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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work

Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams, Verso, 2015

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I*nventing the Future* is a timely and ambitious attempt to outline a broad programme for the left during a period of instability and crisis for neoliberal capitalism. While theoretically rich and broad, the book is written in an accessible style – one that endears it to a wide audience, allowing it to take full advantage of the current conjuncture. Taking their cue from the Mont Pelerin society’s ability to exact leverage from of the crisis of Keynesianism in the 1970s, Srnicek and Williams urge the left

to move away from their recent phobia of established forms of organisation and undertake an equivalent project now. The aim of a such a project being, through long-term strategic work, the construction of a new common sense, one opposed to the current hegemonic emphasis upon individual work for individual gain.

There is an urgent need for such a project, as we are currently traversing an ‘interregnum’ – an in-between period in which the only certainty is political, economic and social change.¹ Srnicek and Williams suggest that this sense of uncertainty as to what the future may bring should be embraced by the left, as it offers an opportunity to re-shape society in fairer and more sustainable ways. How, then, might we ensure full advantage is taken of this opportunity?

The difficulty we face, of course, is that the left’s traditional organizational structures are in disarray, or have become neoliberalized in the wake of forty years of sustained attacks; further, the once-important utopian ideals of a class-based revolution have been largely discredited by poststructuralist theory and identity politics. What, then, is to be done? Srnicek and Williams believe they have an answer: instead of merely protesting, resisting and hoping for a revolution, we should slowly and carefully build a counter-hegemony grounded in appeals for a post-work society. This is a vision that looks to re-direct the recent capitalist acceleration of technological automation towards left-utopian and communitarian ends. Once emancipated from the ‘drudgery’ of 9-to-5 routines and the protestant work ethic we will, it is argued, be able to unleash our creative potential and, consequently, be in a position to usher in a post-capitalist world.

It is with such assertions that the more contentious points of the book come to the fore. While the accessibility and clarity

1 Jane Kelsey, *The FIRE Economy*, Wellington 2015.

of *Inventing the Future* is admirable, with it providing a strong voice for the left in the wake of fifty years of poststructuralism and postmodernism, there needs to be a reckoning with the problematic question of subjectivity. To skirt this risks leaving the figure of the rational, strategic, autonomous and entrepreneurial subject untouched, a subjectivity which has been the cornerstone of neoliberal hegemony.

A related problematic is that this rational strategic subject is presumed to influence historical development in ‘linear and predictable ways’.² Although the classic Marxist presupposition of a unified proletariat is critiqued by Srnicek and Williams, one can still perceive echoes of the Marxist emancipatory tradition in their work: that we will necessarily witness the liberation of the pre-existing creative subject and march confidently together towards a post-capitalist future.

This linear view of history is perhaps linked to a related tendency in *Inventing the Future* to fetishize technological progress – with technology treated as producing certain predictable effects on society from an external position through an internal logic. While others may view them as purely the result of historical struggle, the authors view freedom and progress as partially triggered by ‘the historical conditions of scientific and technological development’, which ‘both expand existing capacities for action and create entirely new ones in the process’.³

The new horizons enabled by technological progress range from the demand for a three-day weekend, through to the more controversial call for ‘synthetic pregnancy’ so that ‘a new-found equality between the sexes’ can emerge.⁴ The emphasis on

2 Martijn Konings, *Imagined Double Movements*, *Globalizations*, 9/4 2012, p. 613.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

4 Srnicek & Williams, *Inventing the Future*, London 2015, p.114.

technology is linked to a re-claiming of the utopian technological imaginary for the left, which had previously contributed to the great modernist and progressive future-thinking of the twentieth century. Once re-claimed, the authors believe the left can, once again, dramatically re-imagine what is possible. While in many senses admirable, this is a position that could be strengthened by a discussion of the dark side of twentieth century scientific modernism – a taking account, for instance, of how ‘scientific’ insights acquired a quasi-omnipotent status that were not to be questioned by mere mortals, and which legitimized widening inequalities (an example being the presuppositions of neo-classical economics, which have been positioned as ‘objective’ and thus beyond question).

As Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers have demonstrated, scientific ‘truth’ cannot be separated from power, the latter being the driving force behind the former.⁵ In a similar way, technology will always bear the imprint of the society that created it – meaning, for a society such as ours, that it can never simply be a neutral enabler of equality.

Despite these issues, the underlying premise of the author’s concept of ‘synthetic freedom’ – that freedom must be worked towards rather than presumed – has much to commend it. In contrast to the ‘negative freedom’ of neoliberalism – a ‘freedom from’, in which the liberal ideal of freedom has been narrowed to include only individual independence from state interference in order to pursue the private accumulation of wealth – synthetic freedom ‘recognises that a formal right without a material capacity is worthless’.⁶ In other words, ‘freedom’ for those that lack capital is a meaningless, empty concept, as the freedom of those who hold disproportionate levels of resources directly impinges

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, London 1977.

⁶ Srnicek & Williams, *Inventing the Future*, p.79.

upon the freedom of others. In order for this version of freedom to be realised, the authors suggest three interlinked projects need to be implemented: ‘the provision of the basic necessities of life, the expansion of social resources, and the development of technological capacities’.⁷ It is to the first – the basic necessities – that we will now turn, as this is where the strongest arguments and most achievable goals in *Inventing the Future* lie.

In Chapter 6, ‘Post-Work Imaginaries’, the authors outline their core utopian demand for a ‘fully automated economy’,⁸ one which aims to ‘reduce necessary labour *as much as possible*’.⁹ While realising total automation is probably never possible, for social and cultural reasons as much as anything else, striving for this aim has the potential to direct society towards a more equal, fair, and sustainable future. In positing this demand they outline their core theoretical premise: that there is a fundamental *need* for demands, as ‘any meaningful vision of the future will set out proposals and goals’.¹⁰ The articulation of demands, such as that of total automation, has the capacity to move the left beyond tired debates concerning the relation between reform and revolution – with Srnicek and Williams offering the concept of ‘non-reformist reforms’.¹¹ Rather than perceiving demands as rigid and fixed, they argue that they can be simultaneously utopian *and* achievable. Following from this, the authors position their project as one able to move us beyond neoliberalism, but not capitalism (at least in the short-term). They focus on neoliberalism as this is the mode of governance currently in crisis (not capitalism *per se*), it is thus imaginable and achievable that we could surpass it from within our current horizon.

7 Ibid., p. 80.

8 Ibid., p.109.

9 Ibid., p. 114. Original emphasis.

10 Ibid., p. 107.

11 Ibid., p. 108.

Closely linked to the demand of total automation is a timely discussion of the universal basic income (UBI), which has witnessed a recent resurgence of interest, especially in the more progressive areas of Europe.¹² Last year it was even considered as Labour Party policy here in Aotearoa, before it was quickly shot down by the right-wing media.¹³ For Srnicek and Williams, the UBI, while seemingly benign and achievable within the current neoliberal paradigm (it appeals to technocratic sensibilities with its capacity to reduce the bureaucratic administration of current welfare systems), is in fact highly political. Its political character comes from the manner in which it ‘unbonds the coercive aspects of wage labour’¹⁴ and places power in the hands of those who work for wages. Tedious, dangerous work would be paid better, as people could choose not to do it, and creative, enjoyable work paid less. The UBI, therefore, has the potential to unite and emancipate both minorities and women (who are more likely to be in badly paid and menial work).

More fundamentally, the UBI has the potential to loosen the relationship between work and identity. The assertion that we must re-claim the ‘right to be lazy’¹⁵ displaces the long-standing theological dogma that holds we derive meaning through suffering. And this is where a more in-depth discussion of subjectivity would be helpful. As psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan have demonstrated, pleasure and pain cannot be so easily separated. We derive a perverse enjoyment from our suffering, and the inhibition of pleasure is required so that we can have a steady and structured access to enjoyment.¹⁶ This perverse need to inhibit

12 Serina Sandhu, Finland to consider introducing universal basic income in 2017, *The Independent*, 1 April 2016.

13 Simon Collins, Labour considers ‘universal basic income’ policy, *New Zealand Herald*, 21 March 2016.

14 Srnicek & Williams, *Inventing the Future*, p. 120.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 123-6.

16 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, London 1992.

pleasure is then projected onto others, who we perceive as enjoying unconstrained pleasure at our expense: as can be seen in the construction and demonization of the figure of the lazy and immoral dole-scrounger, an ideological move that has been central to neoliberalism's hegemonic ascendancy.¹⁷ Such embedded forms of psycho-social investment will likely prove an obstacle to the realisation of the authors' vision of a post-work future. Much of neoliberalism's success stems from its ability to tap into the deeply ingrained notion that we improve ourselves through, and find meaning in, our work; along with the attendant sense of moral superiority that 'hard workers' have over those who are unemployed and/or perceived as lazy. Any push for a 'post-work future', therefore, would need to address this subjective dimension, at least in the short term, if there is to be a mobilisation of 'people's passions in order to topple the dominance of the work ethic'.¹⁸

Srnicek and Williams hold that any push to overcome the work ethic must be accompanied by a recuperation of the universalising dreams of utopia. Without a universal vision we have 'nothing but a series of diverse particulars' that pose no challenge to neoliberal hegemony.¹⁹ The reconsideration of the universal as an important element of a counter-hegemonic project borrows heavily from the work of Ernesto Laclau,²⁰ whose treatment of these issues, along with populism, constitutes the conceptual backbone of *Inventing the Future*.

The use of Laclau's work comes most to the fore in Srnicek and Williams' argument for a populist politics.²¹ They position

17 Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, London 2011.

18 Srnicek & Williams, *Inventing the Future*, p. 126.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

20 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 175-188.

populism as a means of expanding the project for left hegemony beyond the linguistic and rhetorical domains of contemporary political debates. While Laclau's theory is fairly abstract and focuses largely on the symbolic, the authors seek to strengthen it by combining it with more practical insights on organisational ecology and potential points of political leverage. This orientation represents a welcome return to questions concerning the role of the state and organizations such as unions, media institutions, and universities, of which many on the left have recently been wary of interacting with due to their bureaucratic and hierarchical structures. As will be discussed later in this review, this refusal to engage with established organizations is viewed by the authors as symptomatic of a rather naïve politics which negates the possibility for 'expanding and consolidating gains'.²² When viewed with a universalising project in mind, the resources and reach of such organizations has the capacity to form a 'pluralism of forces' – the respective strengths of each directed towards 'a common vision of an alternative world'.²³

This unified vision is, ultimately, realised by a populist movement. Rather than relying on class, 'the people' serves as populism's identificatory calling-card. The benefits of 'the people' as a unificatory locus, is that it is not dependent on any mutual material interest. Unity arises from the identificatory act of naming itself. However, this process of unification also involves the identification of a common enemy, such as 'the 1%' condemned by Occupy. Missing from Srnicek and Williams' discussion here is a full acknowledgement of the potential downsides of this antagonistic identification. As noted by Slavoj Žižek, the construction of an antagonistic other can serve as a means of channelling social frustrations into a fantasy figure of moral corruption, which

22 Ibid, p. 17.

23 Srnicek & Williams, *Inventing the Future*, pp. 163

while useful for mobilizing ‘the people’ is not always helpful for rational debate and, in some circumstances, may be even be dangerous.²⁴

Another potentially problematic tendency for populism concerns the ease with which it can be easily directed, or even drift, into hierarchical political practices and forms. An example here being the trajectory of Podemos (influential members of which are enthusiastic advocates of Laclau’s theory) in Spain, with the party currently separating itself from social movements, on whose energies it had previously relied, as it pursues instrumental parliamentary power.²⁵ Danger stalks populist logics whenever they are orchestrated by a relatively closed group, such as the central party apparatus of Podemos, as a new elite ineluctably emerges who thinks they know what is best for ‘the people’ they are attempting to unite.²⁶ The questionable trajectory of Podemos, and also of Syriza in Greece, should serve as a warning for Srnicek and Williams when they advocate for the scaling of populism to global proportions. There is a risk of replacing one global elite with another in the attempt to challenge neoliberalism’s ascendancy.

In advocating populism and engagement with organisational structures, Srnicek and Williams distance themselves from ‘folk politics’ – ‘a constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common-sense ways of organising, acting and thinking politics’.²⁷ Folk politics is criticised because of its enthusiasm for horizontalism and localism, both of which could never be more than a mild nuisance to neoliberal-

24 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London 2008.

25 Sonia Martínez & Emmanuel Rodríguez, On the decaffeination of Podemos as an anti-Establishment force, *Open Democracy*, 18 December 2015.

26 Benjamin Arditi, Review essay: Populism is hegemony is politics?, *Constellations*, 17/3 2010, pp. 488-97.

27 Srnicek & Williams, *Inventing the Future*, p. 9.

alism, as they have failed to scale up to a mass sustained movement. Folk politics, it is argued, tends toward contingent, context-dependent, short-term and reactive forms of engagement, and consequently is unable to compete against well-organized vested-interests.²⁸

Horizontalist projects, such as Occupy in 2011, and the movements in Argentina in the early 2000s, are charged with having achieved little in the way of real political or economic change. The recent protests and occupations of city squares are seen to have only realised fleeting symbolic victories, as they have failed to articulate or realise any 'long-term and large-scale political goals' capable of challenging the '1%'.²⁹ More generally, the act of 'the protest' itself is critiqued for having taken on a symbolic, ritualistic air, whereby we take on the role of the protester/resister who is terrified of actually winning.³⁰ Anyone who has attended a protest recently will recognise an element of truth in this, and the left should not be afraid of learning from the rather more ruthless and strategic tactics used to build up neoliberal hegemony over time. At the same time, though, we must recognise that 'hegemony' has always meant control over a much broader terrain than just centralised state apparatuses; how people live, feel, and the emblems with which they identify also have real importance, especially in the contemporary era of digital networks.³¹ One of Occupy's key achievements was its contribution to the displacement of the neoliberal common-sense on inequality. In the context of the book's aim to build a hegemonic and unified left, the derogatory labelling of large swathes of it as unproductively mired in 'folk politics' can read as counter to the call.

28 Ibid., p. 39.

29 Ibid., p. 39.

30 Ibid., p. 6.

31 Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, London 2015.

Despite the critiques raised here, *Inventing the Future* presents a range of important issues and positions for debate on the left. Such a debate should be taking place now if we are to take full advantage of the current crisis of neoliberalism. As Srnicek and Williams cogently argue, we need a concrete plan of action animated by universalisable utopian ideals. It is time for the left to move away from the over-worn position of the cynic/critic to one of ideas-generator.

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