



Pitts, F. H. (2015). Review of Paul Mason - Postcapitalism: A guide to our future. *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*.
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The citation for the published paper is as follows:

Pitts, F. H., 2015. Review of Paul Mason, Postcapitalism. *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*. 4th September. Available online at <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2015/2008>.

Paul Mason

Postcapitalism

Allen Lane, London. 340pp., £16.99 hb.

[ISBN 9781846147388](https://www.isbn-international.org/view/title/9781846147388)

Reviewed by: Frederick H. Pitts

Interesting times for students of Marx. Corbyn and Varoufakis compete for column inches with a book on the profit rate and value theory. This book is *Postcapitalism*. Versed in Trotskyism and *autonomia*, Paul Mason communicates complex ideas with clarity. This is a balance seldom struck in Marxian scholarship: Mason theorises as well as he writes. As such, this is no mere popularisation. It is recommended to those old and new to Marxist thought as an ideal introduction to autonomist Marxism. Mason shares autonomism's fascination with Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' (1973, 704-706). For the public reception of Marx's Fragment, *Postcapitalism* is a high-water mark. But, in this inheritance, Mason's book represents 'peak Fragment'. Its weaknesses reflect those of Fragment-thinking around value and labour. Post-workerism's big secret is a productivist understanding of the relationship between the two. For Mason, the secret is an open one.

The argument of the book follows Marx's 1859 Preface. Marx describes how 'the material productive forces of a society come into conflict with the existing relations of production' (Marx 1981, 21). When these relations become 'fetters', revolution ensues. Mason suggests that capitalism struggles to contain the implications of the information boom. It 'corrod[es] market mechanisms, erod[es] property rights and destr[oys] the old relationship between wages, work and profit' (112). Information goods tend towards endless replicability at zero-marginal cost. Their abundance contravenes the scarcity upon which pricing proceeds. Open source and peer-to-peer production create value outside waged labour for non-monetary exchange. The world is now home to a 'generation of consumers psychologically attuned to free stuff' (131). Info-capitalism thus unleashes productive forces uncontainable within its social relations. Free goods and free time elude the attempted enclosure of monopolies and finance.

For Mason, this scenario echoes Marx's Fragment. The law of value faces a crisis of measure sparked by changes in labour and production. 'Knowledge-based production'. The

expansion of free time. The reduction of necessary labour. Machines embody the autonomous knowledge- 'general intellect'- enabled by these trends. This 'destroys the old mechanisms for creating prices and profits' (138). Workers fight for 'freedom from work' and the 'struggle to be human and educated during one's free time' (137-8). Mason locates the source of these 'new social relations inside the old' (114) in a new class subject. This is the educated, networked individual, the 'bearer of the postcapitalist society that could now emerge' (144).

Fragment-thinking tends toward a conventional understanding of the relationship between labour and value (see Pitts 2015, 5-6, 20-23). Ironically, this productivist standpoint belies the avowed post-workerism of its proponents. Their conceptualisation of a crisis of measurability depends upon it. Value must relate directly to expended concrete labour for the latter's reduction to pose a threat. But it instead relates to abstract labour, which has no concrete existence (Bonfeld 2010, 260). As such, the Fragment sits uneasily in the development of Marx's value theory (Heinrich 2013). This accounts for its fragmentary, unpublished nature. Its crisis scenario implies a simplistic labour theory of value (LTOV) that Marx later outgrew.

Mason is no different to Negri *et al* in holding fast to an old-fashioned LTOV. For Mason, the LTOV is an economic theory rather than a critical theory of society. His interpretation seems largely unburdened by contemporary approaches to the value-form and abstract labour (eg Heinrich 2012). But Mason does insert some nuance. Socially necessary labour time is adjudicated post-hoc in the market. The market rewards capitalists who calculated correctly. In this way, the market acts as a 'transmission mechanism' that mediates the deep law with the 'surface outcome'. As such, the LTOV is a theory of the market, to which it ascribes the 'mechanism of making concrete the reality beneath' (155). Mason could have enunciated better these dimensions of his interpretation of Marx's value theory. Resonating with value-form approaches, they test the limits of the otherwise traditionalist LTOV presented.

But in the end, for Mason, '[o]ne hour of labour always adds one hour's worth of value to the products made' (158). The 'ultimate source of profit is work' (52). On these terms, the replacement of labour with machines throws the law of value into crisis. Free machines like information 'eradicate[] the need for labour on an incalculable scale' (165).

They impute less 'labour hours' to the value of commodities (167). In line with the Fragment, free machines 'blow [...] sky high' the law of value (Marx 1973, 706). Stillborn info-capitalism, he explains, struggles for existence against this dissolution of value. Monopolies, new forms of copyright, 'garbled' accounting and 'valuation guesswork'. All contend with the crisis of measurability information sparks (171).

In the context of these conditions, Mason does not advocate a break with capitalism. He advocates a managed transition based on the postcapitalist potentialities Marx ascribed to the situation. '[C]ooperatives, credit unions, peer-networks, unmanaged enterprises and parallel, subcultural economies' point towards a postcapitalist society from within the present (244). The state, Mason contends, should shepherd them. It must regulate to create space for the development of the new society through a 'distributed project'. This is 'Project Zero': zero-carbon energy, zero marginal costs and close-to-zero necessary labour.

It is clear what the 'post' in 'postcapitalism' means. It is 'post' in the sense that one may be 'post-Marxist', different from but still within the Marxist tradition. The 'post' in postcapitalism contains it within its past. Money, price, profit, commodities, the state, finance, wages: all continue in the short-term, with some differences. Money makes way for some kind of scrip system, followed by 'a state-administered bid/offer system for goods and services' (283). Price is determined by supercomputerised big data. The state levies taxes to encourage non-profit production. Profits themselves derive from 'entrepreneurship, not rent' (279), accruing from innovation and novelty. Basic commodities and services become free. Finance allocates capital efficiently using tradable instruments, without 'payback in monetary form' (283). Finally, the basic income replaces the wage.

The basic income, Mason contends, pays people 'just to exist' (284). But this is 'only a transitional measure for the first stage of the postcapitalist project'. The 'socialisation' of the wage through 'collectively provided services', or its abolition, follow (285-6). Payment to exist, coupled with automation, allows networked, autonomous experimentation in place of labour.

There are problems with this Fragment-optimism. Mason asserts that the relationship between work and wages is weakening. And it will weaken further, post-capitalism. But the relationship cannot weaken. This is because it does not exist. The wage

has never related to expended labour. Rather, it relates to a state of existence conditional upon the sale of labour-power to survive. Whether the labour-power sells or not, the conditionality remains. It is intrinsically divorced from the specific process of production engaged in and its end result (see Critisticuffs 2015). The maintenance of this separation is the secret of the wage. It must always be enough to guarantee the continued commodification of labour power. It must be high enough to reproduce it, and low enough to prevent comfort without its sale. The wage is that upon which the worker's existence hinges, not their work. The wage, when considered in its separation from work, is already payment to exist, to be ready for work. Thus, it facilitates the superficially unpaid 'free time' of peer production and open-source tinkering. In fact, the latter is conditional upon the wage- whether received for work or not. This is because in capitalist society the wage is as the principal means through which we meet the conditions of life.

A second issue is the supposed reduction in necessary labour. Mason asserts that this creates the possibility of a crisis of capital and a postcapitalist society. But capital has never *needed* labour. Value relates to *abstract* labour. This is not a type of expended labour (Bonefeld 2010). It is its residue measured by money in exchange. The actual labour that takes place in production is neither here nor there. As Mason himself permits, branding and consumption account for at least some of the value of a given good. A piece of shoddy workmanship can easily retail at a high price when marketed well. Whether and for how long someone works on the good or service is no more than an incidental aspect of its value. So labour need not equal value in any kind of direct way. Capital can reduce necessary labour to turn a greater profit, realising value regardless. Capitalism is not a system based on necessary labour at all. It is preoccupied with surplus, production for exchange, and the accumulation of wealth. Calling for the reduction of 'necessary' labour in this context is myopic.

The continuing relevancy of the wage as the means of existence shows us something else, too. This is that the necessity of labour is *not* reduced for the worker. Labour or the potential for it is a condition of survival. Capital may not need workers. But its social rule relies on workers needing labour or the prospect of it, on the promise of a wage packet from boss or state.

The expansion of non-work time is still based on the wage. Its contents-programming, social media- are too. In the Fragment, Marx suggests that free time follows reductions in necessary labour achieved through technological advances. This free time expands workers' knowledge in new and unseen ways. But Marx recognises something Mason and other Fragment-optimists do not. This is that this knowledge and 'free' activity reenters production. Today sees the same prerequisites the Fragment depicts. But no postcapitalist mode of production attends them. Instead, we see leisure and life dug ever deeper into the groundwork of capitalist valorisation. Long ago, Adorno and Horkheimer noted the resemblance of leisure to factory labour (1997). Today, work resembles the free time of social media, networks and ICT, and, vitally, vice versa. This is the dark kernel of truth in the notion of the 'social factory'.

As Virno suggests (1996), flexibility and free time has locked workers ever closer into the rhythms of value, in and out of work. Rather than undermining capitalist valorisation, ICTs and social media create new methods of capture. The same knowledge and freedom eulogised in the Fragment is recouped by the existing system. The blurring of work and leisure that Mason celebrates (287) is not the signal of a new settlement. It is the stabilisation of an old one. Open source is just the exploitation and valorisation of free time facilitated by the wage. The latter is paid out, as Mason notes (209), for the workers sheer *existence* rather than their nine-to-five. But, as with so much of what Mason calls out as new or novel, it was ever thus: the wage has always been a payment merely to exist. Wages do not relate to actual working time. They relate to capitalist control over time. They relate to the necessity of the worker being always ready for work in a moral and physical sense. This has no temporal specificity.

Mason could do more to delineate how the basic income would be a transitional step towards the abolition of the wage. But even this may retain the separation of people from independent, non-commodified means of living (see Bonfeld 2014). The social conditions undergirding the wage would continue, with or without the wage itself. The social conditions for the sale of labour-power would remain, with or without a buyer.

Mason does project a future of free goods based on the abundance of information. But how this overcomes the enforced scarcity of, say, food, is unclear. With 'some' goods free, a monetary framework would still mediate human life (see Lotz 2014). 'Free' still

assumes, by exception, underlying structures of reproduction: wage, commodity, money, labour. It is the conditions for the latter that need abolishing, not the price paid to endure them.

For Mason, free goods arise from zero marginal productivity gains. But scarcity relates less to technological possibility than social rule. It is subject to constantly reinforced laws of private property and enclosure. Commodity exchange functions on separation and exclusion from the wealth of the world. It is thus a social condition, not technological or material. The material possibility of abundance is ever-present. But capitalist social rule struggles against it. The compulsion to commodify one's labour power depends upon scarce distribution.

Mason puts a lot of faith in the capacity of technology to deliver change. But technology is subject to the social context of its use. It is only through an escape from capitalist social relations that the liberation Mason wishes to see can happen. Money, price, wage, state etc., as we find them, are capitalist through and through. With them still around, Mason's postcapitalist utopia may not be so utopian after all.

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