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Review of *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* by Paul Mason. 2015. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 340 pages, ISBN 978-0-3745-3673-2 Paper (\$16.00)

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Paul Mason is a 58-year-old British journalist who is well-known to scholars of transnational social movements for his perceptive ethnographic coverage of the global justice movement (Mason 2013).¹ An intrepid protagonist of the precariat with a solid grounding in the history of progressive movements and ideas and a good grasp of political economy, Mason is also a former Trotskyist and an active British Labor Party member. The book I am reviewing was published in 2015, before the election of Donald Trump and the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Accords. In this book, Mason:

1. reviews the history of capitalism over the past 200 years;
2. reviews the history of leftist thinking and programs as the basis for an analysis of what has happened during the rise of the neoliberal globalization project;
3. offers an insightful assessment of the strategic problems that humanity is facing in the 21st century; and,

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Mason_\(journalist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Mason_(journalist))



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4. develops a thoughtful and provocative proposal for a transition to postcapitalism—a cooperative, decentralized, and sustainable global sharing network in which the goods necessary for human life are free or nearly free, and people spend their time in creative network projects.

Mason's *Postcapitalism* is written for activists in the New Global Left who have some knowledge of world history and contemporary economics and politics. It is meant to provide a holistic account of what has happened, what the big contradictions are now, and what needs to be done so that humanity can mitigate the problems that have been produced by neoliberalism and move toward a more humane and sustainable world society in the next several decades. The big idea in this book is that information technology makes communism possible, and the expansion of information sharing contradicts both markets and private property in ways that will transform the logic of capitalism into a sharing network.

Mason correctly perceives that the New Global Left needs to develop a consensus analysis of both the problems that have been created by the neoliberal globalization project, and the politically and economically feasible alternatives that could be implemented within the next several decades to mitigate these problems and move humanity toward a more desirable postcapitalist future. He points out that the global justice movement suffers from incoherence (one “no,” but many “yeses”) and so a holistic synthesis and integrated transition project is badly needed. He also realizes that the project he proposes needs protagonists, and that a struggle for organizational and institutional power will be necessary for the project to be realized.

Mason's book presents a realistic interpretation of the trajectory of capitalist development over the past two centuries, except that some important structural elements are missing. There is little mention of geopolitics, including the rise and fall of hegemonic core powers, the decolonization of the Global South, and the rise of the NICs as a continuation of the process of uneven development of global capitalism. These structural cycles and trends are important for grasping what is similar and what is different when comparing the decline of British and U.S. hegemonies and the similarities and differences between the 20th century and 21st century phases of deglobalization (Arrighi 1994, 2006). These are issues that are germane to the project that Mason is proposing.

Mason's familiarity with the Marxist literature and his take on what went wrong with 20th century socialism and communism result in sophisticated and informed versions of some, but not all, of the political stances that have become part of the culture of leftist activists since the world

revolution of 1968.² He contends that progressives are suffering from the Marxists' rejection of utopian socialism (Engels 1935) because this led to the presumption that the road to communism had to proceed by seizing state power and imposing a dictatorship of the proletariat. Like many left activists since 1968, Mason is a horizontalist and a prefigurationist.³ He argues that the program of state-owned firms and central planning was a mistake that should not be repeated in the 21st century, despite the new capabilities for planning that have become possible with large-scale computation. He is sympathetic with those Soviet economists (Kondratieff and Preobrazhensky) who were victims of Stalin. But Mason is not an anarchist. He thinks that states are the only organizations that have enough capacity to deal effectively with the problems that modern industrialization and neoliberal capitalism have created. He also suggests that after postcapitalism has been established, states will no longer be necessary. And though he mentions that a global instrument of enforcement would be desirable for reducing greenhouse gases and the socialization of finances, he proposes that this can be done by states in the absence of a world authority. He fails to mention the importance of the existing international governmental organizations for helping us get through the interregnum produced by U.S. hegemonic decline, apparently presuming that the current wave of hypernationalism will make these irrelevant.

Mason's analysis of the boom and the bubble that have occurred since World War II and what has happened during the rise of the neoliberal globalization project since the 1970s is very cogent. He provides a plausible explanation for the prolongation of the Kondratieff B-phase (downturn) that began in the early 1970s.⁴ Normally a K-wave downturn stimulates a rise in working class resistance that incentivizes capitalists to invest in labor-saving production technology, which, in turn, provides the basis for an upswing. But multiple factors—the rise of Reaganism-Thatcherism, financialization based on the printing of fiat money and quantitative easing by the central banks of the core, and, the use of information technology to export much of the proletariat from the core, expanding the global proletariat by half (as it incorporates the formerly communist countries and many of the Global South's small farmers)—allowed capital to reflate the economy and to repress labor unions in the core and move in the direction of dismantling welfare. Thus, the K-wave upturn

² World revolutions are periods in world history in which rebellions and revolutions break out in many locations within the same decades. Symbolic years designate the signatures of each world revolution (1789, 1848, 1917, 1968, etc.). Mason's (2013) study of the global justice movement interestingly compares it with the world revolution of 1848.

³ Horizontalism is based on Roberto Michels' (1968 [1915]) contention that all organizations become conservative because the leadership ends up only trying to defend its own interests and the survival of the organization. Prefigurationism is the idea that small groups can intentionally organize social relations in ways that can provide the seeds of transformation to a more desirable form of future human society.

⁴ The Kondratieff wave is a 40-60 year long business cycle in which upturns are usually brought about by successful class struggles that incentivize a wave of new investments in labor saving technology (Mandel 1978).

never came. And, when the bloated financial balloon blew out in 2008, the core states stepped in to save the banks and double down on austerity. The decimation of labor unions and labor parties, the rise of right-wing populism, and the expansion of precarious employment has undermined the ability of progressive forces to get a better deal from capital.⁵

Mason provides a lucid, but somewhat incomplete, summary of the main strategic problems that humanity will face in the 21st century: global warming, an aging population distribution, continuing mass migrations from the Global South and a burgeoning fiscal debt crisis. Mason says “the main contradiction of today is between the possibility of free, abundant goods and information and a system of monopolies, banks and governments trying to keep things private, scarce and commercial (2015: xix).” What he leaves out is the crisis of global governance that is emerging because of U.S. hegemonic decline and the potential of this to lead to a return to interimperial rivalry and warfare among strong states.

The most important claim in Mason’s book is that information, once it has been produced, has become costless to replicate, and this infinite replicability eliminates scarcity; thus, as the global economy shifts toward becoming an information economy, the logic of sharing and reciprocity that is the culture of the infotech sector expands, undermining the logic of competition characteristic of the market and capitalism, and creating the basis for a global network in which the necessities of human life are free and shared. In the Introduction he argues that “information spontaneously dissolves markets, destroys ownership and breaks down the relationship between work and wages.” Information is freely replicable and so pricing is based on patents and other forms of enforcing scarcity. Marx wrote a short paragraph about this in the *Grundrisse* (see Mason 2015:137), and Alexander Bogdanov (1984 [1908]) wrote a novel about a future communist utopia based on the elimination of work by technology. Mason’s discussion of the alleged evolutionary consequences of information technology involves a useful discourse on theories of value and the importance of the labor theory of value for calculation. He also is an enthusiast of simulation modeling, though he denigrates as cyber-Stalinists those economists who have proposed a computational centralized approach to planning a complex economy. Software is a machine that

⁵ Regarding the rise of the precariat, employment is increasingly temporary, and workers have little identification with their jobs or the firms that pay them. The increasing power of capital, deindustrialization of the core, and attacks on labor unions have produced a reorganization of the global class structure around precarious work. Standing (2011, 2014) notes that there are important differences between different sectors of the precariat. The slum-dwellers in the informal sector in megacities of the Global South have long been exposed to precarious labor, though this group has expanded because of the neoliberal transformation of agriculture in the Global South. The over-educated, under-employed young people from working class and middle-class backgrounds also face a precarious livelihood, but with rather different tastes and interests from the folks of the planet of slums. They are individualistic and difficult to organize using the methods that worked well for the industrial proletariat.

does not wear out. Information technology can produce a world of free machines with minimal socially necessary labor time.⁶

Chapter 7 deals with the issue of agency. The proletariat and the World Revolution of 1917 have been defeated by commercialism, individualization, and the rise of precarious labor. Work is losing its centrality to both resistance and exploitation. Rather than the rise of the new globalized working class, Mason proposes the abolition of work. The kind of working class culture and solidarity still romanticized by workerists (e.g. Davis 2018) has been made impossible by precarity and “the freedom to tweet.”⁷ Work and leisure time have blurred together in the culture of Silicon Valley. The protagonists of the postcapitalism are networked individuals. Struggle has moved from the workplace to “society.”

Mitigating global warming will require state intervention to enforce the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The growth of the percentage of the human population that is old is described as a demographic time bomb that will produce a fiscal crisis in most states as the 21st century goes on. The eight Global South nation-states in which total population is continuing to grow will fuel failures in those states and huge pressures on people to migrate to the Global North in the next few decades, so the migration crisis will not end soon.

Mason names the transitional project he is proposing the “zero project” because its goals will be to abolish the law of value, making the goods that humans need costless and radically reducing the emissions of greenhouse gasses that are producing anthropomorphic global warming. Neoliberalism has, ironically, opened the possibilities of postcapitalism. Driving the change to postcapitalism are projects such as Wikipedia, Open Source, Time Banks,⁸ open information standards, and low-carbon energy installations. But a more macro project will also be necessary: Project Zero. In Chapter 10, Mason lays out design principles and top-level goals for this “distributed project,” and he advocates a decentralized experimentalist approach to social change that uses simulation modeling and trials to find the best ways. He also discusses the things that states will need to do, and writes a panegyric to the glories of collaborative working groups. His plan includes basic income, socialization of finance that continues the use of fiat money, and the suppression or socialization of monopolies.

A skeptic would point out that sharing and reciprocity networks have been around all along without undermining the logic of capitalism; rather, the long-term trend so far has been just the

⁶ Mason ignores the issue of the likely emergence of machines that are smarter than humans and the political problems that this may cause for postcapitalism. But his project is about the next several decades, so he may be excused.

⁷ Guy Standing (2011, 2014), the economist who has written about the precariat, and is, with Mason, a consultant to Jeremy Corbyn, has a rather different view of tweeting. He thinks it makes people stupid because it reduces their attention spans.

⁸ Time Banks <https://timebanks.org/>

opposite: the subsumption and commodification of non-market social relations into the logic of capitalism. But perhaps the tide will indeed turn in the direction that Mason predicts as information technology becomes more potent, which it definitely has been doing. But the techno fix approach should not underestimate the abilities of the powers that be (the 1%) to use the new technology to defend its interests and to undermine resistance and opposition. Facial recognition software has been adopted by the Chinese Communist Party allegedly for purposes of crime control, but it is not hard to imagine that it will also be used to try to control resistance movements in China (and elsewhere). Mason's silence about geopolitics and global governance issues could have been addressed in a discussion about the emergence of global citizenship. But, again, he seems aware that the world-system is entering another phase of deglobalization, and so that kind of discussion may be more utopian than even he wants to be, at least if we are talking about the next several decades. Nevertheless, a longer view of both the history of the modern world-system and the future of humankind can benefit from thinking about how to move in the direction of a democratic and collectively rational global commonwealth despite the arrival of another age of extremes (see Wallerstein et al. 2013).

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