THE DEMORALISATION OF PAUL MASON

Paul Mason used to be a Marxist and a principled supporter of the group Workers Power. But he has now become a famous advocate of a type of diluted left-wing politics that is based on the rejection of any adherence to a revolutionary standpoint. He has elaborated his views in a new book: ‘Clear Bright Future’ (Allen Lane, London 2019). He does not consider that it is important to outline an understanding of the present situation in terms of the developments in economic and political terms. Instead he indicates in a pessimistic manner the advance of reactionary forces in terms of the election of the Trump presidency in the USA, and the influence of right-wing views on the Internet. The problem with his standpoint is not that the description of the importance of authoritarian populism is not accurate, and that it indicates the possibility of the undermining of the role of democratic liberalism within advanced capitalist society. The emphasis of Mason is about the apparently inexorable and increasing ascendency of the forces of support for the advance of authoritarian types of capitalism. He comments: “Since the 1980’s, free market ideology has attacked our right to possess a self that is more than a collection of economic needs. As globalization falls apart, the very idea of rights that are universal and inalienable has come under attack. Meanwhile technology has begun to undermine our ability to act autonomously, free of digital control and surveillance: we are increasingly subject to forms of algorithmic control that we are not allowed to see, nor to understand.”(p8) This situation is portrayed as being of an omnipotent and absolute character that implies that the progressive transformation of society has become impossible. This means that the attempt to uphold an optimistic conclusion by Mason seems to be very unconvincing. He also comments that: “I believe that despite the fear and cruelty of the present, we can achieve what the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky once called the ‘clear bright future’ of humankind. But as well as demystifying the sources of economic crisis and deepening our understanding of democracy, we need to defend the very concept of humanity and draw new practical conclusions from it.”(p8) But what is not explained is how an increasingly alienated humanity, because of the influence of the character of modern technological society, will become able and willing to transform reality? Instead the inability to resolve this dilemma within his book means that Mason has to utilise increasingly problematical arguments in order to uphold the prospect of progressive change occurring despite the apparently dominant influence of the forces of reaction. Ultimately the problem is that the question of the character of society is not posed in terms of the antagonism between the forces of capital and labour, which has resulted in the offensive of capital since the period of the 1980s in order to maintain the faltering dominance of the forces of reaction. Instead the working class is not considered by Mason to be the major agency of change, and indeed sections of it are considered to have become an expression of mass support for authoritarian populism. In this sense the argument for change is based on an appeal to left wing opinion in elitist terms of the importance of activists who are not apparently demoralised by the apparently increasingly successful advance of reactionary forces within the major capitalist countries. In other words, the intelligentsia is effectively defined as the agency of change, but how this section of society will attract mass support is never explained. Instead it is assumed that the intelligentsia will be able to be victorious in a situation in which the mass of the people become effectively neutralised. There is no mention of the role of democratic mass organisation as the basis of the process of developing genuine change, and instead Mason continually refers to the apparently reactionary role of the mass of the working class in the social conditions of the decline of capitalism. Indeed, the demoralisation of the workers is held to be responsible for the success of Trump, but what is ignored is that Bernie Saunders was also able to obtain the support of the most class- conscious workers. Therefore, the perspective of developing the ability of the vanguard of the workers to promote the possibility of advancing a process of social change is never entertained by Mason. Instead he seems to accept that the working class has become a declining and increasingly impotent class that is most likely to be influenced by reactionary ideas. But what he does not seem to recognise is that this approach seems to undermine the credibility of any perspective of progressive change. His reliance on the role of the intelligentsia as the agency of change is not credible without mass support. But such issues can be apparently resolved in terms of the conception of the importance of the networked society or change via the influence of the role of modern communication systems. This is an illusion which ignores the continued important fact that the majority of society is still defined by its role within the relations of production. It will be the rejection of the role of labour, of its continued domination by capital, that will create the economic and political conditions for change to occur. But Mason considers that this perspective has become a rigid and dogmatic view of Marxists, which has little relevance in relation to the present character of society which is increasingly defined by the role of modern communications. But Mason never outlines in any detailed manner why this understanding of society has become antiquated and anachronistic. Instead he only considers in a dogmatic manner that the Marxist view of the revolutionary possibilities of the proletariat was always unrealistic. Hence, he effectively glosses over the importance of social history since the 19th century which was based on the opposition of the roles of capital and labour. Instead of recognising this character of social history, Mason effectively ignores the character of much of contemporary history and instead emphases the apparent contradiction between the reactionary and progressive forces of the network society. But this standpoint represents an alienated view that emphases the influence of the role of the actions of individuals within modern communications and ignores the importance of the wider relations and activity of people within social reality. He also ignores the possible significance of the election of a Labour government under the leadership of Corbyn and the importance of the success of Bernie Sanders in the USA. Therefore, his approach does not outline a recognition of the continued importance of politics and nor does he outline a strategy that can facilitate the progress of the forces of left-wing opinion.

Mason outlines the most important aspect of contemporary politics in the following manner: “The strategic threat is from technology. It is possible that within the century artificial intelligence will attain a level of sophistication that exceeds the capabilities of all human beings put together. ….Belief in these possibilities is fuelling a strong anti-humanism among those thinking about the future: a defeatism about the value of human individuality; a conviction that homo sapiens is a species destined to be eclipsed.”(p10) If we accept the importance of the prediction being made by Mason, how do we achieve a situation in which it is possible to reconcile the advances of technology with the aims of creating a better and fairer society? The only perspective that is feasible in this situation is to try and create increasing support for the aim of socialism. But this is the very demand that Mason effectively considers to be both antiquated and unrealistic. Hence, what he is effectively advocating is a more democratic form of capitalism, but this raises the problem that it is the very logical development of capitalism which has led to the issues he is raising. How can we create a more humane and progressive form of capitalism that would be willing to regulate in a more democratic manner the role of artificial intelligence? Instead of addressing this question, Mason evades it because of his illusion that it is possible to realise a democratic form of the network society. But how could such a society be effective without the creation of the ability of labour to overcome the domination of capital? The point is that it is the present character of capitalism which is promoting the increased importance of artificial intelligence. Therefore, the only feasible alternative would be to undermine and ultimately overcome the present domination of capital. But this would imply the very importance of class struggle which Mason considers to be unrealistic and not able to achieve the objectives that he is advocating. Therefore, the result of his self-limiting conception of politics is to reduce his perspectives to the role of a moral programme. In this sense he knows what he is against, but he is vague about how to realise his aims. Indeed he often seems to suggest that people have become incapable of achieving this aim because they have become alienated by the network society. Only a few principled individuals seem to be genuinely against the advance of technology and its alienating possibilities. The result of this apparent elitism is an impasse, and this is connected to his continued rejection of the necessity of a strategy of change based on the role of class struggle. The point being made is not that Mason is incorrect to indicate the importance of the reactionary possibilities of new technology and its relationship to a new form of authoritarian populism, but rather that the result of this understanding is the complete lack of a coherent and convincing strategy to oppose this development. Indeed, the character of politics is reduced to a situation of opposition between small groups of progressive or reactionary people. The majority of society is not connected to this development and instead the question as to the ability of opposing and defeating the forces of a new form of authoritarianism is connected to the role of a dedicated and motivated progressive elite which acts on behalf of the interests of society. In other words, the activist is considered to be the expression of a vanguard that acts to oppose the victory of right-wing populism. But this view admits that the mass force in this situation is the doctrine of populism which is able to motivate the support of irrational people. This approach seems to be an admission that the balance of class forces favours the interests of populism. Indeed, this point seems to be indicated by the election victory of President Trump. Such a pessimistic perspective makes no mention of the importance of the popularity of Bernie Sanders and the possibility to revive the popularity of democratic socialism in the USA. Instead it seems to be an assumption of Mason that the forces of irrationalism will generally be victorious over that of rationalism and the approach of progressive politics.

Mason supports the reaffirmation of a new form of radical humanism that is able to locate the importance of humans in the development and progress of society. This approach is welcome given that it is an important aspect of opposing the authoritarian approach of the populist right wing. But the problem is that this standpoint will only become meaningful if it is connected to a strategy that is able to outline the possibility of humans to be able to transform social reality in a progressive and emancipatory manner. However, it is questionable whether Mason has the determination and willingness to provide this sort of approach because his views are based on the success of the reactionary forces within society. He outlines many convincing reasons why the authoritarian populists have achieved success, but this is not contrasted with the importance of the role of an alternative, which is instead defined in terms of an intellectual project. What is not outlined is the praxis of liberation, and yet the praxis of the reactionary mobilisation of the forces of the elite are outlined in detailed terms. This means that the project of emancipation is lacking in practical validity, and it is considered in moral terms as a good idea, but the issue of its viability is not established. In contrast the actual power of reactionary elites is outlined in detail. This means the question of a progressive alternative is reduced to a good idea that seems to lack practical viability. Hence it is not surprising that Mason presents the advance of Trump and his supporters as being an omnipotent process related to the decline of the social cohesion of American society. He comments: “This time round they probably don’t need fascism. Solidarity has been atomised, our belief in collective action eroded, and our sense of self hollowed out by the routines of market behaviour – and with that, so has the moral basis of liberalism. If you wanted to unleash an attack on democracy, reinforced by machine control of human behaviour, this would be it.”(p34) Mason is aware of the divisions within the working class between reactionary and progressive strands, but this is not considered to be important because in these dogmatic terms the ability of the workers to develop the class consciousness required to advocate left-wing politics is effectively rejected and instead the conclusion that is made is that the present situation is inherently favourable for the development of the success of right-wing populism. In this context the end of any prospect of the revolutionary role of the working class becomes the justification of the conclusion that the only credible possibility is for the success of populist politics. The prospect of the success of a left-wing movement in electoral terms is effectively rejected by the assumptions of the above comment. Instead the majority of the working class is considered to be a reactionary mass that provides the popular basis of the success of movements led by people like Trump. What is not recognised by Mason is that this situation could be transformed by the successes in the class struggle. Indeed, it could be argued that election victories for Bernie Sanders, or likeminded people, could transform the situation in the USA. The point is that the discontent of people in the USA, which led to the victory of Trump, was ultimately because of the failures of American capitalism which led to increased unemployment and the lowering of wages. In this situation Obama’s health care reforms were very popular, and Trump has only been able to undermine them in the most cautious manner. The point is that it would be the emergence of a Presidential contender with an ambitious social reform programme that would be most able to defeat Trump in 2020. In this manner the split between the reactionary and progressive sections of the working class could start to be overcome. But Mason is not interested in making this point, because instead he seems more interested in suggesting that the ascendency of the forces of irrationalism is effectively inevitable. But the problem with this apparent pessimism is that it means that his attempt to uphold a progressive alternative becomes unconvincing or an expression of vague hopes that seem to lack any practical justification. Ultimately the possibility of effective social change brought about by the people becomes limited to the post-war period between 1945-79 when a type of state capitalism made important concessions to the interests of labour. But since then the development of neo-liberalism has ended this era of reforms, and instead the interests of labour have become ruthlessly subordinated to that of capital which has acquired global dimensions. The assumption of this analysis is that the forces of the working class have become unable to defend their interests in a convincing manner. What is being argued is that the workers have been undermined and their previous social power has been replaced by a sense of impotence and weakness. The ability to defend their interests has been replaced by a situation in which they have become dispensable for the economic system. The new labour force is that of the white collar and intelligentsia. What is being implied is that the possibility to revive the Marxist notion of the self-emancipation of the working class has been made antiquated by social and economic developments. However, this assumption only indicates that the possibility of any genuine progress is with the liberal inclinations of a section of the elite. But why should their aspirations be defined as being genuinely progressive? Furthermore, the only feasible development seems to be the increasing success of various forms of right-wing populism which is supported by the demoralised and declining sections of the working class. In this context the perspective of Mason that seems to be credible is the prediction that neoliberalism is increasing being replaced by the ascent of forms of the authoritarian defence of capitalism. Indeed, given the pessimistic logic of the approach of Mason his advocacy of a progressive alternative does not seem to be credible. In other words, the only aspect of his analysis that seems to be convincing is that which suggests the continued victory of the forces of right-wing populism. In this context the validity and feasibility of an alternative does not seem to be credible. Hence the conclusion that neo-liberalism represents an irreversible shift in the balance of power from working people to the forces of global capital becomes convincing in the context of this political pessimism. Or as Mason comments: “I want to pause and contemplate the significance of the changes brought about by neo-liberalism. Each involves a shift in the balance of power away from those who work, away from national democracies and away from people who do not own technology companies…..If you invent a form of capitalism with power surges suddenly towards an unaccountable and technologically armed elite, with a penchant for class confrontation, it becomes easy to destroy the liberal, democratic and universalist ethos most people in the West thought was permanent.”(p41) But the point for any progressive minded intellectual is to continue to consider that such changes are related to the situation of the intensification and polarisation of the relations between classes. The argument for socialism is continually being renewed and reinforced in this situation. But what is problematical is the increasing sense of impotence of the working class in this situation. But this is the very aspect that is accepted by Mason as being an inevitable component of the character of neo-liberalism. The result of this one-sidedness is that he knows what he is against, but he has problems in outlining what he is in favour of.

The above criticism is not meant to deny the problematical aspect of the role of social agency in relation to the issue of challenging the domination of capital. But the answer to this issue is not constructively expressed by the rejection of the possibility of an emancipatory potential for the workers in relation to the prospect of facilitating social change. What is being suggested is that whilst it is true that there is demoralisation within the working class because of the recent undermining of social gains by the process of the offensive of capital this does not mean that the forces of labour have become incapable of being able to oppose the present economic and political system. Instead there has been a process of demoralisation which has led to the development of reactionary views as expressed by the BREXIT referendum and the election of Trump in the USA. But there is also a progressive minority of workers who can be capable of developing the mass basis of the plausibility of an alternative to the system in terms of the role of mass and militant action. But such a potential is presently undermined by the moderate role of the leadership of the working class within the trade unions and political parties advocating social reform. It is necessary to create a militant minority that is able to articulate a perspective of opposition to the system, and which could attract the support of the workers for a process of action that becomes increasingly ambitious in its dynamics of mass action. At one time Mason would have supported this approach, but his rejection of revolutionary politics has led him to oppose this perspective. The result of this change of political stance has meant that he now considers the process of progressive change in terms of the role of a progressive elite, which is based on the creation of an alternative in terms of the role of the network generation. But this standpoint can only result in the creation of a small group of elitist people who are united in terms of common beliefs, it does not generate the political conditions for the facilitating of effective mass action and the related generation of the belief in the realisation of a new and alternative form of society that can overcome the various limitations of capitalism. But Mason seems unaware of these issues because he considers the working class to be a declining social stratum that is incapable of creating the conditions for change. But if the aim of mobilising the working class in progressive terms is impractical then this would logically mean that workers would become likely to become supporters of reactionary objectives such as the election of Trump. Indeed, this would seem to be his conclusion because the workers are essentially considered to be a declining social stratum and so attracted by the reactionary policies of Trump. But this approach ignores the fact that the more progressive minded workers in the trade unions and supporters of organisations like the trade unions have an important role in trying to influence the rest of the working class in opposing the reactionary objectives of BREXIT and Trump. It is necessary to begin with the minority of workers who are organised in labour movement organisations and to utilise their sense of class consciousness in order to try and obtain the support of the more reactionary influenced workers to become adherents of a left-wing approach. But Mason ignores this type of perspective because to him the working class is a declining and effective defunct class that lacks any sense of social power. But this means that he ignores the continuing social character of capitalism which is still based on the important role of labour for the purpose of the economic accumulation of the system. Instead Mason defines the character of capitalism in terms of the role of the network economy, and as a result he concludes that the social agency of change is based on the intellectual elite that operate this system. This perspective is entirely one-sided and dogmatic and ignores the continued importance of the relationship of capital and labour.

Mason bases his approach on the view that the neo-liberal transformation of the economic system led to an offensive of capital against labour which undermined the ability of the latter to be able to organise and act in effective terms as a class force. He comments: “The aim of neoliberal policy in the early 1980’s was to inflict a slump so hard that it would destroy the bargaining power of the trade unions, the culture that incubated them, the values of solidarity they spread, the socialist ideals they nurtured and the workplaces they organized in. To break their wills to resist, millions of skilled working class people of my fathers generation would be subjected to the very thing that had haunted their nightmares since childhood: the humiliation of poverty and long-term unemployment.”(p42) But what is not satisfactorily mentioned is that this situation led to the militant opposition of labour and the development of various militant struggles in order to oppose the employers’ offensive. As a result of this aspect the victory of the ruling class was not certain and inevitable and instead only occurred as the outcome of many bitter struggles. Only in this fluctuating situation did it become possible to alter the balance of class forces in favour of the interest of capital and against that of labour. It is true that such a development has had a profound effect on class consciousness but it would be a dogmatic and pessimist conclusion to suggest that this situation means that the possibility of new forms of opposition by labour to the system have become impractical or will be inherently ineffective. Yet this is essentially the conclusion made by Mason when he comments: “By the late 1980s you had two kinds of subjectivity: a group of embittered survivors from the old system living alongside enthusiastic early adaptors of selfishness, individualism and conformity. But in a world of chaos and poverty, the memory of the good times under state capitalism is strong, so the prevailing mood in working class communities is depression and insecurity. The big negative lessons have been learned, the defeat of organized labour has been accepted but there is still no strong, positive, universal common sense for people to buy into.”(p46) Thus the conclusion that is being made is that the situation of the defeats of the workers in the 1980s and 1990s has been irreversible. This has meant the working class is a declining and ineffective social force that is incapable of creating the possibility to change society. Instead the workers are a powerless group that is based on the ideology of nostalgia and the acceptance of a situation of social impotence. This situation would imply that any Marxist who still upholds the perspective of change by the methods of class struggle has an approach that is unable to accept these irreversible changes within society. Mason elaborates his perspective and contends that the result of these developments is the creation of selfish individuals who no longer have any empathy with the interests of the rest of society. The assumption being made is that the possibility of struggles based on the importance of solidarity has become increasingly difficult, except for the small groups of motivated activists. In general terms these developments had created an alienated working class that is only united by its common sense of impotence. He precisely outlines his understanding in the following terms: “And at a deeper level, people came to understand that the new dynamics of capitalism had rendered ineffective the kind of workplace resistance practised by my father’s generation.”(p53) He elaborates his approach when he also comments that the reason for this past situation was because of the importance of labour for the process of production, but this aspect has been superseded by economic changes: “Even if you merely ‘worked to rule’ you could win a pay rise, because it was only the intricate knowledge of factory workers that kept pre-digital production processes going.”(p53) Hence the end of the importance of the factory system has led to the decline of the importance of labour. The result is the undermining of the ability of militant action to be able to influence the economic and political situation. Ultimately the structural changes within capitalism has meant that the importance of the industrial worker has been ended. Mason implies that the dogmatism of Marxism is based on continued adherence to the significance of the role of the proletariat. But the question that he does not ask is that if the importance of labour has been drastically changed does this mean that capitalism has become invincible? He refuses to ask this logical question that arises from his analysis because he is promoting a new strategy of change. But the problem he has concerns who will replace the importance of labour as an agency of emancipation? Ultimately, he can only address this issue by drastically reducing the ambitions of the perspective of change. This means that the central question becomes about which agency can modify the character of capitalism in a progressive manner. The task becomes to replace the neoliberal agenda with a humanised version of the present system. But this perspective creates a dilemma because he has also indicated important reasons why the system cannot be modified because of its inherent interest in the continuation of the neoliberal agenda. The result is that he creates an impasse that he has to try and resolve.

The assumption being made by Mason is that the defeats of the forces of labour in the 1980s means that it cannot become an effective agency of social change. Instead labour is a defeated class that has had its victories in the past and was able to bring about the welfare state in the post-war period, but in the present its effectiveness has been undermined by the role of neoliberalism. But this conception is not outlined in a systematic manner and is instead only assumed and asserted. It is true that the advent of neoliberalism has led to significant changes in the composition of the working class, but has this expressed the situation of the end of its ability to be able to challenge the power of capital? Instead it would be more relevant to suggest that the moderate role of the trade union leadership in many countries has resulted in the acceptance by labour of the development and aims of neoliberalism. Hence, what is required is a change of leadership of the forces of labour that could promote a more militant opposition to neoliberalism. Mason accepts that the era of neoliberalism has led to increasing development of periods of crisis, but this only means that capitalism has entered into situations of stagnation and impasse. It does not mean that it is possible to challenge the system in terms of the role of the militant actions of the working class. But the era of austerity has led to tremendous social unrest, but this is not translated into a situation of mass action because of the conservative role of the trade union leadership. Instead the union leaders have tried to negotiate limited advances for their members whilst refusing to contemplate any action that may challenge the dominant power of capital. However Mason cannot contemplate this possibility, whilst he does acknowledge the importance of ecological and other forms of protest by activists he also indicates that the major beneficiaries of the situation of increasing crisis are the forces of reaction: “The global economic order born in 1989 is being torn apart by economic stagnation and by forces opposed to science and democracy. This is the opposite of progress.” (p62) It would seem that it is not possible to develop the forces of progressive opposition to capital in this situation because it is implied that the various mass protests for ecological change and rejection of elite globalisation can only be the aspirations of a minority. What is being implied is that the majority of society represents a reactionary force that is increasingly becoming supporters of authoritarian populism in this situation of economic uncertainty. Hence, what is being implied is that it is not possible for any progressive parties to emerge that could mobilise a coalition in support of radical change. Instead the domination of neoliberalism resulted in a situation of ideological conformity which became transformed with the development of increased crisis into the alienated support for authoritarian populism: “The neoliberal project was in practice an assault on humanism. It enforced the reduction of human nature to economic competition and it suppressed all attempts to experiment with alternatives. Once its dynamism disappeared in 2008, the ‘order of normative reason’ collapsed. That’s the explanation for why so many people, so easily, were able to revert to the logic of ethnic nationalism, misogyny and anti-science: their mental defences against these ideologies had been destroyed.”(p66) This view is a repetition of the approach of Adorno and Horkheimer who argued that the contemporary form of society was resulted in the development of the domination of an authoritarian personality. But this meant they could not explain the possibility of an agency to promote the perspective of a progressive alternative, and nor can Mason. Instead all that he can outline is the dominant success of a reactionary ideology which means that any form of left-wing politics has to become marginalised or reduced to various forms of activism that lacks popular support. He has outlined the justification of the primary importance of alienation within society, and so the potential for a progressive alternative seems to be entirely undermined. This means that he is unable to establish the credibility of the basis for austerity resulting in the contemporary development of a new type of left-wing politics with mass support.

Yet in empirical terms his very standpoint is challenged by the popular support of a Corbyn led Labour Party and the crisis of the Conservative party because of Brexit. It is true that the Brexit Party has become popular, but this only indicates the increasing polarisation of society between reactionary and progressive perspectives. The point is that the influence of reactionary views is being contested and that there is popular support for the UK to remain within the EU. Furthermore, the Trump presidency in the USA has led to popular opposition and support of many militant campaigns that express the principles of social reform. Furthermore, the ecological issue has become increasingly topical and raises important issues about the character of economic development under capitalism. Indeed, the contradiction in the approach of Mason is that he is very aware of the importance of militant opposition to the various expressions of the role of neoliberalism and has reported on the development of mass opposition to its expression. However, this does not result in the logical perspective of a policy of transforming militant protest into the expression of an aspiration to change the character of society. Instead he contends that this situation of militant opposition to the system has led to a contrasting development of authoritarian populism which resulted in the election of Trump as president of the USA. This irrationalism has become the dominant aspect of the present period: “Nobody designed this catastrophe. It was caused, if anything, by the Western elite’s disdain for the rational design of societies. Now this threefold crisis – strategic economic stagnation, global fragmentation, and the rise of irrationalism – characterise and dominates the age in which we live.” (p100) But if the ascendency of the authoritarian personality has become hegemonic, how is it possible to realise progressive social change? Instead it would seem that the ideological basis of a new type of hegemonic and omnipotent form of capitalism is being created. The only basis of instability is the re-emergence of new forms of inter-imperialist conflict between increasingly rival forms of national capital.

In other words the influence of the repressive personality because of the disorientation caused by the crisis of neoliberalism and the related reactionary influence of the network culture seems to have created a typical right-wing personality who is not able to express forms of solidarity with other humans, and is instead influenced by reactionary and egotistical influences. Instead the only apparent outcome of the demise of the importance of the coherence of neoliberalism is the ascendency of irrationalism: “Neoliberalism’s collapse has stripped the current model of capitalism of all meaning and justification…..the vacuum is being filled by an ideology hostile to human rights, to universalism, to gender and racial equality; and ideology that worships power, sees democracy as a sham and wishes for a catastrophic reset of the entire global order.”(p109) But this conception is not contrasted with the recognition of alternatives such as the importance of progressive views and militant actions that aspire to the creation of a better type of society. Instead Mason seems to assume the uniform ascendency of various forms of irrationalism because of the situation of increasing economic crisis. The domination of the authoritarian personality has become effectively invincible. Hence, it would seem that all that can be done is to make a moral appeal for support for a progressive alternative. But apparently even this adverse situation is even more problematical because the increased importance of computer technology seems to have discredited definitively the aspiration of human beings to create a better type of society. Mason comments: “If the new digital idealism is right, humanism is just a form of nostalgia. If we are to defend truth based on our sensory experience against fake news; if we are going to defend universal rights against theories of racial and gender supremacy; if we are to replace neoliberalism with a system based on our 360 degree human needs – then all the tasks we need to defend the concept of a human being who is capable (subject to given human circumstances) of autonomous thought and action. Or, as philosophers call it, freedom.” (p130-131) But the problem is that even if we can develop such a theory, and Mason is confident of establishing the credibility of this task, how can it be translated into political practice? This is because the problem is that it seems that irrationalism, which has been encouraged by the computer technology, has become omnipotent. The domination of the new authoritarianism does not seem to be undermined by the apparently much weaker forces of the role of progressive views. Thus whilst Mason contends that he whilst he supports Marx’s view that the human being has a dynamic capacity to realise the objectives of freedom via the transformation of nature, he rejects the importance of the social agency that can establish the credibility of this objective, which is labour that is conscious of the aim of creating a better type of society. But such a standpoint seems to have become unfeasible in an era of the increased domination of the role of computer technology and artificial intelligence. In this situation the activity of humans seems to be dictated by sophisticated machinery. Hence the aim of Mason to establish progressive control of technology by humans in terms of emancipatory aims seems to lack credibility because he has already outlined the apparent inevitable rise of irrationalism which would and is comfortably adapting to the requirements of the new technology. Hence the issue which he is unable to express is the necessity to develop a progressive form of social activity that is able to overcome the domination and supremacy of the connection of the new technology with the role of the forces of authoritarianism.

Instead in a vague and yet unconvincing manner he outlines the importance of reviving the progressive protests of the recent past. But instead of elaborating the necessity of the development of militant practice, he instead calls for the formation of an alternative type of network individual: “But at the root of a resistance strategy there has to be a change happening at the level of the self. We need the ‘networked individual’ to change: from an identity spontaneously produced by technology and social freedom to an identity consciously crafted by collective action. The working class of the nineteenth century moved from identifying a common interest between them to designing a common project. So must we.”(p193) But if people are defined by the importance of computers and artificial intelligence how are they to overcome this situation and create an alternative emancipatory situation? Mason cannot answer this issue because he has accepted that the network era is defining the very consciousness of human beings. Instead in a dogmatic manner he insists that that very alienated network individual can become the expression of an agency of progressive social change: “The network individual may be oppressed, harassed, crushed down by circumstance. But the life they are living – simultaneously empowered and manipulated by technology – contains the seeds of a project of human freedom based on overcoming this alienation and self-estrangement.”(p205) But it is not the network individual who can express the basis of a praxis of social transformation, but instead this possibility can only occur when the network individual rejects the importance of this aspect of reality and instead becomes a genuinely dynamic agency of collective change. This can only occur in terms of the development of authentic forms of solidarity based on the generation of traditional forms of mass struggle and connected to coherent and principled political objectives such as the aim to elect a Corbyn led Labour party into government. The point is that the emphasis on the network individual cannot replace the importance of a strategy of change based on the dynamism of effective human activity. To believe that this aspect can be established by the role of the network individual is an illusion that contracts Mason’s more credible understanding of the reactionary role of computer technology. The point is that it is necessary to overcome the alienated situation of the network individual and instead create the generation of realistic forms of human activity. This process requires the role of traditional organisation, strategies and the aspiration to promote various forms of mass action. Instead Mason considers that network technology can overcome its present alienated condition and become an expression of a genuine form of solidarity and praxis. This perspective seems to be an illusion, and instead we would suggest that the network can only become a supplement to the role of more credible forms of mass action, which most importantly are based on the role of a strategy for change.

Potentially Mason understands the importance of Marxism as a perspective of human emancipation based on the increasing possibility for people to establish conscious control of the conditions of their productive activity. But he also considers that this approach has been undermined by the challenges that have been posed by social reality since his time. But the basis of the criticism of Mason is defined by what he considers to be the ability of Marx to predict the developments of events since his time. But such a critique is based on the elitist view that Marx himself should be able to exclusively as an individual have the answers to the problems of the present. Hence he does not accept that Marxism is a dynamic doctrine that is based on the collective development of knowledge by people who are generally committed to the perspective of proletarian revolutionary change and communism. He comments: “What I am interested in is a Marxist critique of Marx around the issues that confront us today: women’s oppression, climate change, how to understand complexity, how to abolish scarcity and how to impose human control over thinking machines in a global ethical framework.”(p227) This comment indicates that he reduces the approach of Marxism to the views of Marx and so comes to the dogmatic conclusion that Marx did not write about many of the issues that are relevant in the present. However, if we extend this comment to the views of contemporary Marxism, Mason is dogmatically ignoring the contribution that Marxists have made to the understanding of feminism, ecology, contemporary capitalism and globalisation and the implications of the advances of technology within the economy. The doctrine of Marx cannot be reduced to the views of a single person. Instead it is a dynamic theory that is able to evaluate and reach conclusions about many contemporary issues. Instead of this recognition by reducing Marxism to the views of Marx it is not difficult for Mason to establish the rigid conclusion that Marxism is a dogmatic approach that is not able to comprehend the importance of many contemporary phenomena within a changing social reality. For example, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky elaborated Marx’s conception of proletarian revolution and Hilferding and Bukharin elaborated a conception of the contemporary world economy. Kollontai and others contributed to an understanding of the struggle for women’s emancipation and this approach has been extended in terms of a perspective to oppose forms of racial oppression. Furthermore, Marxism has helped to understand the development of globalisation and important discussion occurs about the contemporary relationship of the nation state and global economy. Other writers have contributed to a study of the process of emancipation. Thus, Marxism is a dynamic doctrine that has not become a dogma because of a rigid reliance on the exclusive views of Marx. Yet this is the conclusion being made by Mason in order to consider Marxism as a rigid approach that has difficulty in analysing contemporary reality.

Mason suggests that the sexism of the Stalinist states is an indication that the Marxist justification of a neglect of the oppression of women is an expression of theoretical limitations: “Both Marxism and feminism include biological claims. Marx’s theory of human nature is not gender specific: it says we are all defined by imaginative goal centred work, and that once we overcome scarcity, all forms of power hierarchies should disappear. Feminism says that both male power and female oppression can be biologically determined: there has to be a parallel struggle, with separate dynamics, and it will have to carry on beyond the achievement of what Marx calls communism.”(p229) But the failure to realise women’s liberation in so-called socialist countries was not primarily because of the limitations in the theory of Marx and was instead because of the adverse material conditions that facilitated the dynamics of the creation of new forms of exploitative societies, and as a result the commitment to women’s liberation became rejected and replaced by the justification of the imposition of forms of gender exploitation and the acceptance of male supremacy. This development had nothing to do with limitations in the theory of Marx. Indeed, these limitations were being overcome by the development of Marxist and feminist theory. But such advances can only be defined by Mason as undermining the apparent dogmatic certainties in the theory of Marx. Instead if we recognise Marxism as a genuinely collective theoretical and political project, we can understand how Marxism has responded both principally and flexibly to the development of the struggle for the liberation of women. The advent of feminism has only contributed to the principled development of Marxism as a dynamic theory of social reality.

The most important criticism by Mason of Marxism is that it has been based on the illusion that the working class because of its exploitation by capital will become a revolutionary class committed to the realisation of a new communist society: “For the past 200 years the workers movement has been the most heroic and consistent force in fighting for democracy, social progress, internationalism and women’s rights. But at no stage did the majority of working class people consistently and effectively support a project of abolishing private property.”(p229) And: “Instead of embodying (or ‘bearing’) the antidote to private property, workers actually embodied their own interests as a class within capitalism: they demanded higher wages, equal rights and a higher social wage. When their struggles went beyond this – as they frequently did – they often settled for control instead of power – above all control at work and the right to live an autonomous cultural life.”(p230) It would seem that this development was the inherently spontaneous dynamic of mass struggles by workers that were inherently limited to what was possible within capitalism. What is not mentioned is the many struggles as in France in the mid-1930s and 1968 which were undermined by the actions of reformist organisations that ensured that the militancy was limited by their own cautious objectives. Without the problem of the role of the reformists and Stalinists it could have been possible to transform the situation and realise forms of genuinely democratic socialism. It has also been the role of bourgeois ideology to encourage the development of forms of class consciousness within the workers that are limited to what can be obtained under the present system of capitalism. However, what we do learn from these developments is that the working class has difficulty in spontaneously acquiring the necessary consciousness that enables it to act to overcome the domination of capital. It is vital that revolutionary parties be developed in order to promote a process of interaction between party and class that is able to overcome the influence of bourgeois ideology and so enable the possibility of social change to occur. But such an interaction has been undermined by the development of Social Democratic reformism and the decline of the Communist parties into Stalinist organisations that no longer had the aim of revolutionary change as their priority. This situation has been worsened by the inability to build mass and popular revolutionary Marxist parties that would have been able to advocate feasible strategies of social transformation. In this context it is not surprising that the various struggles of the working class generally do not acquire revolutionary dimensions. Mason effectively blames what he considers to be the inherent limitations of the class consciousness of the workers, but it would be more accurate to emphasise the detrimental limitations of the role of the various political organisations claiming to be acting on the basis of the interests of labour. Hence given these political limitations it is not surprising that the aims of the workers become limited to establishing a greater ability to be able to control their social and work environment. But even this aspiration for what is a form of workers control could become the economic and political basis to advance the realisation of the aim of the workers management of society if the logic of this aspiration was made apparent by the role and influence of revolutionary forces. The point is that without the progress towards the realisation of workers management within capitalist society the limited aspects of control that workers have established within society, because of the role of trade union militancy, have been undermined in the era of neoliberalism. The various forces of capital and reactionary governments have acted in order to undermine the strength of the working class within the process of production. Hence, the aspect of control by the workers within the workplace could only have been guaranteed by the ascendency of the working class to the successful domination of society by means of the realisation of workers’ management of the economy. This situation means that Mason’s emphasis on the role of workers control is problematical because it would have required the realisation of socialism in order to ensure that this development was successfully maintained and upheld as the logic of society. Instead the neoliberal offensive ended the limited gains within capitalism, but this development only indicated the importance of socialism if the interests of the working class was to be successfully realised and maintained.

Mason ignores the complex history of the relationship of Social Democratic and Communist organisations with the working class and instead he insists that the workers made the conscious decision to strive to achieve their own autonomy within capitalism: “In fact, the most politically conscious workers repeatedly defied both Lenin and the reformist moderates. They struggled for more than just wages and trade unions but less than socialist revolution. The leitmotiv of working-class history, occurring again and again, is the creation of islands of control and freedom within capitalism. One thing that Leninists, Maoists and moderate Social Democrats agreed on was that such islands of self-control were a distraction.”(p231) But the point is that if we agree that the aspiration for such forms of control was a genuine and inherent aspect of the activity of workers, it would be the very task of revolutionary organisations to indicate that this situation could only be temporary if the domination of capital was not ended. In other words, it would be the political task of the Marxist party to contend that the limited realisation of forms of workers control could only be maintained by being extended in a more effective manner by the realisation of the management of the economy by the producers. Such a possibility could only occur if the perspective of revolutionary change was successfully realised. Hence the aspect of workers control was not an argument against the perspective of revolutionary transformation, instead it was the most important reason why it was necessary to consolidate and extend this situation by the effective transcendence of the continued importance of the role of capital within the relations of production by the act of revolutionary change. Mason has not provided an argument against the necessity and feasibility of revolutionary transformation by the role of labour, instead he has outlined an important reason why this strategy was both feasible and possible. It would be logical to maintain and ensure the continuation of the role of control of labour within society by the act of revolutionary change. In this manner the control of labour which had been a temporary expression of a favourable balance of class forces could become extended and made durable. The very character of socialism would be the expression of the consolidation of the fragile situation of the control of labour within the economy. Indeed the very progress of the aspect of control of the economy by the producers could become the basis for the process of the transformation of the social relations in terms of the realisation of management of the economy by the producers.

Mason rejects this understanding because he considers that the self-limiting role of control of society was an inherently moral and worthwhile aim of labour: “When labour movement cultures were strong, there was a conscious attempt to build a community in which all acts that contributed to the good life were seen as virtuous, and in which living an exemplary life and possessing virtues – such as solidarity, generosity, and the capacity for self-sacrifice – was as important as the ‘end’ itself (whether it be winning a strike or overthrowing a government). Since we want to survive within capitalism, educate ourselves and expand our control within the workplace, workers told each other, this is how to behave.”(p232) This point has validity, but it was the very task of the revolutionary party to indicate that these aspects were not sufficient and that forms of class solidarity had to become an expression of the conscious struggle for economic and political power if the very objectives of the aspirations of the workers were to be maintained and extended. The point is that at a certain moment the very onset of the crisis of capitalism would mean that the forces of capital would act to undermine the social progress made by the workers. This was the very character of the neoliberal offensive of the 1980s and since then. Hence if the gains of the workers were to be maintained in terms of the consolidation of the role of control of the workplace and the community, this would mean the acceptance of a conscious struggle for the realisation of the economic and political power by labour. This is the very point that Mason seems to have rejected.

Mason upholds the contradictory view that whilst the working class was often dissatisfied with capitalism this situation did not motivate the aspiration to overthrow the system. But the point was that it was the influence of reformist and Stalinist parties that undermined the possibility to develop popular forms of challenge to the domination of capitalism. Hence it cannot be plausibly maintained that the working class was inherently unwilling to overthrow capitalism. The very discontent outlined by Mason was the basis to promote the possibility to challenge the domination of capitalism, but the parties of the working class were instead motivated by the aim of obtaining concessions from the system rather than advocating a consistent perspective of revolutionary change. This meant the role of the reformist and Stalinist parties had profound effects on the consciousness of the workers, and the result was that this aspect undermined the possibility to develop support for proletarian revolution. Furthermore, the post-war stabilisation of capitalism meant that it was possible to obtain important concessions which suggested that the system could be improved and modified in terms of the interests of the workers. However, struggles still developed that had revolutionary possibilities like in France 1968 and Portugal 1974. The latter situation could have resulted in the formation of a worker’s government that would have generated the possibility of transition to socialism. Hence, we will never know what was possible if the regressive role of the reformist organisations had not been an important factor in relation to the class struggle. Whilst the era of neoliberalism indicated that the era of reforms was over, and so the situation expressed the necessity for defensive struggles to assume the more ambitious character of an opposition to capitalism. But such a possibility did not occur because of the continued influence of reformism. Labour is still important in this new era of the offensive of capital against the gains of the workers, and this very situation implies that it is vital that the forces of the proletariat develop a strategy to defend their interests and, in this manner, develop a challenge to the domination of capitalism.

However, Mason considers the situation in different terms. He comments: “Having destroyed and dispersed the industrial proletariat, neoliberal capitalism has reincarnated its gravedigger in a new form: the network individual. The network individual ‘bears’ the characteristics of future liberated humanity much more clearly than the coal miners of my grandfather’s generation. If they do overthrow capitalism, networked individuals will do it consciously and gradually, not as the unconscious puppets of historical forces.” (p233) This view is astounding. How will it be possible for the isolated network individuals to be able to develop a situation of cohesion and unity that enables them to act as a collective force, and why should they have the aim of socialism. What is it about their situation that results in the promotion of the perspective of the aspiration for a different society than that of capitalism? In other words, the character of the network economy does not facilitate the possibility of people acting together in terms of being cooperative individuals who have common goals, and this means there is no impetus to strive for socialism. Only if the network becomes the basis to generate forms of struggle such as mass movements of opposition to the aims of capital can it become an aspect of the process of undermining the domination of capital. But this very development would mean that the role of the network would be to facilitate the actions of labour to challenge the system. It would become the process of the means of propaganda and cooperation of the forces of the working class; and so the role of the proletariat in the process of change would still be important but it would be connected to the importance of the new forms of technology.

But this is not what Mason intends. Instead he considers the network as the alternative basis of the means of struggle against the present system and the basis of the alternative. He comments: “First, information technology creates the opportunity to build islands of abundance and self-control within capitalism, bypassing the stages of scarcity, planning, rationing and centralized control. In the early twenty-first century numerous left-wing thinkers, including myself, had the same thought at once that information technology, by collapsing the price mechanism and enabling rapid automation, makes it possible to aim straight for the goal of a classless, cooperative and fully automated society. So the networked individual has an achievable goal.”(p233) This perspective is merely the expression of aspirations that lack any credibility. It is true that the role of the network could be an aspect of the development of the potential of contemporary capitalism to become part of the generation of a different and emancipatory society. But how will such an understanding be realised? Mason vaguely refers to the role of the network individual, but this is a dogmatic view that ignores the fact that the ability to act in collective and cooperative terms is connected with the role of modern labour acquiring and developing new forms of cooperative solidarity. It is still the role of human praxis that will generate the possibilities of undermining the domination of capital within the process of production and in that manner creating the potential for transition to a different form of society. Instead of that understanding Mason implies that the very impetus of technology creates an inexorable dynamic or at least favourable possibility of transition to a classless society. But the point is that the network individual can only consciously act as part of labour in order to promote the importance of cooperative action that can create the economic and political conditions for transition to a post-capitalist society. It is true that the sociological character of labour has undergone important changes because of developments within capitalism but this does not mean that the role of cooperative and militant action has become antiquated. In other words, it is completely naïve to believe that the network individual no longer requires the importance of class struggle in order to realise the aim of an emancipatory society. Indeed, we have to question the extent to which the network economy has replaced more traditional forms of labour in both the private and public sector. It would be more accurate to suggest that the network economy is an important auxiliary aspect of the modern capitalist process of production.

Instead of this recognition of the limited role of the network economy, Mason dogmatically implies that it has become the omnipotent aspect of the economy, and so change at this level is the only feasible strategy for change. But this standpoint is asserted and is not established in terms of an empirical understanding of its precise importance in the contemporary economy. In a dogmatic manner he contends: “In the face of the evidence, clinging to the Marxist theory of the proletariat goes against the spirit of Marxism. But if I am right, and the networked individual is the agent of the next big change in history, then we have to do in the ‘social factory’ what our grandfathers did in the industrial factory: find each other and act.”(p234-235) But this process of cooperation and potential solidarity cannot be abstracted from the continued importance of the role of labour in economic activity. Furthermore, the network economy as part of the technology of the modern production process cannot in and of itself be the impetus for social change. Instead we still have to develop forms of cooperative solidarity because of a situation of subordination to capital. This means that the very network employees are still a form of labour. It is still the transformed and contemporary form of labour that can generate the possibility of social change. Crucially Mason seems to ignore the important question of how the network labour can act in a connected and cooperative manner in order to challenge the domination of the present economic system. He does make many claims that the network individual needs to act in a conscious and collective manner, but how is this possible and what is the programme of emancipation? However, if we continue to insist that labour is the agency of change then it is possible to relate the role of the network individual to this potential force of social transformation. Instead the approach of Mason is based on a dogmatic rejection of the importance of labour and the failure to outline the sustained argument in favour of the new agency of the network individual.

Indeed, the problem with the approach of Mason is that he fails to mention in any coherent manner how the network generation can act as a collective social force capable of changing society. Instead this point is outlined as a hope or expectation: “We saw above that for Marx the proletariat had to go beyond common struggles to become a ‘class for itself’. By analogy, the next phase for the more amorphous, less rigidly defined demographic of networked freedom loving people is to find out what it means to become collectively ‘for themselves’, just as Christiano Salvini’s generation did.”(p298) But this prediction is not outlined in terms of reasonable arguments in favour of this perspective. Instead it is a hope and not an apparent possibility. However, if we consider that the network generation is still part of labour which is exploited by capital then it becomes possible to suggest that the process of change to a different type of society could be promoted and realised. The major error that Mason makes is that he differentiates the role of the network from the other forms of economy, and as a result rejects the notion that labour is still the most important agency of change. Instead he has outlined in more convincing terms how the network can become the expression of alienation and support for authoritarian populism. His approach is ultimately based on a demoralised view of the role of labour which he dismisses as an effective agency of social change in the modern world. His rejection of Marxism is connected to this scepticism about the potential emancipation role of the working class. We have to reject this demoralised approach and instead elaborate why labour can still be an important and effective agency of social change.