Review

Mason, P. (2015) *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future.* London: Penguin Books. 340 pages. Hardcover £9.54, Paperback £6.99.

Paul Mason is an interesting figure. UK's former Chancellor, George Osborne, recently described him as 'revolutionary Marxist' and compared him with Micky Mouse in a speech to the House of Commons[1]. Trying to read this positively, Mason is undoubtedly a very progressive and energetic figure on the left in the UK. At a time when journalists claim to be independent and value-free and are simultaneously unable to conduct proper and informative interviews with politicians due to their pseudo-critical and aggressive style[2], it is refreshing to see journalists like Paul Mason in the arena. He is able to conduct critical, investigative and in-depth journalism and has proven his ability for many years at the BBC and until recently as Economics Editor at Channel 4 News. In order 'to escape the constraints of impartiality rules governing broadcasters' and to engage more fully in the debates of the political left, Mason decided to leave Channel 4 News and now works as a freelance journalist[3]. Mason is quite active and well-known on the political left. He recently produced an independent documentary about the crisis in Greece (#ThisIsACoup)[4], hosts talks with people like Yanis Varoufakis in front of a massive audience[5], contributes to Labour's new economics series[6] and is followed by more than 400,000 people on Twitter. In short, Paul Mason is an important figure on the political left in the UK

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[1] George Osborne on Paul Mason: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lbcGo-B-6c (accessed on 18 August 2016)

[2] For example: Jeremy Corbyn: 'I wanted Hamas to be part of the debate': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOZZF5XCDBM (accessed on 18 August 2016)

[3] Paul Mason quits Channel 4 News: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/feb/26/paul-mason-quits-channel-4-news (accessed on 18 August 2016)

[4] #ThisIsACoup - documentary series: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLf_crfInZ12A4XTB8aPhB1jorD8OorB8g (accessed on 18 August 2016)

[5] Yanis Varoufakis: why Britain must stay in Europe: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=md6_WfF9Ky0 (accessed on 18 August 2016)

[6] The New Economics: http://www.labour.org.uk/blog/entry/the-new-economics (accessed on 18 August 2016)

who understands how to play the game within corporate media. It is precisely in this context that we should see his new book.

PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future was published in 2015 by Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, and with a price less than £10 it is meant for the mass market. It has been reviewed by many major newspapers in the UK including the Guardian[7], is among the bestsellers on Amazon and the author has been travelling across the country and abroad to give talks and promote his new book. As part of the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2015, he shared a stage with Alex Salmond, the former First Minister of Scotland, providing him the opportunity to talk about his new publication in a sold-out venue. After a lean period of some decades, it is inspiring to see books like *PostCapitalism* promoting important political demands such as the need for a basic income, public funding and capital tax that could help create a post-capitalist society, bringing the question of capitalism back into the political debate. On this political level, the book can be praised and highly recommended without any doubt as it does have the potential to reach out widely (and, indeed, has already done so).

But let's have a look at the scientific edge of this publication as well. I neither want to echo previous critical book reviews[8] nor to discuss every detailed aspect, but to focus on the book's core argument instead.

Mason's main point is that technologies, namely information technologies, have been brought forward which are not compatible with capitalism anymore, and thus post-capitalism is on its way:

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[7] PostCapitalism by Paul Mason review – a worthy successor to Marx?: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/15/post-capitalism-by-paul-mason-review-worthy-successor-to-marx (accessed on 18 August 2016)

[8] Henryk Grossmann 2.0: A Critique of Paul Mason's Book "PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future": http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/757/841 (accessed on 18 August 2016)

'But the technologies we've created are not compatible with capitalism – not in its present form and maybe not in any form. Once capitalism can no longer adapt to technological change, postcapitalism becomes necessary. When behaviours and organizations adapted to exploiting technological change appear spontaneously, postcapitalism becomes possible. That, in short, is the argument of this book: that capitalism is a complex, adaptive system which has reached the limits of its capacity to adapt.' (p.xiii)

Elsewhere (Allmer 2015), I argue for the need of a critical and dialectical view on technology that sees its development as both progressive and regressive, liberating and repressive, as potential and risk. It indicates different possibilities of technological dynamics between resignation and utopia. This view is neither techno-deterministic nor socio-constructivist, neither techno-optimistic nor techno-pessimistic (Dyer-Witheford 1999, p.71), and takes into consideration the design and assessment of technology.

Technological development in capitalism is a dynamic and contradictory process that creates potentials but also risks. The traditional idea of simply taking technology over from capitalism to socialism was already accentuated in orthodox Marxism. This ignores Marx's critical remarks on technology and implies productive forces need solely be liberated from capitalist relations of production (Feenberg 2002, p.45). Mason's idea is not that different.

Furthermore, Mason claims that 'information technology expels labour from production…, it will erode the link between labour and value altogether' (p.179). If we take a look at the global division of labour in the ICT industry, we can see that the realm of digital technologies is also related to handcraft and industrial labour that poses global social and ecological problems and rather reinforces the relationship between labour and value (Fuchs 2014; Dyer-Witheford 2015). Due to the imperialist character of digital capitalism, new inner colonies of exploitation are created: miners in Congo extracting minerals that are essential in the manufacture of a variety of electronic devices, assembly line workers at Foxconn with inhuman working

conditions, IT workers in the Indian software industry, call centre workers in Scotland, etc. Uber and Deliveroo are further examples of how well prepared capitalism is in driving exploitation forward smartly in the realm of digital and social media. Indeed, new information technologies entail potentials but also the risk of new forms of value creation and exploitation, and it depends on social struggles and class conflict which direction we are heading in. But this is a social, not a technological, question. Unlike Mason states, capitalism adapts well to the new technological age, and new technologies are highly compatible with digital capitalism. Mason underestimates the power of digital capitalism and digital labour, and idealises the development of digital technologies that results in a rather naive assessment of information technologies. It should be true hope, not banal optimism, that keeps a political project alive (Eagleton 2015).

References

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