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What is Fully Automated Luxury Communism?

Anarchist Communist Group

6th April 2020

Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC) has been much in vogue lately, especially with the publication of Aaron Bastani's book of the same name by Verso this year. It was originally a slogan/meme developed by people around the group Plan C. They began using the expression "Luxury for All" and this was backed up by a Tumblr called Luxury Communism. Plan C members spotted the slogan "Luxury For All" on a demonstration in Berlin, and at first adopted it as a tongue in cheek joke but they then started taking it seriously. They believe it had its origins in the science fiction Red Mars trilogy by Kim Stanley Robinson, where a socialist utopia is established on Mars, and in A Pattern Language written by three architects, Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa and Murray Silverstein in 1977 which describes a similar utopia. We also have the book written by Massachusetts Institute of Technology professors Erik Brynjofflsson and James McAfee, The Second Machine Age, who envisage an increasingly robotised world where work has been abolished.

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ACG's *Virus in the Body Politic* magazine.

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The expression has picked up traction among the “woke” generation, who seem also inspired by Corbynism. In some ways it has recuperated the concept of communism, originally more or less the reserve of anarchist communists before being seized as a label by the Bolsheviks with the resulting discrediting of the idea.

Both Plan C and Bastani seem to think that the development of technology under capitalism will lead to the end of work and the end of capitalism itself. In this scenario somehow capitalism assists at its own death, it voluntarily places a gun against its own temple and pulls the trigger. Technology, rather than being seen at the moment as an instrument of capitalism to further itself, is seen as an agent of radical change.

Marx too thought that advances in technology would bring about the conditions for communism. Bastani says that this was flawed, that capitalism had to reach a higher stage that Marx could not foresee. He thinks we have now arrived at this higher stage, further, he locates this to the year 2008 with its financial crisis.

Like another predictor of the future, Paul Mason, Bastani believes that advancing technology will lead to widespread unemployment. This cannot be answered by the creation of new jobs, which Bastani believes are impossible to create. At the same time the development of technology will replace scarcity with abundance, “extreme supply” as Bastani calls it. The capitalists will respond to this with artificial scarcities, because abundance leads to a fall in prices and of markets.

This new abundance will be facilitated by the development of solar technology and the mining of asteroids! (Bastani says: “More speculatively, asteroid mining – whose technical barriers are presently being surmounted – could provide us with not only more energy than we can ever imagine but also more iron, gold, platinum and nickel. Resource scarcity would be a thing of the past.”)

During the course of the book, the whole concept of class struggle is rarely touched upon, as is the nature and role of the State.

The working class is not seen as the agent of social change and instead Bastani envisages a scenario that would find favour with the Corbynists of Momentum. He believes that at the national level, outsourcing would end immediately and privatised industries like rail would return to the State and the public sector would wipe out outside contractors. On the local level, there would be “municipal protectionism” where public sector organisations would spend as much of their budgets locally, to keep money circulating in the local economy. He bases this scenario on what he calls the Preston model after the town which carried out such a plan.

Furthermore, local businesses would be favoured, being those which operated within ten kilometres of the locality, were a worker-owned cooperative, or offered organic products and renewable energy. Central banks, too, would move “away from low inflation” and instead relate to “rising wages, high productivity and affordable house prices”. National energy investment banks would invest in sustainable energy and housing with the result that by 2030 “the world’s wealthier countries would see their CO2 emissions fall to virtually zero”.

The State would create a network of regional and local banks and credit unions, with the same aims as above. They would encourage the growth of worker-owned businesses.

In addition, there would be a system of Universal Basic Services (UBS) which would provide the necessities of life- for example, education, housing, transport- free to all at the point of use. This in a society heavily dominated by the State.

It is unclear how Bastani sees this plan being activated. Which government would do that? It is not openly stated but is implied that this would be brought about by a reformist government. How would such a government come to power? Would it not seem logical that such a government would need mass support (but see later for Bastani’s views on mass engagement)? What would elements within the State and among the capitalist class resist such developments? Bastani talks vaguely about a “workers’ party against work”

but he fails to elaborate on this party and what its role would be in this transformation to a new society. And indeed, there is no indication about what would develop after this State-heavy economy as envisaged by Bastani. As noted earlier, the working class itself would have no serious role in this Brave New Utopia of Bastani. To us, anarchist communism, libertarian communism, free socialism, call it what you will, has to come about through the involvement of the mass of the population. But for Bastani “the majority of people are only able to be politically active for brief periods of time”. He uses this false scenario to advocate engagement in “mainstream, electoral politics”.

Unfortunately, capitalism CAN deal with abundance. There are many products now that were expensive, that are now cheap like some mobile phones and many other electrical appliances, not to mention the various pound stores. Capitalism can adapt very easily and indeed big capitalist outfits like Facebook and Google are free at point of use. They obtain their profits in other ways. The whole history of capitalism indicates that it can, time and time again, turn scarcity into “extreme abundance”.

Capitalism has indeed destroyed many old industries and services, but it has replaced them with others. Certainly, certain industrial sectors are threatened, have disappeared or are in the process of disappearing, not least the high street as we know it but the capitalist system itself is not threatened, it continues to find ways of renewing itself, as demonstrated by the rise of the online market. The continuing tooth and claw eradication of various industries is part and parcel of the capitalist system.

Bastani is enamoured by the idea of “accelerationism”, that is that the “rate of historical change is accelerating” and will very soon bring about the changes that he envisages. This is debatable, as various commentators have noted economic stagnation and technological slowdown. Tyler Cowen, for example, posits a “great stagnation”. In addition, we could counter the ideas of degrowth (decroissance in French) which are gaining traction which argue

and are in stark contrast to Bastani's pawky and miserable Statist utopia. Whilst Bastani is blind to a mass movement as an agent of social change, Bookchin emphasises it.

strongly against production for production's sake (productivism) and which clash with the eco-modernist ideas of Bastani and Mason. Accelerationism believes technology can be used for progressive purposes, whereas degrowth argues that certain types of technology need to be limited and must relate to availability of resources. Some eco-modernists still believe in the use of nuclear power, although Bastani, to his credit, rejects this.

Bastani is aware that he will be accused of technological determinism and admits that "technology matters, but so do the ideas, social relations and politics which accompany it". However he uses an unhappy example. He believes the emergence of mass veganism and vegetarianism has led to the development of synthetic technology. This is worrying for two reasons, first he appears to think that demand leads supply, as any common or garden theorist of capitalism believes rather than the reverse views of revolutionaries that supply leads demand. Companies are producing vegan products like never before because they can create very highly processed products to make substantial profits. And, do we really want to eat these highly processed foodstuffs grown in vats that Bastani has enthusiasm for, when evidence points to processed foods being dangerous to health? It has been established that there is enough food to feed the world adequately, and if an unequal society was replaced by communism it would be able to provide for all and it would be unnecessary to manufacture these vat-grown synthetic foods.

Bastani is also enthusiastic about electric driverless cars in this new world of his. He envisages electricity being able to be supplied 100% from renewable sources which will fuel these cars. But this still fails to deal with traffic congestion, with roads still being dangerous for children and the aged and disabled, and communities bisected and blighted by highways. We should reject these ideas and instead look towards environmentally friendly free public transport.

Bastani talks about the eradication of work and describes a 10 hour week. We in the anarchist communist movement have long argued against the ideas of work, and certainly a 10 hour week would be an improvement on the 40 hour and rising week that many have to suffer now. But it would be still 10 hours a week in the same unsatisfying and boring work for many. Again when he refers to the abolition of work he means in the workplace, whilst the work of social reproduction and care in the home, looking after children, elderly parents, the disabled and infirm, and housework in general, mostly undertaken by women, is ignored, again revealing Bastani's blindness on gender oppression and his failure to include this in his 'utopia'.

He waxes lyrical about genome sequencing being able to eradicate "nearly all forms of disease" in the near future with little evidence for this. He talks about "Cartier for everyone, MontBlanc for the masses and Chloe for all." But are these not prestige goods spectacularly exhibited by the rich precisely because they are expensive and do we really, really, want these items? Many under the goad of the looming environmental devastation are increasingly turning away from consumerism in the light of limited natural resources and the damage that a productivist capitalism is dealing to the planet. Degrowth and sustainability have to be key factors in the construction of a new society but instead Bastani talks about a luxury communism which would result from an increase in production.

What is also disturbing is Bastani's vaunting of the "seven-decade survival" of the USSR as "one of the great political achievements of the last century" which brings him a tad too close to a minority of "woke" hipsters who have turned to praising Stalinism as with for example, the Red London group.

Bastani turns a blind eye to the environmental and social consequences of previous advances in technology under capitalism. He believes that the technological breakthrough that he foresees will solve the problems created by a capitalism that is inherently en-

vironmentally destructive. But who makes and who controls this technology, who decides how it is used?

We remember Bastani from the 2010 student movement when he attended Royal Holloway College and when he described himself as a libertarian communist. Like many of his associates in that particular student movement, he gravitated towards Corbynism. Indeed his Novara Media organisation quickly transformed itself into an engine for the building of Corbynism. Ultimately Bastani's vision of a new society is a narrow and dull vision. It does not address itself to the oppressions of class, race and gender, and fails to envisage blueprints for their eradication. It's the Attlee government of 1945 with new added technology. Far from being revolutionary, it is a tame social democratic and reformist programme that any Corbynist would be proud of. To call this communism is a travesty.

What about Plan C's conception of FALC? To their credit, they have been critical of technological determinism and are also considering the ideas of degrowth and are aware of the ignoring of the agency of the working class in bringing about these technological utopias. It appears that their concept of FALC is more nuanced than Bastani's and is still a work in progress. We await a fuller development of their ideas on the subject. Nevertheless, their connections to Corbynism are causes for concern.

P.S.

Before FALC, there was Post-Scarcity Anarchism as developed by Murray Bookchin. Like Bastani, Bookchin talks about the positive aspects of technology as enablers of a new society: "The seeds for the destruction of bourgeois society lie in the very means it employs for self-preservation: a technology of abundance that is capable of providing for the first time in history the material basis for liberation.

Again, the question has to be asked, how can this technology become liberatory? Certainly, Bookchin's views of a post-scarcity society are far more imaginative and far-reaching than Bastani's