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Wiki Socialism?

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Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future

Paul Mason

Penguin Books, 2015

For a century and a half, Marxists have predicted that capitalism, by fostering growth and innovation, would sow the seeds of its own destruction. Could this finally be happening? According to Paul Mason, the author of *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, the answer may be yes. Mason argues that transcending capitalism has become a real possibility, rather than just a utopian dream. Although capitalism has proven immensely versatile throughout its history, it is now faced with new information technologies to which it can no longer adapt. These technologies erode the market's ability to function normally, challenge the very notion of intellectual property, and reduce the need to work long hours to achieve economic security. Information goods and technology, already thriving in the practices of the so-called "sharing economy," are the building blocks of Mason's vision of postcapitalism. To reduce the inequality and environmental destruction produced by the current system, Mason calls for rapidly expanding these new models, particularly the collaborative production of knowledge, goods, and services.

Through the lens of several key economic ideas, Mason analyzes the history of capitalism, the labor movement, and Soviet communism. Of particular importance in his analysis are Nikolai Kondratieff's wave theory (which posits a technological revolution about every fifty years that prompts a cycle of economic expansion, stagnation, and recession) and Karl Marx's theory of

crisis. *Postcapitalism* directly challenges the traditional left's assumption that a new system cannot be built from within the old, and that the only route to radical change is for workers to unite and overturn capitalism. In Mason's reading, the labor movement has long been more concerned with how to live with capitalism than how to overthrow it. And the past twenty-five years, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the turn toward neoliberal capitalism, have seen the collapse of the historical project of the left. What, then, remains?

Drawing on the work of contemporary economic theorists such as Yochai Benkler, author of the seminal text on social production *The Wealth of Networks*, Mason contends that rather than leading to a new form of "information capitalism," freely available and networked information is rapidly dissolving the market-based order by eroding property rights and enabling forms of collaborative production that undermine the market paradigm. When goods become "shareable," the economy is exposed to imperfect competition, and the laws of supply and demand no longer apply.

This analysis is compelling: Mason is right to point out that the sharing of information, goods, and knowledge through distributed networks will dramatically transform society. The proliferation of new forms of economic exchange based on the ethic and practice of sharing (as opposed to ownership and profit maximization) suggests that change is already afoot. Familiar examples include open-source software programs such as Wikipedia and Linux, as well as sharing economy platforms that facilitate reuse of excess goods—from apartments to drills—by renting them on a peer-to-peer basis or simply "freecycling" them. Gift economy initiatives, where people volunteer their time and skills to socially beneficial projects or undertake small acts of generosity such as "paying it forward," are also increasingly popular. Although these embryonic forms of largely technology-enabled collaboration are challenging core assumptions of neoliberalism, do they really herald the end of capitalism *per se*?

One should be skeptical. Mason is overly sanguine about the power of technology to drive the transition to postcapitalism. There is every reason to believe that corporate forces will continue to co-opt information technology and thwart progress towards a fundamentally different political-economic order.¹ We have seen such co-optation in the rise of Internet giants like Facebook, Google, and Ebay, which are just as prone to oligopolistic control as the big banks. Despite not

controlling the production of goods and information, they extract vast financial value from the peer-to-peer networks they enable. Advances in information technology have made new forms of sharing and collaboration possible, but that hardly guarantees the imminent demise of the capitalist system.

A Postcapitalist Framework

Although Mason ultimately complements the fairly long theoretical part of the book with concrete policy prescriptions, he fails to provide a clear strategy for achieving them. This is unfortunate in light of the refreshingly holistic scope of his framework for transformational change. His “Zero Project” envisions a world in which market forces no longer allocate resources, where many goods are produced at zero marginal cost and freely distributed, and where people work less in the traditional market economy while devoting more time to non-market activities such as the collaborative production of goods, knowledge, and culture.

Unlike many in the commons movement, Mason spells out the far-reaching and systemic governmental reforms needed to facilitate the transition to postcapitalism. The state, he explains, “has to act more like the staff of Wikipedia: to nurture the new economic forms to the point where they take off and operate organically.” Beyond promoting and supporting collaborative production, governments would assume the responsibility to “switch off the neoliberal privatization machine,” reshape markets to favor sustainable and socially just outcomes, coordinate and plan infrastructure projects such as social housing, and write off government debt through a carefully controlled ten- to fifteen-year global framework.

The alternative economic practices celebrated in *Postcapitalism* depend on a robust public sector. The universal provision of public goods such as health care and education would offer a foundation of economic security, and a universal basic income would separate work and wages, aiding the transition to a shorter workweek. Governments would also socialize the financial system to align investment with social purpose, and act as the public custodian of the entire energy infrastructure to help mitigate climate change. Given that many disillusioned new economy proponents regard any campaigns to democratize government as a lost cause, Mason’s emphasis on an enlarged and revitalized public sector is particularly welcome.

Towards a Great Transition?

Mason's framework does not conform to any one pre-existing ideology in its core premise that economic sharing not reliant on market forces will be central to a postcapitalist future, and it avoids the common pitfall of confining the scope of transition to small-scale socioeconomic alternatives involving only local engagement. However, despite this wide scope, the book fails to address broad questions of global governance, such as how the transition can ever take hold amidst geopolitical tensions that leave governments incapable of effective global cooperation.² There is no acknowledgement of the legally binding international agreements needed to facilitate a worldwide "contraction and convergence" to reduce environmental damage while promoting greater international equity, nor is there discussion of how governments could forge an international framework for sustainably managing and sharing the global commons.³

Moreover, the Zero Project's policy measures seem most relevant to rich industrialized nations. Indeed, they may prove impossible to implement in low-income countries where there is little prospect that governments can afford to provide comprehensive public services—let alone fund a universal basic income for their citizens. Nor is it clear how this program would end economic deprivation in the Global South, which should constitute a foremost priority at a time when 3.3 billion people live on less than \$5 per day—300 million more people than in 1981.⁴ The true measure of our humanity is the degree to which our economic systems protect the most vulnerable, not the extent of our technological advancement.

At the same time, Mason provides no path forward for the radical improvements he envisages becoming reality in the Global North, particularly given considerable political inertia, corporate influence, and public apathy that sustain the status quo. He seems to count on the disruptions of information technology to drive and sustain desirable change, but such technological determinism impoverishes the complexity of the vision, organization, and strategy central to any social revolution. Zero Project reforms are likely to remain impossible without the widespread support of an unprecedented movement of engaged global citizens. The insights the book provides certainly contribute to that collective project, but as a self-proclaimed guide to the future, *Postcapitalism* falls short.

Endnotes

1. Juliet Schor, "Debating the Sharing Economy," *Great Transition Initiative* (October 2014), <http://www.greattransition.org/publication/debating-the-sharing-economy>.
2. Paul Raskin et al, *Great Transition, The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* (Boston: Stockholm Environment Institute/Tellus Institute, 2002).
3. Justin Kitzes et al., "Shrink and Share: Humanity's Present and Future Ecological Footprint," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 363, no. 1491 (February 2008): 467-475.
4. According to the World Bank's PovcalNet website, 3.334 billion people lived below PPP \$5/day in 2012. See "Regional Aggregation Using 2011 PPP and \$1.9/day Poverty Line," PovcalNet, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/index.htm?1,0>.

About the Author



Rajesh Makwana is Executive Director at Share The World's Resources, a civil society organization campaigning for a fairer sharing of wealth, power, and resources within and between nations. He is a passionate advocate for applying the principle of sharing as a solution to a range of global crises, from poverty and inequality to climate change and conflict over land or natural resources. He has written numerous publications, chaired panel discussions, and promoted the concept of economic sharing in debates and presentations in the UK and overseas. STWR was founded in 2003 and granted Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 2009.

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