IS POSTCAPITALISM THE ALTERNATIVE WE SHOULD ASPIRE TO REALISE? By PHIL SHARPE

Paul Mason, the Economics editor of Channel Four News, has written an important book entitled: ‘Post-Capitalism’.(1) He argues that there is a potential alternative that is being developed within the present capitalist economy: “The aim of this book is to explain why replacing capitalism is no longer a utopian dream, how the basic forms of a post-capitalist economy can be found within the current system, and how they can be expanded rapidly.”(2) Marxism should not ridicule any serious attempt to locate the possibilities for a future economic system within the present, and instead should establish whether the claim to go beyond the limitations of contemporary capitalism is feasible and credible. However, we also have to study whether there is a coherent strategy for change that goes beyond suggesting that the new is emerging within the old. We have to establish if an agency of change within humanity is present that can bring about the promotion of the transitional possibilities of economic developments. This approach seems to be lacking in Mason’s argument because of his technological determinism: “Once capitalism can no longer adapt to technological change, post-capitalism becomes necessary. When behaviours and organizations adapted to exploiting technological change appear spontaneously, post-capitalism becomes possible.”(3) The problem with this comment is that economic evolution cannot be separated from the role of human activity and consciousness. Hence the ability of this development of the productive forces to achieve the transformation of the mode of production requires the role of a class that expressed the possibilities of this technological advance. But Mason has ruled out the strategic significance of the proletariat because of the social traumas of neoliberalism. As a result his argument is dependent on the apparent imperatives of technology, the collapse of neo-liberalism, and the apparent development of new forms of co-operative production. This means he effectively denies the importance of the political, such as parties, class struggle, and the influence of ideology and its ability to shape consciousness and so stifle discontent within society. His analysis of the class struggle is connected to his conclusion that is over and change should be connected to different aspects of human activity.

The possible flaws in Mason’s approach mean that he proclaims the end of capitalism. Is he one of many of the false prophets of the demise of the system? If we acknowledge the importance of politics then we can also recognise that the present system is not based on an historical necessity connected to the unfolding of economic contradictions. This means the economy will not necessarily result in collapse because of inexorable laws, and instead the role of the state, parties, and significance of the class struggle, will create a complex situation that implies the ruling class can create defensive mechanisms that undermine the tendencies for change. Only if the subordinate class acquires sufficient consciousness can it acquire the faculties that can overcome the ability of the ruling forces to withstand the prospects of change. In this context, the ideological hegemony of the forces of neoliberalism mean that the advocates of an alternative are marginal and defensive and the tendency for an economic alternative is not recognised. The point is that technological determinism will never bring about change because this viewpoint ignores the importance of ideology and politics. Furthermore, this theoretical dependency on economic determinism replaces the apparent limitations of the revolutionary subject. This is not to suggest that a revolutionary subject is ready-made and receptive to the perspective of change, rather that without the formation of this subject the prospect of change, which is both economic and political, will be unlikely. It is one thing to suggest that the working class is no longer a potential revolutionary subject, as Mason maintains, but it is another thing entirely to try to gloss over the historical importance of the role of the subject in the name of technological determinism. Instead what is less dogmatic and more constructive is to try and elaborate the features of the contemporary subject of change. We will attempt to scrutinise Mason’s book in terms of these comments.

Mason is adamant that his aim is not socialism that was historically about the establishment of a planned economy. This he regards as outdated. Instead his aim is post-capitalism which is inspired by the utopian socialist vision of co-operative production without a market logic, and suggests that recent unrest in the world has been an expression of the tendencies for post-capitalism. But this unrest was a political desire for democracy and lacked a definite economic content, and his rejection of socialism is an ideological attempt to distance himself from past projects for emancipation. The point of convergence between Mason’s standpoint and previous attempts to establish an alternative society is that the prevailing logic of capitalism is rejected as exploitative and in the interests of the minority or very rich. However he rejects socialism because of its apparent anachronistic inability to come to terms with contemporary economic trends. But why is not possible to develop a conception of socialism that is able to connect to developments within the present economic society? Mason does not answer this question because of his association of socialism with what he considers to be the past and discredited trends of Marxism. He does not reject Marx, but he is critical of Marxism, including the legacy of socialism. But this effective rejection of Marxism means that we have to investigate whether the conception of post-capitalism is opposed to socialism. Furthermore, can adherence to socialism be reconciled with anti-Marxism? In defending Marxism we do not want to suggest that it represents an exclusive conception of the alternatives to capitalism but what we are concerned with is to argue that it does not uphold an antiquated conception of socialism which has become outdated because of developments within capitalism. Instead socialism can be a flexible conception that is able to assimilate the importance of the latest tendencies within capitalism. Socialism is not a dogmatic historical conception that has been made old-fashioned because of neoliberalism and the recent development of the productive forces. In this sense we will seriously study – which Mason does not – whether his conception of post-capitalism is compatible with socialism.

Mason begins his study with an analysis of the present economic crisis that is quite acceptable and connected to his sympathies with the poor, and the view that the crisis is being resolved in the interests of the rich and against working people. However, he then develops criticism of Marxist political economy in the early 20th century for ignoring or rejecting the importance of Kondratieff’s theory of long waves, or approximately 50 year cycles of economic and historical development. Mason argues that Kondratieff explained not only the period of the depression in the 1930’s more profoundly than other theorists, but that he also anticipated the long wave of 1940-2008 better than anyone else. This view seems to be correct, but the point is that it does not indicate the related limitations of Marxist political economy, rather the problem is one of intellectual freedom within the USSR. Kondratieff’s views were criticised and he was ultimately persecuted and killed by Stalin. Ernest Mandel has outlined how Kondratieff’s approach is compatible with Marxist views of economics and the class struggle.(4) In other words the problem is not Marxism but rather the lack of intellectual freedom caused by the degeneration of Stalinism. There is nothing to suggest that 50 year economic cycles, in order to explain upswings and decline, is an important innovation that Marxism can welcome. The point is that if Marxism is an explanatory discourse new ideas can be discussed thoughtfully and their merits, or problems, discussed in a reflective manner. Instead Mason equates Stalinism with Marxism and so implies that Marxism after Marx, is a dogmatic doctrine. Only Marx is exempted from this categorisation.

Mason argues that Marx outlined an understanding of the crisis of capitalism that indicated the ability of the system to adapt in relation to ten year cycles, but this approach was compromised by the doctrine of catastrophism that was adopted by Marxist political economy in the 20th century. Hilferding had outlined how the development of finance capital had introduced adaptability into capitalism but he was vague about what would occur after finance capital. Rosa Luxemburg ended this ambiguity when she connected the development of increasing crisis with the end of non-capitalist areas for the purpose of capital accumulation. Lenin and Bukharin criticised this conception of capitalist development and imperialism, but Luxemburg’s influence remained in terms of the theory of the final crisis of capitalism which become connected to under-consumptionism. Mason argues that the Bolsheviks inherited the catastrophism of Luxemburg, and they conceived of imperialism as decaying capitalism that would generate the transitional conditions for socialism: “There was, in the Bolshevik eyes, a clear dialectical progression – from free markets to monopoly, from colonization to global war. Once this had taken place, their philosophical scheme could brook no further evolution: capitalism could not progress except to its own destruction.”(5)

The perspective of Lenin is more complex than this evaluation by Mason. One of Lenin’s primary aims is to reject Kautsky’s understanding that inter-imperialist conflict can be replaced by ultra-imperialism or the development of the peaceful alliances of imperialist powers in order to jointly exploit the world. Lenin remarks: “We ask, is it “conceivable”, assuming that the capitalist system remains intact – and this is precisely the assumption that Kautsky does make – that such alliances would be more than temporary, that they would eliminate friction, conflicts and struggle in every possible form?”(6) The argument is that the present form of capitalism, as expressed by inter-imperialist conflict, is unlikely to be replaced by ultra-imperialism. This is what is emphatic in the standpoint of Lenin. The assumption is that the contradictions of inter-imperialist conflict will generate the tendencies for transition to socialism, but there is no justification for the automatic demise of capitalism. Instead it is implied that only proletarian revolution will overcome the domination of capitalism in the form of imperialism. (We now know that Lenin’s conception of imperialism can be replaced by ultra-imperialism, but his position was accurate for its time) Lenin would seem to vindicate Mason’s view when he comments: “From all that has been said in this book about the economic essence of imperialism, it follows that we must define it as capitalism in transition, or more precisely, as moribund capitalism.”(7) It is vitally important to note that Lenin only refers to the economic conditions for transition to socialism in this comment, but it is his vital contribution to Marxism that he is also aware that the political aspects of revolutionary change are not identical to the economic. For example, he also recognises the reactionary importance of the collapse of the Second International and the rise of national chauvinism and opportunism. This is why Lenin is also careful to remark that: “When a big enterprise assumes gigantic proportions……. private property relations constitute a shell which no longer fits its contents, a shell which must inevitably decay if its removal is artificially delayed, a shell which may remain in a state of decay for a fairly long period of time (if at the worst, the cure of the opportunist abscess is protracted), but which inevitably will be removed.”(8)

In other words formally, Lenin seems to uphold a teleological dialectic which conceives of inevitable change via the role of historical and economic necessity. But implicitly because of Lenin’s recognition of the importance of politics he is aware of the complexities and problems involved in the development of revolutionary change. For example, the role of opportunism represents an important political and ideological limitation that undermines the transformation of inter-imperialist war into revolutionary struggle. Thus there is an important contradiction between the maturing of the economic conditions for socialism and the continuing lack of mass popularity of the standpoint of revolution. Lenin is outlining the contradiction between the objective situation and subjective factors which is the reason why revolution may not occur in favourable conditions and the maturing of the prospects for socialism. Instead of this recognition of the complexities of Lenin’s dialectic of strategy and politics, Mason wants to reject him as a doctrinaire economist. This conclusion is only possible by simplifying Lenin and ignoring his influence on the revolutionary tradition of principled Marxism. But this vulgarisation has a purpose for Mason because he can project from his one-sided reading of Lenin the apparent dogmatic limitations of Marxist political economy in the 20th century. Apart from Bukharin in the mid 1920’s most Marxist economists are portrayed as vulgar economic determinists, like Varga’s justification of under-consumption in the late 1920’s. The actual complexity of Marxist economics is ignored by this dogmatic interpretation of its limitations. Mason is more constructive when he presents his alternative of a modified form of Kondratieff long waves combined with Marx’s understanding of the rate of profit and the significance of the resistance of the working class. It is a pity that he does not combine this approach with a more sympathetic appraisal of Marxist political economy rather than justifying a rejection of it as a generalised justification of catastrophism.

Mason outlines an accessible and interesting analysis of post-war capitalism and the increasing accumulation of contradictions that resulted in the neoliberal regime. He explains the reasons for this development in the following manner: “Neoliberalism’s guiding principle is not free markets, nor fiscal discipline, nor sound money, nor privatization and offshoring – not even globalization. All these things were byproducts or weapons of its main endeavour: to remove organised labour from the equation.”(9) He contends that the apparent success of the ability of neoliberalism to undermine the ability of the working class to resist the aims of capital has not meant the end of the possibilities to transcend the limitations of the present economic system. Instead there is evolving new economic forms, as anticipated by Peter Drucker and Paul Romer, who outlined how the profit motive of capitalism is being undermined by the emergence of vast information generated, via the network economy.

The individual who apparently anticipated this development was Karl Marx, who in the Grundrisse conceived of the transformation of labour by a general intellect, or the subordination of machines to the dynamics of the generation of knowledge: “This is possibly the most revolutionary idea Marx ever had: that the reduction of labour to a minimum could produce a kind of human being able to deploy the entire, accumulated knowledge of society; a person transformed by vast quantities of socially produced knowledge and for the first time in history more free time than work time.”(10) Marx’s views can be applied to understand the present. The result of contemporary economic development is the creation of the networked individual who does not necessarily share the values of neoliberalism, and the tendency is for the development of automated production and the collapse of value as the basis of price because of the sharing of information: “Today, the main contradiction in modern capitalism is between the possibility of free, abundant socially produced goods, and a system of monopolies, banks, and governments struggling to maintain control over power and information. That is, everything is pervaded by a fight between network and hierarchy.”(11)

The problem with this conception of the emergence of post-capitalism is that whilst it can describe an economic process and its contradictory development what is ignored is the role of politics and the importance of consciousness. The logic of post-capitalism can be outlined in terms of the subversive impact of the network economy in relation to undermining the profit motive of neoliberalism. But what is not explained satisfactorily is how does this process relate to the ability of a subject to bring about the realisation of post-capitalism? For example, the network economy also creates the alienated individual who is only able to interact with other human beings via the virtual reality of the network. How can such an individual combine with others in order to generate the creation of an economy based on the replacement of the market motive?

In contrast, Marx explained that it was the cooperative character of labour which promoted its ability to act as an agency of change. The process of capital accumulation is connected to the development of cooperative labour.(12) But over time the alienated character of cooperative labour is transformed by the legacy of struggle and the increasing willingness of the working class to resist the logic of capital accumulation. The prospect is created for the following to occur: “Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows; but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it.”(13) This prediction of social transformation may have not been realised for many reasons but it is still premature for Mason to reject the working class as a potential agency of change in terms of the apparent victory of the forces of Neoliberalism. Instead because of the very open-ended character of history it is deterministic to rigidly argue the working class can no longer act as a possible subject of social transformation. Furthermore, Mason’s network subject seems to represent a feeble agency of change when compared to the cooperative character of labour. What would have been less dogmatic and more convincing is for Mason to relate the dynamism of the network economy with the continuing subversive logic of labour. This approach would have represented a more intransigent conception of post-capitalism and made it compatible with socialist themes.

The point of dispute with Mason is firstly, the significance of cooperative labour has not been ended with the defeats inflicted by the neoliberal offensive since the 1980’s. This argument does not mean that the possibility of proletarian revolution is inevitable, but neither can we categorically suggest that the role of class struggle has been overcome by the recent actions of the ruling class. The antagonism between labour and capital is still an aspect of society and therefore this conflict can result in developments we presently do not anticipate because of the pessimism generated by the success of the neoliberal offensive and the related retreat of labour. The issue of the future historical role of labour has been outlined by Erik Olin Wright in the following terms: “Proletarianization by itself, however, would not be enough to generate the intensification of anti-capitalist class struggle…..since the intensity of social conflict depends not only on the intensity of opposing interests but also, crucially on the capacity of people to engage in collective actions in pursuit of those interests. Grievances are never sufficient to explain overt conflicts, since it is often the case that people lack the capacity to act on their grievances.”(14) In this sense the working class is still a collective actor that is capable of promoting militant activity despite the social changes since the 1980’s, and the decline in trade union membership. This does not mean that the working class has presently the consciousness to aim for socialist objectives, and it is possible that this process could never take place, but it is also dogmatic and pessimistic to rigidly deny any future political role for labour.

However this scepticism about the role of labour is justified by Mason in the following comment: “Put more brutally, it had become impossible to imagine this working class – disorganized, in thrall to consumerism and individualism - overthrowing capitalism. The old sequence - mass strikes, barricades, soviets and working class government – looks utopian in a world where the key ingredient, solidarity in the workplace has gone AWOL.”(14) What he describes may be the aspects of a working class in retreat, or sociologically changed by the process of neoliberalism. However, there is nothing to suggest that this development may be permanent and an expression of the end of the possibility of labour acting as a historical subject. The point is that any period of defeat or retreat results in the generation of pessimism and claims that the class struggle is over. We cannot suggest that proletarian revolution will occur, but it is also dogmatic to claim that history has changed and the traditional class struggle is over. This type of claim was made in 1933 with the victory of fascism in Germany, but the post-war working class was militant and assertive. In other words, the class struggle may have significant periods of defeat or regression as Meszaros explains: “For so long as the these transformations unfold on an antagonistically contested terrain, no emancipatory step is safe from the dangers of retrogression, no matter how favourable the ultimate historical relation of forces for the ‘new historic form’ might be once the old order fails to develop the productive forces. While the social confrontations effectively persist, the outcome remains fundamentally open.”(16)

The very openness of history means that the character of the class struggle is connected to the balance of class forces. There can be periods of ruling class offensive, or militant action by the working class. What is ontologically true is that the class struggle is never over as long as capital dominates labour. In this context, Meszaros is emphatic that we have to explain periods of defeat as well as advances in the class struggle: “Thus, the historical perspectives of a socialist transformation cannot be simply re-affirmed. They must be constantly reconstituted on the basis of fully acknowledging the actual transformations (by no means always for the better) of the social forces involved in the changing confrontations. If we cannot account for the negative aspects of social development since Marx’s death, as they affect the prospects of transition to socialism, any amounts of faithful self-assurance is bound to sound like singing in the dark.”(17) The point is that both false optimism and shallow pessimism do not explain the complexity of the class struggle. Mason has proclaimed the conflict between capital and labour is effectively over and so considers history is not open-ended and is instead defined by the inherent economic development of capitalism. This is a dogmatic claim.

Secondly, the network individual cannot replace the role of labour as a subject of opposition to the domination of capital. This is because the relations of the network do not express the dynamism and possibilities of cooperative labour despite the development of non-profit making aspects. The network individual is connected via social media and the internet and is not expressed by the more cooperative character of the workplace. It is true that Marx recognised that this form of cooperation is promoted in the interests of capital but the point he also made was that the increasing historical experience of labour would enable it to overcome this domination and transform the relations of production. This process was vindicated by the struggle for workers control after 1900. However, the network individual is not so important for the relations of production, and therefore cannot establish an alternative logic to the existing system of capitalism which would represent an identity to the transforming possibilities of cooperative labour. Consequently Mason has to rely on technological determinism in order to uphold his perspective of the evolution of economic forms. Furthermore, he effectively rejects any suggestion that this process of change would be advanced and become more dynamic if it was connected to the role of labour.

Mason would disagree with the above defence of orthodox Marxism because he maintains that the law of value can explain the generation of a type of economy that is different to that envisaged by most Marxists: “The labour-theory, as outlined by Marx, predicts that automation can reduce necessary labour to amounts so small that work would become optional. Useful stuff that can be made with tiny amounts of labour is probably going to end up being free, shared and commonly owned says the theory. And it is right.”(18) But this development represents a tiny fraction of the production and services of capitalism and the network economy, although Mason predicts that increasing automation and the non-market character of work and services is becoming more generalised, and he comments: “An economy based on information, with its tendency to zero-cost products and weak property rights, cannot be a capitalist economy.”(19) However this understanding is based on a particular interpretation of the law of value rather than empirical validity of his perspective. He assumes that the increasing contradiction between value and economic activity implies the creation of the post-capitalist economy. This standpoint represents the contradiction between a theoretical proposition and reality, or the conflation of what we would like reality to be with the actuality. The problem is that the ‘ought’ is imposed on the ‘is’ via a particular interpretation of the law of value. Mason can outline dynamic new aspects of the contemporary economy but he cannot interpret them in terms of establishing dominant forms that replace the importance of cooperative labour.

Mason also justifies his standpoint in terms of a historical approach that rejects the Marxist standpoint. He claims that the working class is not a revolutionary subject that aims for an alternative to capitalism, but instead aspires to realise respect for its autonomy, skills and status within the existing system. Workers utilised militant methods from their social formation in order to obtain better conditions and establish a cooperative culture within the system. They also established workplace autonomy and forms of workers control by the late 19th century. The development of the German Social Democratic party and the Second International enhanced the process of political education. Hence, Mason concludes with some justice that Lenin was wrong to reject the possibility of workers developing revolutionary consciousness based on opposition to capitalism, and considered the theory of the conservative labour aristocracy to be sociologically untenable: “Lenin was wrong to say that workers can’t spontaneously move beyond pure, reform minded trade unionism. He was right to say revolutionary communism was not their spontaneous ideology. Their spontaneous ideology was about control, social solidarity, self-education and the creation of a parallel world.”(20) This seems to be an accurate explanation and description of the class struggle up to 1945. The major aspiration was often workers control and this aim sometimes led to support for revolutionary struggles, but it did not necessarily mean conscious adherence to the objectives of Marxism.

However, Mason beomes pessimistic about the period after 1945. He contends that the traditional working class was often the victim of fascism during the war, and so the post-war workers were interested in wage improvements rather than autonomy. Ultimately this new working class became militant in relation to the growing crisis of capitalism in the 1970’s, and the capitalist class decided that this situation was intolerable: “Western capitalism, which had coexisted for organized labour and been shaped by it for nearly two centuries, could no longer live with a working class culture of solidarity and resistance. Through, off-shoring, de-industrialization, anti-union laws and a relentless ideological warfare, it would be destroyed.”(21) The contemporary working class has become flexible, divided into a core and periphery and subject to the dictates of management. But this situation has been accompanied by the rise of the network individual and alternative economic forms.

Mason seems to be right to suggest that the actions of the working class never corresponded to the theory of Marxism, but this does not mean that theory never corresponded to practice. For example, GDH Cole described the militancy of the working class in terms of the aspiration for industrial democracy.(22) In this semi-Marxist manner the class struggle could be associated with the promotion of militant types of activity that upheld different conceptions of socialism. The working class was not necessarily content to generate its autonomy within capitalism, instead this aim was connected to the aspiration for a type of socialism that aimed to realise industrial democracy. The same point could be made about the struggle for workers control within the Italian car factories in the 1920’s. However, the emergence of the Communist International meant that workers became divided into being supporters of reformist or revolutionary parties. This division was to undermine the struggle against fascism, and meant Marxism became reduced to Social Democratic or Stalinist interpretations. Despite this problem, the Spanish workers asserted revolutionary aspirations in 1936. Thus we can say that the ideology of socialism began to motivate the activity of the European working class, and this process was influenced by Marxism. Hence Mason is simply inaccurate when he underestimates the mass appeal of Marxism. What was tragic was that Marxism had ossified into its Social Democratic or Stalinist form. Hence the aim of socialism or communism was not an ideology of simply the Marxist intelligentsia but was also an aspiration of the working class, and was indicated in the popularity of the various socialist organisations and the appeal of the USSR.

His accurate description of the post 1945 class struggle is tinged with pessimism and a nostalgic affection for the workers before this period. Hence it is not surprising that he concludes the ruling class was able to defeat this new working class and so the traditional class struggle is declared over. The present working class is portrayed as the instrument of capital, and so the hope for change is with the network individual. He argues that the Russian Bolshevik, Bogdanov, anticipated the prospects of this type of change in his novel ‘Red Star’: “He advocates technological maturity as the precondition for revolution, the peaceful overthrow of the capitalists by means of compromise and compensation, a focus on technology as a means to reduce labour to a minimum and a relentless insistence that humanity itself has to be transformed, not just the economy.”(23) The problem with this analysis is that it glosses over the continued importance of the capital-labour relationship. The point is that this relationship still explains economic activity even if the most militant forms of class struggle seem to belong to the past. Thus if change is to occur it requires Cultural Revolution at the level of the capital-labour relation combined with the dynamics of technology. In this context, Bogdanov’s conception of the future could still apply to the present in terms of the interaction of technology and the importance of Cultural Revolution if the consciousness required to sustain social transformation is to occur.

Olin Wright outlines how the process of change requires the interaction of unintended social changes such as the role of technology combining with the conscious importance of strategies and political parties: “Both deliberate and unintended processes of social change are crucial for emancipatory transformation. Significant movement towards radical egalitarian democratic empowerment is not something that will happen just by accident as a by-product of social action for other purposes; it requires deliberate strategic action, and since such popular empowerment threatens the interests of powerful actors, this strategic action typically involves struggle. But strategy and struggle are not enough. For radical transformation to occur conditions must be “ripe”; the contradictions and gaps in the process of social reproduction must create real opportunities for strategy to have meaningful transformative effects.”(24) This comment indicates the primary basis of the problems with the class struggle of the present - not that the capital-labour relation has been superseded in importance - but instead the central issue is the lack of strategy that could combine with the importance of the material conditions in order to promote a mass moment against capitalism. It seems that the working class has been definitively defeated, but this is a misleading appearance that underestimates the problems of ideology, consciousness and the present lack of support for a strategy of change. The answer is not to support an alternative perspective of technological determinism but instead to promote a strategy of conscious action against capitalism.

Mason makes one of his most important mistakes. He rejects socialism in order to uphold his aim of post-capitalism. This rejection is carried out in theoretical terms. Mason suggests that planning has become antiquated because of the dynamism of computers and the flexible and changeable role of labour and markets. Hence he suggests that the attempt of Cockshott and Cottrell to use computers in order to develop a planned economy is already antiquated: “Where the dynamism and motivation would come from is not addressed. Nor how the vastly enlarged cultural sector would come in. In fact, the researchers make a strong case that, because of its decreased complexity, a planned economy would need fewer calculations than a market one.”(25) But what Mason has created is a straw man. He has criticised a rigidly planned economy that does not allow for the role of the market. This may be the preference of Cockshott and Cottrell but it does not represent a definitive version of socialism. Instead as an alternative to statist Stalinist type of socialism and Social Democratic reforms, there is market socialism that can be defined in the following terms: “By implication it has the following four aims (at least): (a) to obtain the efficiency advantages of markets in the production of most goods and services; (b)to confine the economic role of the state in a way that makes democratic government feasible; (c) to protect the autonomy of workers, both as individuals and as members of self-managed enterprises; (d)to bring about a much more equal distribution of primary income (rather than relying entirely on secondary distribution).”(25) This comment describes a market socialist economy which is based on cooperative production and distribution, and a socialised realm of health, education, and the nationalisation of the basic utilities. Hence the advantages of the market can be combined with industrial democracy, the values of equality, and the right balance between centralisation and de-centralisation.

What is interesting is that Mason’s broad conception of post-capitalism is compatible with this conception of socialism. But he effectively reject this comparison because he can only conceive of socialism as a replica of the USSR and the outcome of a Marxist schema of historical development: “It is entirely possible to build the elements of the new system molecularly within the old. In the cooperatives, the credit unions, the peer networks, the unmanaged enterprises and the parallel, subcultural economies, those elements already exist. We have to stop seeing them as quaint experiments; we have to promote them with regulation just as vigorous as that which capitalism used to drive the peasants off the land or destroy handicraft work in the eighteenth century.”(27) Mason rightly suggests the left should reject its present defensive posture and instead outline what is in favour of instead of concentrating on what it is against. But his standpoint is not an alternative to contemporary conceptions of socialism. For example, Tony Smith defends a cooperative version of socialism in the following terms: “In socialist democracy, the net profits of firms are returned to workers directly, according to a formula decided by a management democratically accountable to the workforce. Under such an arrangement, workers have a clear incentive to contribute to gains in labour productivity in the enterprise as a whole. Eliminating the capital/wage labour antagonism also tends to encourage higher levels of cooperation, honesty, and trust, all of which contribute to productivity gains, and all of which are inevitably constricted in capitalist enterprises. Democratic control over the introduction of innovations in the labour process will also tend to make work more creative and enjoyable, considerably lessening the problem of motivation.”(28)

If both of these definitions of a possible future are combined together we have a convincing conception of socialism. Mason has outlined the importance of post-capitalism in terms of the development of the network economy on a non-profit making basis and without the control of the monopolies; whilst Smith has elaborated what cooperative labour can be like without the domination of capital, and this process is connected to the overcoming of alienation within the process of production. Hence it is quite possible to support the progressive character of post-capitalism without rejecting Marxism, instead it represents the development of an alternative in relation to the economic conditions of the present. But this definition of the future can be strengthened in terms of accepting the continued importance of cooperative labour. It will not be possible to create a credible future without the emancipation of cooperative labour from the conditions of exploitation and alienation. In strategic terms the emancipatory future can be brought about by the political unity of the network individual and cooperative labour. In isolation both of these social forces are not powerful to bring about an alternative society. Combined they represent an effective opposition to capitalism in the contemporary period.

However Mason does not contemplate this strategy because he is psychologically overwhelmed by the serious character of the ecological situation and the economic impact of ageing. This means his conception of change becomes short-term and the agency of this process of transformation is the state. He defines his standpoint as revolutionary reformism and argues: “But the external shocks call for action that is centralized, strategic and fast. Only the state, and states acting together, can organize such action.”(29) He does not explain how states that have been the servant of the forces of neoliberalism can suddenly be transformed into agencies of ecological sustainability and with the ability to resolve serious economic problems in a rational and humane manner. Surely, the only logical and coherent strategy is that we need to be serious about developing the alliance of the network individual and cooperative labour in order to overthrow existing states if the problems of ecology and ageing are to be tackled in a principled and effective manner? In contradictory terms, Mason seems to retreat from his revolutionary reformism when he also suggests that the primary strategic agency of change is the network and the development of the automated and information economy. The prospect of tackling ecology is dependent on our capacity to advance post-capitalism. But why would the state become an ally in this process of effective self-liquidation of existing capitalism? Surely, a more reliable ally of change is cooperative labour, but instead of making this conclusion, Mason contends in an unrealistic manner that the state could become the major agency of transition to the new society: “In summary: under a government that embraced postcapitalism, the state, the corporate sector and public corporations could be made to pursue radically different ends with relatively low-cost changes to regulation, underpinned by radical programme to shrink debt.”(30) This standpoint is actually a revamped programme of traditional Social Democracy, in which basic utilities are nationalised and the economy is still predominantly based on private ownership. The reason for this strategic limitation is because he has forgotten the importance of politics when outlining the economy of the future. He neglects the continued importance of the struggle for political power if an alternative to capitalism is to be truly realised. There is no substitute for the realisation of a workers government if the profit motive is to be replaced by the emancipatory possibilities of post-capitalism combined with socialism. The ultimate weakness of Mason’s approach is his neglect of the significance of political revolution if the economic potential within capitalism is to be seriously emancipated.

Mason proposes an end to the domination of finance capital and the role of the major monopolies, and is for a basic income and decent living wage, and ultimately he is for the emancipation of cooperative labour from the dictates of capital: “Let’s spell out what this means: co-operative, self-managed, non-hierarchical teams are the most technologically advanced form of work. Yet large parts of the workforce are trapped in a world of fines, discipline, violence and power hierarchies – simply because the existence of a cheap labour culture allows it to survive.”(31) This comment almost represents his support for an alliance of the network with cooperative labour. Unfortunately, the anti-Marxist prejudices he has accumulated undermine his ability to reach this logical conclusion. However we can use the viewpoint of Mason in order to establish the conclusions that he is unwilling to systematically support because of his rejection of the traditions of Marxism and its revolutionary programme. Mason uses the idea of Marx in order to contrast them with the supposed dogma of Marxism. He occasionally makes powerful points about the history of Marxism such as in relation to its rigid rejection of Kondratieff long waves. But it is a caricature to define Marxism as the justification of dogma. Instead principled Marxism has had, and will remain in the present, a guide to the class struggle. In contrast, Mason has rejected the role of the contemporary working class in the most pessimistic manner.

Despite these criticisms, Mason has carried out one invaluable service. He has made a vital contribution in elaborating what the future could be like without the domination of finance capital. Marxists have no excuse to limit their understanding of the future to Marx’s notes in the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’. Instead we can combine the conception of post-capitalism with the development of an understanding of what we mean by socialism in the contemporary period of globalisation. Thanks to Mason it is possible to argue that socialism is no longer the failure of Stalinism, or a product of the utopian imagination, and instead it is emerging within capitalism. The historical possibility for the future is present and is constantly attempting to free itself from the limitations of the present system. Mason has contributed to Marx’s understanding that: “The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.”(32)

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Paul Mason: PostCapitalism, Allen Lane: London, 2015

(2)ibid pxi

(3)ibid pxiii

(4)Ernest Mandel: Long Waves of Capitalist Development, Cambrige University Press,

(5)Mason op cit p65

(6)V.I Lenin: Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, in Volume 22, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964 p295

(7)ibid p302

(8)ibid p302-303

(9)Mason op cit p91-92

(10)ibid p138

(11)Ibid p144

(12)Karl Marx: Capital, Penguin, London, 1976 p449-454

(13)ibid p929

(14)Erik Olin Wright: Envisioning Real Utopias, Verso, London, 2010 p94

(15)Mason op cit p177-178

(16)Istvan Meszaros: Beyond Capital, Merlin Press, London, 1995 p448

(17)ibid p449

(18)Mason op cit: p164

(19)ibid p175

(20)Ibid p195

(21)Ibid p207

(22)GDH Cole: The World of Labour, G.B Bell and Sons, London 1915

(23)Mason op cit p220

(24)Wright op cit p298-299

(25)Mason op cit p233

(26)David Miller: Market, State and Community, Oxford University Press, 1989 p9-10

(27)Mason op cit p244

(28)Tony Smith: Globalisation: a Systematic Marxist Account, Haymarket books, Chicago, 2009 p313-314

(29)Mason op cit p261

(30)ibid p278

(31)ibid p287

(32)Marx op cit p929