has to grapple. What is frustrating about the book is its authors' refusal to face the real difficulties this question involves—most importantly, the problem of how technological capacities (forces of production) can be *reproduced* without reproducing the class relation (relations of production). This is indeed among the basic problems of how social reproduction is possible after the end of capitalism. The opponent Srnicek and Williams pick out for themselves—one whom supposedly thinks that technology is bad, small is good, and immediacy is authentic—is just a cartoonish profile stamped on the other side of their idealist coin. I find their book unsatisfying not because I think we already have good answers to the ques-

tion concerning capitalist technology but because I think we don't, and *Inventing the Future* does nothing more effectively than obscure the very ground on which that question could be properly posed.

Srnicek and Williams note that contemporary technologies have the potential to reduce labour time and increase abundance, yet are “encased within social relations that obscure these potentials and render them impotent” (150). Yes, we have known for a long time that there is a contradiction between forces and relations of production, and that technological use values are bound up with that contradiction. But it does not suffice to say that we should have “democratic control over technology development” (146) or to “establish broad parameters to adjudicate on the potentials of a technology” (152). It isn't *use value* that poses a problem where technology is concerned. They acknowledge that “power relationships are embedded within technologies, which cannot therefore be infinitely bent towards purposes that oppose their very functioning” (151), and they stipulate that “if a technology's only role is that of exploiting workers, or if such a role is absolutely necessary to its deployment, then it can have no place in a postcapitalist future” (152). But these formulations miss the essential problem. Just as, earlier, they relied upon psychologism in their evaluation of “the left,” here they address the relation between technology and social relations in terms of individual machines and their individual uses.

It is not *individual* technologies that will have to be evaluated according to their use values because “power relations” are inscribed in them one by one. Considered case by case, the question of whether “a technology's only role is that of exploiting workers” (152) is incoherent. Nor is the physical obduracy of capitalist infrastructure—what Srnicek and Williams call the “materialised aspects of hegemony” (136) at the heart of the problem. Rather, it is the immaterial process of valorisation requisite for the *reproduction* of the technological process of production that is inextricable from the way we make things. Advocating social democratic legislation predicated upon the valorisation process (taxes on the rich) or automation subsidies for individual firms merely dodges the real conceptual and historical problem to be grappled with. Srnicek and Williams confine their engagement with the relation between “full automation” and the valorisation process to a dismissive footnote (218-219), directing their attention instead to criticising folk politics and to a reformist program for the extension of capitalism beyond neoliberalism. Indeed, despite the book's vague references to “postcapitalism,” it proves disinclined to press its invention of the future beyond the persistence of the class

relation, trading instead upon proposed measures that require it.

It is telling that Srnicek and Williams do not use the term “communism” to designate the postcapitalist future: perhaps *avoiding communism*, rather than “inventing the future” should be viewed as their real theoretical commitment. By framing their political project as a movement to “escape neoliberalism” (3), they open a theoretical space of possibility within which they can keep on imagining a reinvigorated capitalism prior to postcapitalism, and that is exactly what they spend their time doing. This makes sense, I suppose: attempting to think through the disarticulation of capitalist social relations as the very process of communist revolution is a stringent task that doesn’t offer up the sort of voluntarist vistas and bullet-point prescriptions that make for good jacket copy. That process will not be “relatively easy to finance” because it will have to break through the very structure of the class relation that would enable measures like “taxes on the rich.” It is easier to respond to the limits of particular struggles by caricaturing them from afar than by participating in their collective articulation, just as it is easier to project the extension of capitalism beyond neoliberalism than to confront the problem of the end of the class relation posed by communist theory. This evasion, rather than a supposed taste for the complexity and abstraction, is the real “preference” at issue in *Inventing the Future*. Attempting to project another epoch of capitalist valorisation beyond neoliberalism is an understandably weak response to the impasses of the present, but it merely evades, rather than addresses, the difficult task of thinking through the end of capitalism.

NOTES

1. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London: Verso, 2015, 9. All subsequent parenthetical references are to this text.
2. Buckminster Fuller, *Critical Path*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981, xxv. Like Srnicek and Williams, Fuller was a utopian proponent of Universal Basic Income, automation, reduced labor time, etc. On the common ideological ground of both mid-twentieth century technocratic and counter-cultural formations which appealed to automation and cybernetic models of social redesign, see Reinhold Martin's excellent book, *The Organizational Complex: Media, Architecture, and Corporate Space*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003.
3. See *The Occupation Cookbook, or the Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb*. London: Minor Compositions, 2009. <http://marcbousquet.net/pubs/The-Occupation-Cookbook.pdf>
4. One could just as easily write the opposite: it is "widely accepted" by "a broad range of the contemporary left" that "large scale action is necessary, we must think globally, history is complex, organizational permanence is important, we must struggle for progressive values." Neither of these two lists is more, or less, correct than the other, because such generalizations about "a broad range of the left" are basically meaningless.
5. See Aaron Benanav and Endnotes, "Misery and Debt," *Endnotes II* (April 2010): 20-51 and "The Holding Pattern," *Endnotes III* (September 2013): 12-54.
6. They cite, for example, Andre Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*. London: Pluto Press, 1985. Although Srnicek and Williams insist that the Left cannot look back, their claim to be "inventing the future" is belied by their recycling of decades or centuries old democratic socialist proposals. The nostalgia for utopian futurism that determines the book's political horizon is immediately legible in its first two sentences: "Where did the future go? For much of the twentieth century, the future held sway over our dreams" (1).