IS CAPITALISM A PROGRESSIVE SYSTEM?

Steven Pinker has written a book: “Enlightenment Now” (Penguin books, London 2018). He contends that the present social system is based on the expression of the principles of progress: “So for all the flaws in human nature, it contains the seeds of its own improvement, as long as it comes up with norms and institutions that channel parochial interests into universal benefits. Among these norms are free speech, nonviolence, cooperation, cosmopolitanism, human rights and an acknowledgement of human fallibility, and among the institutions are science, education, media, democratic government, international organisations and markets.” (p28) In other words the present system has the potential to express these aspects of the role of enlightenment values, or the connection of liberal values with a system of capitalist economy. Therefore, the major opposition to this development is the role of ideologies that express the rejection of the role of progress and enlightenment: “Left wing and right-wing political ideologies have themselves become secular religions, providing people with a community of like-minded brethren, a catechism of sacred beliefs, a well-populated demonology and a beatific confidence in the righteousness of their cause…political ideology undermines reason and science. It scrambles people’s judgement, inflames a primitive tribal mindset, and distracts from a sounder understanding of how to improve the world.” (p32) Thus it is being suggested that there cannot be a progressive expression of criticism of the present system which is defined in terms of the principles of enlightened reason. But such a conclusion would imply that it is assumed that the capitalism is inherently superior and so cannot be replaced by a superior social system. So, it is being suggested that the only alternatives to the present system that are being proposed is the justification of forms of society that are essentially a justification of a regression to a past era that has actually been replaced by the superiority of modernity. But the advocates of socialism do not have this type of justification of their perspective, and instead suggest that the progressive advantages of capitalism should be consolidated within the development of a superior type of system. But to Pinker the very character of criticism of capitalism is based on the rejection of the apparent advantages of progress in favour of a return to a mythical golden age. But this is not the basis of the approach of socialists. Instead, they suggest that the very advantages of the modern era of capitalism should be consolidated and developed in terms of the creation of a new progressive system. The point is that their very criticism of capitalism is that it is unable to realise in a consistent manner the potential of a new era of modernity. Instead, the limitation of the present system means that it is unable to consistently express the possibility of social and economic progress. But this type of criticism is not acknowledged by Pinker who instead considers that the very aspect of criticism is based on the rejection of the advances of a situation of modernity: “It is the idea of progress that rankles the chattering class – the Enlightenment belief that by understanding the world we can improve the human condition.”(p39) But contrary to this dogmatic view it is the very attempt to try and obtain knowledge of society that is the basis of the politics of the progressive critics of the present social system. But to Pinker this approach is dismissed as unimportant because he wants to define all opposition to the present social system as being irrational and reactionary. Therefore, he cannot accept that many critics of capitalism want to maintain the progress of the present social system within the development of a higher type of society that is more egalitarian and progressive. But Pinker considers that most criticism of capitalism is an expression of scepticism about the possibilities of progress. He cannot consider that it is possible to combine an understanding of the progress of modernity with a critical evaluation of contemporary society that results in the advocacy of a social alternative. Instead, he can only connect the progress made within present society on issues such as famine and life expectancy with the role of the present capitalist character of the economy.

However, his most important argument is that the role of economic progress has led to increasingly generalised wealth within most contemporary societies. The assumption being made is that the very development of increasing economic efficiency and levels of productivity creates a situation of the overcoming of the problems of poverty and want. It is suggested that the major reason for this progress is the demise of the inefficient and authoritarian communist systems: “For…. market economies can generate wealth prodigiously while totalitarian planned economies impose scarcity, stagnation, and often famine. Market economies, in addition to reaping the benefits of specialization and providing incentives for produce things that other people want, solve the problems of coordinating the efforts of hundred of millions of people by using prices to propagate information about need and availability far and wide, a computational problem that no planner is brilliant enough to solve from a central bureau. A shift from collectivisation, centralised control, government monopolies…to open economies took place on a number of fronts beginning in the 1980’s. They included…. embrace of capitalism in China, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its domination of Eastern Europe, and the liberalisation of the economies of India, Vietnam, and other countries.” (p90) But this process of change was based on the replacement of authoritarian elitism of Stalinism with capitalism. This situation did not express the limitations of a genuine form of socialism but instead the expression of the limitations of the domination of a nationalised economy by a party elite. Therefore, these developments did not represent a progressive and egalitarian capitalism but instead indicated the attempt of various political elites to maintain economic domination of their societies. In this context the aspirations of the people were not a factor in the process of change but instead the motive of the self-interest of various elites to consolidate control over society was the expression of a situation of the social changes that occurred. In this context the lack of trade union organisation of the working class actually meant that the material conditions of the workers were undermined. Thus, the character of the process of economic change was based on the creation of the domination of a new capitalist class. Only the development of the success of the collective struggles of the workers would realise the possibility of changes that could be of material benefit for the producers.

In other words, the assumption being made that capitalism is a system of inherent economic progress for the people is questionable and this view is based on the imposition of an ideological viewpoint onto the complexity of society. But Pinker contends that it is possible that inequality within society can occur and yet people in general also become more prosperous because of the essential dynamic and efficient character of the capitalist economy. This development would seem to undermine the credibility of the alternative view that socialism could be a progressive alternative to the inequalities generated by the role of a capitalist economic system. But surely the important issue is that the lack of control of the producers over the economy means that it is possible for the capitalist class and conservative type governments to impose regimes of austerity on the people that effectively reduce the material situation of the majority of the people. Indeed, it could be suggested that this is the result of an austerity regime of the last thirty years. Hence there is no inherent dynamic for the capitalist system to improve the material situation of the people and instead their economic welfare depends on the overall prospects of the economy. In this connection only the collective role of organisations like the trade unions can ensure that the material situation of the workers is not continually undermined. But Pinker seems to deny the importance of this aspect and instead suggests that there is an inherent benevolence of the role of governments of modern capitalist societies to increase expenditure in order to undermine the importance of poverty and inequality. Indeed, he would suggest that despite the situation of austerity the various western governments are generally committed to the realisation of the material welfare of the people. In other words, his argument is that despite the problems created by economic recession the resulting role of austerity has not meant an end to an attempt to improve the material welfare of the majority of the people. Hence it is being suggested that important economic problems have not led to an undermining of the material standards of the majority of the people in western societies. But surely this empirical viewpoint ignores the importance of the lack of economic and social power of the workers. The most important fact is that labour is unable to establish increasing influence within the economy which would enable it to establish its objectives as the basis of economic activity. Instead, the important point is that capital has the dominant ability to be able to define the priorities of the mode of production and so the role of labour is to accept this situation in terms of this subordinated role. This means that in periods of austerity the capitalist class is able to effectively reduce the level of affluence of the workers. The important aspect is the domination of capital over labour which enables the bourgeois class to be able to impose its interests onto the workers. Only the success of mass struggle will enable this situation to be changed.

But Pinker does not recognise the possible problems of the inequality connected with the role of the capitalist system. He comments: “Inequality is not the same as poverty, and it is not a fundamental dimension of human flourishing. In comparisons of well-being across countries, it pales in importance next to overall wealth. An increase in inequality is not necessarily bad: as societies escape from universal poverty, they are bound to become more unequal, and the uneven surge may be repeated when a society discovers new sources of wealth. Nor is a decrease in inequality always good: the most effective levellers of economic disparities are epidemics, massive wars, violent revolutions and state collapse.” (p120) In other words the dynamic of the possibility for economic equality is a form of political change that can be destabilising for society and so result in social problems that contrast with the general equilibrium of most capitalist based regimes that are able to combine political stability with social inequality. In other words, the discontent of the people results in political upheaval that is not conducive to progress and political stability and so it would seem that they instead benefit by the cohesion of capitalism despite its expression of inequality. But this viewpoint would suggest that capitalism is a superior system despite its generation of economic and political inequality because of its tendency for stability. The aspect of efficiency would seem to undermine the credibility of the reasons that could justify radical change. However, it could be argued that this very expression of social and economic inequality continues to facilitate the possibility of the development of popular discontent within society. Only the possibility of the improvement of the material standards of the people would seem to undermine the development of this potential dynamic for the expression of the objective of social change. However, the very crisis of capitalism, which is expressed by the policy of austerity, would seem to undermine the expression of this possibility of continual social and economic progress. Hence the result is the consolidation of a situation of inequality which can generate the expression of a potential for social change in order to resolve this aspect in an egalitarian manner. The point is that capitalism only seems to be a credible system when it is able to create the conditions for economic and social progress. But the very imposition of the era of austerity would seem to undermine the validity of this perspective. Indeed, Pinker can only attempt to deny the validity of this criticism of capitalism by suggesting that the material situation of the people has continued to improve despite the imposition of austerity. In other words, his approach is based on the dogmatic contention that capitalism is a system that has an inherent tendency to continue to improve the material situation of the people. Therefore, he has to try and justify the contentious claim that the economic conditions of the workers generally continue to improve despite the situation of austerity. But such a standpoint can only be justified in terms of the vague and dogmatic contention that capitalism is an inherently efficient system and so is able to realise the continual progress of the material situation of the producers. This viewpoint seems to ignore the importance of the situation of the class struggle which is surely the most significant aspect that explains the material conditions of the workers. In this context it is questionable whether the workers have made economic progress in the era of austerity because this has represented the onset of the imposition of the aims of capital at the expense of the interests of labour. In this context important aspects of the economic gains made by labour in the period 1945-90 have been undermined by the situation of the victory in the class struggle of the forces of capital. But this type of analysis is what is not elaborated by Pinker.

Instead he outlines a complex situation in which increasing affluence has occurred alongside the development of economic inequality: “As globalization and technology have lifted billions out of poverty and created a global middle class, international and global inequality have decreased, at the same time that they enrich elites, whose analytical, creative or financial impact has global reach. The fortunes of the lower classes in developed countries have not improved nearly as much, but they have improved, often because their members rise into the upper classes. The improvements are enhanced by social spending, and by the falling cost and rising quality of the things people want. In some ways the world has become less equal, but in more ways the world’s people have become better off.” (p120) But is this situation the result of the presumed progressive logic of the capitalist system to provide increasing material goods for society, or is it because the workers have been able to organise in an effective manner in order to obtain concessions from the economic and social system? Indeed, it could be argued that the very importance of the prolonged era of austerity has resulted in the undermining of the credibility of the view that the capitalist system is able to achieve consistent material progress for society and as a result the situation is that of increased poverty and inequality. In other words, it was the success of the workers in the class struggle which enabled material progress to be made rather than because of any expression of an inherent benevolent character of capitalism. Thus, the onset of austerity has led to increased unemployment and poverty for the people and the aim of a consistent generation of affluence has seemed to have become increasingly unrealistic. In this context it could be suggested that only with the realisation of a socialist alternative can the economic conditions be created that could facilitate the development of a situation of genuine prosperity. Therefore, the capitalist system continues not because of the expression of an inherent tendency towards the realisation of genuine prosperity for society but instead because of the success of the forces of capital in the class struggle. The major material gains of the workers were realised in a pervious era of sustained boom before the 1980’s and since that era the defensive position of the trade unions has meant that these economic advances have been increasingly undermined. Instead, the workers are struggling to maintain the gains of the period before 1980 and therefore the situation is increasingly characterised by the economics of austerity. In other words, the declining influence of the workers within the economy has led to increasing importance of poverty and the result is an end to the situation of increasing affluence. Hence the only basis to oppose a situation of generalised poverty is the fact that the capitalist system needs a situation of limited affluence of the workers in order to maintain the market for consumer goods. But this development of the economics of austerity is an indication that the most effective manner in which the workers could achieve an improvement in their material situation is by the successful attainment of a socialist alternative in which they would be able to establish economic priorities such as the creation of cheap goods that would be able to meet their needs. But Pinker is indifferent to this argument because he can only envisage the role of capitalism and so he implies that what he considers to be an era of austerity will ultimately be replaced by a situation of prosperity. In other words, his dogmatic support for capitalism means that he can only consider that this economic system is the credible basis to ultimately sustain the possibility of increased prosperity. However, he has to concede that this development is an uneven and often problematical aspect of capitalism and therefore he can only vaguely hope that the continuation of capitalism will increase the prosperity of the people in generalised terms. But this perspective is qualified by the knowledge that the economic situation has often been influenced by periods of austerity. What he cannot concede is that the most effective manner in which the workers can improve their material situation is by the role of collective actions such as expressed by the militancy of trade unions. Instead, he has to vaguely suggest that capitalism has an inherent tendency to improve the material situation of the people. But such a conclusion is not based on a credible historical analysis and is instead established by the view that capitalism is a superior system that will ultimately realise the material improvement of the members of society. However, we would suggest that it is not the automatic expression of capitalism that leads to mass affluence but instead this possibility is connected to the success of the collective organisation of the workers which is often combined with the role of reformist governments based on the popular support of the people.

In other words, it is the role of class struggle which primarily explains the development of the affluence of the workers within capitalist society. There is not an inherent economic dynamic that results in popular affluence. Instead, it has been the increased influence of the workers within post-war capitalist society that has led to the possibility to achieve material advances. Hence in countries with weak trade unions, and the lack of an effective social democratic or communist party, these developments have often not been realised. In the third world countries where there are often weak trade unions and the lack of an effective social democratic or communist party, the result of this situation is the lack of generalised affluence. Instead, the capitalist class is able to impose its domination by means of an authoritarian regime. This has meant the lack of the introduction of economic reforms that could result in the improvement of the situation of the people. Therefore, the capitalist class in these countries is dominant because of authoritarian political structures. Only the success of class struggle can transform the material situation in favour of the interests of the workers. In the major capitalist countries, the situation has often been improved by the role of reformist governments and the related aspect of a balance of class forces that is often in the interests of the workers. Therefore, this means that there is no progressive dynamic that can result in the generation of increased prosperity for the people. Instead, only the success of mass struggle and the connected increased influence of the workers can ensure that the situation is favourable to the introduction of measures that can result in increased material prosperity for society. In contrast Pinker is suggesting that the economic efficiency of capitalism can result in the realisation of prosperity. Indeed, he would contend that the era of austerity has not undermined the credibility of this view and that the people are still often prosperous in this unfavourable situation. It is being suggested that the dynamic aspects of capitalism make this situation feasible and that the efficiency of the system makes the capitalists willing to accept the possibility of increases of wages for their workers. But we would suggest that this development is not an automatic aspect of capitalism and is instead the result of the level of effectiveness of the collective actions of the workers. It is the important role of the trade unions which has led to the possibility to improve the material standards of the producers. But in the period of austerity the offensive of capital against the economic interests of the workers has often led to decreases in the level of wages. Such a situation is an indication that it is the aspect of the balance of class forces which pragmatically decides whether the workers are able to make material advances. There is nothing automatic that suggests a constant rise in the level of the wages of the workers. Instead, the balance of class forces is the most important aspect that decides the level of prosperity of the producers. Hence there is nothing inherently benevolent or progressive about capitalism with regards to the material interests of the workers. Instead, it is the aspect of the balance of class forces which defines the level of wages. If capital is able to go onto a successful offensive against the interests of the worker’s, it is quite possible that low levels of wages can be generally established. Only the effectiveness of the struggles of the workers can ensure that high wages can be realised. In other words, the events of the class struggle decide the level of prosperity of the workers within capitalism. There is no automatic aspect that means that material prosperity is constantly generated by the economic effectiveness of capitalism. Instead, it is generally the collective success of the workers that determines the level of their wages. This point has been proved by the fact that the effective offensive of the supporters of capital against the interests of the workers has led to ensuring that wages remain low despite a situation of inflation. It is only the success of the collective action of the workers that can ensure that they are able to obtain a situation of increased prosperity within the capitalist system. Therefore, the success of the offensive of capital since the 1980’s has generally ensured that the wages of the workers remain low. The aspect of austerity dictates the necessity for capital to act in order to lower the level of the renumeration of the workers within the economic system. In this context the period of improving prosperity has generally been an expression of the boom of capitalism between 1945-80.

In other words, the development of a situation of austerity has been because of the success of the offensive of the supporters of capital against the interests of the workers. This situation has resulted in a changing balance of forces in favour of capital and against the influence of the working class. It has been possible to ideologically justify this development not in terms of the influence of ideas but instead because of a pragmatic acceptance of what seems to be an inevitable expression of the aspect of the domination of capital within society. But Pinker does not tackle the aspects of this development in a satisfactory manner because he effectively ignores the role of class struggle within society. Hence, he does not establish the importance of the attempt of the supporters of capital to change the balance of class forces against the interests of labour, and instead suggests that this type of system is inherently in the interests of all the people within contemporary society. This means that it is possible that both inequality and prosperity can be an aspect of the character of capitalism: “As globalization and technology have lifted billions out of poverty and created a global middle class, international and global inequality have decreased, at the same time that they enrich elites whose analytical, creative or financial impact has global reach. The fortunes of the lower classes in developed countries have not improved nearly so much, but they have improved, often because their members rise into the upper classes. The improvements are enhanced by social spending, and by the falling cost and rising quality of things that people want. In some ways the world has become less equal, but in more ways the world’s population has become better off.” (p120) But the problem with this conclusion is that it ignores the importance of the fact that this situation is based on the domination of capital within the economy, which means that the workers lack the possibility to be able to influence the character of society. Hence any development of material improvement does not tackle the issue of the lack of economic and social power that would enable the workers to be able to influence the character of the economy and society in general. Instead, the role of capital remains dominant, and this means that the economy is organised in terms of these interests, and so the aspirations of the workers can only be realised in limited terms. There is still no alternative than to strive to realise the ascendency of the working class if a different type of society that is more egalitarian and progressive is to be established. In contrast Pinker considers that capitalism is ultimately a benevolent type of economic system that is conducive to realising the material aspirations of the majority of the people. However, the era of austerity would seem to challenge this perspective and instead the material interests of the workers have been undermined in order to uphold the domination of capital. In this context the alternative of socialism would seem to be a more effective basis to establish the material improvement of the majority of the people. However, instead of this approach Pinker uncritically assumes that capitalism has a character that makes it conducive to the realisation of the material aspirations of society, but we would challenge this assumption and suggest that this conclusion has only been credible for the period 1945-80. After this period capitalism has increasingly been characterised by austerity and the related undermining of the material situation of the majority of the people within society. The result of this development has been the redevelopment of class struggle and the domination of capital has only been maintained by the ability of reactionary governments to be able to undermine the importance of the collective strength of the workers. Therefore if the prosperity of society is to become realised it could be suggested that Pinker’s equation of this aspect with the role of capitalism is questionable and instead it could be considered that the alternative of democratic socialism may be a more effective possibility to realise this aim. In other words, Pinker considers that despite the importance of austerity the material standards of the people continue to increase is a questionable view that is based on dogmatic support for capitalism. However, he does accept that in certain circumstances capitalism is not able to overcome the problem of poverty, but he also inconsistently suggests that in general this economic system is able to improve the material standards of the people despite a situation of inequality.

Pinker accepts that the issue of ecology represents an important challenge for modern society. But he comments that progress has been made: “The fact that many measures of environmental quality are improving does not mean that everything is OK, that the environment got better by itself, or that we can sit back and relax. For the cleaner environment we enjoy today we must thank the arguments, activism, legislation, regulations, treaties, and technological ingenuity of the people who sought to improve it in the past. We need more of each to sustain the progress we’ve made, prevent reversals, and extend it to the …. problems that still face us, such as the health of the oceans and …..atmospheric gases.” (134) He rejects what he considers to be the ecological approach of a pessimistic view of humanity and instead considers that ecological progress has been made and that further improvements are also possible. In other words, the relationship of the capitalist system to environmental objectives can be of a compatible nature, but that it still requires the role of activism in order to ensure that the aims of the green movement are consistently realised. Hence, he comments that it is possible to reconcile the objectives of environmental activism with the interests of the development of capitalism: “Despite a half-century of panic, humanity is not on an irrevocable path to ecological suicide. The fear of resource shortage is misconceived. So is the misanthropic environmentalism that sees modern humans as vile despoilers of a pristine planet. An enlightened environmentalism recognizes that humans need to use energy to lift themselves out of the poverty to which entropy and evolution consign them. It seeks the means to do so with the least harm to the planet and the living world. History suggests that this modern, pragmatic, and humanistic environmentalism can work. As the world gets richer and more tech savvy, it dematerialises, decarbonizes, and densifies, sparing land and species. As people get richer and better educated, they care more about the environment, figure out ways to protect it, and are better able to pay the costs.” (p154) But this optimistic approach would seem to deny the priority that is given to the objective of making profits rather than the realisation of the interests of ecology. Hence it would seem that the most convincing attempt to achieve the aims of green objectives is to strive to achieve an economic and social system in which the objectives of accumulation are not the priority.

But instead of this perspective Pinker considers that the capitalist system can generate important dynamics for improving the ecological situation: “We cannot be complacently optimistic about climate change, but we can be conditionally optimistic. We have some practicable ways to prevent the harms and we have the means to learn more. Problems are solvable. That does not mean that they will solve themselves, but it does mean that we can solve them if we sustain the benevolent forces of modernity that have allowed us to solve problems so far, including societal prosperity, wisely regulated markets, international governance, and investments in science and technology.”(p154-155) In other words it is assumed that capitalism is a inherently rational and progressive system that is capable of tackling important problems like the ecological situation. Hence the application of political pressure can express the aspect of ensuring that governments tackle the issues of the environment in an effective manner. Thus it is being suggested that the capitalist system is essentially compatible with the attempt to realise environmental objectives, but this understanding does not seem to accept the importance of the apparent fact that the supporters of capitalism give a priority to the aim of profit above the importance of the objective of ecological aims. There would still seem to be a contradiction between the interests of the environment when contrasted with the aims of capital accumulation. But this issue does not seem to be tackled by Pinker who instead essentially asserts the compatibility of the interests of capitalism with ecological objectives. But we would suggest that it is only with the establishment of a different social system will it be possibility to consistent realise environmental aims because they are an inherent aspect of the type of society being developed.

Pinker also contends that there has been the increasing rejection of the role of military conflict as the basis to achieve political and national objectives. But what he does not establish is that this situation has become durable or is instead an episodic aspect of a temporary political situation. Indeed the increasing number of conflicts in the recent period would seem to suggest that his evaluation of the situation is premature. He comments: “Also, as countries become richer, they become less vulnerable to civil war. Their governments can afford to provide services like health care, education, and policing and thus outcompete rebels for the allegiance of their citizens, and they can regain control of the frontier regions that warlords, mafias and guerrillas (often the same people) stake out…..That helps explain the shrinking geography of war, with most regions of the world at peace.”(p164) But this conclusion seems to be premature given the increasing frequency of conflicts in the recent period. This means that the assessment of Pinker seems to be optimistic when he considers that: “In fact war may be just another obstacle an enlightened species learns to overcome, like pestilence, hunger and poverty. Though conquest may be tempting over the short term, its ultimately better to figure out how to get what you want without the costs of destructive conflict and the inherent hazards of living by the sword, namely that if you are a menace to others you have given them an incentive to destroy you first. Over the long run, a world in which all parties refrain from war is better for everyone. Inventions such as trade, democracy, economic development, peacekeeping forces, and international law and norms are tools that help build the world.” (p166) Such an analysis would seem to be one-sided given the increasing frequency of conflict in the recent period and the fact that various ruling elites consider that war is still a credible option in order to uphold political domination. Hence the aspiration for peace that most people have can still contradict the interests of the process of generating increased economic and political power by the utilisation of the role of military conflict. Hence the most effective manner by which international peace can be established is to realise the development of a system of progressive regimes that no longer consider the role of military conflict as being a credible aspect of the expression of their interests. Instead, Pinker assumes that under the present system of capitalism a progressive dynamic leading to the increasing establishment of peace is being generated. But we would question the credibility of this perspective and instead suggest that there are important economic and political reasons why military conflict can develop between rival nation states.

In other words, we would suggest that it is the very role of what are often rival nations can result in the possibility of political tensions becoming expressed in the development of military conflict. It is necessary to create a genuinely progressive international economic and political system if this problem is to be convincingly resolved. But how can this development occur if the situation is defined by what are rival capitalist countries which can be capable of translating economic and political rivalry into military conflict? The assumption being made by Pinker is that war is a declining aspect of an increasingly stable international system, and so the assumption is being made that the objective of economic progress means that there is an incentive for countries to attempt to realise relations based on the aims of international peace. But this conclusion is still without a credible basis of truth given the apparent possibility for political tensions to become expressed in military terms. It could be argued that these developments have regional and specific reasons for their development and that tensions between the major countries are not likely to occur. However, the point is that the very competitive character of capitalism means that the aspect of economic tensions can become expressed in aspects of political rivalry that has military possibilities. In other words, capitalism is an economic and political system that is not able to overcome the problem of potential military conflict. Only the realisation of an international socialist system can resolve this issue. But Pinker has to reject this perspective given his support for capitalism and instead insist in a biased manner that international conflicts are diminishing within the present system. This would seem to deny the importance of the present tensions between Russia and America and the aspect of many regional conflicts. Therefore his conclusion that capitalism is a system that is progressively realising international peace seems to be an assessment that is not based on a genuinely thoughtful understanding of the situation.

But Pinker’s standpoint seems to be more credible when he considers the apparent advantages of democratic systems: “One can think of democracy as a form of government that threads the needle, exerting just enough force to prevent people from praying on each other without preying on the people itself. A good democratic government allows people to pursue their lives in safety, protected from the violence of anarchy, and in freedom, protected from the violence of tyranny. For that reason alone, democracy is a major contributor to human flourishing. But it is not the only reason: democracies also have higher rates of economic growth, fewer wars and genocides, healthier and better educated citizens, and virtually no famines. If the world has become more democratic over time, that is progress.” (p199-200) But the point is that this development is not necessarily an inherent aspect of the capitalist system and instead democratic advances have been obtained by the political pressures of workers and women. It has been political struggle which led to the progress of democratic type systems. But these developments have been ignored by recent intellectuals who tend to equate the importance of popular struggles as merely being an aspect of the inevitable development of democracy in the context of the role of capitalism. Hence it is being suggested by Pinker and these other intellectuals that what is of primary significance for the increasing role of popular forms of democracy is the connection of this aspect to capitalism. But the most ardent supporters of the aim of popular forms of democracy were often motivated by aim of establishing a socialist type of society. They considered that the opposition of elites to the importance of democracy was based on a defence of the interests of capitalism. Indeed, the anti-capitalist character of the Paris Commune was connected to the application of new forms of popular democracy. Hence it seemed that the very principles of democracy were connected to the aim of establishing the socialist alternative to capitalism. Only the increasing success of the bourgeois establishment parties in the electoral process led to a reluctant support for the democratic voting system by the traditional conservative type organisations. In this context it seemed that democracy could be utilised in a manner in order to undermine the credibility of the role of the socialist inspired parties. Indeed, democracy could become the basis to establish the importance of bourgeois parties who could utilise the role of the political process in order to suggest that they had genuine political support for the implementation of measures in order to defend the capitalist system. Furthermore, the reformist parties of the workers suggested that the democratic system represented a political alternative to a strategy of revolutionary change. In this context it was often difficult for Marxist parties to suggest that a popular form of democracy was a genuine alternative to the role of the actual political system which seemed to be based on the application of democratic principles. The minority support for the Marxist groups indicated that the expression of democracy did not indicate that they had a popular basis for the promotion of the aim of establishing socialism. Instead, the role of democracy seemed to be an indication of the popular character of the defenders of capitalism rather than the adherents of socialist change. This situation seems to have become durable and is an apparent indicator of the stability of capitalism. Pinker does not address these issues because he is instead content to merely indicate the democratic role of the capitalist system. In this context to him the alternative is between a democratic form of capitalism when contrasted to a possible authoritarian prospect. But we would suggest that there is also another alternative based on the role of popular mass struggle which can facilitate the potential to realise a democratic type of socialism. This development would be superior to the democracy of a capitalist system because it would be based on the expression of the popular role of the people and the expression of their role in creating an economic and political system that expressed their interests. But Pinker effectively rejects this alternative because he can only consider that the credible political options as being either a democratic form of the capitalist system or its authoritarian variant.

In general terms Pinker considers capitalism to be a system that is generally generating increased affluence for the people: “The poor may not always be with us. The world is about a hundred times wealthier today than it was two centuries ago, and the prosperity is becoming more evenly distributed across the world’s countries and people. The proportion of humanity living in extreme poverty has fallen from almost 90 percent to less than ten percent…Catastrophic famine, never far away in most of human history, has vanished in most of the world, and undernourishment and stunting are in steep decline. A century ago, richer countries devoted one percent of their wealth to supporting children, the poor, and the aged; today they spend almost a quarter of it. Most of the poor today are fed, clothed and sheltered and have luxuries like smartphones and air-conditioning that used to be unavailable to anyone, rich or poor. Poverty among the racial minorities has fallen, and poverty among the elderly has plunged.” (p322) But the point is that this progress has occurred within the situation of the continuation of the capitalist system which means that the forces of labour remain subordinate within the economy. The basic antagonism between capital and workers has not been resolved and instead people still have to produce in order to produce profits for companies that are dominated by the role of entrepreneurs. Therefore, the situation is characterised by the domination of capital within society and so the forces of labour are still having to tackle the issues created by this situation of their lack of economic and social power. The development of increased affluence has not resolved the continuing issue of the subordination of labour to capital and so this means that the workers will only achieve a situation of genuine liberation in terms of the transformation of the character of the social and economic system. However, it is being suggested by Pinker that the increased affluence of the workers has essentially resolved the issues created by the domination of capital within society and so in this manner it has become possible to reconcile what has been the different and distinct interests of the workers and capitalists. It is being suggested that the increased affluence of people means that they have been able to acquire enhanced economic and social power. But this situation has not ended the issues generated by the continuation of the domination of capital over labour. Increased prosperity has only modified but not ended the tensions that have been created by the supremacy of the capitalist system. It is the contention of Pinker that technological progress can be expressed in the increased affluence of society and that this situation is connected to the importance of education which enables an articulate population to be able to resolve any outstanding economic and cultural problems. Therefore, it is being suggested that only the influence of dogmatic right or left-wing forms of populism can undermine the continuation of the progress being made by dynamic and increasingly egalitarian societies.

But if society is generally improving why would people want to undermine this situation by supporting regressive and reactionary ideologies? The point is that there is discontent within society that can take right wing populist forms because people consider that the economic and technological changes that have occurred in the recent period do not benefit them and so they often have nostalgia about previous forms of society. In this context can the standpoint of an appeal to the apparent progress made in the context of capitalist modernity seem convincing given that it is these very developments which seem to have resulted in social problems? Pinker suggests that both left wing and right-wing forms of populism appeal to the apparent superiority of the past. They uphold the virtues of traditional principles and deny the validity of change and progress. Hence it is being suggested that socialism and conservatism are united by a dislike of the role of modernity and change and instead appeal to a conception of the past which they effectively want to restore. This standpoint may seem to explain right wing populism, but it could be argued that it does not explain the character of genuine left-wing views. A principled and left-wing form of politics is based on confidence that the potential of the present can be realised in the creation of a different form of society that is based on equality and the participation of the people in the organisation of the economy and political system. In other words, a radical approach is not based on a sentimental nostalgia for the return to a past, but instead has confidence that a different future can be realised that is able to establish the potential of the present for the attainment of a new type of society. Hence the left-wing approach is based on the justification that the potential of the present can be realised by the successful attainment of economic and political changes that overcome the limitations of the capitalist system. In other words, the justification of a capitalist conception of modernity is being challenged by the advocacy of a different type of society that is able to achieve the potential of the present in a more effective and emancipatory manner. Hence it would be a contradictory approach for socialists to be nostalgic about the past or present and instead they have a confidence that the potential of the capitalist system can be realised in terms of the attainment of a different future in the form of a socialist society. But this orientation to the future is rejected by Pinker who instead considers that a left wing approach represents a type of populism in which the very aim of progress is being rejected: “As for progress, forget about it: populism looks backward to an age in which the nation was ethnically homogenous, orthodox cultural and religious values prevailed, and economies were powered by farming and manufacturing, which produced tangible goods for local consumption and export.”(p334) But it could be argued that this understanding of left-wing populism is a caricature that is unable to explain its general justification of an alternative conception of modernity. The left-wing approach is not based on an appeal to the role of a traditional nation but is instead an expression of the genuinely progressive aim of the creation of a different type of international social system. In other words, the principled character of left-wing radicalism is based on the emphasis on the role of popular forms of solidarity for being able to create an alternative to the domination of global capital. This means that any tendency for support of nationalism has to become replaced with a conception of how to achieve a new global system based on the values of socialism. In this context the approach of nationalism would be considered to be an unprincipled acceptance of the continued domination of global capitalism. Instead it becomes understood that the aims of anti-capitalism are connected to the aspiration to create a new type of international social system. This approach does not mean the denial of the importance of national forms of mass struggle, but this very aspect has to be subordinated to the primary aim of how to overcome the domination of global capital and replace it with a new internationally defined socialist society. In this context any concession to global capitalism would mean an unprincipled acceptance of the continuation of this system. It becomes understood that nationalism is not an adequate perspective for the promotion of the possibility of the overcoming of the domination of global capital. Only an internationalist perspective is equal to the tasks posed by the aspect of the role of the domination of global capitalism. In this manner a left-wing approach has to reject populism in both its left wing and right-wing variants. Instead, it has to uphold a principled and intransigent revolutionary approach that does not make opportunist concessions to a populist standpoint. In other words, the major problem with populism is that it cannot express a genuine perspective of revolutionary change and the basis to overcome the domination of capitalism. Instead, it ultimately is based on an acceptance of capitalism and is merely an opportunist form of political rebellion against the present system. Hence the revolutionary standpoint has to reject the utopianism and opportunism of populism and instead elaborate a more principled perspective of how the capitalism system is to be ended. This means that populism is a problem rather than an expression of the potential to overcome the domination of global capitalism. In this context the actual aim is to replace the influence of populism with what is a more principled and consistent conception of a revolutionary strategy for social change.

It is argued by Pinker that the contemporary capitalist system is effectively challenging the issue of poverty and inequality and there has been a serious attempt to tackle issues about the environment which is considered to be the most outstanding problem of the present era: “As societies have become healthier, wealthier, freer, happier, and better educated, they have set their sights on the most pressing challenges. They have emitted fewer pollutants cleared fewer forests, spilled less oil, set aside more preserves, extinguished fewer species, saved the ozone layer, and peaked in their consumption of oil, farmland, timber, paper, cars, coal, and perhaps even carbon. For all their differences, the world’s nations came to an historic agreement on climate change, as they did in previous years on nuclear testing, proliferation, security, and disarmament….The world’s two most pressing problems, then, though not solved, are solvable: practicable long-term agendas have been laid out for eliminating nuclear weapons and for mitigating climate change.”(p324) But this optimistic perspective would seem to ignore the importance of the very role of the rivalry of nation states which have to act in a expansionist manner because of the demands imposed by the process of capital accumulation. Pinker suggests that the enlightenment is an actuality and has led to progress for humanity, but the point is that this aspect is still expressed in terms of the competitive character of the capitalist economic system and the related rivalry between nation states. In other words, there is a contradiction between the progressive possibilities of a situation of a generalised development of the productive forces and the connected efficiency of the world economy and the continued importance that this aspect is still expressed by the rivalry of competing nation states. But Pinker seems to underestimate the problems connected to the role of a capitalist system that is based on the rivalry of nations and competing companies. He does not seem to recognise that in this situation it is not possible to establish a harmonious economic and political system because the rivalries of nations and companies means that this type of development cannot be realised. Instead, he contends in a dogmatic manner that: “The Enlightenment is working: for two and half centuries, people have used knowledge to enhance human flourishing. Scientists have exposed the workings of matter, life, and mind. Inventors have harnessed the laws of nature to defy entropy, and entrepreneurs have made their innovations affordable…..Activists have pressured the powerful to overturn repressive measures, and their fellow citizens to change repressive norms.”(p324) But this democratic influence of the people on the character of society has only occurred in a minority of situations and often the character of many types of political regimes is based on the authoritarian domination of an elite. It has been the influence of radical ideologies like socialism which has led to the increased democratisation of many capitalist type societies rather than this aspect been an inherent dynamic of contemporary society. Thus, the possibility of political progress has been the outcome of the role of popular struggles and so this development of democratic modern societies has not been an inevitability of a dynamic of progress. Therefore, the concept of enlightenment is not an inherent aspect of the character of contemporary society and is instead the outcome of the role of popular forms of struggle. For example, it required mass struggles in order to obtain the votes for women. Indeed, Pinker accepts that the role of activists has been necessary to realise democratic advances within contemporary society. He also concedes that advances in economic and political terms have often been limited and that inequality in economic and political terms is a continued aspect of contemporary society. Nevertheless, it is suggested that continued technological progress can facilitate the creation of societies in which these advances can be to benefit of the people. In other words, capitalism is a dynamic economic system, and this means that this aspect can be expressed in the application of technology to the realisation of the needs of society. Therefore, it is suggested that what is most problematical is the aspect of the role of types of authoritarian populism which conceives of the role of the nation in traditional terms and is opposed to the aims of internationalism and humanism. In other words capitalism is a dynamic economic system but it can be undermined by the development of reactionary political doctrines that attempt to justify the ascendency of political elites by making demagogic appeals to the people for support. This standpoint is considered to be irrational because it is not based on a credible defence of the merits of capitalism and instead often uses the ideology of nationalism in order to justify the rule of new conservative elites. But it could be argued that this very development occurs because of the problems associated with the economic aspects of capitalism which is no longer a dynamic system that is able to afford the role of a welfare state. Therefore, in order to gloss over the increasing economic problems of capitalism it is necessary for reactionary political elites to emerge that have to justify the system in terms of the ideology of populism and nationalism. In other words, the capitalist economic system is in a situation of increasing crisis and so it is necessary for elites to utilise the ideology of demagogic populism in order to justify their domination. But this very development is an indication that the system has entered into a period of crisis and that the aspect of progress that has been associated with the post-war world economy has come to an end. In this context of the increasing expression of the decline of capitalism it is necessary that this situation is justified in demagogic and populist terms. It is no longer possible to uphold the domination of capitalism in terms of the role of a progressive ideology of continual economic and social improvement of society but instead it is necessary to justify the role of elites in dogmatic terms. But this very aspect seems to indicate that Pinker’s conception of capitalism as a system of progress is questionable. Instead, it would seem that the influence of populism is because this Is the only possible ideological justification of what has become a declining economic system. It is the role of nationalist populism which has become the most important aspect of ensuring the perpetuation of capitalism. In this context it is necessary for the defenders of capitalism to attempt to discredit any attempt to uphold the ideology of internationalism by the supporters of the objective of socialism. This was an important reason for the BREXIT referendum in the UK. In order to create a political identity between the capitalist class of the UK with the working class it was necessary to utilise the referendum in order to undermine any expression of left-wing internationalism, which was in a certain sense connected to the membership of the EU by the UK. In other words, the actual economic advantages of the membership of the EU by the UK had to be subordinated to the political objective of developing the influence of reactionary nationalism within the working class. But this very aspect was an indication of the economic problems of the UK and so it was necessary to impose a prolonged period of austerity in terms of increasing the influence of populist nationalism within society. However, such reactionary developments indicates that the dynamism of capitalism in the UK has been ended and replaced by a situation of effective recession which can only be sustained by a policy of austerity. In this context the only feasible political basis to sustain the system is the role of an ideology of reactionary populism. However, this is an indication that the aspect of progress can no longer be considered to be an aspect of the role of the capitalist economic system in the UK. Indeed, this situation can be generalised in international terms. Therefore, if progress is to be realised it is necessary to strive for the realisation of a socialist alternative. But it is the very political problems involved in attempting to uphold this standpoint which means that it seems that capitalism is the only credible possibility. It is this apparent ideological discrediting of the objective of socialism which ultimately sustains the view of Pinker that capitalism is a progressive system. However, his actual emphasis is about the apparent advantages of capitalism in economic and political terms. In other words, he is ultimately an uncritical defender of the present system and so is not able to elaborate the problems that are associated with its continued domination. Instead, he considers that any outstanding issues can be resolved in terms of the role of an enlightened politics that is able to defend capitalism in terms of a non-dogmatic and progressive approach. Ultimately he is suggesting that because capitalism is a credible social system it is possible to connect its role with the politics of an ideology of enlightenment. The fact that capitalism has increasing been defended in terms of authoritarian populism seems to be an aspect that he tries to ignore or denies its importance. Thus his approach is dogmatic.

In other words, it is being suggested by Pinker that the ascendency of liberalism is likely in the conditions of the general efficiency of the capitalist system. Hence he considers that the tensions between authoritarian populism and liberalism will be resolved in terms of a victory for the latter progressive forces: “How will the tension play out between the liberal, cosmopolitan, enlightenment humanism that has been sweeping the world for decades and the regressive, authoritarian, tribal populism pushing back? The major long term forces that have carried liberalism along – mobility, connectivity, education, urbanisation – are not likely to go into reverse, and neither is the pressure for equality, from women and ethnic minorities.” (p341) But this perspective would seem to contradict the actual situation of the imposition of an economics of austerity in terms of the political and ideological role of the role of authoritarian populism. It has been the utilisation of reactionary politics that has been able to establish the ascendency of an economic approach of the imposition of austerity and deflation. Hence the effective development of the increased importance of capital has been politically upheld by the role of an ideology of populism. In this context it is questionable to suggest that progress has continued to be a primary aspect of social development. Instead, the domination of capitalism has been upheld by the imposition of austerity in terms of its connection to the politics of authoritarian populism. Indeed, this development is noted by Pinker, but he believes that it can be overcome by the progressive dynamics of liberal democracy. But the point is that the very interests of liberal democracy can be upheld by the role of authoritarian populism in particular circumstances as with the present attempt to impose the economics of austerity. In this context the values of liberalism are most consistently being upheld by the standpoint of democratic socialism and the attempt to suggest that a progressive alternative to the continued domination of capitalism is possible. The point is that Pinker can only dismiss the significance of authoritarianism within capitalism because of his essential claim that the system is both liberal and progressive. But it could be argued that these values can be most effectively upheld by the development of the importance of an anti-capitalist regime based on the values of socialism. In other words, it is the very importance of austerity that has challenged the credibility of the view that capitalism is an inherently progressive system. Instead, it is only possible to maintain the domination of capital by the intensification of the domination of capital over labour. Pinker is aware of the problem of authoritarian populism but he does not connect it with the interests of capitalism in the era of austerity. Instead, he considers that it represents reactionary trends within the population of many societies. In other words, he considers that capitalism is an inherently progressive system that is most consistently upheld by the role of liberal and democratic political values. But in actuality the increasing economic problems, of contemporary capitalism means that forms of authoritarian populism have been important in order to defend and maintain the economic system. In this context the most effective manner in which this approach can be opposed is not by an appeal to a mythical progressive liberal capitalism but instead by promoting the values of a democratic socialism. This approach is connected to the understanding that the necessity of austerity means that the economic system can only be politically upheld by the approach of authoritarian populism. Hence the genuinely democratic and progressive alternative to this development is the promotion of a genuine conception of socialism which would be based on the effective participation of the people in the organisation of the economy and political system. But Pinker denies this perspective because he can only envisage the transformation of capitalism in terms of the increased importance of liberal values and the influence of rationality. In other words he imposes an ideal conception of a progressive capitalism based on the values of reason onto the actual situation in which the role of forms of ideological irrationality are important in order to defend a system based on the domination of economic and political elites. Hence he imposes an ideal conception of how he considers that capitalism should be like onto the actual reality in which the importance of the domination of authoritarian elites is often an expression of the character of the economic and political system.

Pinker also contends that the role of science has been crucial for ensuring the progress of the interests of humanity. But he also considers that this this development has often been obscured by an increasing influence of a progressive opposition to the merits of science. But surely the important issue is not about the possible benefits that can be associated with science in economic and social terms but instead that the advances of science have often become connected with the interests of the process of capital accumulation rather than being a more effective expression of the aspirations of society. Hence the issue concerning science is about whose interests it should represent. In other words, science has the potential to increase knowledge that is able to realise the welfare of the people. But Pinker considers that progressive liberal prejudice about the merits of science has primarily led to scepticism about its benefits. But surely the views of various academic intellectuals are of less importance than the actual manner in which science has been utilised. In general, the role of science can be of immense benefit for society, but it also has to be understood that this possibility is sometimes undermined by the manner in which science has been utilised in order to uphold the interests of the capitalist system. This situation is not established by Pinker who instead considers the influence of irrational attitudes of many intellectuals for being responsible for undermining the importance of the view that science is beneficial for humanity. But this viewpoint does not influence the manner in which science has been utilised in economic and social terms. Instead, it has to be considered that the very character of science is modified by the importance of the capitalist economic system. In other words, science is increasingly defined by the imperatives of capital accumulation. Therefore, it is necessary to establish an alternative socialist system that would be able to utilise science in a more progressive and emancipatory manner. But Pinker cannot make this conclusion and instead emphasises the irrationalism of many intellectuals. He blames the views of elites for the general distrust of the role of science. But surely this situation is of secondary significance and what is more important is the manner in which science has been utilised in order to uphold the domination of the present economic system. Thus, the very scepticism about the role of science is about the manner in which it has been utilised in order to uphold the un-ethical objectives of the capitalist system. Therefore, the very development of the influence of the standpoint of socialism is the most effective manner in which an alternative approach to the unethical aims of capitalism can be developed. But instead of this standpoint Pinker seems to suggest that an ideal and ethical expression of capitalism would be the most effective manner in which the importance of morality can be established. But he does not explain how a system based on the exploitation of labour by capital can develop the credibility of these ethical principles. Instead, we would suggest that it is only with the realisation of a socialist alternative will it be possible to establish the principles by which a society without the aspect of domination within society can become genuinely realised. But Pinker cannot envisage this alternative because he cannot consider that there is any valid alternative to capitalism. Hence, he has to try and outline a conception of capitalism that is progressive and able to realise the aspirations of society. But it is questionable whether this type of society can be realised because of the very fact that the economic system has to be based on the exploitation of labour by capital in order to realise the aspect of accumulation. But this is the very issue that is not addressed by Pinker because his emphasis is on the progressive potential of capitalism. This means that the issues of exploitation and class struggle are not addressed. Instead, it is assumed that progressive elites can emerge that are able to realise a system of genuine liberal democracy. It is assumed that capitalism has the necessary character in order to establish an economy and political structure that is able to realise the aspirations of the people. But this means that Pinker has to outline a conception of capitalism that is an ideal view that it could be argued is not realised in practice. Instead the actual character of the system is based on the intention of the capitalist class to maintain its economic and political domination over society.

Pinker considers that the ethical approach most conducive to the development of a liberal capitalist society is that of an ethical humanism: “Though humanism is the moral code that people will converge upon when they are rational, culturally diverse, and need to get along, it is by no means a vapid or saccharine lowest common denominator. The idea that morality consists in the maximisation of human flourishing clashes with two perennially seductive alternatives. The first is theistic morality, the idea that morality consists in obeying the dictates of a deity, which are enforced by a supernatural reward or punishment in this world or an afterlife. The second is romantic heroism: the idea that morality consists in the purity, authenticity, and greatness of an individual or nation.” (p419) But the point is that these reactionary forms of ideology are often promoted by the defenders of the capitalist system in order to obtain popular support for this type of society. Hence there is no necessary connection between progressive and enlightened values and adherence to capitalism. Instead, it could be argued that the most logical and consistent expression of the views of progressive rationalism is expressed by the standpoint of socialism. In other words, it is quite possible to defend the domination of capitalism in terms of the role of reactionary and populist ideologies. In opposition to this standpoint, it is the approach of socialism which defends a conception of a rational and progressive alternative to the limitations of capitalism.

Therefore, the capitalist system is no longer progressive because it has become possible to elaborate a conception of a socialist alternative that is more able to realise the aspirations of the people. However, it has also been possible to consider the capitalism is the only viable and progressive possibility for society because of the apparent failures of the various societies that have claimed to be socialist. But it can also be suggested that the progressive gains within capitalism, such as the creation of the welfare state, have been the result of the role of a politics that is to some extent based on the objective of achieving socialism. There has been no automatic generation of change within capitalism that has represented social progress, and the recent offensive of the defenders of capital against the workers has often led to the undermining of the social gains of the people. Hence the only manner in which the aim of progress is to be effectively upheld and realised is by the successful struggle to realise a socialist alternative. But Pinker can only consider the serious alternative to a progressive and humanitarian capitalism in terms of regressive ideologies of traditional and irrationalism. Hence, he effectively denies the importance of a progressive alternative in terms of the possibility of a democratic socialism. But we would suggest that the limitations of a capitalist system can still only be overcome in terms of the establishment of an emancipatory form of socialism. Hence it is dogmatic and problematical to suggest that the only possible historical development for society is a progressive form of capitalism. Indeed, if capitalism has become progressive in certain circumstances this is because of the realisation of the influence of the working class and trade union movement. These advances can only be consolidated in terms of the establishment of an alternative to capitalism in the form of a democratic socialism. This standpoint has only become problematical because of the reactionary role of Stalinism. If this issue is tackled it can still be suggested that socialism is the only progressive and genuinely humanitarian alternative to the limitations of capitalism. Ultimately Pinker cannot recognise the inherent limitations of capitalism because he is a defender of this system. For example, he is unable to recognise the importance of the era of austerity and how it has undermined the possibility for the majority of the people to be able to make economic and social progress. In other words his view that capitalism is a progressive system of inherent liberal change is a problematical view that is unable to recognise the various limitations of this social formation. We would suggest that it is only with the realisation of a socialist alternative can the values of the enlightenment be genuinely realised.

However Pinker ignores the issue as to whether socialism can provide a superior alternative to capitalism that is able to express the possibility of progress in more effective terms. We would suggest that the aim of socialism to end the aspect of the exploitation of labour within the relations of production and to introduce measures that create a welfare state means that it is potentially superior to capitalism. The problem with capitalism is that it is a system based on the exploitation of labour within the relations of production and is generally indifferent to the issue of the realisation of the welfare of the people. Hence the domination of capitalism is not because it is the most effective system for the realisation of the needs of the people but is instead its ascendency is because of the difficulties involved in trying to establish the more progressive socialist alternative. This situation has also been related to the apparent failure of the system of the Soviet Union to establish a genuine socialist system. Hence the domination of capitalism is not established by its supposed ability to realise the needs of the people but is instead because of the failure to realise the ascendency of a more emancipatory alternative. But is this situation inevitable and likely to become enduring so that it is not possible to establish the success of socialism? The point is that the domination of capitalism is not inevitable but instead this ascendency depends on the apparent success of the forces of capital to be able to maintain the supremacy of their system. But we would suggest that the limitations of the aspect of exploitation of labour within capitalism means that the workers cannot become ultimately reconciled to the continuation of the present economic system. Instead, it is the very fact that capitalism cannot ensure consistent economic progress that means that people will ultimately not be reconciled to the continuation of the system. There will be the objective basis for the development of opposition that will pose the possibility of a socialist alternative. But whether this potential is realised depends on the outcome of class struggle, and it is entirely possible that this can mean that the capitalist system remains dominant. However, such a situation does not mean that capitalism is inherently progressive but that instead the forces of opposition have not been able to develop an effective strategy that will enable them to establish the possibility of revolutionary change. This problem is connected to the present lack of credibility of the forces for socialism and the related apparent unchallengeable domination of capitalism. Hence capitalism can remain in the ascendency not because it is a progressive system capable of continuing generating improvements for the people but is instead the result of the problems involved in trying to develop the increased influence of a revolutionary alternative. In other words, capitalism is able to continue despite the imposition of an approach of austerity because of the important problems involved in trying to establish the credibility of a socialist alternative. Hence capitalism can remain dominant even though it is effectively a system of economic decline and the generalised imposition of an approach of austerity. This situation of effective economic stagnation can continue because of the ability of the capitalist class to continue to ensure its domination over society. It will only be possible to transform this situation if the forces of opposition to the system become able to organise effectively in order to ensure the development of struggle that is able to transform society. Thus, capitalism is able to continue as a system that is no longer progressive because of the problems involved in trying to end the domination of present society. However, the potential for the increased effectiveness of the forces of opposition can be realised because it is only a socialist alternative that represents the possibility to end the austerity and decline of capitalism. But whether this development can occur is not an inevitability based on the dynamics of history but is instead related to the level of success of the forces of Marxism in being able to create credible Marxist parties that are able to establish a convincing perspective of change. However, this possibility would not result in inevitable change but would instead only suggest that it has become increasingly likely that the revolutionary transformation of society can be achieved.

But Pinker would presumably suggest that even if revolutionary change did occur this would not mean the successful development of a socialist economy when compared to the apparent practical superiority of capitalism in being able to realise the aims of the enlightenment. However, such a criticism would imply that people cannot learn from the experience of the Soviet Union and its apparent failure to create a socialist economy. But the very lesson that can be established by the limitations of the Soviet Union is that a party elite cannot create a democratic and effective socialist economy. Instead, only the participation of the people on the basis of credible economic aims can become the basis for the development of a successful and efficient socialist economy. It was the lack of this development which meant that the aim of socialism became defined in terms of the essential objectives of an economic and political elite. It was this development which meant that socialism could not be established as the alternative to capitalism. Hence this situation was not characterised by an inherent superiority of capitalism and was instead the result of the bureaucratic distortions introduced by the role of an increasing ascendency of a party elite. These developments do not represent justification of Pinker’s assumption of the superiority of capitalism as an enlightened and progressive system, but instead are the expression of the limitations of the role of the party elite. Hence the alternative to this situation is not the development of an enlightened capitalism but is instead the promotion of what would be a genuinely popular and democratic form of socialism.

However, we would suggest that a major reason why capitalism is not an enlightened system is that it has been based on the necessity of austerity in order to ensure the domination of the capitalist class in the period since 1980. In other words, the aspect of the dynamism of the system which had been established since the period of increasing economic success and improvement in the material situation of the people has come to an end. It could be argued by the defenders of capitalism that this development is temporary and will be replaced by the onset of a new period of boom. But such a possibility does not seem to be occurring in the present conditions. Instead, the only basis to uphold the domination of capitalism in the present period is not because of any inherent economic efficiency to the system but is instead because of the apparent inability to develop effective forms of collective struggle by the forces of labour in order to oppose the attempt to intensify the domination of capital in what seems to be an enduring situation of austerity. In other words, it could be suggested that the crisis character of capitalism is being intensified but this development does not result in the generation of an inevitable dynamic of social change. Instead, the workers seem to have been on the defensive and have been unable to develop effective forms of collective struggle in order to oppose the domination of capital. Hence the ascendency of capitalism is not because it is a progressive system but is instead because of the favourable balance of class forces. In this context the development of the effectiveness of the mass struggle of the workers would enable it to be able to oppose the domination of capitalism in this context of increasing economic crisis. However, such a possibility is not an inevitability and the aspect of the effective demoralisation of the workers seems to undermine the prospect of this generation of collective opposition to the system. But we can also suggest that the present adverse balance of class forces is not because capitalism remains a progressive system but is instead the result of the difficulties involved in trying to establish the development of collective opposition. In other words, the prospect of developing more effective forms of opposition could mean that the present situation could become transformed and that this would result in the creation of the conditions for genuine economic and political change to occur. But such a possibility is not an inevitability and instead capitalism could continue as a system of decline even if it is no longer progressive or an expression of enlightened values. However, this situation means that Pinker’s understanding of capitalism as a progressive system is not able to explain the importance of the aspect of the decline of the economy. Indeed, his approach is based on the effective ignoring of the importance of economics. But it would be dogmatic to claim that the limitation of his position is an indication of the credibility of the socialist approach. Instead, we have to connect the advocacy of an alternative to Pinker’s approach to a more convincing perspective of revolutionary change.

The understanding that it is necessary for the forces of capital to conduct an offensive against the interests of labour in order to stabilise the economic system is outlined by Michael Roberts in: “The Long Depression” (Haymarket books: Chicago, 2016) He comments: “The post-slump austerity politics of most governments are not insane, as Keynesians think. These policies follow from the need to drive down costs, and the need to weaken the labour movement so that profits can be raised. It is a perfectly rational policy from the point of view of capital, which is why Keynesian policies were never introduced to any degree in the 1930’s.” (p94) But this situation is an indication that the connection of capitalism to the objective of economic and social progress is increasingly untenable. The only effective alternative for the people is to strive to achieve the alternative of a more progressive type of society that will be able to realise their interests in a more convincing and effective manner. In other words, it is being openly suggested that capitalism can only continue to be dominant in terms of the implementation of the approach of austerity and the era of economic and social progress is over. But this very development means that the argument that only the alternative of socialism is able to uphold the principles connected to the objectives of progress actually becomes more credible. However, the influence of this approach is marginal because of the very aspect of the success of the forces of capital in the attempt to impose the policy of austerity onto society. In this situation there is not a definite support for the capitalist system but instead only the passive acceptance of the view that it cannot be challenged and ended. Hence it is the apparent adverse balance of class forces that seems to be the major reason why the objectives of socialism seem to be unrealistic. Thus, people like Pinker can only uphold the apparent superiority of capitalism by elaborating a conception of its supposed enlightenment principles that seem to have little relationship to the actual situation of the political situation which is based on the imposition of the approach of austerity. However, it has to be suggested that this very development implies that the view that the present system is based on an effective role of political democracy is tenuous and instead there is little genuine support for the policies of various pro-capitalist governments. Hence, we have to suggest that people effectively passively accept the economic and social policies of various administrations without any genuine level of support. This means that the situation is defined by a type of authoritarianism that is based on the effective imposition of the approach of austerity. This situation is only tolerated because of the lack of support for the genuine alternative of democratic socialism. In other words what are apathetic populations reluctantly accept the introduction of the approach of austerity. This development seems to have become inevitable and so opposition to such a situation seems to be futile. In this problematical manner the introduction of austerity occurs, and the apparent discontent of society is being neutralised by the apparent inevitability of these developments. Hence the democratic system is being exploited by various political elites in order to introduce the politics of austerity despite the lack of genuine support for this development. In other words, the democratic system is being effectively exploited and undermined in order to ensure the introduction of policies that lack any genuine mass support. This development is also facilitated by the failure of the various opposition parties to support credible alternative policies that are based on a consistent rejection of the approach of austerity. But it can be argued that there is little genuine support for these actions of various bourgeois governments and the basis to develop support for radical alternatives is still a genuine possibility. However, none of the various reformist parties seem able to be equal to the challenges of the present situation and instead they essentially uphold an unconvincing defensive stance. The result is that the various bourgeois parties continue to be elected to government because they seem able to advocate what seems to be convincing political programmes. In this context the alternative of socialism is not being elaborated in effective terms. But this does not mean that socialism has become irrelevant but rather that it is not being advocated in a convincing manner.