



Full Marx

A CLUTCH of recent books and the associated media hype hail the end of capitalism – not through conscious struggle by those, us, the “many,” who have the most to gain from its end, but gradually, piecemeal and of its own accord.

Some of them come from the left and are well-intentioned.

A recent example is Fully Automated Luxury Communism – A Manifesto (FALC) by Aaron Bastani a self-proclaimed left-wing provocateur, co-founder of Novara Media and (since the publication of his book) a television personality.

Bastani declares (and wears a T-shirt proclaiming): “I am literally a communist” and staunchly defends the ideas of Marx and the principles of communism.

At the same time FALC presents the transition to a “post-capitalist” society as one not merely mediated but driven by technology which, if embraced, could replace scarcity (and production for profit) by superabundance.

Limitless solar energy will replace fossil fuels; cheap rockets built by 3D printers will supply abundant minerals mined from asteroids; intelligent automatons will do all the hard, dangerous and routine work; synthetic food production will eliminate polluting industrial agriculture; genetic engineering will eliminate disease and infirmity.

As a review in the current issue of Theory and Struggle, the journal of the Marx Memorial Library argues, beyond its rather breathless technomyopia, FALC’s major flaw is that the working class “appears in this account only as a vanishing class being written out of history, not for the first time.”

The Morning Star declared that FALC was “Hipster Marxism for millennials – without the Marx.”

FALC was preceded by another text along similar lines; Inventing the Future; postcapitalism and a world without work (ITF) by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams.

ITF situates itself as a “critique of today’s left” and asks “why aren’t we winning?”

One problem, they proclaim, is “folk politics” – “the fetishisation of local spaces, immediate actions, transient gestures, and particularisms of all kinds” typified by anti-war and anti-globalisation movements like Occupy and Extinction Rebellion.

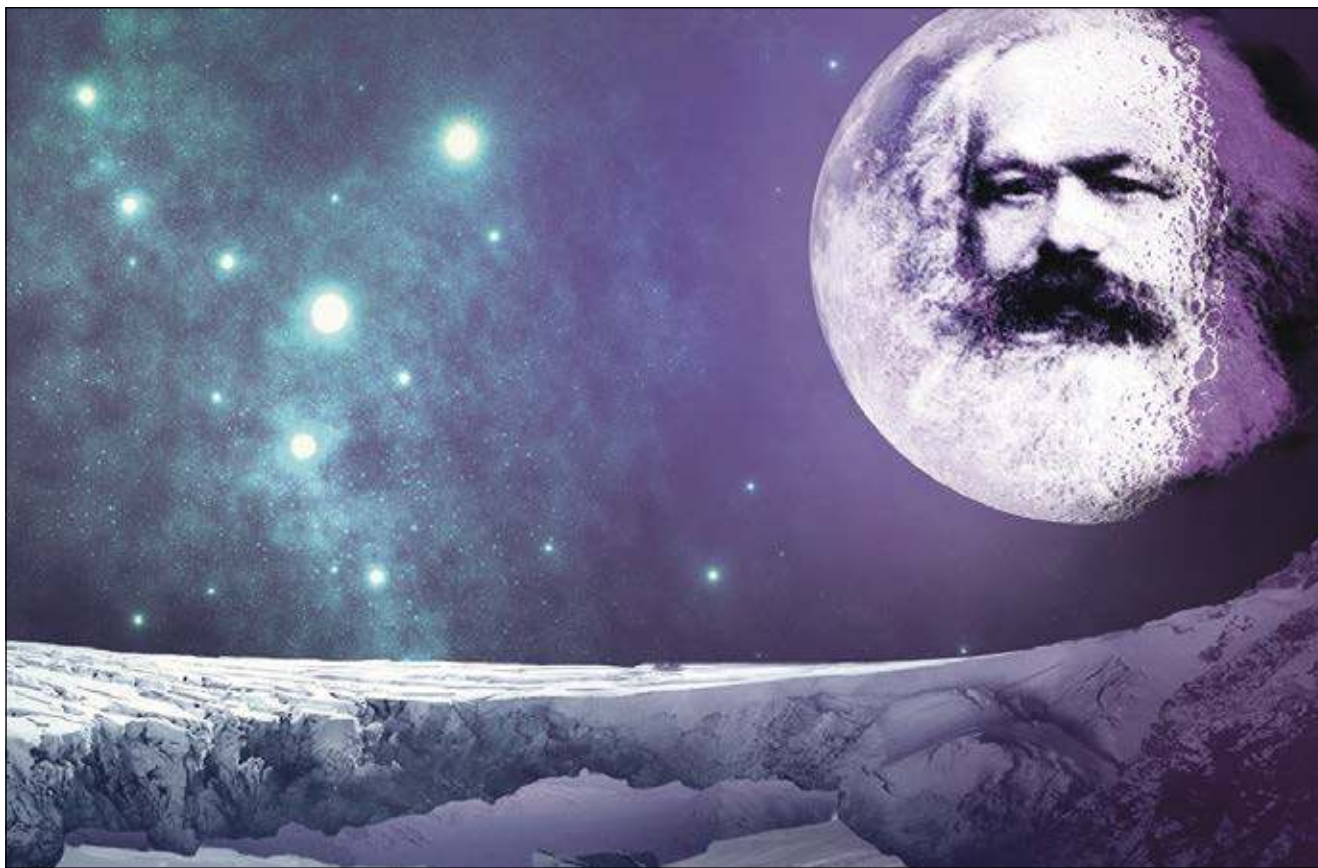
All are “bunkers,” they say, to resist the encroachments of global neoliberalism but “incapable of articulating or building a new world.”

What is needed is “an alternative vision” (ie their book) to realise the “utopian potentials inherent in 21st-century technology.”

Equally influential has been Paul Mason’s PostCapitalism:

What is ‘post-capitalism’?

It’s an empty phrase used by people who wish to bypass the necessity of struggle, says the **MARX MEMORIAL LIBRARY**



A Guide to our Future and his more recent Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being.

First culture and digital editor then economics editor of Channel 4 News, Mason was one of the first such to be allowed to blog and has since become perhaps the most prominent “serious” commentator on AI, a media personality and household name.

While recognising that information technology “changes everything,” Mason misinterprets Marx to argue that it renders exploitation obsolete.

Common to all of these – and to much media commentary – is that technology is presented as autonomous and essentially neutral.

Its social origins, particularly in relation to ownership and control, are ignored.

Exploitation creeps in but primarily as a historical relict, not as a fundamental contradiction to be addressed.

Marx is often invoked, particularly in relation to the technological dynamism of capitalism which becomes its own gravedigger, but in these interpretations not through the agency of class struggle.

Class is seen as something that – along with capitalism – will simply become irrelevant.

Srnicek and Williams declare: “Our choice is between glorifying work and the working class or abolishing them both.”

Mason concludes: “Without us noticing, we are entering the postcapitalist era.

“At the heart of further change to come is information technology, new ways of working and the sharing economy. The old ways will take a long while to disappear, but it’s time to be utopian.”

The argument is not particularly original.

Alvin Toffler was an associate editor of Fortune magazine. His Future Shock (1970) argued that industrial society was being rapidly superseded, with “information overload” resulting in individual and social disorientation.

It became a worldwide best-seller, selling over six million copies. It was followed by The Third Wave (1980, written with his wife Heidi) which extended the theme to include technological advances such as cloning, personal computers, the internet, cable television and mobile communication.

In parallel, Daniel Bell gave the concept of post-industrialism respectability with his 1974 book The Coming of Post-Industrial Society.

This argued that a shift (in employment and in the creation of wealth) from manufacturing to services was a feature central to capitalism, replacing old industrial capitalism and leading to new social stratifications based on access to information.

Bell was a serious sociologist, but no Marxist. His earlier book The End of Ideology (1960, subtitled On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties) claimed that humanistic ideologies derived from the 19th and early 20th centuries (including Marxism) had become irrelevant and that the future would be driven by piecemeal economic adjustments to new technological and social imperatives.

These early works were followed by a host of others. For example, the management consultant Peter Drucker’s influential book Post-Capitalist Society (1993) argued that knowledge, rather than manufacturing capital, labour or land, is the new basis of wealth.

The classes of a fully post-capitalist society, he said, would be divided into knowledge workers and service workers, in contrast to the capitalists and proletarians of a capitalist society.

Drucker estimated the trans-

formation to post-capitalism would be completed by 2020.

The reality is that under capitalism IT has created new ways of extracting profit, new arenas of control, entrenching exploitation in our everyday lives.

As an earlier answer has argued, financialisation – the global domination of finance capital – has given new meaning to Marx’s concept of “fictitious capital” as money itself – in the form of credit and debt – has become the world’s most traded commodity, generating profit that is increasingly divorced from the manufacture of physical commodities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly emphasised the importance of “service” workers – NHS staff, carers, teachers, warehouse, delivery and supermarket workers, cleaners... And many of those now “working from home” are indeed working in what Drucker would have called the “knowledge economy.”

But production of physical goods – from food to freezers – is as important as it ever was, and most of it is far from automated.

What has changed is that in deindustrialised Britain, much of it is produced in other countries and is dependent, like much of what is produced at

home, on low-paid, precarious or migrant labour.

Witness the appalling conditions producing iPhones in the factories of Foxconn, the world’s largest electronics manufacturer in Asia, Brazil and Mexico.

Or the recent appeal for 70,000 volunteers to pick Britain’s veg and fruit that will otherwise soon lie rotting in the fields.

Before the mid-1970s it used to be fashionable for critics of capitalism to speculate about what might replace it.

These included what Marx and Engels would have called “utopian” socialists – including those who saw the transition as achievable by appeals to “common sense” and others who saw the “mixed economy” of the post-war years as some form of intermediate stage which could gradually morph into something less exploitative.

Today with the collapse of that illusory dream, the key question is not “what” but “how” (the subject of other answers in this series).

So to answer the question “What is post-capitalism?” – it’s an empty phrase used by people who either believe or who want us to believe that, somehow, society has already transcended its “capitalist” stage, or that it will inevitably soon do so, without conscious action, without struggle.

High-tech hype is disabling and it serves the interests of globalised finance capital when, rather than emphasising the contrast between what is and what could be if technology were used for the benefit of the many rather than the few, it argues instead that we will all benefit, “automatically,” and it dismisses existing struggles as irrelevant.

Capitalism – the exploitation of the many by the few – can be ended but it won’t happen by itself.

Ending capitalism will require determined action by an organised working class – the majority of the people – to replace it with something better; socialism.

■ The Marx Memorial Library and Workers’ School journal Theory and Struggle is just out and is free to members – see www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/support. Previous Full Marx Q&A (this is number 66) can be found on www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/education/full-marx.