

Review

NEWS FROM NOWHERE

Fully Automated Luxury Communism
A Manifesto by Aaron Bastani

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Fully Automated Luxury Communism is a clumsy phrase and the acronym, FALC, is, if anything, worse. However, Aaron Bastani's book provides a welcome relief from the dystopian futures offered by those held in the dismal grip of 'capitalist realism'. The book breaks boldly away from those who see capitalism as 'the end of history' to a place where we stand on the verge of

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abundance. Gone are all those worries about ‘the limits to growth’ as technology is mobilised to save the planet from terminal degradation, and humanity from the whip of hard labour.

Aaron Bastani is inspired by Karl Marx for whom the “realm of plenty beyond imagination wasn’t something to recall or enjoy in the afterlife – it was a political project to aim for in the here and now. It was communism.” Clearly, the book and the ethos Bastani seeks to promote is entirely at odds with the communism of the twentieth century, steeped as it was in dictatorship and blood; threadbare and mired in inescapable poverty. In this book we land in the realm of Oscar Wilde, who had no time for what he called “barrack socialism”, and travel to the country he dreamed of in ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’, his essay of 1891:

“Just as the grass grows while the country gentleman sleeps so all the dirty and unrewarding work will be done by machines.”

Or, perhaps FALC raises the dream of William Morris’s novel of 1890, *News From Nowhere*, where capitalism has ebbed away, the Palace of Westminster has become a barn used to store manure, and the world has become a place of peace, equity, and bucolic charm.

Bastani argues that society is facing a series of changes and upheavals as radical as those caused by the introduction of agriculture five or six thousand years ago, or the industrial revolution at the dawn of the nineteenth century. In our day, information – digitalisation – artificial intelligence, and all the related technologies, from autonomous vehicles to gene editing will transform everything.

Specifically, he argues these changes will render capitalism unsustainable.

What he means by this is that “capital will become labour” or to put it another way, the worker will become more or less entirely redundant as machines will produce goods and services without our assistance. We will all become members of the “unnecessariat” as machines and

fully automated systems simultaneously become both capital and labour.

Clearly, Bastani imagines a situation in which surplus value is produced only by those who conceive and design the machines, systems, and software. Hence, the numbers of those who produce profits will have become vanishingly small as capitalism faces its nadir.

His dream has thrown up some theoretical problems; the production of surplus value is one, and the relative social autonomy of technology is another. This is because technologies are never independent of the social relations which give rise to them. But it is perfectly plausible to imagine, as this book does, that the drive of capitalists to remove living labour from the production process by means of hyper automation will, in the fullness of time, render capitalism unsustainable.

The robots will not become consumers, and it is difficult to see how the business owners will realise the surplus value, i.e. the profits, if they cannot sell their goods and services to living consumers in possession of wages.

So, the crisis which commercial society is facing is one in which the headlong development of technology will undermine the *raison d'être* of capitalism: a system in which goods and services are produced for sale by entrepreneurs who buy the necessary materials, pay the wages, and in turn, realise profit from the sale of the finished goods.

As the trend towards full automation, already well-advanced, becomes general, capitalism will become unsustainable. Unemployment will become more or less universal and some way will have to be found in which the common wealth of society is made available to the population at large. Communism, so Bastani argues will be the only solution as we strive to realise Arthur C. Clarke's vision:

The goal of the future is full unemployment so we can play.

I agree with this and with Bastani. I also agree that climate change and resource exhaustion can only be overcome by technological advance. Consuming less, and sorting our garbage into a bewildering array of colour-coded bins, is not going to save the planet.

Abundance, and a world in which human activity is focused upon creativity and self-development rather than drudgery and wage-bondage is perfectly conceivable. More than that, it is achievable, if we mobilise all our intelligence and technical innovation to the task of creating renewable energy, animal free meat, the mining of minerals from asteroids, and the development of entirely automated systems for travel, communication, construction, manufacturing, and food production.

OK, “mining asteroids” may seem a little far-fetched, but remember, in February this year the Hayabusa2 spacecraft successfully landed a probe on the asteroid, Ryugu, in an attempt to collect samples from the surface, and in 2014 the module, Philae, landed on comet 67P, and sent back photographs to earth. Certainly, it is not absurd to imagine that from these ‘primitive’ beginnings human beings will be able, in the decades to come, to carry out much more complex operations on distant objects within our solar system.

Aaron Bastani is envisaging a brave new world, full of potential – it is only utopian in the sense that it doesn’t exist at the moment – but I agree with him, it certainly could be brought into practical existence. And, the truth is, that capitalism is certainly not going to survive the full automation that commercial society and commercial relations are rapidly ushering into existence.

In this sense, we are faced with ‘the necessity of communism’ a situation in which the common wealth of society is mobilised for the welfare of the population at large rather than those who are able to benefit from

the private ownership and private profits of the present set-up.

Aaron puts it like this:

Capitalism, at least as we know it, is about to end.
What matters is what comes next.

It is at this point that the utopian optimism comes crashing down to earth, with suggestions of municipal protectionism, ‘universal basic services’, socialised capital markets, cooperatives, and people’s businesses financed by people’s banks. This aspect of the Bastani’s vision is incoherent and is most certainly not innovative, composed as it is of random elements gathered up from the socialist tradition. It is a ramshackle social democracy which seems to take no account of the modern realities of globalisation or the need for modes of international solidarity that can transcend, in practice, the limits of national politics, national power structures, and multinational corporations.

It is true the book offers some very sketchy suggestions of ‘green and red’ politics, of “luxury populism”, as opposed to the populism of the traditional right, in a discussion in which Corbynism is loosely associated with the outlook of Syriza, Podemos, and Bernie Sanders – this slovenly kind of thinking is entirely at odds with the marvellous challenge the book offers to those miserable folk who argue for the ‘limits to growth’ and the need for ‘appropriate technology’.

This lack of a politics adequate to the terminal crisis which capitalism is facing cannot be laid at Bastani’s door. He well understands that the transformations wrought by automation cannot be viewed merely as political problems – he knows that we are confronted by a profound social and cultural crisis which will test all existing arrangements to destruction.

I hope, therefore, that the kind of thinking that has gone into the best parts of this book will provoke a more detailed discussion of the kinds of political intervention and strategies that the headlong rush towards automation will demand of working people in our communities, our workplaces, and in the wider labour movement.

Consequently, Aaron Bastani is to be congratulated for boldly setting out the manner in which fully automated capitalism will inevitably usher in a crisis that can only be met by a situation in which the wealth created by society at large, is deployed, and enjoyed by society as a whole.