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The Politics of Postcapitalism: Labour and our Digital Futures

JON CRUDDAS AND FREDERICK HARRY PITTS

Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on the politics of postcapitalism. Considering the theoretical foundations, empirical perspectives and political ramifications of claims made about a coming 'post-work' or 'postcapitalist' society, it maps existing debates through a discussion of two key recent texts, Paul Mason's *Clear Bright Future* and Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. It first surveys how the relationship between labour market trends, technological change and wider political-economic shifts is articulated in the postcapitalist literature. It then explores how concepts from Marx are deployed to depict social relations as a constraint on technological development and its utopian potentialities, leading to political demands for new class actors and electoral blocs centring on the new forms of economic and political activity associated with digital networks. It also considers the role of the state and how this theoretical and political approach envisions historical change, situating utopian visions of an incipient postcapitalist alternative to capitalism within the contemporary political context of authoritarian populism and challenges to liberal democracy. Finally, it explores the continuing relevance of humanism as a critical counterpoint to the social and philosophical agenda of present day 'posthumanism'. It concludes that, in unfavourable political conditions, it would be strategically unwise to stake too much on an over-optimistic approach to the unfolding future. This outlook, it is suggested, carries considerable risks and consequences for a contemporary left in search of a viable electoral coalition and route back to power.

Keywords: postcapitalism, post-work, Labour Party, Marx, technology, humanism

Introduction

ENVISIONING THE END of work and the implementation of a universal basic income (UBI), recent years have witnessed an intellectual renewal in how the left understands labour and the future of capitalism. Its narrative deploys a broadly Marxist theoretical inheritance to celebrate the substitution of human labour with technology, and the replacement of the traditional class base of the left with a new urban, networked, educated youth for whom modern technological change creates unique possibilities to transcend capitalist society and, in some cases, the human condition itself. Through influential articles and books discussing 'accelerationism', 'postcapitalism' and 'fully automated luxury communism', such ideas populate broadsheet columns, policy seminars and the wider

activist imagination.¹ Unravelling at the time of writing, the Corbynist ascendancy in the UK Labour Party has incubated these ideas and their carriers. Seeking solutions to the intellectual and electoral crisis of social democracy, this thinking constitutes one of the richest and most stimulating sides of the contested theoretical project constructed around Corbyn's leadership. Policies coloured by this vision of the future populated Labour's manifesto in the recent general election, but the party failed to understand the public perception that its pledges placed too much emphasis on preparing for the development of a new world in the shell of an old one that they seemed to have lost touch with.²

This special issue introduces and unpicks some of the intellectual wiring behind this emerging thinking on postcapitalism and the post-work society on the contemporary left.

Following this introduction, which explores the politics of postcapitalism with reference to the two latest and most salient additions to its growing literature in the UK political sphere, Paul Mason's *Clear Bright Future* and Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, the first part of the issue considers the empirical claims made around the changing face of work and economic life in contemporary capitalism and the potential for a postcapitalist or post-work alternatives.³ Mason opens with an account of the practical and policy agenda underpinning his vision of the 'postcapitalist transition'. Paul Thompson contests portrayals of a present day 'tipping point' towards a post-work society. Julie Macleavy and Andrew Lapworth consider the implications a 'post-work' future holds for everyday practices of work in the context of contemporary labour market trends. Lorena Lombardozi scrutinises the implications of one of the primary postcapitalist policy proposals—the universal basic income (UBI)—and its potential impacts upon gender inequality inside and outside the labour market. Lisa Nandy relates debates about future demographic and labour market changes to the practical realities of constructing electoral coalitions in contemporary Britain.

The second part of the special issue considers the wider political underpinnings and consequences of this vision of capitalism and its transformation. Matt Bolton surveys the transatlantic 'democratic socialist' resurgence and its understanding of capitalism and its alternatives. Anton Jäger considers what past populisms can tell us about the productivist, anti-rentier politics characterising the contemporary left. Bridget Phillipson sets out the opportunities and limitations of state power in support of social transformation within the context of contemporary UK political economy. Florence Gildea reviews the vital contribution of Srnicek and Williams's *Inventing the Future* to the postcapitalist literature, and the posthumanist implications of their 'accelerationism'. Picking up this thread, Harry Pitts discusses how postcapitalism's political tensions and contradictions both inform and are informed by the thematic and strategic shifts undertaken in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

The absolute state of things to come

The essence of the postcapitalist vision is 'a world beyond jobs, profit and even scarcity'.⁴ Postcapitalism here represents the latest development of capitalist productive capabilities, harnessing new technologies to transcend capitalism itself for a qualitatively different society. It proposes that continued increases in human productivity from a 'combination of computing power, globalization and rising educational levels' precipitate a 'decisive human take-off which propels us towards economic abundance'.⁵ Perhaps most significantly, robotics, 'thinking machines', and automated technologies, have the potential to liberate humankind from physical work and the proliferation of free goods.⁶ In the 'expanded leisure time' facilitated by the 'reduction of hours worked', humans will be free to avail themselves of new levels of 'freedom and self-knowledge'. This is seldom presented as an outcome accomplished automatically by technology itself, but requires political work to harness new technologies like artificial intelligence to 'design and run the systems we need to survive on this planet' and autonomous systems to perform working tasks 'without human guidance'. Nothing less than the obliteration of 'class divisions, hierarchies, poverty, oppression and inequality' follows. Thus, 'information technology makes Utopian Socialism possible'.⁷

However, as Thompson makes clear in his contribution, the forecast labour market effects of automation empirically challenge this utopian portrayal of an escape from drudgery. Whilst White House figures suggest an '83 per cent chance that workers earning less than \$20 per hour will lose their jobs to robots in the medium term', it may well be the case that more complex problem-solving roles are automated first.⁸ As Bastani notes, this is due to the greater 'processor power' required for the 'motor-sensory coupling, spatial awareness and unanticipated responses' needed to replace manual tasks.⁹ As regards analytical tasks, meanwhile, Deloitte figures suggest that around 40 per cent of all jobs in the legal sector face a likelihood of automation in the next two

decades—some 114,000 jobs—on top of 31,000 jobs already eliminated.¹⁰ This evidence suggests that professional jobs with prestige, perks and decent terms and conditions may be the first to go, rather than the drudgery to which automated luxury is posed as an alternative.

Indeed, Mason and Bastani recognise that empirical trends confound attempts to paint capitalist development bending inevitably towards automated utopia. In the noughties, productivity growth and technological innovation declined. Rather than a given, whether firms automate production is ‘an outgrowth of competition, the prevailing logic of capitalism’. Evidence shows the degree of automation in the economy slowing in recent decades, ‘primarily as a result of wages being pushed so low that replacing workers wasn’t profitable’.¹¹ Citing David Graeber’s theoretically and empirically questionable ‘bullshit jobs’ thesis, Mason observes that, ‘far from automating production, advanced market economies are creating millions of jobs that do not need to exist’.¹² In this unfavourable context, ‘post-work’ aims are perhaps better addressed to reshaping the sphere of social reproduction than production proper—something Macleavy and Lapworth’s contribution to this special issue highlights.

Both Mason and Bastani explain the distance between reality and ‘fully automated’ utopia with reference to two posthumously published fragments from Marx. Firstly, the 1859 *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, which outlines Marx’s ‘fetters’ theory of history centring on the dynamic relationship between the forces and relations of production.¹³ Secondly, the 1858 ‘Fragment on Machines’ from Marx’s *Grundrisse*, which outlines a future where technological development bursts through capitalist frameworks of labour and valorisation.¹⁴ For Mason and Bastani, the former explains why things do not happen according to plan, but might do so given the right political and regulatory environment, whereas the latter explains why some day things definitely will unfold according to the postcapitalist vision of the future.

A stagist understanding of societal transformation is derived from Marx’s dialectical presentation of the progression of history in

these fragments, whereby the technological forces of production must reach their fullest development for the path to open to whatever follows—in this case, a ‘postcapitalist’ society. This means that political struggle for the latter depends upon the full blossoming of present technological capacities, helping accomplish their revolutionary trajectory. For instance, ICT-enabled ‘collaborative production’ in the peer-to-peer open source economy helps nurture the new society in the shell of the old.¹⁵

When the ‘cultural, legal, social and ideological superstructure’ of society—in other words, the relations of production—‘fetter’ the development on the technological forces of production, the former must adapt.¹⁶ Marx eventually surpassed such a crude base-superstructure understanding of society, but it lives on in the economic determinism of successive generations of socialists. Indeed, the political consequence of seeing social relations simply fetter and follow the productive forces is clear when Bastani relegates ‘legal and political rights’ and ‘liberal ends of personal fulfilment and self-authorship’ as secondary to foundational ‘socialist means’ of ‘economic and social resources’.¹⁷

The point at which the relations of production act as a fetter upon the forces, for both Bastani and Mason, has already been reached, with established forms of private property unable to accommodate the increased ‘socialization of knowledge’ that technological progress implies.¹⁸ Attempting to enclose this socialisation, monopolistic ownership structures represented in ascendant platform firms in turn constrain the dynamism of these technological tendencies. Technological innovations ‘bringing extreme supply to information, labour and resources’ undermine conventional economic presumptions about the scarcity undergirding capitalist valuation and exchange.¹⁹ Mason describes how from the 1990s onwards, traditional accounting has struggled to capture the impact of information technology upon economic growth. Some see information technology contributing indirectly through facilitating quicker, more transparent, and more competitive online transactions. Price cannot measure it, just as the wage does not measure the vast expanse of ‘free’ labour performed by internet users at home. For Mason, this incapacity to

capture the value of technology and labour conceals an expansion of use-value concurrent with a failure of established measures to express the exchange-value of products and their creation.

Bastani, meanwhile, follows mainstream economics in suggesting that the 'zero marginal cost' of informational goods—examples cited include robot design and drug patents—debilitates not only traditional business models based on sales margins, but capitalism itself, identified as the production of things for profit.²⁰ More circumspect about such a transformation, Mason sees a continuing capacity to contain the crisis of value in the platform economy's 'network effects' and monopoly tendencies.²¹ Capital responds to infotech's effects on 'prices, automation, networks and availability', Mason argues, through 'vast monopolies whose main aim is to suppress the free, competitive formation of prices, and to eradicate competition in entire swathes of the market', as well as laying claim to 'artificial forms of ownership over information: extensions of copyright, complex legal obligations, intellectual property laws'. Where prices are 'difficult to form' and profits thus 'difficult to achieve', platform firms valorise 'positive spillovers' like Facebook interactions.²² Thus for Mason the postcapitalist transition is 'fettered' by outdated productive relations.

Politically, this results in a productivist and populist anti-rentier positioning that, depicting platform rentiers leeching upon an otherwise freely disposed of commonwealth of knowledge logically and ethically preceding capitalist capture, seeks to eradicate the 'economic rents' that info-capitalists extract from 'everyday interactions' and 'suppress all business models based on rent-seeking' in order to 'make the seeking of economic rent socially unacceptable'. The alternative, we are told, is 'real entrepreneurship' focussed on the emergent infrastructure of 'non-profits, collaborative production, the peer-to-peer economy and open source software and standards'—a 'sharing economy' that is itself arguably a result, rather than simply a victim, of over-accumulated capital's search for a return on investment in an age short on other routes.²³ The boundary work policing what is productive and unproductive here seems more redolent of the anti-rentier

populists Jäger surveys in his contribution to this special issue than what passes at first glance for anti-productivist, anti-work political programme.

As Bolton notes in his contribution, the 'fettered' view of history has the effect of suggesting capitalist social relations impose themselves upon an otherwise natural socialism expressed in the forces of production, and it is simply a case of absolving this pre-existing state of affairs of the artificiality of capitalist social relations to let those forces run free. But the underlying forces driving free information goods, and so on, did not come into the world possessed of an untouched, free and natural goodness, spoilt by the capitalist relations of their production and consumption. They are the result of, and conditioned by, these relations from the off. Such a notion nonetheless permeates the postcapitalist literature. Scarcity, for instance, is nothing more than a 'political imposition' that the informational forces of production are helping undo. However, there is some recognition that info-capitalism's technological potentialities do not unlock utopia in and of themselves, but their unfolding depends on 'the political, ethical and social contexts' from which advances emerge. Scarcity being, for Bastani, a political imposition, it is also a political condition that can be removed with 'immediate action'. Whilst 'extreme supply' creates the conditions for 'fully automated luxury communism', the latter is not an inevitability, but 'a politics' that 'maps' the future.²⁴ Similarly, Mason rows back on some of the more exuberant claims made in his first book, presenting a state of technological abundance as something to 'try to achieve' rather than existing in the here and now.²⁵

This 'political realism' plays a key part in the closer interface struck between postcapitalist and post-work thinking and centre-left policy making in recent years. This proximity gives Bastani's 'communism' a quaint feel, relying as it does on technocratic tweaks like greater 'access to credit' for 'cooperatives and worker-owned business' that would then, like the Preston Model, provide local services in a form of 'municipal protectionism' supported at the national level by an overarching system of universal basic services (UBS).²⁶ Whilst possessed of a welcome pragmatism, statements arguing that 'UBS

begins the work of communism in the present, articulating resources necessary to a decent life', depending as it would on a state subsisting on capitalist profit, leave a somewhat underwhelming impression of the seriousness of this purported break with the present. The evidence for the utopian possibilities which postcapitalists perceive in contemporary economic life is arguably too weak to risk time and resources building a programme around such thin political gruel. Tellingly, examples cited in support of the catch-all solution of 'central planning' include no less than Walmart and Amazon.²⁷

As political defeats mount, it is an oft-stated and self-conscious caveat common to the post-work literature that these technological trends will not accomplish themselves, but must rather be regulated into existence. The robotisation of production is an effect of other imperatives and incentives in the economy as a whole, but the question is seldom raised as to whether the outcome of greater automation is worth the political-economic paths that must be navigated to achieve it. The recent announcement of a new UK migration policy implies that reduced access to cheap European labour will incentivise employers to recruit higher paid, higher skilled local labour, or invest in productivity-raising labour substitution technologies. Whilst these dynamics are already in play in some areas of agriculture, their application to the service-intensive work the government appears to have in mind—care or hospitality—is questionable.²⁸

To take one example: the resurgence of hand carwashes and the untimely disappearance of the apparently more advanced automated alternative has been supported by the illegal exploitation of migrant labour in a deregulated labour market.²⁹ Are tighter borders a price worth paying for greater investment in labour-saving technologies like the machine carwash that, we are told, will liberate us all in the long run? Most of its adherents would no doubt disagree, but often the post-work imaginary elides the character of the state within which its projections will unfold.³⁰ Where the state's powers of policy making and regulation do pop up in the postcapitalist conversation, it is either to hedge some of the more technological determinist ideas circulating in this body of

literature, explain why things may not pan out the way this prospectus anticipates, or recommend practical steps for how it can be better brought about in the context of contemporary capitalism unprecedently short on growth, productivity, and innovation—hardly favourable conditions for the kind of 'fully automated' future some anticipate. The issue of how the left approaches and wields the state is addressed in Bridget Phillipson's contribution to this special issue.

Regulation is a convenient alibi against accusations of technological determinism, but the presence of the state is no guarantee that the roll-out of technology will have an outcome favourable to the cause of human liberation. The relationship between the state and technology is a pressing issue at a time when the coronavirus crisis is exposing tendencies already in train towards the generalisation of a digitally-enabled, interventionist, authoritarian mode of governance. Whilst the medical evidence may well merit them, the measures possible in a totalitarian state like China set the template for state action elsewhere in response to the spread of the virus, even if adopted reluctantly in liberal democracies like the UK. The question is whether, once uncorked, the restrictions on freedoms can be rebottled, or whether the lasting effect of the current turmoil will bring not the end of neoliberalism, as some foresee, but rather something much worse. For Mason, China leads the way in a 'digital feudalism' whereby regime power stimulates development of new technologies of absolute 'digital surveillance and algorithmic control' and these technologies in turn enrich the power of the regime.³¹ Chinese success in the technology sphere—in particular in state priority areas like semiconductors, artificial intelligence and biotech—cannot be separated from its authoritarian aspirations. The implementation of the Social Credit system in China epitomises the coincidence of centralised state power and distributed ICT. Determining access to benefits and other services, as well as accumulating a vast body of data on the Chinese populace, the Social Credit system will evaluate citizens according to peer-rated categories like creditworthiness and political loyalty.

As its model of authoritarian governance proves itself as the optimum contemporary

means of administering capitalism, using new technology to solve perceived social problems and control citizenries, Mason sees this model becoming increasingly popular and viable beyond China, independent of the latter's growing sphere of influence through business and economic initiatives. Indeed, rates of digital innovation and development are surging in precisely those states experimenting with the most authoritarian modes of governance, whereas in the social and liberal democracies they are lagging behind.³² Whilst this might simply represent the extra room to grow in developing country contexts, it indicates that digital innovation in and of itself is not a good thing and should not be divorced of the social and political context in which it is taking place and the ends of which it is put in service. As an economically interventionist, politically authoritarian politics poses itself worldwide as a solution to issues of capitalist reproduction with much wider purchase than in China alone—especially in the context of a public health emergency with lasting import for how we live our lives—the resonance between technological development and authoritarianism forecloses a dystopian, rather than utopian, future.

The rise and fall of the networked individual

Submitting superstructural social relations to the requirements of technological progress, Mason associates the domination of human and non-human life under official communist regimes like China with the mistaken application of a 'fetters' theory of history that suggests social life in any epoch must flex to fit the forces of production. Whereas the 'fetters' theory of history ultimately grants us only an understanding of capitalism's survival, Mason argues, it takes Marx's posthumously rediscovered but seemingly prophetic 'Fragment on Machines', to give us a theory of capitalism's demise. The Fragment depicts the 'general intellect' embodied in machines replacing direct human labour in the production process. Marx later surpassed a simple labour theory of value equating direct labour time with the production of value, but for Fragment-thinkers like

Mason, such a theory underpins the association drawn between the substitution of human labour in the production process with a crisis in capitalism's capacity to create and capture value.³³

This crisis, adherents propose, precipitates the germination of a new postcapitalist order from within capitalism itself, smashing class structures. Granting textual justification for the celebration and acceleration of the substitution of human labour—and the class that lives by it—with technology, significant political consequences flow from this reading of a small, discarded and theoretically surpassed few pages of Marx's notebooks. It provides a theoretical foundation for resetting the base of the left away from a discernible labour interest in and around a notion of the working class, an embrace of technological change sometimes endowed with an anti-humanist technological determinism, and the belief in a new political cosmos built around an urban networked youth. The future political base of the left is no longer anchored around a 'labour interest' dismissed as political nostalgia. The site of political struggle expands from the factory to wider society as the wage-labour relationship offers diminishing returns for the left as a result of desirable technological shifts. Within these terms, the demand for a UBI follows, explored in Lombardozzi's contribution. It is a policy proponents have been keen to push in the context of the economic turmoil caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Curiously enough, Donald Trump stands alone in having seriously considered a blanket payment, while other democracies, like the UK, have opted for a more complex array of targeted measures. The pattern of UBI's uptake indicates its political ambivalence in a populist age.

To replace a working class on the wane, the intellectual repositioning inspired by Fragment-thinking also seeks new class subjects brought into being by the unfolding forces of production to complete their revolutionary trajectory. The turn to social movements seems a response to the sheer scale of the political regulation required to control and humanise new technology. Whereas the standards and regulations that enforce social and political interests against capitalist exploitation in the sphere of production are

fairly well-established now, no such common standards and regulations exist to police the interests of capital in the implementation of artificial intelligence. As Mason notes, if AI is not set 'cooperative goals' in line with a wider 'legal enforcement structure' similar to that which human society is already subject to, then it runs the risk of developing in an increasingly uncontrollable and 'sociopathic' direction. Whereas 'autonomous artificial intelligences cannot be safely deployed under any form of market-driven capitalism', Mason writes, where they are 'deployed into socially useful applications under meaningful, ethical human control, AI could be the tool that liberates humanity'.³⁴ Regardless of the flaws of the 'fetters' view of history that ascribes to this potential, the political effort required to fit the relations of production to the oncoming technological forces would be so great as to seem entirely unachievable, taking nothing less than the design and implementation of 'a new global system to utilize the capabilities of automation, reduce the amount of work needed to keep us alive on the planet and in the process stabilize the planet's ecosystem', as well as regulate AI, protect data rights and defend against algorithmic control.³⁵ Whilst some of these might be possible as part of a wider political effort to preserve aspects of the imperfect present, when put together they make any positive or utopian outcome to these processes sound nigh-on impossible.

In light of the substantial barriers to such a programme—not least the repeated failure of leftists to seize state power—social movements enter stage left as a means of generating a 'politics' capable of shepherding the technological forces along. This implies a 'collective subject with specific demands' tied to the technological expansion of abundance, leisure and luxury.³⁶ Mason casts in this role the figure of the 'networked individual', including 'small, often socially-conscious, entrepreneurs and large numbers of people who work in a globalised corporate environment'.³⁷ It is the networked individual, and not technology alone, that will accomplish the leap into a postcapitalist society of technological abundance, endless leisure and free goods.

In the wake of technological changes in how people live and work, the networked

individual chimes with a dramatic redefinition of the left across western market economies. Mason identifies the 'new core of the Labour project' in 'the big cities, among the salariat and among the globally orientated, educated part of the workforce'.³⁸ Associating Corbyn's leadership with this political vision of (post)capitalist transformation, Mason eulogises a new left reliant on a 'rough-and-ready ideology' combining three elements: 'networked activism', 'a focus on party politics to achieve state power' and a 'relentless focus on the issues, language and concerns of ordinary people'.³⁹ Clearly this amounts to a major detour from left orthodoxy, whereby 'the old relationship between the urban salariat and the ex-industrial working class *has inverted*' and Labour is the *de facto* party of the urban salariat with a new heartland in 'Remainia'.⁴⁰ Yet rather than being confronted as a political or ideological problem, this shift is presented as awash with possibilities for the much-vaunted new politics of postcapitalism. For Mason 'it is no disaster for Labour to find its core support among this demographic—because it is the future of the workforce in any successful twenty-first century capitalism'. Suggesting that networks which now produce value—found primarily amongst the urban, networked, educated youth as the traditional working class is replaced and redefined by apparently unstoppable technological change—are simultaneously the new agents to confront capital, has political implications not only in terms of new policy innovations, but in the construction of electoral coalitions. Nandy's contribution to this special issue seeks to take on some of this thinking in application to the political realities of post-referendum Britain.

Where earlier post-work thinkers like André Gorz saw the proletarian revolutionary subject wilting away in its role as capitalism's gravedigger, Mason sees the networked individual stepping into its shoes—both produced and manipulated by the political, economic, and technological tendencies of contemporary capitalism, but also coming to gradual consciousness as the agent of its revolutionary overthrow.⁴¹ Indeed, Mason sees the networked individual as more powerful than the proletariat, able to create 'islands of abundance and self-control' through the

hyperconnected infrastructure of info-capitalism and being wound into circuits of financialisation and circulation through their indebtedness and the 'productive' character of their consumption in a platform-mediated world, where user data is commodified and valorised by capital. This grants the new subjects of social transformation leverage in the sphere of circulation previously unavailable to the production-based class actors of the past. Classical worker struggles for a greater degree of reward or control within the system seldom gestured beyond the alienation of liberal democratic capitalism—struggling, as Mason puts it, 'for far more than just wages and trade unions but much less than socialist revolution'.⁴² Labour politics have largely served to shore up the autonomy and freedom of workers within the system whilst laying claim to a greater share of the spoils. Mason implies that the new class subjectivities of the networked society potentiate a radical leap beyond this.

But in a world falling apart, it might well be a better bet to replicate some of those older forms of struggle as a bottom-up way of defending what we have already. This would run against the grain of those such as Bastani, who suggest the labour movement should stay well clear of 'forms of worker organising' and political activity premised on the institutions and mediations of a broken 'society of work' rapidly 'passing away'. On the global stage, it is also necessary to confront what Bastani calls, in language jarringly redolent of right-wing conspiracy theorists, the 'cult of globalism' and its insistence on 'international coordination' as the solution to contemporary challenges. These 'multilateral compromises' Bastani sees as nothing more than the expression of 'elite interests'.⁴³ What is needed, Bastani argues, is a return to the nation-state as the horizon of political action. Liberal claims that this would obviously result in a thirties-style unravelling are little more, he suggests, than 'anti-utopianism' and 'capitalist realism', permitting no positive change in the present.

Mason, meanwhile, places judicious emphasis on the need to defend imperfect institutions and protect the global order. What strikes him as suspect in the contemporary time is the combination of justified 'geopolitical despair' about liberal decline

and misplaced 'technological euphoria' about the capacity of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution—a 'hi-tech, automation-driven, green future'—to overcome this generational catastrophe.⁴⁴ In this respect, Mason's work has become more circumspect, specifically about the threat that technological solutionism poses to universal and inalienable human rights. As was pointed out at the time, *Postcapitalism's* celebration of an increasingly interconnected world potentiating the rise of a new revolutionary subject was quickly outpaced by the online proliferation of racism, denialism and disinformation.⁴⁵ In *Clear Bright Future*, this world appears as a crucible for machines, platforms and algorithms that, by 'sucking the lifeblood out of human choice and reason', facilitate a 'war on liberal, democratic values' through the national-populist ascendancy.⁴⁶

Mason's recommended route for combatting authoritarianism is a humanist commitment to the universalism nationalists and populists despise—centring on the primacy of 'the human being, with universal rights'.⁴⁷ Humanism, Mason suggests, universalises what identitarianism and authoritarianism particularises and relativises, smashing through 'identities imposed on us by poverty, racism and sexism'.⁴⁸ Mason's 'radical humanism'—replacing 'postcapitalism' as his central intellectual project—is an assault on four faces of contemporary anti-humanism: neuroscience presenting human behaviour as predetermined; relativistic attacks on universal rights and concepts of human essence; market economics reducing human life to rational calculation and utility maximisation; and, most importantly, academic and popular posthumanism seeking the transcendence of human limits through new technology.

The last of these—addressed in this special issue in contributions by Gildea and Pitts—Mason describes as a 'reactionary thought-system' arising from the left, but picked up and run with by reactionary Silicon Valley pseudo-visionaries like Peter Thiel.⁴⁹ Whilst Mason relates it in places to structuralist Marxism, his association of it with a post-modernist, relativistic approach to science and reason rings truer, specifically that stemming from Bruno Latour's conceptualisation of scientific facts as 'socially constructed' and society as nothing more than a simple 'part

of nature'.⁵⁰ Underpinned by a vision of a single undifferentiated reality over which human knowledge has as much or as little claim as nature or 'inert matter', this draws an ontological equivalence between human life and non-human living things like animals and plants and inanimate objects like machines.⁵¹ This vitalist ontology is represented most notably in the 'object-oriented ontology' from which contemporary accelerationism has gained at least some of the intellectual succour for its worryingly attractive political programme.⁵²

Posthumanism's attempt to overturn the supposed 'oppression' to which the non-human world is subject at the hands of human thought and practice has dangerous ethical consequences.⁵³ Mason notes the trend within currently fashionable environmentalist and animal liberationist politics to rhetorically bemoan human existence itself, or even will into being its elimination—a prospect the current moment brings into cruel focus. Chiming with what has been, until lately, a profoundly anti-human cultural and political moment, the posthumanist worldview negates humans as nothing more than strings of information, proposing that 'we are *already* posthuman' insofar as whether a body or a computer carries this information is of secondary importance.⁵⁴ The apparently accomplished character of this state of affairs discourages resistance against a technological singularity uniting humans and machines.

Whereas Bastani follows others in the postcapitalist literature by eulogising new technology's potential to transcend human limits, Mason rejects this Prometheanism for a more pessimistic understanding of human life as meaningful only within those limits.⁵⁵ Mason follows Francis Fukuyama in suggesting that applications of biotechnology, like bionic arms and gene editing, create advantages and inequalities that erode the 'universality of our human essence'.⁵⁶ But Mason differs in suggesting humans can socially determine this 'essence' through the application of technology to dominate nature. Here the narrative of 'unleashing individual freedom' through the abolition of our 'need to work' makes a reappearance from the earlier and more optimistic prospectus presented in *Postcapitalism*. But it is precisely our distance from nature than burdens humankind with

the need to dominate it through work as a purposeful, transformative intercourse with the world around us in the first place. Whilst wage labour is an historically specific mediation of this relationship and can be struggled over politically as such, it is difficult to see a form of human life that would absolve us of 'work' in this broader sense.

Conclusion: the end of the end of history?

For adherents of postcapitalism, history is back. The literature is characterised by obligatory derision of Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, informed by Mark Fisher's critique of the condition of 'capitalist realism' whereby—in the phrase attributed variously to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson—it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.⁵⁷ But the underlying political assumption that a desirable alternative to liberal democratic, free-market capitalism fell with the Berlin Wall is as questionable as the empirical assessment that a viable alternative exists today. The only proof Bastani offers that 'capitalist realism is already coming apart' in the face of a real alternative is 'the fact you are reading these words at all'—a unilateral declaration of independence from false consciousness wherein all it takes is to free one's mind and the world will follow.⁵⁸

Mason, meanwhile, advances a more clear-sighted assessment of the risks of history's return, taking issue less with Fukuyama's normative vision than liberalism's lack of stomach defending it. He situates the ugly end of the end of history in the great unravelling in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, 'a crisis of legitimacy for the free-market system' that steadily escalated into 'an attack on democracy and human rights'.⁵⁹ In this context, the return of history has brought not progress, but regression, at the hands of 'forces opposed to science and democracy'.⁶⁰ With coronavirus, the world reels from another crisis seemingly jump-starting history anew. But as a continuation and exacerbation of the same morbid symptoms Mason describes, the coronavirus may not change the current state of affairs so much as realise what lies latent within it, extending and

intensifying existing dynamics towards a digitally-enabled post-liberal nation-state rather than paving the long road to utopian socialist renewal. Where the latter path implies that the left strike an offensive posture typical of postcapitalist thinking, the former implies a watchful defence of imperfect principles and institutions—rhetorically and practically a much harder sell. The pandemic may seem to suspend temporarily the debates featured in this special issue, but in many ways the wider spirit of rumination on social, political and economic transformation sparked by the crisis renders them more, not less, pressing.

Offstage, at the time of writing, the Labour leadership election draws to a close, promising an ideological and strategic reset. In its post-Marxist appraisal of the socially transformative potential of technological change, the postcapitalist left appears paradoxically descendent of the Blairite ‘third way’ to which Corbynism purportedly posed an alternative. New Labour’s privileging of certain sections of the electorate, based on technologically determinist assertions about the withering away of the working class, played out in both the politics of Brexit and Corbynism’s rise and subsequent fall with the 2019 election. But, driven by similarly optimistic readings of the progressive potentialities of contemporary political economy, both Blairism and Corbynism absolve the left of the task of confronting the ‘progressive dilemma’.⁶¹ As with New Labour’s ‘knowledge economy’ hype, the Labour Party is once again in danger of wishing away labour market realities for techno-utopian over-confidence, sidestepping the political imperative of improving the quality of work. And, having redefined the left’s base along the restrictive demographic lines of the urban, educated, networked youth and their transcendent potential, it is hard to chart a path to electoral coalitions that cut across classes and geographies sufficiently to gain and retain power in the wake of the disastrous 2019 election result.⁶² The radical left faces the added obstacle of confronting this problem in a position of alienation from traditional representative democracy—an outsider status to which, with the exception of a few converts to reconciliation with the political centre, they are now returning, following

the failed experiment of Corbynism. As partisans of postcapitalism like Mason peel away from the remnants of the Corbyn project, there is a need for something new to stand in the wreckage that places less faith in the potential of technological development and its beneficiaries to achieve social transformation.

In a world stricken by manifold crises, untimely over-optimism is by no means a condition confined to the left. The same messianic expectations invested in the likes of Corbyn by a small, but loud, section of his support, chime with Trump’s ‘make America great again’ mantra and the demand that Britons ‘believe’ in even the hardest Brexit insofar as contemporary politics conspires to expel, at all costs, sceptics, spoilsports, and sticks-in-the-mud, who declaim impossible dreams of sovereignty and control. Automated luxury may sound more attractive, but is no less unattainable. In the face of the dreams of left and right alike, today, pessimists appear to be the ones with the problem, out of touch with the possibilities with which the present is pregnant. But in an age of authoritarian populism, these possibilities are seldom as they seem. Whilst some parts of the left read the coronavirus crisis as an epochal sign that free-market capitalism is crumbling, the actually-existing character of present political and economic possibilities appears as likely to vindicate the pessimists by inaugurating something even worse that expedites, rather than extinguishes, foregoing tendencies towards digital authoritarianism. This special issue is a contribution to the sorting through of the fruits of the contemporary left’s engagement over the wider question of work and capitalism in the digital age, and what, if anything, we might find in the ‘post-’ that we are told lies beyond them.

Notes

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