

***On Paul Mason's 'Post-Capitalism' – An extended review***  
**David Tyfield, Lancaster University**  
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*Part 1: Overview*

Paul Mason is not an economist by training, and it shows.<sup>1</sup> For how else could he have written such an imaginative, insightful and stirring book on economics? After charting the ongoing global turbulence in clear and fiery prose over the last few years in his two versions of *'Why It's [Still] Kicking Off Everywhere'*, Mason has turned his evident passion for social justice and his coal-face experience of the profound changes in global political economy to a project that is politically grander and theoretically bolder. The result is *'Post-Capitalism'*, a landmark publication of ambitious theoretical synthesis that also asks Big Important Questions – about what the 'information revolution' means for humanity and the future of capitalism as dominant political economic system – that are basically totally absent in more polite policy and/or academic discussion. And, most impressively, it does so with Mason's trademark succinctness and clarity of exposition.

Almost as proof of its importance, it has been systematically dismembered in reviews in the British press; they did at least need to notice it! These reviews, however, do not even begin to respond to Mason's arguments, instead stooping to predictable *ad hominem* attacks (his 'shrill' tenor) or simply blasting back with a blunt restatement of the reviewers own politics (e.g. "the problem with the financial crisis was not enough market, not too much"). By contrast, this review wants to give Mason the engagement he deserves. This means there is too much to say in a single piece of readable length. Instead, this response – a critical response, in fact – will be divided up over several pieces to appear as blogs in coming weeks. This first piece, then, by way of an introduction and overview, we will do three things here. First, a brief summary of the structure and conclusions of Mason's argument. Secondly, a short list of some of the most important points Mason makes. And finally, an overview of the substantive criticisms that will be developed in the remaining blogs.

The structure of the argument

*'Post-Capitalism'* is effectively structured around four arguments and/or theories. First, Mason calls upon a variant of the Kondratiev theory of 'long waves' of capitalist growth. The variation he inserts is the importance of understanding this rhythmic process in terms that take seriously political (economic) contestation. Hence resistance to a given phase of capitalist growth is not merely a predictable side-effect that must be historically worked through, perhaps as part of the birth pangs of an 'upswing', but is constitutive and irreducible. For without such resistance, capitalists in pursuit of opportunities for competitive profit are not compelled to pursue the kind of radical socio-technical and socio-political innovation that make up the new 'upswing' and subsequent 'Golden Age'. Instead they can continue to pursue the 'easy' option of tightening the screws of existing mechanisms of exploiting their workforce in order to eke out a profit, even as the system tends to stagnation.

Through this lens, then, Mason argues that a new 'wave' should now have emerged, given the demise of the 'last' wave and the empirical periodicity of the process as a whole. Yet, using especially a series of interesting graphs (on which more later), Mason argues instead we are amidst an historical anomaly – the exceptional extension of a downswing that has endured

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<sup>1</sup> Nor am I, I should add.

now some 20 years beyond its proper ‘date of death’. To Mason, this shows that the cycle is broken, and with it the dynamic of the capitalist growth engine that is the cycle of long waves; hence the turbulence, stagnation and general disorientation of the present. Capitalism needs a new upswing for it to survive. Yet none has emerged, for some two decades now. The reason for this, according to Mason, is ironically precisely the global triumph of capitalism under neoliberalism. For the destruction of the working class (of the Global North), which has been this ‘victory’s’ primary means and end, was also the destruction of the most powerful socio-political mechanism forcing the renewal of capitalism, as just described. Mason’s discussion on this point, and on working class history more generally, is amongst the best parts of the book.

Secondly, though, not only has capitalism not yet changed, but nor is it pregnant with a new upswing. To the contrary, the complex of socio-technical innovation that neoliberalism’s ‘long down-swing’ has actually generated – i.e. the ICT revolution – is systematically incompatible with capitalist relations of production. To make this argument Mason calls on two further economic theories, again at radical odds with the neoclassical mainstream. First, he explores theories of information economies and information capitalism. ‘Information’ is an ever-increasing part of economic activity and value, including as the catch-all accountancy term of ‘goodwill’ on corporate balance sheets. Following many other (high-profile) scholars, Mason conceptualizes ‘information’ as intangible, non-appropriable, non-rival and hence – now enabled by ICTs and the internet – ‘free’ in the double sense of freely circulating (as in ‘free speech’) and with a marginal cost of (re)production (hence price) that tends to zero (as in ‘free beer’). In short, the very technological productivity of capitalism, still constantly revolutionizing the means of production, has now produced cutting-edge transformations in those means of production that also systematically undermine the price mechanism on which competitive profit through the market utterly depends. Developments in use value *undermine*, rather than renew and expand, exchange value. In these circumstances, then, we can see how the harder capitalism tries to renew itself, the more it simply deepens its crisis. No wonder no new ‘long wave’ has emerged.

Yet to this Mason adds a further argument for the impossibility of an ‘information capitalism’, based upon an orthodox Marxian economics, founded in the ‘labour theory of value’ (LTV). Following the LTV, Mason notes how capitalist profit is actually the appropriation by capitalist employers and financiers of (surplus) value produced always and only by waged labour. This appropriation happens primarily under cover of ‘fair’ market exchange of work for a wage, where the worker is paid for the value of their *labour power* (expressed in the value of the basket of goods and services needed for their daily reproduction) but is employed for – i.e. consumed as – the value contributed by their actual *labour* (time). The exchange values of the use values produced by capitalist production processes are thus the combination of the exchange value (in socially-necessary labour time) of the labour, living and dead (as embodied in material means of production), that they incorporate. This seeming digression into arcane theory, however, serves a particularly important purpose. For understanding this process, and the systematic way in which prices (as exchange values) interact across a capitalist economy, illuminates further the challenges of information capitalism.

For Mason, the booming of information and information-based production, including software, big data, interconnected materialities (the ‘internet of things’) and learning machines, is not just the latest revolutionizing of the means of production, the next step in a familiar process now several hundred years old. Rather, the information revolution’s tendency to zero marginal costs combined with the fundamental capitalist mechanism of

harnessing and appropriating the value of labour in production processes tends to the progressive and relentless destruction of the capacity of the market to coordinate political economic activity. First, the increasing use-value importance of information to production processes translates into falling prices for those commodities, as competitive advantages and monopoly pricing are undermined by information's free circulation. The reduction in commodity prices, however, in turn reduces the cost of the basket of goods and services that adds up to the wage. The exchange value of labour thus also falls. And this is then combined with the progressive replacement of labour with high-(information)-technology that is itself increasingly cheap, and often cheaper (hence 'cost-saving' in austere times) than workers. Put this together, though, and capitalism enters a death spiral, for the combination of ever-reducing inputs by labour AND ever-falling value of labour is to destroy the central motor of the expansion of capitalism, namely *increasing* production of value. If the value input of labour is declining and attempts to rectify this (i.e. more 'innovation') simply *accelerate* the devaluation of labour, there is no escape from the stagnation and demise of a system that is systematically dependent upon endless growth.

Moreover, capitalist enterprises, in their individual pursuit of short-term competitive gain, are meanwhile busily constructing the technologies of an information economy that are increasingly affording spontaneous political economic coordination *outside* the market. For Mason, in short, the inexorable and accelerating movement – which the labour theory of value can explain while mainstream economics cannot even begin to conceive – is towards a political economy that prioritizes use-value over exchange value. This is an 'economy' – more accurately a society or social formation, the idea of a standalone 'economy' itself a peculiarly capitalist notion – that is increasingly not only capable of being organized by way of voluntary knowledge input and labour; but also one that is, conversely, impossible to coordinate and run on the basis of capitalist employment for production of commodities to be sold for a profit. So, argues Mason, arises post-capitalism.

Mason does not end here, though. Rather this is just the start of the political project he is trying to seed and cultivate. For the emergence of post-capitalism from the Pyrrhic victory of neoliberalism needs agency. Realizing the end of capitalism demands a social force actually to *seize* the reins of power. One may expect, given the Marxian resources used to this point, that the identity of this social agency would be obvious. Mason, however, makes a distinct and compelling break with his own orthodoxy at this point, arguing that post-capitalism will not be constructed by the 'working class'. Indeed, going further, he argues that Left-wing movements seeking to expedite the emergence of a progressive information post-capitalism must do some profound rethinking of political shibboleths. What is needed instead is the construction of a new global social 2.0 movement, focused not on communal identities as exploited workers but on new and dynamic collective identities as enabled and emancipated and interconnected persons, enjoying the abundance and leisure of an equitable and socially just information society. On this point, then, Mason presents some speculations regarding how the political economy of this post-capitalist utopia could be organized, before finishing with an extended discussion of how we get from 'here' to 'there' and what such a 'transition' could involve.

### Many strengths and insights

It is clear that the summary above does not do full justice to this rich and thought-provoking book. To be clear, then, this is a book that deserves to be read, and read from cover-to-cover. And this because you will *disagree* with parts (or much) of it, not just because you will be

‘enlightened’ by its ‘answers’. It is, in short, a crucial opener in ongoing discussions of exceptional importance. And Mason himself commendably seems to see it this way. In the same spirit, the following initial responses are way-stations in an ongoing discussion and markers as an overview of the fuller responses to follow in due course in subsequent posts.

First, against many commentators who take offence with the wide-ranging and imaginative synthesis of unapologetically heterodox theories, I find Mason’s choice and use of theoretical structure for his argument informed, informative and sensible. It seems by far the greater error in this moment of unquestionable political economic turbulence to remain timidly locked within an orthodoxy that admits only a timeless economy of markets of physical goods tending to equilibrium, than to stride out and experiment with bolder, more political and more historical theories of the evolution of capitalism. Indeed, the former is simply incapable of even beginning to make sense of what are transparently the most radical transformations in purely *economic* matters – namely the explosion of the production of information and the centrality, as never before, of ‘innovation’ to corporate, national and individual economic prosperity – let alone the evident and profound social and political transformations wrought by these ‘economic’ changes. The sheer dominance and stagnation of the economic mainstream in the academy – still, after the intellectual debacle of the complete failure to foresee the financial crash of 2008 – may well mean that only a complete outsider, a journalist and one without an economics training but still respected widely for his political economic journalism, could make this kind of argument and get a decent hearing. In this case, heterodox economists owe a debt of gratitude to Mason for forcing these issues into public discussion, regardless of more nuanced or detailed disagreements with his particular schema.

To this major ‘pro’, we may add a short list of important substantive points that Mason makes. First, he argues compellingly that neoliberalism is bust yet undead, offering no way out of the current global malaise but only deeper and deeper system dysfunction. Secondly, he proposes a conception of neoliberalism as a complex political economic system, thereby opening up thinking not only beyond the economics mainstream but also beyond the Marxian political economic orthodoxy. This conceptual reframing is crucial given his third key point, namely his insistent demand that we grapple seriously with implications of the ‘information revolution’ (or, we should say more accurately ‘information *communication* revolution’) for major issues of social organization regarding political economy and human subjectivities. Fourthly, Mason is also persuasive that a major reason for the need to do this thinking is that the ‘information revolution’, while the product of neoliberalism, profoundly challenges this (now ‘common sense’) form of political economy because of the qualitatively greater challenges of appropriation and, hence, market pricing of ‘intangibles’. Combined then with the first point above, it is understandable and legitimate that Mason seeks insights regarding the broader historical trajectory and rhythmic of capitalism.

This then leads to several more strengths of his argument regarding his deployment and changes to ‘long wave’ theory. This includes two important criticisms of the seminal work of Carlota Perez, the most influential of recent exponents of the Kondratiev wave. First, Mason is quite right to insist on the constitutive nature of political agency in the course of capitalism’s history. This point really matters. Too often we read of how the early turbulence and possible worsening of the lot of the masses in a techno-economic cycle is merely a phase of immaturity that works itself out ‘in the end’ almost as a matter of natural development like the imbalance of an adolescence. Today this is true of techno-fetishist discourses from cheerleaders of Silicon Valley and from more Left-leaning academic

evolutionary economists of ‘system transition’ alike, and those in between, like Jeremy Rifkin. But absent Mason’s emphasis on the central importance of political agency – of political and activist resistance to the given regime of capitalism – in the very process of ‘maturing’ it is hard indeed not to read these ‘wave’ or ‘cycle’ theories as, at best, patronising and, at worst, condemning and disempowering towards those who are clearly losers in the new wave and are not going to take this lying down. In short, only by taking political agency seriously, as does Mason, can we escape the fallacy that a new ‘Golden Age’ is simply guaranteed *ex ante* by the ‘natural’ periodicity of the long wave cycle and the Call to Passivity and Inaction this effectively counsels.

This leads directly to the second, more-or-less explicit, criticism of Perez’s work that Mason rightly makes. Namely that there really *is* no empirical evidence to hand that the last cycle ended in 2001 (or was it 2008 or...?) and a new one is now palpably emerging. By contrast, Perez has repeatedly called this moment over the last 15 years, and done many a theoretical jig in the process, but still to no avail. The empirical record thus corroborates the theoretical and political objections just made in disputing Perez’s interpretations.

Finally, Mason’s clear-eyed focus on the political challenge and his brilliant theoretical artlessness also then allow him the leeway of further insightful heterodoxy in his determined split from the working class as the agents of History. For Mason the journalist, no doubt, this is simply nothing but the reporting of empirical fact. Having reported on massive, profound and lasting unrest from places across the world in the last decade, he has witnessed for himself how resistance to neoliberalism is ubiquitous and proliferating. Yet it is simply not the resistance of a unified industrial working class, national let alone international. Indeed, to the contrary, what remains of the latter are *de facto* politically conservative in many ways; both in their inability to challenge austerity, given their significantly weakened state after 30 years of neoliberalism, and in the clinging of their membership to lives of now unusually ‘privileged’ steady work and debt- and asset-based (moderate) prosperity that are indissolubly wedded to the neoliberal system – even as this segment of global society is the unquestioned absolute loser of that system (as Mason shows) and a continuing target for its further squeezing.

So Mason is about as well placed as anyone in the world to be able to write informatively about what unifies the disparate groups *actually* contesting the violent death throes of neoliberalism. And his argument that we must look instead to the kinds of *person* being constructed in the crucible of the information society and economy is surely spot on. For it invites the kind of open-minded reimagining of the human condition that can both begin to grapple with the potentially profound transformations to society that a move beyond capitalism in an information age may very probably involve, and just as importantly, the many possible lines of strategic intervention that may be possible and/or necessary. Finally, then, his call for a meso-level and practically- and politically- engaged theory, iteratively illuminating this growing movement and contributing to its self-consciousness, is also thoroughly compelling. (It is also, we may add, far more in keeping with the spirit of Marx, the primary narrator and organic intellectual of an entirely new emancipatory movement of *his* time – the (presumptively international) working class – than is the desiccated reproduction of a dead Marxist orthodoxy.)

Some criticisms... to be argued in more detail...

These many strengths notwithstanding, though, ‘Post-capitalism’ is a book whose problems are many and interesting. Many of these reside not in Mason’s theoretical boldness, whether

in his use of heterodoxy, his synthesis of these theories or his own twist on them, but in the particular theoretical choices and interpretations he makes. Moreover, these lead him to draw conclusions that are often too quick or over-stated with potentially problematic political implications. To be clear, therefore, the following criticisms come not from a position of political antipathy to Mason's evident distaste (even disgust) with capitalism, nor to his impatience and fervour for a better alternative. To the contrary, these are shared – and, indeed, the vehement and urgent advocacy in Mason's delivery that is so awkward and inappropriate to other reviewers is for this one a key element of Mason's persuasiveness. Rather, these criticisms are based in great sympathy for Mason's broader project *but also* a determination to ensure it is as strategically enabled and informed as possible. This leads, for me, to rejection of four of Mason's major conclusions.

First, and against his arguments about (and specific interpretations of) information economics and the labour theory of value, capitalism is not about to implode. To the contrary, a highly productive and even revolutionary information *capitalism* is perfectly conceivable, even when taking on fully the objections Mason presents. Moreover, and more generally, it is a strategic error of the worst kind for the Left to latch on to the idea that 'this time' the crisis of capitalism really is terminal. I will argue this is simply strategically self-defeating wish projection. For, even if (repeat, *if*) capitalism is about to die, the relevant question becomes not 'will it or not?' and 'why (do we know that)?' but 'how?' All analyses that focus on 'proving' the imminent end of capitalism, however, systematically distract the attention of the radical imagination into politically sterile debates of the former kind, leaving the essential strategic question of 'what do we do then?' as permanent after-thought, a question always for the next discussion. To be as blunt as possible, and a bit provocative to boot, even if capitalism ended, a Left obsessed with diagnosing its demise would be utterly and swiftly outmanoeuvred by precisely the self-seeking and powerful forces it would be hoping to displace. The Left would thus be proven 'right' ("at long last!") about the end of capitalism only to be immediately proven equally conclusively irrelevant. In short, the end of capitalism is not the question for the Left, but rather its most dangerous and self-defeating obsession.

Secondly, and following directly on, just as an information capitalism is *theoretically possible*, it is also *highly likely*; and, certainly, far more likely in the short/medium-term of 'what happens next', given the current strategic landscape of power relations, than is a post-capitalism of the kind Mason describes and advocates. We will argue this by taking issue with Mason's other major theoretical pillar: Kondratiev waves, which will be contrasted with a more informative, and explicitly political, periodicity building on the work of neo-Gramscian historical sociologist Giovanni Arrighi. On this conception, post-capitalism is not imminent, nor waiting in the wings just waiting to be realized by a committed post-capitalist movement that has understood its rationality. On the contrary, if it is *ever* to emerge, it will take many decades, even generations, of political education and effort.

I repeat that this is not a conclusion I present because it is something *I am advocating in opposition to Mason's advocacy of post-capitalism*. To the contrary, this new and embryonic information capitalism is a political economic regime – and a form of global society – that is profoundly troubling in many ways. But with clear and growing evidence for its emergence, there is all the more need for a strategic understanding of what it is and the strategic challenges and opportunities it presents to shape a more socially and ecologically equitable future than that presented by current, but substantially unchallenged, trajectories.

In other words, while this argument will accept that neoliberalism is busted, it will argue that capitalism *per se* remains resilient and strategically productive, and hence the most likely future (to mid-century at least) is not a post-capitalism, but a post-neoliberalism. Specifically, this will likely be a new classical or *laissez faire* liberalism – a ‘liberalism 2.0’ – revived and rejuvenated by the profound technological, epistemic and socio-cultural transformations afforded by 2.0 social media and big data, complexity, and cosmopolitized social networks, including – *crucially* – outside the erstwhile core of the US-centric Global North, not least amongst the massive, populous and fast-developing countries of China, India, Brazil etc... This singular global transformation – an uncompromisingly *capitalist* and even *bourgeois* development – is simply not tackled by Mason, leading to the highly parochial (both geographically and as Left-wing partisan) conclusion that the demise of the Western working class means the end of a meaningful challenge to the incumbent model of capitalism, viz. neoliberalism. Whether you welcome it or not, in short, capitalism has plenty of life left in it yet. And with stakes that have never been higher. Politically misleading and strategically blinding talk of an imminent post-capitalism thus potentially bears a grievous burden of responsibility.

This leads to the third major objection, at a higher level of abstraction, namely that the information economy’s purported ushering in of an age of abundance does not *per se* equate with solving the problems of social justice. We will challenge three specific sub-claims of this argument (which also speak to the problematic but popular conception of the ‘sharing economy’ as inherently emancipatory): first, that the information society as currently emerging does not in fact entail abundance but rather information capitalism, hence systematic information concentration, control and inequalities; secondly, that the information society *per se* does not even tend ‘in the long run’ inevitably to abundance; and finally, that abundance does not in any case equate with social justice. This last point hinges on the key argument that social justice is not just a matter of – nor therefore is it explicable or researchable purely in terms of – materialist political economy. Challenging the residual prioritization of this lens in Mason’s choice of a Marxian theoretical base, therefore, we will argue that social justice rather is a question of empowerment, not of just allocation, and that this in turn points to key issues of power/knowledge relations that are not reducible to ‘realist’ issues of materialist economics, not even in the proverbial ‘last instance’.

From this perspective of meta-theoretical criticism, then, we make one final set of criticisms, regarding Mason’s positive (rather than critical) suggestions regarding the form of a post-capitalism and the entire discourse of (prioritizing) the issue of ‘transition’, from ‘here’ to (a supposedly clearly understood) ‘there’. Drawing on questions of complex government of complex systems, the inherent openness and uncertainty of (accelerating) socio-technical innovation and the irreducibility of power/ knowledge, we will argue that the real strategic challenge facing the Left today is even more profound than Mason argues – but also much more promising, albeit in the longer term.

It is more challenging because if the Left is not simply to be the radical foil and unwitting handmaiden of a new and grievously iniquitous capitalism it must conclusively repudiate 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Left-wing orthodoxies of rational socialism and a foundationalist (but actually groundless) faith in an Enlightenment politics. This is something that will only be achieved by moving definitively *beyond* these often deeply buried tacit presumptions. This, in turn, depends on the emergence of and shift to an *alternative* and strategically productive framing, because the mind abhors a conceptual vacuum. Simple renunciation in words will not be enough. So it is not something that will be achieved easily, but only through the painful and

slow process of embodied learning that is the transformation of subjectivities, common-senses, lived practices, collectivities and institutional forms.

But it is also more promising because when one begins to move in this direction, namely towards thinking and acting in terms of complex dynamic systems of power/knowledge, not only do strategic openings appear – for intervention *here* and *now*, not for the construction of an always distant future utopia. But also the strategic imagination is liberated, perhaps even giving the Left a strategic advantage it has not held for a generation, and certainly does not hold now.

*The next blog in this series will discuss the first set of criticisms, regarding the theory of information economics and the labour theory of value.*

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Parts 2 and 3 of this extended review also now available:

*Part 2: Capitalism is Not About to Die, or The Possibility of Information Capitalism*  
[http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/tyfield/On\\_Postcapitalism\\_2.pdf](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/tyfield/On_Postcapitalism_2.pdf)

*Part 3: The Non-Stalled Kondratiev Wave*  
[http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/tyfield/On\\_Postcapitalism\\_3.pdf](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/tyfield/On_Postcapitalism_3.pdf)