

# LEFT ACCELERATIONISM AS A MESSIANISM

*A dialogue between Left Accelerationism and the messianic turn to Saint Paul*

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# Left Accelerationism as a messianism: a dialogue between Left Accelerationism and the messianic turn to Saint Paul

## ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that Left Accelerationism is better characterized as a *messianism* rather than as a form of *accelerationism*. First, I show that Left Accelerationism's attempt to combine Deleuze and Marx results in an irreconcilable dualism between determinism and ahistorical voluntarism. Then, I develop several analogies between Left Accelerationism and the philosophical turn to Saint Paul's letters. Both currents respond to a historical conjuncture that offers no alternative to capitalism and liberal democracy, and as such, they are both concerned with the possibility of an exception to the current world order. However, with the exception, both risk replacing dialectics with a dualist worldview, resulting in the messianic problem of the indefinite postponement—rather than acceleration—of the future.

KEYWORDS: accelerationism, messianism, Saint Paul, Marxism, Deleuze

*Andalucía no es una arcadía a la que regresar  
Sino un horizonte que perseguir  
Yo no quiero volver a ser lo que fuimos  
Reivindico volver a ser lo que somos*  
CALIFATO <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Left Accelerationism emerged in the 2010s in response to an accumulation of global crises—financial, climatic—that was met in the West with only a further insistence on neoliberal and austerity policies. Faced with the apparent lack of an imaginable alternative to capitalism<sup>1</sup>, this philosophical current argued that capitalism's best technologies should be preserved while freed from the interests of capitalist accumulation, so that technological development could be reoriented towards ending current crises. Its proponents argued that the technological infrastructure of capitalism was not to be destroyed or rejected—in contrast to what they saw as a prejudice of today's leftist “folk politics”<sup>2</sup>—, but “accelerated” or repurposed towards a post-capitalist future. However, despite its self-identification as an *accelerationism*, I suggest that Left Accelerationism is better characterized as a *messianism* in which, rather than accelerated, the advent of a new, post-capitalist era is announced, yet its occurrence is indefinitely postponed.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, London 2009.

<sup>2</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, in *#Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by R. MacKay, A. Avanessian, Urbanomic, Falmouth 2014, pp. 347-362.

To argue for this claim, I develop several analogies between Left Accelerationism and the philosophical turn to Saint Paul in the 1990s, in which authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, or Slavoj Žižek reappraised the revolutionary potential of Paul's letters. The novelty of this messianic turn to Paul consisted in its distancing from a nihilist reading of Paul à la Nietzsche<sup>3</sup>: while the latter considered that Paul merely rejected our world in favour of an afterlife, these authors found in Paul a transformation of *this* world in light of the messianic event. The messianic event represents an exception that does not follow from present laws of the world, but one that nevertheless transforms *this* world, in a characteristically Pauline dialectic of exception between immanence and transcendence<sup>4</sup>. I propose that Left Accelerationism also relies on a similar notion of the exception, which regularly appears in its writings as “the outside”.

Earlier attempts to establish a dialogue between accelerationism and Pauline messianism<sup>5</sup> have focused on the figure of the *katechon*<sup>6</sup>. Although the *katechon* provides a fruitful link between Judeo-Christian messianism and accelerationism<sup>7</sup>, the discussion around this figure usually concerns the eschatological and apocalyptic aspect of Paul. Since Left Accelerationism emerges as an attempt to rehabilitate human agency against the earlier nihilist, anti-humanist, apocalyptic accelerationism of Nick Land —for whom acceleration was the retroactive effect of a technological singularity disassembling human civilization from the future<sup>8</sup>—, I prefer to focus my discussion on the motif of the exception and show that a dialogue between accelerationism and messianism is possible even beyond the *katechon*. In fact, in my view, the difference between Left Accelerationism and Nick Land illustrates the distinction between a *messianism* and an *eschatological apocalypticism*, respectively.

To establish a dialogue between these two currents, I will first outline the left accelerationist program and its deflated use of the term “accelerationism” to merely capture a certain progressive attitude towards capitalist technology, in contrast to an

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ: A Curse on Christianity*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. by A. Ridley, J. Norman, trans. by J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 1-67.

<sup>4</sup> G.J. van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy: The Outcast and the Spirit*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. S. Prozorov, *Like a Thief in the Night: Agamben, Hobbes and the Messianic Transvaluation of Security*, in «Security Dialogue», XLVIII, 6 (2017), pp. 473-487; A. Galindo Hervás, *Delay or Accelerate the End? Messianism, accelerationism, and presentism*, in «International Journal of Philosophy and Theology», LXXVII, 4-5 (2016), pp. 307-323.

<sup>6</sup> An enigmatic figure from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians that delays the occurrence of Christ's Second Coming by restraining the “lawlessness” that will precede it. G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by P. Dailey, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, pp. 108-111.

<sup>7</sup> According to Prozorov, accelerationism would affirm “lawlessness” and insecurity against the *katechon* in order to accelerate the end of times. S. Prozorov, *Like a thief in the night*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. N. Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by R. MacKay, R. Brassier, Urbanomic, Falmouth 2012.

insistence on deterritorialization, as Deleuze and Guattari originally suggested<sup>9</sup>. I will explain how Left Accelerationism (henceforth, “L/Acc”) attempts to combine Deleuze and Guattari’s dynamic of deterritorialization-reterritorialization with a Marxist-inspired, “Promethean” political program that relies on the possibility of human agency; this leads to a number of tensions between determinism and voluntarism which ultimately leave the left accelerationist program with an impasse, rather than an “accelerationist” strategy. Secondly, I will turn to Gert-Jan van der Heiden’s recent identification of a specifically Pauline dialectic of exception and give an overview of the messianic turn to Paul in the 1990s. Despite the lack of a direct dialogue between both currents, L/Acc and the messianic turn to Paul developed similar intuitions in response to the problem of a new beginning in a world that seems to offer no alternative. In the concluding section, I will explicate these analogies and briefly sketch some possible paths towards a Marxist critique of both currents.

## 2. ACCELERATIONISM

In *#Accelerate#*: *The Accelerationist Reader*, Robin MacKay and Armen Avanesian define accelerationism as «the insistence that the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, nor to await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies»<sup>10</sup>. The first part of this attempt to define accelerationism refers to L/Acc’s opposition to what it derisively designates as today’s leftist “folk politics” of “marching” and “holding signs”<sup>11</sup>. The second, i.e., the reference to capitalism’s collapse under its own contradictions, alludes the confusions around L/Acc that arose from Benjamin Noys’ original coinage of the term “accelerationism” to capture a certain tendency toward a “*la politique du pire*” of post-May ’68 French philosophy<sup>12</sup>.

With a critical intent, Noys had defined accelerationism as the idea that «if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalise capitalism itself: the worse the better»<sup>13</sup>. Noys had three particular works in mind: namely, Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy*<sup>14</sup>, and Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death*<sup>15</sup>. These works had in common a radical “affirmationism” of capitalism’s own “forces of dissolution” that seemed to Noys to ironically «reinstate the most teleological forms of Marxism»<sup>16</sup> by eliminating the need for a revolutionary subject. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, thought that

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by R. Hurley, M. Seem, H.R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983, pp. 239-240.

<sup>10</sup> R. MacKay, A. Avanesian, introduction to *#Accelerate#*: *The Accelerationist Reader*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, cit., p. 358.

<sup>12</sup> B. Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2010, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. J.F. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. by I.H. Grant, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. By I.H. Grant, Sage Publications, London 1993.

<sup>16</sup> B. Noys, *Maligned Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*, Zero Books, New Alresford 2014, p. 9.

“deterritorialization” —roughly defined, a force that frees desire from the ways in which it is socially codified, destabilizing any rigid social order— had found its greatest expression in capitalism. In their view, capitalism is a massive “decoding” of “flows of desire” that insistently destabilizes the socius, pushing it towards its own “schizophrenic” limits<sup>17</sup>; that is why capitalism needs a compensatory movement of “reterritorialization” in order to recodify in its own terms all that it had previously decoded<sup>18</sup>. It would then seem that a further insistence on deterritorialization could eventually break through the very limits of capitalism, where a compensatory reterritorialization would no longer be possible:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? To withdraw from the world market [...] Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to “accelerate the process”, as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven’t seen anything yet<sup>19</sup>.

This wager on a fully affirmative strategy —the affirmation of capitalism’s own forces of dissolution— seemed to Noys to eliminate the “destructive”, practical moment of negation of the status quo and its corresponding forms of revolutionary subjectivity and agency<sup>20</sup>. In this way, this strategy would risk coming too close to a teleological radicalization of the Marxist idea that capitalism is like the “sorcerer” who conjures up forces that escape its own control<sup>21</sup>, i.e., that capitalism’s intensification of class antagonism sets the stage for its own collapse, but where the practical moment of revolutionary struggle, now replaced with capitalism’s own automatic development, would no longer be necessary.

### 2.1 LEFT ACCELERATIONISM

Owing to this definition of accelerationism by Noys and to the fact that L/Acc identifies both as Marxist and accelerationist, a common misconception amongst L/Acc’s critics has it that this thought current suggests intensifying the contradictions of capitalism in order to accelerate its automatic collapse; in other words, that L/Acc is such a teleological Marxism. However, proponents of L/Acc insist that they have

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<sup>17</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, cit, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi., p. 257.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi., pp. 239-240.

<sup>20</sup> B. Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. K. Marx, F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in vol. 1 of *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, trans. by S. Moore, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1969, pp. 98-137. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>.

never held this position<sup>22</sup>. While the authors of the *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* do claim that «If any system has been associated with ideas of acceleration it is capitalism»<sup>23</sup>, this is not so much an argument in favour of accelerating capitalism or its contradictions per se, but only a call to maintain a progressive attitude towards capitalism's most revolutionary achievements, such as contemporary technologies. L/Acc detects an emancipatory potential in the unprecedented technological progress brought about by capitalism's competitive dynamics, potentially enabling, for instance, the automation of work and the achievement of a “post-work future”<sup>24</sup>. In this sense, L/Acc sees technological development at once as a product of capitalism and a means that could be strategically reoriented towards overcoming it. What must be accelerated is, then, not capitalism's internal contradictions or its “worst” aspects, but on the contrary, its potentially emancipatory achievements.

Nevertheless, the authors of the *Manifesto* also distinguish L/Acc from a “techno-utopianism” in which technological development would on its own bring about a post-capitalist society: «Never believe that technology will be sufficient to save us. Necessary, yes, but never sufficient without socio-political action»<sup>25</sup>. Left to its own automatic development, capitalism will never actualize the emancipatory potential of the technologies that it has unleashed, but rather, it will continue to direct them towards its own interests —such as the «progressive elimination of the work-life distinction»<sup>26</sup> instead of less work, or the monopolisation under patents of inventions from which a large part of the world could have benefitted. Following Deleuze and Guattari, L/Acc recognizes that «what capitalist speed deterritorializes with one hand, it reterritorializes with the other»<sup>27</sup>, and acknowledges the need for a political strategy that manages to interrupt this cycle.

Thus, left accelerationists insist that «As Marx was aware, capitalism cannot be identified as the agent of true acceleration»<sup>28</sup>; indeed, their distinctive observation with respect to earlier accelerationisms<sup>29</sup> is precisely that «Capitalism *has begun* to constrain the productive forces of technology [...] rather than a world of space travel, future shock, and revolutionary technological potential, we exist in a time where the only

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<sup>22</sup> Cfr. P. Wolfendale, *So, Accelerationism, What's All That About?*, in «Deontologistics» (blog), February 18, 2018, <https://deontologistics.co/2018/02/18/ofta-so-accelerationism-whats-all-that-about/>.

<sup>23</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, cit., p. 351.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. N. Srnicek, A. Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Verso, London 2015.

<sup>25</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, cit., p. 356.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi., p. 354.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi., p. 352.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi., p. 354.

<sup>29</sup> For Nick Land, capitalism and technological development were identical, and both had to be accelerated in order to accelerate the integration of human civilization into a technological singularity. Cfr. N. Land, *A Quick-and-dirty Introduction to Accelerationism*, retrieved from *Obsolete Capitalism* (blog), 26 May, 2017, <http://obsoletecapitalism.blogspot.com/2017/05/nick-land-quick-and-dirty-introduction.html>.

thing which develops is marginally better consumer gadgetry»<sup>30</sup> (my italics). While capitalism was revolutionary with respect to earlier modes of production, it has now become «a system that holds back progress»<sup>31</sup>: what is to be “accelerated” is therefore not capitalism, but its progressive achievements, by questioning the alleged inseparability of technological development from capitalism’s competitive market dynamics. Thus, to “accelerate” is to free technological development from the laws of capitalist accumulation, in order to actualize technology’s potential for human emancipation and for a future beyond capitalism. The idea is summarized in the *Manifesto* as follows: «Accelerationists want to unleash latent productive forces. In this project, the material platform of neoliberalism does not need to be destroyed. It needs to be repurposed towards common ends. The existing infrastructure is not a capitalist stage to be smashed, but a springboard to launch towards post-capitalism»<sup>32</sup>.

To insist, in contrast to “*la politique du pire*” denounced by Noys, “accelerationism” here merely captures a certain progressive attitude towards capitalist technologies and their potential for achieving «a new left global hegemony»<sup>33</sup>. This attitude emerges against the background of L/Acc’s critique of the current strategies of a left that, in its view, has abandoned all aspirations of political hegemony, and whose critique of capitalism is limited to a romanticizing of a pre-capitalist past:

We believe the most important division in today’s Left is between those that hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology. The former remains content with establishing small and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, eschewing the real problems entailed in facing foes which are intrinsically non-local, abstract, and rooted deep in our everyday infrastructure. [...] By contrast, an accelerationist politics seeks to preserve the gains of late capitalism while going further than its value system, governance structures, and mass pathologies will allow<sup>34</sup>.

## 2.2 TENSIONS IN L/ACC BETWEEN DELEUZE AND MARX

In line with L/Acc’s deflated use of the accelerationist label, acceleration is, moreover, distinguished from “speed”: «We may be moving fast, but only within a strictly defined set of capitalist parameters that themselves never waver. We experience only the increasing speed of a local horizon, a simple brain-dead onrush rather than an acceleration which is also *navigational*, an experimental process of discovery within a universal *space* of possibility»<sup>35</sup> (my italics). Here, two meanings of “acceleration” are

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<sup>30</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, cit., p. 355.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi., p. 361.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi., p. 355.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi., p. 357.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi., p. 354.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi., p. 352.

set in opposition to each other: on the one hand, a *temporal* acceleration that is already at work and that consists in the mere speed at which capitalism feeds on itself, with human societies remaining passively subjected to its self-engendering dynamic of deterritorialization-reterritorialization; on the other, one that appropriates acceleration and makes of it a *navigational* political project, presupposing the possibility of a human collective agency that is actively engaged in the achievement of a common goal. In the first case, we have an acceleration that is its own finality, where an increase in speed does not in principle yield any novel results, since every deterritorialization is always accompanied by a compensatory reterritorialization. In the second, we have a goal or a teleological horizon —post-capitalism— that transcends or remains exterior to the other, immanent acceleration, since it would not automatically follow from a further insistence on it.

At this point, certain tensions within the left accelerationist project begin to emerge. Crucially, a temporal, descriptive concept of acceleration is contrasted with a prescriptive acceleration with spatial connotations, where the proper means would be explored in order to intervene in an otherwise automatic, a-teleological, self-engendering acceleration. Since the former corresponds to the Deleuzian, immanent dynamic of deterritorialization-reterritorialization, which L/Acc takes as its descriptive point of departure, the whole of the left accelerationist project will consist in figuring out how to redress or repurpose this dynamic towards the prescriptive, desired post-capitalist goal. The second, prescriptive, navigational acceleration would then correspond to L/Acc's efforts to enable human collective agency and political praxis against this immanentist, self-engendering dynamic. This navigational acceleration refers to the Promethean, Marxist-inspired component of L/Acc's program that invites humankind to reappropriate its destiny; as defined by Ray Brassier, «Prometheanism is simply the claim that there is no reason to assume a predetermined limit to what we can achieve or to the ways in which we can transform ourselves and our world»<sup>36</sup>.

Thus, L/Acc argues that the immanent insistence on deterritorialization proposed by Deleuze and Guattari is insufficient; it would only yield “more of the same”, since, left on its own, technological development can never escape the compensatory movement of reterritorialization by capitalism. In this way, actualizing the emancipatory potential of contemporary technologies requires the possibility of an “outside”<sup>37</sup> of capitalism, i.e., a political space that transcends the limits imposed upon the imaginable possibilities of technological development by the laws of capitalist accumulation. This outside is understood in two senses: first, in the already mentioned sense of there being a post-capitalist goal that would not automatically follow from the already existing, immanent dynamic of acceleration, and towards which an accelerationist politics would be oriented; second, the outside as this navigational space

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<sup>36</sup> R. Brassier, *Prometheanism and its Critics*, in *#Accelerate#*: *The Accelerationist Reader*, cit., p. 470.

<sup>37</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, cit., p. 362.

that would also be exterior to immanent acceleration, but one within which, nevertheless, the means would be explored in order to intervene *in* the latter and reorient it or repurpose it towards the post-capitalist goal. However, on the one hand, by postulating such a navigational outside, L/Acc betrays Deleuze and Guattari, for whom the accelerationist strategy consisted in a fully immanent insistence on deterritorialization; the same applies to the attempt to introduce a goal into deterritorialization, which for Deleuze and Guattari was a-teleological<sup>38</sup>.

On the other hand, the Promethean component of L/Acc that aims to enable this navigational outside begins from the Marxist rejection of a pre-given human essence and is closely associated with transhumanist ideals. In the *Fragment on Machines*, Marx argues that the automation of the process of production results in the absorption of the worker's physical and cognitive capacities by machinery, making the worker a mere accessory to a process that acquires its own life<sup>39</sup>. L/Acc relies on this fragment to argue that, by taking control of the technological infrastructure of capitalism, we can in turn steer this transformation of the worker by technology towards a potential improvement of human cognitive and physical capacities, creating the subjects that will inhabit a post-capitalist and post-work future. However, as Paddy Gordon notes, this results in a replacement of dialectical materialism with technological determinism and an ahistorical, transhuman subject<sup>40</sup>. With its cherry-picked, heavy reliance on Marx's *Fragment on Machines*, L/Acc often leaps into a form of teleological and technological determinism, where if the technological infrastructure of capitalism is properly decoded, redesigned, and repurposed, it will transform human societies according to the desired, post-capitalist goal. In this way, agency is granted to the technological infrastructure instead of the material activity of human subjects, abandoning the Marxist, historical materialist insight that human societies are as much a product of industry as the latter is a product of them, or, as Marx and Engels put it, that «circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances»<sup>41</sup>. Where L/Acc claims that “men are a product of circumstances”, it does so deterministically, and where it claims that “circumstances are a product of men”, it does so ahistorically and from a wholly voluntarist stance. Rather than dialectics, L/Acc gives us a dualism between these two poles. The result is that L/Acc's reference to Marxism ends up being rather aesthetic and limited, for instance, to empty appeals to «reconstitute various forms of class power»<sup>42</sup> as one of the goals of an accelerationist program.

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<sup>38</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, the insistence on deterritorialization requires «not assigning it a goal. We'll never go too far with the deterritorialization, the decoding of flows. For the new earth [...] is not to be found in the neurotic or perverse reterritorializations that arrest the process or assign it goals», G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, cit., p. 382.

<sup>39</sup> K. Marx, *Fragment on Machines*, in *#Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader*, cit., pp. 51-66.

<sup>40</sup> P. Gordon, *Left Accelerationism, Transhumanism and the Dialectic: Three Manifestos*, in «New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry», XII, 1 (2021), pp. 140-154.

<sup>41</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, Prometheus Books, Amherst 1998, p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, cit., p. 360.

To conclude, in its attempt to elaborate a Marxist accelerationism, L/Acc betrays both Marx and Deleuze. The immanent, self-engendering, a-teleological dynamic of deterritorialization-reterritorialization that is taken as a descriptive point of departure clashes with the prescription of a navigational goal that would repurpose the former from without, but nowhere is it clear how this navigational outside is to be made possible or how it could intervene in an otherwise a-teleological, self-engendering acceleration by assigning it a goal. Thus, the whole of the left accelerationist project remains stuck in the task of figuring out how to enable this navigational space outside of the existing relations of production; rather than an accelerationist program, we are left with an impasse and with an uncertain, indefinitely deferred post-capitalist horizon whose occurrence is announced but whose conditions of possibility must still themselves be enabled. This impasse is reflected in the very words of Pete Wolfendale, one of L/Acc's leading thinkers:

I want post-capitalism, thank-you-very-much, and there's plenty other people like me. The question should not be: *when is it going to happen?* but: *what can we do to make it happen?* No doubt this sounds remarkably impatient to those who concern themselves with the grand arc of history, but there is no reason why this attitude need be impatient. I don't want my post-capitalism *right this minute*, I want it *as soon as possible*, and just how soon that is is an open question. Personally, I'm pretty sure I won't see it in my lifetime, but this doesn't mean that I'm any less committed to nurturing the seeds of future post-capitalism I see germinating in the capitalist present<sup>43</sup>.

In the following section, I will illustrate how the messianic turn to Saint Paul's letters in the 1990s by authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek developed similar intuitions with respect to the problem of how to enable an alternative to capitalism, in order support my argument that Left *Accelerationism* is, in fact, better characterized as a *messianism*.

### 3. THE MESSIANIC TURN TO PAUL

The 1990s were the occasion for a philosophical reappraisal of Saint Paul's letters. Philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek became interested in the political significance of Pauline messianism: Paul compromised the political hegemony of the Roman Empire and founded Christianity by announcing Christ's resurrection and his future Second Coming. Similarly, according to these philosophers, today, Paul can inspire us to challenge the hegemony of capitalism and liberal democracy. But why would these philosophers trace any political potential in the Pauline epistles, especially after Friedrich Nietzsche's earlier, merciless critique of Paul as a nihilist who rejected our world in favour of a beyond?

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<sup>43</sup> P. Wolfendale, *So, Accelerationism, What's All That About?*, cit.

In *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, Gert-Jan van der Heiden contextualizes this philosophical turn to Paul as partly a reaction of contemporary continental philosophy to the postmodern tendencies towards particularism and relativism. This is especially the case for Badiou and Žižek, who see in Paul the founder of a universalism that has strongly shaped militant discourses on emancipation and equality in the West. While on the one hand, Badiou and Žižek see Paul as a Leninist whose foundational task for Christianity is analogous to the universalist aspirations of communism<sup>44</sup>, Agamben, on the other hand, tends towards a more anarchistic interpretation of Paul, where Paul’s paradigm of “messianic time” renders the law “inoperative”, revealing «the substantial illegitimacy of each and every power»<sup>45</sup>.

### 3.1 A PAULINE DIALECTIC OF EXCEPTION

Van der Heiden claims that such post-Nietzschean, political reappraisals of Paul were partly enabled by Taubes’ discovery that Paul’s historical reception has been strongly influenced by Marcion of Sinope<sup>46</sup>. Marcion radicalized a “Gnostic temptation” in Paul by establishing a variant of a Platonic dualism with two mutually exclusive gods and two corresponding realities, namely, the creator God from the Old Testament —the worldly God who is responsible for the imperfect order of creation— and the transcendent, true God, the father of Jesus Christ. According to Van der Heiden, Nietzsche’s reading of Paul falls within this Marcionite tradition, with Nietzsche radicalizing, in turn, a dualist reading of Paul into a nihilist one. However, Van der Heiden argues, this tradition has failed to appreciate in Paul a specific “Pauline dialectic of exception”, one that navigates «between the Scylla of monism and the Charybdis of dualism»<sup>47</sup>, or between immanence and transcendence, through the messianic event as an exception to the present order of the world, enabled by the Pauline “principle of the spirit” of God. This principle does not follow from the immanent laws of the world and is therefore grounded on a transcendent plane, yet —*pace* Nietzsche— this principle transforms *this* world by introducing an exception into it through the messianic event, which inaugurates the possibility of salvation.

While dialectics always implies negativity and negation —hence Taubes’ suggestion that Nietzsche does capture in Paul «a profound nihilism at work [...] toward the destruction of the Roman Empire»<sup>48</sup>—, these need not be equated with a nihilist rejection of the present order of the world or an invitation to “destroy” it. Rather, Van der Heiden suggests, negation in the Pauline dialectic is much closer to a

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<sup>44</sup> A. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by R. Brassier, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 2; S. Žižek, *On Belief*, Routledge, London 2001, pp. 2-3; S. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, cit., p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. by D. Hollander, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004.

<sup>47</sup> G.J. van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>48</sup> J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, cit., p. 72.

Hegelian *Aufhebung*, where negativity is understood as a productive moment. Hegelian dialectics, in fact, follow «the Pauline paradigm of “death and resurrection”»<sup>49</sup>: while Christ’s death at the cross leaves us with an infinite «abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed»<sup>50</sup>, this is only a moment towards the negation of death itself, represented by the resurrection. The negation of finitude is itself negated, from which an infinity arises that is no longer a nihilist, all-engulfing abyss, but «the spring of eternal movement»<sup>51</sup>. This proximity between a Hegelian and a Pauline dialectic makes sense when we consider, on the one hand, Hegel as a modern heir of Stoicism, particularly when it comes to the notion of a “world spirit” or *Weltgeist*, which, Van der Heiden argues, can be interpreted as a modern derivation of the Stoic concept of *pneuma*, and on the other, the “spirit of the world” in passages such as 1 Cor 2:12, which also seems to be an appropriation by Paul of this Stoic *pneuma*; in Stoicism, *pneuma* is the cyclic, self-organizing principle of the cosmos in different degrees of complexity.

However, in 1 Cor 2:12, Paul is in fact establishing a distinction between a “spirit of the world” and a “spirit of God”, one which seems to imply an opposition or a dualism rather than a Stoic monism of gradations. The same applies to the Pauline distinction between *sarx* (flesh) and *pneuma* (spirit) throughout the epistles, which seems to bring Paul back to a Platonic or a Gnostic dualism. There is a specific dialectic at work in Paul, Van der Heiden argues; one that does neither entirely fit the Stoic or Hegelian monism of a world spirit, nor the Marcionite, ontological dualism that would become the pretext for Nietzsche’s accusation of nihilism. In the first case, there is little room for the exception and for a genuine *transformation*, since every negation is understood as a necessary moment in the automatic, rational self-development of the world spirit; Christ’s resurrection, for instance, would already be implicitly included in Christ’s death, which would fail to appreciate its quality as a miracle and as an exception to the present laws of the world. Paul therefore rejects the “immanentism” whereby «a principle is present in reality itself that causes the process of transformation»<sup>52</sup>; yet the second, dualist interpretation confuses dialectics with nihilism:

Paul does not wish to leave this world, but he does contemplate that the existing order of this world is characterized by a fundamental bankruptcy [...] Yet, this does not mean that creation should be destroyed but rather that creation eagerly looks out for the principle of the spirit, that is, to a principle that can transform this futility and meaninglessness, and *elevate creation itself to a higher, pneumatic meaning*. [...] Paul’s pneumatic interpretation and the principle of transformation [...] are not anchored in a *necessary* development. The principle of the spirit (of God) is no purely immanent or rational one that naturally occurs and unfolds in

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<sup>49</sup> G.J. Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, cit., p. 111.

<sup>50</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. by W. Cerf, H.S. Harris, SUNY Press, Albany 1977, p. 190.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> G.J. Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, cit., p. 46.

the world. Paul's pneumatic principle is not the principle of the spirit of the world, but rather that of the spirit of God. This latter principle brings something new and something different into play that does not allow itself to be understood from the existing world order and its intrinsic possibilities or potentialities. The pneumatic principle is active in the world, according to Paul, but is anchored and grounded in an event —that of the coming of the Messiah— that does not belong to the world and through which the working power of this principle really *began* for the first time<sup>53</sup>.

All of this being said, what do we then make of the seemingly apocalyptic Pauline passages in which, for instance, Paul announces that “time is short” (1 Cor 7:29) and that the “present form” of the world is “passing away” (1 Cor 7:31)? Or of such an apparently nihilistic passage as is 1 Cor 1:27-28, in which God chooses the “foolish” and “weak” in the world in order to “nullify” or “abolish” what is?

Van der Heiden agrees with Critchley that there is an important “meontology”<sup>54</sup> in Paul, i.e., a «doctrine of non-beings [...] that are not simply nothing»<sup>55</sup>. These «non-beings [...] refer to that which *was not assigned a place in the current world order* or does not fit into this order»<sup>56</sup>. However, this need not be interpreted in a nihilistic vein, where Paul would be claiming that the principle of the spirit will destroy —or “nullify”, or “abolish”— what is held as *being* in and by this world to avenge what is considered as “lowly” or as non-being. Rather, and following Agamben, the verb *katargeo* in 1 Cor 1:27-28, usually translated as “to nullify”, “to abolish”, or “to reduce to nothing”, is a technically Pauline term which means “to deactivate” or “to render inoperative”: *katargeo*, according to Agamben, is not the opposite of *poieo*, but of *energeo*<sup>57</sup>, the same term that Aristotle uses for “act”. By deactivating or rendering inoperative what is actual in the present order of the world, the principle of the spirit allows a space of possibilities or potentialities that remained inhibited in and by that order to appear: «The suspension of a given reality does not open an empty space of the purely unreal or the mere non-being but *a well-defined space of possibilities that have not been actualized in a given reality* [...] actuality is rich in possibilities that are and remain unactualized»<sup>58</sup>. Nevertheless, the Pauline idiosyncrasy with respect to the Aristotelian notion of potentiality is that a reference to a transcendent principle of the spirit is necessary: since these non-beings are “weak” and “foolish”, “despised” by the “strong” and “wise” to whom the present order of the world is favourable, the

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<sup>53</sup> Ivi., p. 43-45.

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. S. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*, Verso, London 2012, pp. 177ff.

<sup>55</sup> G.J. Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>56</sup> Ivi., p. 81.

<sup>57</sup> Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, cit., pp. 95-97.

<sup>58</sup> G.J. Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, cit., p. 85.

immanent conditions that would allow them to thrive remain inhibited by the present laws of the world, which must first be deactivated.

### 3.2 THE EXCEPTION IN BADIOU, ŽIŽEK, AND AGAMBEN

The notion of the exception would allow to make sense of the contemporary political relevance of the Pauline epistles: with the announcement of the messianic event—an event that does not follow from the present laws of the world, such as the resurrection—, Paul is seen by the philosophers of this messianic turn as, in Van der Heiden’s words, «the announcer of a new beginning leading to a transformation of reality»<sup>59</sup>, a beginning that «cannot be understood in terms of possibilities of change and transformation intrinsic to the order and dynamics of the world itself»<sup>60</sup>. Van der Heiden translates this interest in the motif of a new beginning into the historical context of the 1990s:

With some of the philosophical reflections on Paul, and in particular of those scholars that work extensively with Badiou and Agamben, this focus on the proclamation of the new should be seen against the backdrop of a political reality that does not seem to allow any alternative. While in Paul’s time, the Roman empire determined this reality, authors such as Badiou and Agamben translate it in the political constellation that took shape in the nineties. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, it seemed the Western world had but one political-economic option left: that of capitalism. As bankrupt as communism was towards the end, it was still an alternative to the political reality to be found on the western side of the Wall. Today, capitalism and neoliberalism still seem to be the only option, tempting Žižek to posit that it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Especially in a world order that offers no alternative and in which history seems to be at its end, Badiou and Žižek turn to Paul as the one who knows how to herald a new beginning in a given socio-political and historical status quo<sup>61</sup>.

Badiou, for instance, denounces the complicity of capitalism and liberal democracy in downgrading the universal to the vulgar, “false universality” of “monetary abstraction”<sup>62</sup>, which can accommodate any particular so long as this particular can circulate as a commodity: «Everything that circulates falls under the unity of a count, while inversely, only what lets itself be counted in this way can circulate»<sup>63</sup>. Similarly, while liberal democracy claims to protect particular social and cultural identities, it only does so insofar as the latter can be identified as such by the juridical order, and therefore, made homogeneous; structurally, capitalism and democracy are complicit in

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<sup>59</sup> Ivi., p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ivi., pp. 22-23.

<sup>62</sup> A. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, cit. p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Ivi., p. 10.

preserving each other via this downgrading of the universal to an empty abstraction. In Badiou's words, «On the one hand, there is an extension of the automatism of capital [...] This configuration imposes the rule of an abstract homogenization. [...] On the other side, there is a process of fragmentation into closed identities [...] Both processes are perfectly intertwined. [...] Deleuze put it perfectly: capitalist deterritorialization requires a constant reterritorialization»<sup>64</sup>. Only a universal truth or a “universal singularity”<sup>65</sup> that “subtracts” itself from this homogenizing rule or that cannot be subsumed by it can interrupt this dynamic. Such a truth is always grounded in an “event” that interrupts the present laws of the world by introducing something that cannot be accounted by them; Christ's resurrection is a paradigmatic example.

Žižek's treatment of Paul is in many respects close to that of Badiou. For instance, he is also interested in Paul as the founder of a certain form of militantism that introduced universal ideals and truths in the world. Just like Paul challenged the political hegemony of the Roman Empire by founding Christianity, today, we should establish a “politics of Truth”<sup>66</sup> that breaks with the pragmatic compromises of liberal democracy. For Žižek, Paul is a paradigmatic representative of such a politics. Like Badiou, he compares Paul to Lenin:

One cannot emphasize enough the fact of Lenin's *externality* with regard to Marx: [...] in exactly the same way, Saint Paul, who formulated the basic tenets of Christianity, was not part of Christ's inner circle [...] Lenin violently displaces Marx, tears his theory out of its original context, planting it in another historical moment, and thus effectively universalizes it. [...] It is only through such a violent displacement that the “original” theory can be *put to work*, fulfilling its potential of political *intervention*<sup>67</sup>.

Agamben, on the other hand, is interested in how Paul's critique of Mosaic law can also be translated into a critique of contemporary democracy. In Paul's reality, Mosaic law or the “law of works”, i.e., the normative or prescriptive commandments given by God to Moses, has lost its original significance —the Abrahamic promise— and has replaced faith. Without faith, the law becomes «entirely unobservable, and, as such, only functions as a universal principle of imputation»<sup>68</sup>, or in other words, the law begins to produce sin. This interdependence of the law and its transgression translates into the problem that preoccupies Agamben —inspired by Carl Schmitt— throughout his oeuvre<sup>69</sup>, namely, that of the “state of exception”, i.e., how biopolitical power is defined by the interdependence of the norm and its suspension, leaving nothing

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<sup>64</sup> Ivi., pp. 9-10.

<sup>65</sup> Ivi., p. 14.

<sup>66</sup> S. Žižek, *On Belief*, op. cit., p. 2

<sup>67</sup> Ivi., pp. 2-3.

<sup>68</sup> G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998.

outside of the coverage of the law<sup>70</sup>. Similarly, Žižek speaks of a “perverse core of Christianity” in relation to those moments —such as the Fall, Judas’ betrayal, or Jesus’ death on the Cross— in which God seems to test the faith of men only to then offer salvation. Paul, according to Žižek, detects in Mosaic law such a «dialectic of the law and its transgression [...] on how Law engenders sin, that is, the desire to transgress it»<sup>71</sup>.

What all these analyses have in common is the preoccupation with the lack of an outside or an exteriority to the present laws of the world. With Van der Heiden, this preoccupation can be traced back to the proclamation of the “end of history”<sup>72</sup> in the 1990s. Since the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, there seems to be no viable alternative to capitalism and liberal democracy; be it the false universality of capitalism denounced by Badiou or the interdependence of the law and its transgression in Agamben and Žižek, the present laws of the world seem to leave nothing outside of their coverage. The Pauline dialectic of exception allows these philosophers to find a principle of transformation that does not come from this world, yet—contra Nietzsche’s nihilist reading of Paul— it transforms *this* world by interrupting its present laws and introducing the possibility of a new beginning.

For Badiou, the resurrection of Christ as announced by Paul is the paradigmatic example of an event: the resurrection does not follow from any law or from previous historical events, and it can happen at any time and place, since it is exclusively grounded on “grace”<sup>73</sup>. As such, the resurrection is a *singularity*, but it is a *universal singularity*, because its truth can be accessed by anyone independently of their historical and cultural background: anyone can choose to announce it and to live accordingly to the principles that it has introduced in the world<sup>74</sup>. Thus, the resurrection introduces the possibility of becoming a Christian and of the “militant” fidelity by which Christian subjects announce and support the truth of the resurrection. This is why Paul is «one who practices and states the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure»<sup>75</sup> and can be compared to «a Lenin for whom Christ will have been the equivocal Marx»<sup>76</sup>. According to Badiou, since the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s and the resulting global hegemony of capitalism and liberal democracy<sup>77</sup>, there is a widespread need for such a militant figure.

In contrast to Badiou’s anti-dialectical reading of Paul<sup>78</sup>, Žižek offers a more dialectical interpretation. Paul’s critique of Mosaic law overcomes that “perverse”

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<sup>70</sup> G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, cit., pp. 104-108.

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, cit., p. 56.

<sup>72</sup> Cfr. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, in «The National Interest», XVI (1989), pp. 3-18.

<sup>73</sup> A. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, cit., pp. 63-64.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi., p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> Ivi., p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ivi., p. 6-7.

<sup>78</sup> For Badiou, the resurrection «is not a “moment” of the Absolute. It is affirmation without preliminary negation», A. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, cit., p. 66.

reading of Christianity by insisting «on the absolute *identity* of the two gestures: God does not first push us into Sin in order to create the need for Salvation, and then offer Himself as the Redeemer from the trouble into which He got us in the first place; it is not that the Fall is followed by Redemption: the Fall is *identical* to Redemption, it is “in itself” already Redemption»<sup>79</sup>. According to this dialectical reading, Paul’s critique of Mosaic law in Romans overcomes an antagonistic interpretation of the relationship between faith and the law: rather than abolishing Mosaic law and replacing it with faith, Christianity, in fact, brings the law to fulfilment<sup>80</sup>.

Finally, for Agamben too, Paul does not simply negate, reject, or abolish Mosaic law in order to replace it with faith; rather, by “deactivating” Mosaic law, the law is brought to its fulfilment in a new “law of faith”<sup>81</sup>. Agamben is interested in this Pauline *katargesis* of the law, i.e., in how Paul’s announcement of Christ’s resurrection and his Second Coming renders Mosaic law “inoperative”<sup>82</sup>: in messianic time, the old divisions and distinctions made by Mosaic law —between Jews and non-Jews, slaves and free citizens...<sup>83</sup>— are suspended; following the law of faith no longer means abiding by the prescriptions of Mosaic law, such as circumcision<sup>84</sup>, because the original significance of these prescriptions is now accomplished or fulfilled in a «non-normative figure of the law»<sup>85</sup>, a «justice without law»<sup>86</sup>, or a law based on faith, promise, loyalty, and trust, rather than obligation. Thus, the interdependence of law and sin is overcome.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Despite the lack of a direct dialogue between Left Accelerationism and the philosophical turn to Paul, both currents emerge as responses to the historical conjuncture of the 1990s, defined by the “end of history” and the apparent lack of an imaginable alternative to capitalism and liberal democracy. In the case of L/Acc, this concern with the lack of an alternative is made more urgent by the accumulation of global crises in recent decades. In this article, I have shown that both currents develop similar intuitions in relation to the problem of the lack of an alternative to the present world order. Specifically, both are preoccupied with the ways in which capitalism and

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<sup>79</sup> S. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, cit., p. 118.

<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, as Van der Heiden indicates, Žižek’s dialectical reading gets too close to a Hegelian monism in which salvation is already implicit as a necessary moment in the rational self-development of the spirit of the world, perhaps missing the specificity of a Pauline dialectic of exception. G.J. van der Heiden, *The Outcast and the Spirit*, cit., pp. 51-52.

<sup>81</sup> G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, cit. pp. 93-95.

<sup>82</sup> Ivi., pp-101.

<sup>83</sup> «There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus», Gal 3:28, NRSVUE.

<sup>84</sup> «Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but obeying the commandments of God is everything», 1 Cor 7:19, NRSVUE.

<sup>85</sup> G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, cit. p. 95.

<sup>86</sup> Ivi., p. 107.

liberal democracy do not seem to leave any outside or exteriority, capturing anything that could compromise their hegemony. In L/Acc, this is reflected in the dynamic of deterritorialization-reterritorialization that inhibits the emancipatory potential of technological development under capitalism; in Badiou, it is the complicity of capitalism and liberal democracy in downgrading the universal to an abstract generality that captures all particulars; in Agamben and Žižek, it is the interdependence of the law and its transgression.

Given these dynamics of self-preservation, both currents agree that the present order of the world has run out of immanent resources for transformation, and that, consequently, a reference to something that transcends this world order or does not follow from its laws is required in order to transform it; hence the concern of both L/Acc and the turn to Paul with enabling an outside or an exception to the present laws of the world through which the possibility of a new beginning is introduced. This concern motivates L/Acc's turn to Marx and to Prometheanism: a left accelerationist program would consist in the collective steering of technological development towards a post-capitalist future, yet this requires stepping out of the constraints that capitalist accumulation currently imposes upon the imaginable possibilities of technological development. It also motivates Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben's turn to Paul; in Van der Heiden's words, the Pauline exception «introduces a principle of revivification and renewal that cannot be understood in terms of possibilities of change and transformation intrinsic to the order and dynamics of the world itself»<sup>87</sup>.

However, this focus on the exception and the outside carries along the risk of dualism. As I have argued, in L/Acc, this is reflected in the replacement of dialectical materialism with a dualism between determinism and ahistorical voluntarism<sup>88</sup>: while on the one hand, it is acknowledged that technological development under capitalism transforms subjects and societies in ways that are beyond the control of human agents, on the other, L/Acc suggests repurposing this process according to a common goal; however, establishing such a goal already relies on the possibility of a political agency that falls outside of the ways in which capitalism and technological development currently shape subjects and collective desire. In the case of the turn to Paul, we have already seen how Paul's dialectic of exception must navigate between monism and dualism.

Interestingly, both L/Acc and the turn to Paul also have in common an effort to distance themselves from their nihilistic counterparts. In the case of L/Acc, the attempt to turn acceleration into a collective, navigational project responds to L/Acc's departure from the earlier nihilist, teleological, apocalyptic anti-humanism of Nick

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<sup>87</sup> G.J. Van der Heiden, *The Outcast and the Spirit*, cit., p. 21.

<sup>88</sup> For a similar critique of the bourgeois dualism between “fatalism” and “voluntarism”, cfr. G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by R. Livingstone, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1971, pp. 4, 124, 134, 191.

Land's accelerationism<sup>89</sup>. Furthermore, L/Acc articulates its strategy against the background of a leftist "folk politics" that rejects all gains of capitalism and romanticizes a pre-capitalist past; this latter attitude could also be seen as nihilistic, to the extent that it wholesale rejects the present world and looks away from it, idealizing another reality. Although both L/Acc and the turn to Paul agree that the present world order has run out of transformative resources, they do not wish to reject it entirely or destroy it. Rather, L/Acc argues in favour of *repurposing* capitalist technologies.

To conclude, both L/Acc and the messianic turn to Paul seek an alternative to, on the one hand, a Hegelian monism or immanentism, and on the other, a dualist nihilism that rejects *this* world in favour of another world; as a consequence, they all develop similar intuitions. The Pauline dialectic of exception identified by Van der Heiden provides a useful yardstick against which to measure their positions according to whether they are, for instance, more or less dualistic or dialectical.

Although an exhaustive Marxist critique of both L/Acc and the messianic turn to Paul has been out of the scope of this article, allow me to briefly sketch some of its possible directions on the occasion of Paul's meontology. It has been argued that there is a meontology in Paul, i.e., a doctrine of potentialities that remain inhibited in and by the present order of the world and that can only appear through the intervention of a transcendent principle of the spirit that suspends the immanent laws of the world. In their claim that the technological infrastructure of capitalism is pregnant with possibilities that remain inhibited by the laws of capitalist accumulation—and that rather than *rejected* or *destroyed*, this technological infrastructure must be *repurposed*—, one could also see in L/Acc a meontology. Nevertheless, if the claim were simply that given a certain stage of development the capitalist forces and relations of production already contain the potential for its own overcoming, L/Acc would not really deviate from a Marxist analysis, and an analogy with Pauline meontology as simply a doctrine of potentialities would be superfluous. But where L/Acc *does* crucially deviate from Marxism and inclines toward an analogy with a Pauline dialectic of exception is in the suggestion that this potential can only be actualized once the laws of capitalist accumulation are deactivated from an *outside*. This outside is «a universal space of possibility»<sup>90</sup>, in contradistinction to the limited space of possibilities offered by the existing relations of production. Contrary to a Marxist dialectical perspective, this is to claim that while post-capitalism is a latent possibility in the existing technological infrastructure, this possibility can only be actualized from outside of the existing productive relations, which ultimately amounts to claiming that the possibility of capitalism's overcoming is not contained within the existing relations of production, but must itself be enabled from a space that transcends them. The whole of the left accelerationist project will then consist in a second-order theoretical effort to enable this space, i.e., to enable the *possibility* of capitalism's overcoming, leading to an impasse

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<sup>89</sup> Cfr. N. Land, *Fanged Noumena*, cit.

<sup>90</sup> A. Williams, N. Srnicek, *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, cit., p. 352.

rather than revolutionary acceleration. By contrast, Marxist dialectics understands that the proletariat becomes collectively organized and subjectivated as a class through the *immanent* critique<sup>91</sup> of the abstractions that govern the material reproduction of its life, i.e., the “critique of political economy”, and by this, it gives shape to the “objective possibilities” for revolution, in a unity of theory and praxis<sup>92</sup>. Instead of engaging in an immanent critique of the capitalist mode of production by which to give shape to the objective possibilities for its overcoming that are *presently* contained in its relations of production—and which, in turn, are the result of the development of *earlier* modes of production—, L/Acc hopes that these potentialities will be handed down from the idea of the “future”, i.e., a theoretical abstraction. In Marxism, theory is a moment of revolutionary praxis, whereas by ruling out the possibility of immanent critique, L/Acc ultimately reduces the theoretical moment to an idealistic effort «to generate a new left global hegemony»<sup>93</sup> which relies on the capacities of the collective “imagination” to rehabilitate «the idea of the future»<sup>94</sup>. As such, L/Acc represents another idealistic, utopian inversion of historical materialism, where the future as an abstract ideal is imposed upon the material forces and relations of production of capitalism which, once repurposed according to this ideal, will almost deterministically lead to a post-capitalist society. Rather than a Marxist dialectics, this brings L/Acc closer to a Pauline dialectic, over which the spectre of dualism still looms. Similarly, in their interest in the motifs of grace and the principle of spirit, the authors of the messianic turn to Paul must assume the risk of ahistoricism.

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<sup>91</sup> Cfr. R. Celikates, *Karl Marx: Critique as Emancipatory Practice*, in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. by K. de Boer, R. Sonderegger, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 101-118; A. Buchwalter, Hegel, Marx, and the Concept of Immanent Critique, in «Journal of the History of Philosophy», XXIX, 2 (1991), pp. 253-279.

<sup>92</sup> Cfr. G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, cit.

<sup>93</sup> Ivi., p. 357.

<sup>94</sup> Ivi., p. 362.



## RESEARCH PROPOSAL

### The Category of *Possibility*: From Marxism to post-Marxism

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#### 3. Title of research proposal

The Category of *Possibility*: From Marxism to post-Marxism

#### 4. Summary

Despite the emergence in recent decades of multiple crises in capitalism and liberal democracy, there still seems to be no viable alternative to these economic and political systems. While in the last century Marxism still seemed to provide a feasible alternative, today, it appears as an outdated paradigm. In light of this outdatedness, some post-Marxist currents argue—contra traditional Marxism—that the possibility of overcoming capitalism does not exist in the present, and that creating this possibility depends on our ability to establish new ideals for the future.

However, in this debate on the possibility of an alternative to capitalism, scholars have overlooked the role that the idea of *possibility* plays. If, as Marxism argues, this possibility *already exists* in the present, what prevents us from realizing it? And if we have to *create* this possibility, as post-Marxism claims, then, how to do it? This project proposes to compare Marxist and post-Marxist concepts of possibility and the political implications that follow from each conception, in order to arrive at a concept of possibility that allows us to critically address our present-day crises. We will examine three positions concerning possibility: one that draws inspiration from theology,

another that emphasizes the possibilities emerging from technological development, and another, Marxist position that focuses on present possibilities.

## 5. Resubmitted proposal

This is a new proposal.

## 6. PhD candidate

Initials: A.

Prefix: -

Surname: Rafecas Sogas

## 7. Curriculum Vitae PhD candidate

### a) Education

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 2020–<br>present | Research Master in Metaphysics<br>Radboud University<br>Interim GPA: 8.57   Expected graduation date: 31.08.2023<br>Relevant courses: Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy (grade: 9); Philosophy of Religion (9); Methods and Skills I (9)   |
| 2015–2020        | Bachelor in Philosophy<br>University of Barcelona<br>GPA: 8.8   Graduation date: 16.06.2020<br>Relevant courses: Political Philosophy I and II (grade: 10); Metaphysics I (10); Issues in Metaphysics I (9); History of Contemporary Philosophy II (9); Issues in the History of Philosophy IV (10) |

### b) Honours, prizes, scholarships and grants

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 2020–2022               | Faculty scholarship for excellent international students in the ReMA Philosophy (Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Radboud University) |
| 2018(Aug)–<br>2019(Jan) | Erasmus+ grant as part of BA Philosophy, University of Barcelona. Receiving university: Radboud University  |
| 2015–2020               | “Excellent with Honours” distinction in 7 courses (BA Philosophy, University of Barcelona)  |

### c) Relevant academic experience

#### *Student assistantships*

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| 2023(Feb–<br>June) | Teaching assistant “Philosophical Research: Methods and Skills 2” (ReMA Philosophy, Radboud University) |
| 2022(Sep–<br>Jan)  | Teaching assistant “Philosophical Research: Methods and Skills 1” (ReMA Philosophy, Radboud University) |
| 2022(Feb–          | Teaching assistant “Philosophical Research: Methods and   |

June) Skills 2” (ReMA Philosophy, Radboud University)

*Board activities*

2020–2022 Student representative in the Programme Committee (ReMA Philosophy, Radboud University)

*Organizational experience*

2021(Oct)– Creator and coordinator of the Cyberfeminism reading group  
2022(Feb) (ReMA Philosophy, Radboud University)

2020(Jan– Internship at Sala Beckett’s philosophy and drama lab as part  
June) of BA Philosophy, University of Barcelona (Sala Beckett theatre, Barcelona)

**d) Other relevant positions**

2019–2020 English teacher (Kids&Us, Vilafranca del Penedès, Catalonia)  
2015–2020 Scout leader (Scout group Pere II i Santa Maria de Foix, Vilafranca del Penedès, Catalonia)  
2015–2018 Private tutor; Catalan, Spanish, and English teacher (Lingo Món, Vilafranca del Penedès, Catalonia)

**e) Output**

*Peer-reviewed journals*

- “Left Accelerationism as a Messianism: a Dialogue between Left Accelerationism and Saint Paul.” *Points of Interest*, 10 (forthcoming)

*Blog posts*

- ““The Gaia Hypothesis:” the Many Worlds of the Anthropocene.” *The ARCHAIC* (blog), September 4, 2021, <https://thearchaic.nl/the-gaia-hypothesis-the-many-worlds-of-the-anthropocene/>
- “Reflections on Race and Posthumanism.” *The ARCHAIC* (blog), February 18, 2021, <https://thearchaic.nl/blogpost-on-postcolonialism/>

*Lecture reports*

- “The Parliament of Things: Lecture by philosopher Bruno Latour.” *Radboud Reflects*, 23 November 2020, <https://www.ru.nl/radboudreflects/terugblik/terugblik-2020/terugblik-2020/20-11-23-livestream-the-parliament-things-lecture/info/english-review-the-parliament-things/>
- “Making Sense of Thinking: Lecture by philosopher Markus Gabriel.” *Radboud Reflects*, 5 September 2019, <https://www.ru.nl/radboudreflects/terugblik/terugblik-2019/terugblik-2019/19-09-05-making-sense-thinking-lecture-by-virtuele-map/english-review-making-sense-thinking/>

**f) Motivation for doing PhD research**

Ever since high school, I have been encouraged by professors and colleagues

to study philosophy, and throughout my higher education, I have become convinced that I am fit to pursue philosophy as an academic career. This conviction grew stronger when, during my bachelor's, I spent a semester at Radboud University with an Erasmus+ grant; after a successful academic performance, I was encouraged to return to Radboud for a research master's degree by the program's coordinator. During my research master studies at Radboud, I have acquired the methodological skills necessary to conduct research in philosophy. I have thoroughly enjoyed taking courses and writing papers, but I have also taken every opportunity to gain academic experience by teaching, leading discussions, organizing reading groups, attending and participating in conferences, and contributing to defining and improving the program's academic goals as a student representative. I believe that a PhD would be the appropriate continuation to this trajectory.

This proposal addresses a path for future research left open by my research master's thesis on Saint Paul and accelerationism, soon to be published by the peer-reviewed journal *Points of Interest*, and emerges from the intersection of the domains in which I have specialized throughout my studies: while in Barcelona I learned about Marxism and accelerationism, at Radboud, I have become interested in the philosophy of religion. Thus, I am convinced that this project fits the research interests of Radboud's Faculty of Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies and can contribute to further expanding them with a fresh, international perspective. More widely, I believe that it can contribute to enlivening Marxist scholarship in the Netherlands by demonstrating Marxism's unsuspected alliances with other traditions that are being researched in this country's philosophy and theology departments.

## **8. Period of funding**

Standard PhD, 1.0 FTE, 01.09.2024–01.09.2028.

## **9. Description of the proposed research**

### INTRODUCTION

Western politics in the twenty-first century is characterized by a paradox: despite the accumulation of economic, political, and environmental crises in capitalism and liberal democracy, there still seems to be no viable alternative to these economic and political systems.<sup>95</sup> While in the twentieth century Marxism still appeared to provide a feasible alternative, today, given the failure of Marx's predictions that capitalism's recurrent crises would lead to its overthrow by the revolutionary working class,<sup>96</sup> Marxism appears as an outdated paradigm. In light of the failure of Marx's predictions, some

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<sup>95</sup> See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

<sup>96</sup> See Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party."

post-Marxist currents argue—contra canonical Marxism—that the conditions for overcoming capitalism do not exist in the present, and that creating these conditions depends on our ability to imagine a future beyond capitalism.<sup>97</sup>

However, in this debate on the possibility of an alternative to capitalism, scholars have overlooked the role that the idea of *possibility* plays. While in Marxism, this possibility follows from a critique of the present state of affairs,<sup>98</sup> in these post-Marxist philosophies, it follows from an ideal for the future. In the former case, the possibility of overthrowing capitalism already exists in the present, but for some reason, we just do not do it, and then the question is why. In the latter, this possibility does not yet exist, and so we have to create it, but then, the question is how. This suggests that, today, a lot is at stake in the category of possibility. This research proposes to examine the ways in which Marxist and post-Marxist strategies think of possibility and the political implications of each conception, in order to arrive at a concept of possibility that allows us to critically address our present-day crises. Our research question can be stated as follows:

“In the face of today’s multiple global crises, how should we conceptualize the  
*possibility* of an alternative to capitalism?”

To answer this question, our first aim is to investigate in what ways recent post-Marxist trends that respond to the problem of the lack of an alternative to capitalism conceptualize possibility. We will examine two recent currents in which the category of possibility is central, namely, the turn to Saint Paul’s letters in contemporary philosophy, which draws inspiration from Paul’s announcement of the possibility of salvation in the future, and accelerationism, which argues that contemporary technologies offer unprecedented possibilities for the future, but realizing these possibilities is a human task. Our second aim is to examine the category of possibility in the Marxist tradition and compare it with these post-Marxist currents. We will begin with a paradigmatic Marxist concept of possibility, namely, Georg Lukács’ concept of the *objective possibility* of class consciousness.<sup>99</sup> Our third aim is to inquire into the contemporary validity of this concept, and thus, to inquire about the historical and philosophical reasons behind the contemporary post-Marxist need to rethink possibility beyond Marxism.

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<sup>97</sup> See, for instance, Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*.

<sup>98</sup> See Celikates, “Karl Marx: Critique as Emancipatory Practice,” and Buchwalter, “Hegel, Marx, and the Concept of Immanent Critique.” See also Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*.

<sup>99</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 22, 52, 79, 327.

## STATE OF THE ART

### DESCRIPTION OF THE POSITIONS AT STAKE

#### (1) *The messianic turn to Saint Paul's letters*

In recent decades, post-Marxist philosophers such as Alain Badiou,<sup>100</sup> Slavoj Žižek,<sup>101</sup> or Giorgio Agamben<sup>102</sup> have become interested in the political aspects of Saint Paul's letters. Paul compromised the political hegemony of the Roman Empire and founded Christianity by announcing Christ's resurrection and his future Second Coming. The resurrection introduces the possibility of salvation in a world that is experiencing a crisis of faith. To achieve salvation, one must become a Christian and live in the expectation of Christ's Second Coming. Similarly, according to these philosophers, Paul can teach us how to announce the possibility of emancipation and inspire us to live in the expectation of a future beyond the present crises.

#### (2) *Accelerationism*

Accelerationism claims that contemporary technologies offer unprecedented possibilities to solve current crises and increase human well-being. For instance, we could create a society in which machines do all the work. However, what we see instead is that technology is used in the interest of capitalist profit: for instance, to collect data from us and use it to sell us products, or to make sure that we can be reached outside of working hours.<sup>103</sup> Consequently, while technological development introduces new possibilities for human well-being in the world, we cannot simply expect that it will on its own lead to a better future: we must accelerate the arrival of this future ourselves by appropriating and democratizing technological development.

#### (3) *Lukács' objective possibility*

For Lukács, the possibility of overthrowing capitalism depends on the ability of the working class to achieve *class consciousness*. Lukács was a critic of utopianism: class consciousness does not consist in shared ideals or goals for the future, but in the knowledge of the present.<sup>104</sup> By engaging in a critique of the present industrial relations, the working class becomes conscious of its exploitation; this leads it to organize as a class with similar interests and to change society accordingly. Thus, class consciousness leads to revolutionary action. Achieving class consciousness is an *objective possibility*, meaning that the conditions for achieving it already exist; however, it is not an easy task, because the working class is also affected by the dominant ideas of a capitalist society.

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<sup>100</sup> See Badiou, *Saint Paul*.

<sup>101</sup> See Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*.

<sup>102</sup> See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*.

<sup>103</sup> See Williams and Srnicek, “#Accelerate.”

<sup>104</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 22.

## RESEARCH AIMS

### (1) *A post-Marxist concept of possibility*

Our first aim is to extract a concept of possibility from recent post-Marxist currents that address the problem of the lack of an alternative to capitalism. Therefore, we will examine possibility in two currents that have emerged as responses to this specific problem, namely, the philosophical turn to Paul and accelerationism.

While both currents deal in various ways with possibility, the importance of this category for each of them has been overlooked by existing scholarship. This is surprising, since notions of possibility abound in both cases. For instance, Agamben thinks that Paul's announcement of Christ's resurrection and his Second Coming suspends the established political order and restores politics to a state of *potentiality* in which everything is possible;<sup>105</sup> Badiou is interested in Paul's announcement as introducing the possibility of salvation in the world;<sup>106</sup> Van der Heiden identifies a *meontology* in Paul, namely, a doctrine of the possibilities inhibited by the established political order.<sup>107</sup> Accelerationism, on the other hand, speaks of the "universal space of possibilities"<sup>108</sup> for human well-being inaugurated by contemporary technologies.

Moreover, both currents respond to a similar historical conjuncture, namely, the collapse of communism since the 1990s and the resulting global hegemony of capitalism.<sup>109</sup> However, few scholars have assessed them jointly. While Prozorov sees messianism and accelerationism as competing positions,<sup>110</sup> Galindo Hervás suggests that both are analogous, although where one draws from theology, the other draws from the possibilities of contemporary technologies.<sup>111</sup> How has Christianity shaped the Western expectations of what is possible in politics? And is the Christian expectation of salvation being replaced today by the promises of technological development? Our project aims to reflect on these questions by assessing both currents as symptomatic of a broader post-Marxist need to rethink possibility.

### (2) *Possibility in Marxism*

Our second aim is to assess in what ways these post-Marxist currents go beyond Marxism in their conceptualization of possibility. Therefore, we will examine the category of possibility in the Marxist tradition and compare it with the post-Marxist currents examined above.

Although the category of possibility is always implicitly at stake in the debates between Marxism and post-Marxism, no one has so far explicitly thematized its

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<sup>105</sup> See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*.

<sup>106</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 45.

<sup>107</sup> Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul*, 85.

<sup>108</sup> Williams and Srnicek, "#Accelerate," 352.

<sup>109</sup> See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, and Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul*, 22-3.

<sup>110</sup> Prozorov, "Like a Thief in the Night."

<sup>111</sup> Galindo Hervás, "Delay or Accelerate the End?," 310.

discussion. Moreover, a systematic treatment of this category in Marxism is still lacking. We will lay the groundwork for such a treatment by turning to a particular instance of a concept of possibility from the Marxist tradition, namely, Lukács' objective possibility of class consciousness. This will be compared with the post-Marxist concepts of possibility examined in the first part. The post-Marxist currents assume that the possibility of an alternative to capitalism does not exist in the present, but must instead be introduced by some radically new development. By contrast, Lukács thinks that this possibility is "objective," meaning that, qua possibility, it already exists in the present, but its realization depends on the ability of the working class to achieve class consciousness.<sup>112</sup> Thus, while post-Marxism places possibility in the future, Lukács invites us to engage with our present reality: replacing a critique of the present with an ideal for the future risks leaving our existing reality unchanged.<sup>113</sup>

By examining objective possibility in Lukács, our project aims to lay the groundwork for a more systematic study of the category of possibility in Marxism, as well as to explicitly thematize a point of contention between Marxism and post-Marxism that has so far been neglected.

### *(3) The contemporary validity of Lukács' objective possibility*

Our third aim is to critically assess the contemporary validity of Marxist concepts of possibility, and consequently, to inquire into the historical and philosophical reasons behind the post-Marxist need to rethink possibility beyond Marxism.

While Lukács' concept of objective possibility could still present valuable critiques to post-Marxism, the fact remains, as Patnaik indicates, that rather than giving rise to class consciousness, capitalist crisis has led significant parts of the working class to identify with a right-wing rhetoric. Is class consciousness in Lukács' sense itself still possible?<sup>114</sup> Moreover, contemporary political struggles pertaining to categories of gender and race cast doubt upon the centrality of class in Lukács and in Marxism: it is not clear that there is still a single exploited class with a unified set of interests. Can the privilege that Lukács attributes to the working class as the revolutionary class be extended to other collectives? While some argue that this is possible,<sup>115</sup> others think that such an extension would conflict with crucial aspects from Lukács' thought.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps, then, the post-Marxist reconceptualization of possibility provides us with critical and practical resources that Marxism can no longer provide in our times. For instance, as Robert indicates, post-Marxist tendencies such as the ones examined above provide Marxism with the political space to revitalize its project beyond the

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<sup>112</sup> See Patnaik, "The Emergence of Class Consciousness", and Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács*, "Lukács' theory of ascribed class consciousness."

<sup>113</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 160-2.

<sup>114</sup> Patnaik, "The Emergence of Class Consciousness."

<sup>115</sup> See Hall, "Returning to Lukács," 207-8, and Jameson, "*History and Class Consciousness* as an 'Unfinished Project,'" 63-4.

<sup>116</sup> See Larsen, "Lukács *sans* Proletariat," 83.

institutional parameters of the party form.<sup>117</sup> Thus, our project aims to assess Marxist and post-Marxist concepts of possibility vis-a-vis our historical context.

## METHODOLOGY

This project will maintain a general methodological commitment to historical materialism, namely, the view that the prevalent philosophical concepts of a certain society result from its economic and industrial relations, or in other words, from the ways in which its members are compelled to procure their living conditions.<sup>118</sup> This means that in our treatment of contemporary notions of possibility we will pay particular attention to, for instance, recent transformations in the labor market that may have influenced people's self-perception as members of a certain socio-economic class or people's perception of the feasibility of an alternative economic system. This method allows us to critically confront emerging and established philosophical concepts by revealing to what extent they support existing economic and political relations and conceal other possible analyses.

As to the specific research methodology, our project will be divided into three parts corresponding to the research aims stated above, plus a concluding chapter in which the results obtained will be synthesized. For research aims (1) and (2), our methodology will be comparative philosophy: for each position studied, a concept of possibility will be explicated; then, both concepts will be contrasted, resulting in three subchapters for part (1) and two for part (2). For (3), our methodology will be a historically embedded study of concepts: we will trace Lukács' concept of objective possibility to Lukács' own historical context and inquire into the function that this concept performed with regards to its political needs. Then, we will analyze whether contemporary post-Marxist concepts of possibility fulfill any political needs in our present historical context that a Marxist concept could no longer fulfill, and we will inquire into the reasons why that may be the case.

## RELEVANCE

The relevance of our project is twofold. First, it is of societal relevance: for the first time in the history of the evolution of humanity throughout different models of economic and political organization, one single model appears to be dominant around the globe, namely, capitalism and liberal democracy. Yet the apparent lack of a realistic alternative to this model clashes with a multiplication of crises that its institutions cannot seem to solve, such as global warming. The global urgency of these crises demands that we analyze how we think of the possibility of other economic and political models.

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<sup>117</sup> Roberts, "The 'Returns to Religion,'" 96.

<sup>118</sup> See Marx, preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy."

Second, it is of academic relevance: while always implicit in the debates between Marxism and post-Marxism, an explicit thematization of the category of possibility has so far been neglected in political philosophy. However, this category is central to certain post-Marxist currents that have emerged since the late 1990s. This demands that we inquire about the historical and philosophical reasons behind the renewed centrality of this category, as well as that we systematically analyze its trajectory in both Marxism and post-Marxism. Moreover, turning to Lukács endows our project with a particular academic relevance, since 2023 marks the hundredth anniversary of his magnum opus *History and Class Consciousness*. The concept of objective possibility, introduced in this work, has so far been neglected in Lukácsian scholarship.

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## 10. Number of words

2.360

## 11. Summary in keywords

Possibility, Marxism, messianism, accelerationism, Lukács.

## 12. Data management

### 1. Will data be collected or generated that are suitable for reuse?

This research will not *collect* data, as it will make use of already published primary and secondary sources of literature. However, it expects to *generate* data in the form of publishable articles for peer-reviewed journals, presentations at conferences and congresses, and a written dissertation.

### 2. Where will the data be stored during the research?

The data generated will be stored at the servers of Radboud University's ICT facilities.

### 3. After the project has been completed, how will the data be stored for the long-term and made available for the use by third parties?

After completion, the written dissertation will be stored at Radboud University's repository, accessible at <https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/>.

### 4. Which facilities (ICT, (secure) archive, refrigerators or legal expertise) do you expect will be needed for the storage of data during the research and after the research? Are these available?\*

\*ICT facilities for data storage are considered to be resources such as data storage capacity, bandwidth for data transport and calculating power for data processing.

This project will make use of the standard research facilities available to all

employees of Radboud University, such as ICT facilities, an office, and the databases to which the University Library provides access.

### **13. Institutional embedding and supervision**

This project will be carried out at Radboud University's Centre for Contemporary European Philosophy (CCEP), the only centre in the Netherlands specializing in twentieth and twenty-first century continental philosophy. The CCEP hosts researchers working on authors and traditions that are relevant to the project, such as Prof. Dr. Gert-Jan van der Heiden, whose own NWO-financed research specialized on the contemporary philosophical reception of Saint Paul, or Dr. Ype de Boer's research on Agamben and potentiality. But it also expands on the expertise of the CCEP by establishing a dialogue between these traditions and emerging philosophical currents such as accelerationism; Dr. Arjen Kleinherenbrink, who is also a member of the CCEP, specializes in such emerging philosophies.

Moreover, the project will add Georg Lukács to the range of twentieth-century philosophers on which the CCEP has acquired an expertise. In order to examine Lukács' work more deeply and reflect into its possible applications to our present-day crises, the project also aims at a research stay at the Centre for Social Critique of the Humboldt University of Berlin. The centre investigates the structural aspects of the crises of capitalism and democracy as well as the social movements and agents that bring about social change, while working on authors and traditions closely related to Lukács.

The supervision of the research will be conducted by Dr. Arjen Kleinherenbrink in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Gert-Jan van der Heiden. Both have previously provided guidance to the candidate's work on the traditions involved in this research proposal. While Prof. Dr. Van der Heiden's supervision will be particularly focused on the parts of the project that involve Saint Paul, Dr. Kleinherenbrink will be tasked with the day-to-day supervision of the project as a whole, although his advice will prove particularly useful to the aspects of the research that concern accelerationism and other emerging post-Marxist philosophies.

## 14. Work programme

<i>Period*</i>	<i>Research and education</i>	<i>Output</i>
Sep24– Jan25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PhD course on research methodology</li> <li>- <i>Research aim (1)</i>: historical context of accelerationism; philosophical aspects; views on possibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part 1, ch. 1: possibility in accelerationism</li> </ul>
Feb25– Aug25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Research aim (1)</i>: historical context of the philosophical turn to Paul; authors and philosophical work; views on possibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part 1, ch. 2: possibility in the philosophical turn to Paul</li> </ul>
Sep25– Jan26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Research aim (1)</i>: compare views on possibility by accelerationism and the turn to Paul; extract a post-Marxist concept</li> <li>- Teach a bachelor's course in philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part 1, ch. 3: possibility in post-Marxism</li> <li>- Publishable article 1: possibility in post-Marxism</li> </ul>
Feb26– Aug26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Research aim (2)</i>: Lukács' life and philosophical work; historical and philosophical background of <i>History and Class Consciousness</i>; the concept of <i>objective possibility</i></li> <li>- If possible, research stay at the Centre for Social Critique of Humboldt University of Berlin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part 2, ch. 1: <i>objective possibility</i> in Lukács</li> <li>- Present publishable article 1 at a conference</li> </ul>
Sep26– Jan27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Research aim (2)</i>: compare Lukács' objective possibility with post-Marxist concepts of possibility from Part 1</li> <li>- PhD course on relevant topic (preferably, on intersectionality) at OZSW or Dutch University</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part 2, ch. 2: possibility in Marxism vs. post-Marxism</li> <li>- Publishable article 2: possibility in Marxism</li> </ul>
Feb27– Aug27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Research aim (3)</i>: analyze the contemporary applicability of Marxist concepts of possibility to present-day political struggles</li> <li>- Teach a master's course in philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part 3, ch. 1: the contemporary validity of Marxist concepts of possibility</li> <li>- Present publishable article 2 at a conference</li> </ul>
Sep27– Jan28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Research aim (3)</i>: elaborate a concept of possibility based on the results obtained throughout the research</li> <li>- Summarize and synthesize the results of the research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part 3, ch. 2: a concept of possibility to address our present-day crises</li> <li>- Draft concluding chapter</li> </ul>
Feb28– Aug28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Summarize and synthesize the results of the research</li> <li>- Incorporate final feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Concluding chapter</li> <li>- Complete dissertation</li> </ul>

\* *The standard amount of vacation time has been taken into account.*

## 15. Summary for non-specialists (in Dutch *or* English)

Competing political and economic systems have existed throughout the history of human civilization. To take a recent example, the twentieth century was defined by the tensions between, on the one hand, Western democratic governments with a capitalist economy, and on the other, communist states. However, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, one single political and economic order has established itself around the globe, namely, capitalism and liberal democracy. Given its historical triumph over any other alternative, today, this order is widely perceived as the only realistic or feasible option.

Nevertheless, in recent decades, the world has witnessed an accumulation of economic, political, and environmental crises resulting from the shortcomings of these systems. In order to avoid societal collapse, these crises urge us to think about the possibility of an alternative political and economic reality. While in the twentieth century Marxism could still provide such an alternative, today, it is perceived as an outdated philosophy. Marxism follows Karl Marx in the belief that capitalism is ridden with internal contradictions, and that these tensions create the conditions for overcoming capitalism; thus, for Marxism, overthrowing capitalism is already possible *in the present*. However, given the failure of Marxism's predictions of a revolution, some post-Marxist philosophers argue that these conditions do no longer exist, and that today, the possibility of an alternative to capitalism depends instead on our ability to imagine a different *future*.

However, in this debate on the possibility of an alternative to capitalism, scholars have overlooked the role that the idea of *possibility* plays. Different consequences follow from different ways of conceptualizing possibility: if, as Marxism argues, the possibility of overcoming capitalism *already exists* in the present, we must ask why it is not being realized. But if we have to *create* this possibility, as post-Marxism argues, then, we have to find ways to imagine an alternative to capitalism beyond the limited resources that the present can offer. This research proposes to examine Marxist and post-Marxist concepts of possibility and the consequences that follow from each conception, in order to arrive at a concept of possibility that allows us to critically address our present-day crises.

Three positions concerning possibility will be investigated and compared to each other. The first draws inspiration from theology and the Judeo-Christian hope for salvation in the future; the second argues that technological development has created the possibility of a future beyond work and beyond capitalism; these two post-Marxist positions will then be compared to a canonical Marxist concept of possibility by the philosopher Georg Lukács. However, the contemporary validity of Lukács' thought and of Marxism will have to be critically assessed, especially considering contemporary political struggles against oppression that involve groups other than the working class.

## 16. Title and summary for newsletters and website (in Dutch *and* English)

THE CATEGORY OF *POSSIBILITY*: FROM MARXISM TO POST-MARXISM

While capitalism and liberal democracy are still perceived as the only feasible economic and political systems, the present-day accumulation of global crises urges us to think about the possibility of another economic and political reality. This research proposes to examine the category of *possibility* in Marxist and post-Marxist thought. How did Marxism conceptualize the possibility of overcoming capitalism? And, in light of the failure of Marxism's predictions of a revolution, how does post-Marxism think of possibility? By comparing these traditions, our research aims to arrive at a concept of possibility that allows us to critically address our contemporary crises.

DE CATEGORIE VAN DE *MOGELIJKHEID*: VAN MARXISME NAAR POSTMARXISME

Terwijl het kapitalisme en de liberale democratie nog steeds worden gezien als de enige reëel mogelijke economische en politieke systemen, dwingt de huidige opeenstapeling van wereldwijde crises ons om na te denken over de mogelijkheid van een andere economische en politieke realiteit. Dit onderzoek stelt voor om de categorie van mogelijkheid in het marxistische en postmarxistische denken te onderzoeken. Hoe conceptualiseerde het marxisme de mogelijkheid om het kapitalisme te overwinnen? En, in het licht van het mislukken van de voorspellingen van het marxisme over een revolutie, hoe denkt het postmarxisme over deze mogelijkheid? Door deze tradities met elkaar te vergelijken, probeert ons onderzoek tot een begrip van mogelijkheid te komen dat ons in staat stelt onze hedendaagse crises kritisch te benaderen.

### By submitting this form I declare that:

- I have completed this form truthfully;
- I satisfy the nationally and internationally accepted standards for scientific conduct as stated in the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity 2018.

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Place: Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Date: 06.06.2023