

Michel Foucault, Accelerationist

The Debate

So far the debate over Foucault’s relationship to neoliberalism is split between two positions. On one side there are those ([Daniel Zamora](#), [François Ewald](#), [Michael Behrent](#), and [others](#)) who argue that Foucault’s “sympathy” for neoliberalism marks his later work as at least partially “[compatible](#)” with neoliberalism. On the other side many more ([Stuart Elden](#), [Peter Gratton](#), [Steven Maynard](#), [Michael Hardt](#) and [Antonio Negri](#), and [others](#)) argue that although “Foucault’s mode of reading texts often makes it look like he is agreeing with [neoliberal] arguments, he is really trying to reconstruct them, to understand their logic, [and so on](#).” Furthermore, given Foucault’s commitment to Leftist groups like [Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons](#), [GIP](#) and [others](#), the argument goes, Foucault could not have been a neoliberal.

But perhaps this debate has been made unnecessarily polemic. The question of the debate is not, “was Foucault a neoliberal or not?”. As far as I can tell, no one is explicitly arguing that he was, only that he shared “*some sympathies*” with neoliberal theory: some anti-statism, some anti-authoritarian values, [and so on](#). Is it not possible to share some points of interest or critique with a position that one does not fully accept? Thus, the more interesting question I think we should be asking is, “what commonalities or shared interests might exist between Foucault’s political thought and certain neoliberal ideas, and to what degree?”

Accelerationism

Posing the question in this way points us to a third position in the debate: that Michel

Foucault was an accelerationist, or least expressed *some* accelerationist tendencies.

Accelerationism is the political belief that the best way to combat capitalism is actually by accelerating capitalism's *own inherent tendencies* toward anti-statism, decentralization, constant novelty, and experimentation. To be clear, this position should not be confused with either resignation (the hope for capitalist apocalypse) or dialectics (the hope that capitalism will transform itself into communism through contradiction). Accelerationism does not simply affirm capitalism or neoliberalism: it only affirms *some tendencies* in it. Much has been written recently on the history and theory of this position as well as criticisms of it. Michel Foucault, to my knowledge, has not been included in these discussions. But perhaps he should be.

I do not have the space in this short piece to mount a full defense of this position, but it is not very hard for me to imagine that Foucault might have been influenced by French accelerationism in his 1978-1979 lectures on neoliberalism, *The Birth of Biopolitics*. For instance, several of his colleagues at the University of Paris VIII, Vincennes had been espousing accelerationism for years. Deleuze and Guattari published *Anti-Oedipus* in 1972 where they write that our "flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. [The task then is] Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to 'accelerate the process'" (AO, 239–240). Foucault wrote the preface to this accelerationist work. Two years later Jean-François Lyotard published *Libidinal Economy*, where he writes that "We abhor therapeutics and its vaseline, we prefer to burst under the quantitative excesses that you

judge the most stupid. And don't wait for our spontaneity to rise up in revolt either" (LE, 116).

Even if Foucault did not fully adopt these positions at the time, it seems like more than a coincidence that after their publication he is suddenly inspired to begin a new research program analyzing the features of twentieth century capitalism—something he had never attempted before, and something Deleuze himself had only just begun in 1972 with Guattari.

Accelerationism in The Birth of Biopolitics

In his new research program, Foucault located several points at which neoliberalism and Left wing struggles share some similar biopolitical features. First, they share a "state-phobia." "All those who share in the great state phobia," Foucault says, "should know that they are following the direction of the wind and that in fact, for years and years, an effective reduction of the state has been on the way, a reduction of both the growth of state control and of a 'statifying' and 'statified' (*étatisante ou étatisée*) governmentality born in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (BB, 191-192). Anti-state anarchists and neoliberals, despite their differences, have been working to reduce the power of the state for over a hundred years—and this tendency is winning.

Second, they share a valorization of previously non-economic phenomena like affect, leisure, intellect, desire, and other forms of so-called "immaterial labor." As Foucault says in his lectures, "How is this capital made up? It is at this point that the reintroduction of labor or work into the field of economic analysis will make it possible, *through a sort of acceleration or extension*, to move on to the economic analysis of elements which had previously totally

escaped it" [my italics] (BB, 226). Foucault is correct to describe this process of real subsumption as an "acceleration," since it is precisely this tendency within capitalist production that keeps deterritorializing farther and experimenting with new markets (social capital, intellectual capital, cultural capital, etc). But it is also this same tendency that describes the revolutionary task of "moving beyond" the current order. The difference between the two is that capitalism is slowed down by the requirements of commodification, while the revolutionary has already moved on.

In the context of accelerationism, what we are witnessing in this renewed debate about Foucault's relationship to neoliberalism is all too familiar. Deleuze, Guattari, and Lyotard have all been praised both as revolutionaries and so-called "post-modern capitalists." Slavoj Žižek, for example, even argues both in the same chapter. "Deleuze," he says, "more and more serves as the theoretical foundation of today's anti-global Left" (OwB, xi). Eleven pages later he then argues that this foundation is only "masquerading as radical chic, effectively transform[ing] Deleuze into an ideologist of today's 'digital capitalism'" (OwB, xxii). But there is no contradiction. This is the point Žižek and others miss. Accelerationism is an affirmation of capitalist deterritorialization, but without the need for commodification and its axioms of exchange. Foucault was well aware of this theoretical position and even makes several points that are entirely "compatible" with accelerationism in his 1978-1979 lectures.

Foucault was not a neoliberal, but he may have experimented with accelerationism.

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Thomas Nail is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Denver. He is the author of *Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012) and *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming). His publications can be downloaded at <http://du.academia.edu/thomasnail>