

The communist mode

The futurologists of the Washington think-tanks are fixated on various kinds of war – trade, on drugs, on terrorism, and high-tech battlefields. It has been a while since the culture industry or academe has ‘imagined’ a post-capitalist society where war and injustice no longer reign. Some Science Fiction continues to highlight inequality as in the blockbusters *Avatar*, *Elysium*, *The Hunger Games* and *Ice Piercer*.

None depicts a qualitatively different future. That absence makes Lanchester’s closing paragraphs the more remarkable since he goes beyond the information that he and Kaplan compile. Much of what they tell us extends warnings about situations that we know too well. The surprise comes when Lanchester contends that the new technologies not only have made socialism practical but also a necessity. So that we can ponder a line of thinking which has been shoved off the agenda, his final section deserves to be reproduced in full but interleaved with comments from Marxist and Leninist perspectives:

It’s also worth noting what isn’t being said about this robotified future. The scenario we’re given – the one being made to feel inevitable – is of a hyper-capitalist dystopia. There’s capital, doing better than ever; the robots, doing all the work; and the great mass of humanity, doing not much, but having fun playing with its gadgets. (Though if there’s no work, there are going to be questions about who can afford to buy the gadgets.) There is a possible alternative, however, in which ownership and control of robots is disconnected from capital in its current form.

That rupture is what bourgeois ideologues cannot conceive as being possible. For them, capitalism is eternal, natural and universal, sprouting from what Adam Smith called our ‘propensity to track’. Without necessarily denying this version of the past, Lanchester envisions a qualitatively different future:

The robots liberate most of humanity from work, and everybody benefits from the proceeds: we don’t have to work in factories or go down mines or clean toilets or drive long-distance lorries, but we can choreograph and weave and garden and tell stories and invent things and set about creating a new universe of wants. This would be the world of unlimited wants described by economics, but with a distinction between the wants satisfied by humans and the work done by our machines.

This picture of a future of superabundance is pretty much that of Marx, whether young or mature, both utopian and scientific. Lanchester, however, glides around the point that, within socialism, our wants will be stimulated no longer by the need that capital has to expand. Our needs therefore will not be ‘unlimited’ in the way that capital must direct them for its survival. New limits

will apply, some to protect our physical environments. At the same time, new types of 'need' will arise through deepening the socialisation of human creativities.

The meaning of 'unlimited' also confronts us with how to distribute goods, both within and between economies. Despite the fantasy of mass marketers, 'unlimited' can never mean that every Italian, let alone every African, will own a Maserati. Our actualisable choices will be about reallocating the totality of the commodities that exist across the globe, as the pope is fond of saying. How much more stuff will eight billion human beings need for us all to enjoy somewhat better than frugal comfort? Or can that goal be reached by redistributing the excess from what is currently over-consumed by two billions?

Communism means free public transport instead of everyone being sold both a HumVee and a Jazz. Mass marketing has made obesity a burden for the richest and the poorest so that redressing food intakes will lower medical bills and reduce waists and waste. Economies in the Global South that have been 'over-developed', that is, distorted, to supply corporates with coffee or copper will rebalance their productive systems to nourish more of their own citizens.

Lanchester now gets to the crunch point: 'It seems to me that the only way that world would work is with alternative forms of ownership.' In a word, our pressing need is for socialism. As ever, the hard bit is how to get out from under the rule of capital. Here, Lanchester tumbles into utopianism in the bad sense of wishful thinking about the means to that end. Marxist-Leninists are scientific about how to realise a goal which the agents of capital dismiss as utopian because it is not capitalism writ ever larger. Lanchester can do no better than to claim that '[t]he reason, the only reason, for thinking this better world is possible is that the dystopian future of capitalism-plus-robots may prove just too grim to be politically viable.'

A shift in property relations will take more than the spread of despair. The world dominated by capital has been 'grim' for 250 years yet that system remains 'politically viable'. Why? Because the property-owning class holds state power and shows every sign of clinging to it with 'grim' death. Leo Huberman ends *Man's Worldly Goods* (1936) with an anecdote about a monkey prized by zoos; trappers place pieces of sugar inside coconuts tied to trees. The creature puts its paw in through a narrow hole, seizes the sugar in its fist, and gets stuck. All it has to do to escape is to let go the sugar. It never does. Neither will capitalists. Imagine a class which has always had breakfast served in bed meekly accepting that it is now their turn to be at the match factory by 7 a.m. **Edward Luttwak** is one of the few honest enough to recognise the social, political and economic injustices flowing from the lowering of living standards in the advanced economies but opposes redistribution because that means taking income and capital away from him. (*Times Literary Supplement*, ?? October 2015, p.)

Lanchester returns to utopianism in its best sense of striving for a future which is not predicated on injustice, war and the crippling of human potential: ‘This alternative future would be the kind of world dreamed of by William Morris, full of humans engaged in meaningful and sanely remunerated labour. Except with added robots.’ That exception unpicks a key thread from Morris’s tapestry. His craft practices convinced him that art is the only kind of work suited to humankind. His workshops were producing use-values as exchange values (commodities). Socialists will also need carpets, curtains and wallpapers. The unasked question is how are billions to regain fulfilment from the application of our capacities in paid employment as well as out of creative leisure.

Alienation

Alienation arises from twin aspects of wage-slavery. First, we sell our creative capacities as just another commodity. That step is a formal subjection of labour to capital. But as Marx and Kaplan remind us, capital needs to do more than to own our capacities for set periods of time: ‘The less he is attracted by the nature of the work and the way in which it has to be accomplished, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as the free play of his own physical and mental power, the closer his attention is forced to be.’ To maximise profit, its agents must discipline our application of those capacities. The maximisation of surplus-value requires severing conception from execution, as Josiah Wedgwood imposed at his pottery production lines from the 1760s. This Quaker secured the subjection of labour by having one strike leader hanged; he pursued the subordination of his hands by turning them into the arms of a machine for mass producing fine-art ceramics. This division of labour needed artisans, not artists. One hundred years later, Morris sought to restore workers to art by reintegrating the arts of conception with the crafts of execution. At the core of Harry Braveman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) is the anti-human necessity for capital to expand by splitting conception from execution

The issue of meaningful work is often presented through the prism of Marx’s contrasting our species with all other creatures, usually given as the difference between an architect and a bee:

... a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells, but what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the master-builder builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.

Two textual doubts call for consideration. The German that is translated here as ‘human architect’ is *Baumeister* which literally means ‘master builder’ and is, therefore, at some remove from the less hands-on engagement of an architect, as that professional is now understood. Moreover, the doer in Marx’s next sentence is neither sense of *Baumeister* but *Arbeiter* (worker): ‘a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning.’ In addition, the anti-Materialist (teleological) implications of an end result ‘already existing ideally’ are trimmed by Marx’s recognition that ‘a purposeful will is required for the

entire duration of the work.' Hence, conception cannot ever be utterly severed from execution.

Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realises his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it. This subordination is no mere momentary act. Apart from the exertion of the working organs, a purposeful will is required for the entire duration of the work. This means close attention.

Marx returns to the part played by re-conceptualisation throughout every sensuous human activity:

... it is by their imperfections that the means of production in any process bring to our attention their character of being the products of past labour.

Each incremental improvement in performance brings any initial goal closer to realisation but only by modifying it. The end is excluded.

In Lanchester's future, robots will do what we now call 'work'. In certain cases, their take-over of tasks might be desirable since it is not easy to see how the integrating of conception and execution relates to cleaning toilets. However, that technical fix avoids an ethical element in socialism, namely, respect for every contribution to our well-being. From that perspective, cleaners are as valuable as authors. Lanchester's catalogue of what we could do instead of work 'in factories or go down mines or clean toilets or drive long-distance lorries' is that we can 'choreograph and weave and garden and tell stories and invent things and set about creating a new universe of wants.' Stimulating as this mixed bag of alternatives is, its premise is not the same as Marx's vision that humans can avoid becoming a thing (reified) only if we do more than one thing.

Historical materialists do not reduce 'sensuous human activity' to labour or still less with paid work or wage-slavery. Instead, we know that we become what we do, as individuals and as a species. Collective doing and re-making are how we hominised ourselves as a species and how we were socialised as individuals, as explained by Engels on 'The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man'. Our learning to speak is a foundational instance of social labour. A future without labour is therefore as inhuman as one in which labour is reduced to the routines of wage-slavery. Worse still, many long-term unemployed men spend their days in pajamas watching TV, which Australian writer George Turner calls 'the triv'. While Kaplan's interview subjects are time-poor, those made redundant by sophisticated mechanisation have had their free time impoverished.

Opiates

Socialists are not looking forward to the *Brave New World* that Aldous Huxley conjured in the early 1930s. Parts of that dystopia have been realised in order to meet the needs of capital by promoting drugs as soporifics, stimulants and prescribed pharmaceuticals, and by the commodification of sex and the sexualisation of children as one niche in the mass marketing of capital's necessary over-production. In a social order where morality has been

boiled down to a choice between vanity and gluttony, the pursuit of “stuff” is a more effective opiate than the happy-clappies or rival Fundamentalisms. In living memory, the determining of one’s worth by owning a commodity has given way to the pleasure from the purchase, whether one ever uses the acquisition or not. For as Marx puts it on the first page of *Capital*: ‘The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.’ Obsolescence has become instantaneous. The use-value is in the exchange, but in denial of the utility in archaic gift relationships espoused by the French socialist Marcel Mauss (1925) and given contemporary force by Richard M. Titmuss (19).

Yet, the craving for those narcotics is still, in Marx’s words, ‘the *expression* of real distress and also the protest against real distress.’ These conflicting opiates, mental or material, are ways of helping us to go on struggling against ‘a heartless world,’ as Marx wrote of religions. Superstitions will not lose much of their appeal until after the social conditions that help to make them necessary can be abolished. Meanwhile, no sense can be made of rampant consumerism without first recognising how all purchases serve capital by realising as profit the surplus-value present in commodities. In addition, materialists spurn the quack diagnosis of ‘affluenza’ as an individual’s sin when it is one of the surrogates proffered under the rule of capital for the lack of satisfactions from socially productive labour; ‘affluenza’ is inherent in the expansion of capital, not some original concupiscence of the flesh.

Conditioning determinism

In charting the road ahead, Lanchester is right to conclude: ‘It says a lot about the current moment that as we stand facing a future which might resemble either a hyper-capitalist dystopia or a socialist paradise, the second option doesn’t get a mention.’ In taking up the good old cause, we dare not rely on the old tactics, no matter how much of the Marxist-Leninist strategic critique of capitalist exploitation and repression holds good. If new things did not happen there would never have been capitalism, just as socialism would be impossible. That rule applies to how we might take the first steps in reordering strategic assumptions about the links between technologies and social relations of production.

Marx foresaw how capitalist exploitation could develop the productive forces needed for socialism. Indeed, he built his efforts to overthrow capitalism on how class conflicts manifest themselves in the cross-links between the forces of production and their social relations. In the West, we already have a production system which could deliver a superabundance of material goods in a free association of producers. On paper, we could leap over any further development of the productive forces needed for human self-emancipation.

In light of these changes, a passage from Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* takes on a new significance:

No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of

production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself.

This timetable has been attacked for implying that we have to wait until capitalism is over-ripe with the productive forces needed for socialism before any attempt can be made to bring it into existence. This recipe for counter-revolutionary politics does not apply to the circumstances that confront us now. How much more room for development will the productive forces require before making an end to capitalism a possibility? The means of production necessary for socialism have existed for a couple of generations.

Does that excessive capacity mean that we can bypass socialism on some freeway to communism? To see why our answer must be NO, we have to absorb the significance of what Marx says next:

Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or at least in the process of formation.

The validity of this claim is beyond doubt as a statement about the origins of socialism. The possibility of a post-capitalist solution did not begin to capture the imaginations of working people until after 1800 when the centralisation and concentration of resources initiated the cooperative manner of working essential for the accomplishment of socialism. Some 200 years on, 'the material conditions for its solution' are present to the power of 'n'. What has happened to 'co-operation'?

Capitalism has been pregnant with socialism far longer than any pachyderm. Once we extend 'the task' for revolutionaries from developing the means of production to our overturning their social relations, it becomes obvious that only a caesarian will rip the new from the womb of capital.

The state vs revolution

More than a socialist alternative has lost its place in thinking about the future of humankind. Even among those of us 'clinging to the wreckage' of socialism, a key element has gone missing in action – namely, a dictatorship of the proletariat. One reason for this erasure is the memory of real existing socialisms. There is no chance of building a mass movement in Australia by calling for any kind of dictatorship, not even one decked out as a Peoples Democracy.

In addition, every attempt to build socialism runs into the anarchist point of divergence from Marxism-Leninism. Yes, both camps agree about the exploitative nature of capital and the repressive nature of the state. But the anarchists say that we Marxist-Leninists are wrong about the means of reaching our shared goal of the withering away of the state. Yes, the anarchists are still wrong about how far spontaneity can take us. As Shaw quipped: 'Anarchism is a game at which the police can always beat you.' No, the anarchists were not mistaken to fear where democratic centralism could end up. In light of what went wrong after 1917, we cannot brush aside their insistence of matching means and ends. Again, every 'result' is altered by the means we employ just as the fulfillment of each step reshapes subsequent ones.

Even more debilitating has been a reluctance around the Left to face up to the real existing dictatorship which we endure in bourgeois democracies. One sign of that avoidance is that every tightening of the law is labeled fascism when

it is no more than a further instance of the normal functioning of the covert dictatorship. New laws for data retention and FairWork Australia do not point towards fascism. If they did, would you be reading this article?

Moreover, fascism is only one form of overt dictatorship, the one that emerged to deal with revolutionary threats to the rule of capital during and after the 1910s. In countries like Australia, the agents of capital do not want to risk the illusion of popular rule. That asset is too valuable to be abandoned unless absolutely necessary for the survival of class rule. In the case of Jack Lang in 1931-32, Andrew Moore has shown how the Old Guard in New South Wales organised to contain the extra-Parliamentary New Guard. The big bourgeoisie solved the political crisis of capital not by a military coup, but by manoeuvres within the parliamentary circus to shift Joe Lyons from the Commonwealth Labor government to head up the United Australia Party. Of course, had the electorate failed to follow suit, more drastic measures would have been undertaken.

Dictatorships of the bourgeoisie, whether overt in Saudi Arabia, or covert in Australia, are grounded in the property relations that socialists strive to replace. Similarly, class conflict is grounded in the fact that an overwhelming majority of us, though not 'the 99 percent', are compelled to sell our labour-power in order to exist. That economic oppression has double-headed effects. It keeps wage-slaves submissive from fear of being put out of work; at the same time, the exploitative nature of wage-slavery kindles resistance. The agents of capital know the difference between 'the puny strength of one' and 'Solidarity Forever'. The Kaplan article again illustrates how the restructuring of workplaces aims to isolate workers from each other, as do casualisation, churn and the loss of coffee breaks.

Once the facts of class power are re-admitted, the prospect of leaping over socialism crashes to the ground. No matter how over-developed the forces of production might become, the social relations of production are now weighted more heavily against the socialist alternative than at any time since the late eighteenth century. Even in the gun-toting United States, the firepower of the state overwhelms that of the right-wing militias by multiple orders of magnitude. Remember Waco?

War and revolution

All but one seizure of power by workers and peasants against overt dictatorships has come out of wars which had broken the monopoly of the propertied classes of violence: Paris in 1871; Russia in 1917; Eastern Europe in 1945 followed by China, Korea and Indo-China. Cubans snuck in along the rails before the U.S. made sure that nothing like that happened again until Venezuelans cracked the carapace in the late 1990s only because Chavez started with more support within the army than Allende had after 1971.

Another exception to the dependence of revolution on war was the 1979 fall of the Shah of Iran which was made possible by the willingness of unarmed civilians to march against troops in the expectation of being killed. Those methods have no positive lessons for a proletariat seeking to overthrow the rule of capital. Leninists do not engage in human-wave attacks in which the lives of the most advanced sections of the proletariat are thrown away. On the contrary,

we stick to the maxim: 'Maximum harm to the boss at minimum cost to the workers.'

Since the U.S. defeat in Indo-China, its strategists have de-labourised their side of the battlefield. Instead of B-52s, they send in the drones. This shift comes at a cost to the imperialists. Air-power can take territory but only infantry can hold it. Hence, the frantic attempts to train Afghani and Iraqi forces alongside the inability to drive ISIS out by bombs alone. These disasters for Big Oil echo the failure of Nixon's Vietnamisation policy in the final stages of the wars against the peoples of Indo-China. But this realignment of firepower has also come at a cost to the working-class since the state no longer needs to arm us and thus no longer risks depriving itself of its monopoly of violence.

Of the French volunteers who charged the Prussian guns shouting 'Vive le nation!', meaning 'Long live all the people', and singing '*Ca ira*', victory at Valmy on 20 September 1792: 'Here and today a new epoch in the history of the world has begun ...'. Goethe as observer

No longer universal conscription to train working in the use of arms in the U.S. . Military service always double-sided and used to bind workers to a conception of the state as expressive of the general will as it did in Bismarck's Germany.

The around Thomas Jefferson No standing army but a people's militia so that the citizen had his right to bear arms enshrined in the Constitution as the December 1792 Amendment alongside free speech etc six months after the act requiring 'each and every free able-bodied white male citizen of the republic' to serve in the militia.

Now a money-making by the merchants of death such as Smith and Weston

The militia overwhelmed by the U.S. war machine and turned into an other branch of the state repression against striking workers and all social protestors as in the shootings of anti-war demonstrators **at ??? State in 1970????**

fantasies about a coming race war

Given the density of guns in the U.S. it is striking that none of the mass shootings take place on Wall Street, not since the anarchist bombing of the exchange **in ????** none of the Deans of Economics exposed as complicit in the 2007-9 financial crimes exposed in the documentary *Inside Job* (2010)

Fears here after 1918 about the revolutionary potential of the returning diggers

Efforts by the then proscribed Communist Party to set up a Peoples' Army to resist invasion in 1939 as an anti-fascist measure at home fear of conscription as a union-busing device as it had been opposed in 1916 and 1917 plebiscites.

Churchill's scheme to invade the Soviet Union in July 1945 backed by 100,000 Wehrmacht troops told by his generals that if he even attempted the British Army would rebel.

The blowhards who talk about 'revolution' are mostly gun-shy. Ask them about their weapon of choice and they blanch. As a school cadet, I rarely hit the target with my .303 and my fighting prowess has not improved with age.

The implications of this imbalance of force for socialism are stark. Suppose that Lanchester's arguments were to be accepted by two-thirds of Australians. We then vote in parties at every level of government committed to

ending capitalist property relations. What next? The answer is the same as Norm Gallagher gave in 1961: 'When I see how hard it is to get the bosses to pay an extra ten shillings a week, I can't see them handing over the keys just because we ask.' The anti-Marxist Christian Socialist R.H. Tawney denounced Communist demands in the 1930s for a revolution to achieve socialism in Britain but accepted that the British propertied classes might not accept a Labor victory at the ballot box. Hence, he called on the labour movement to prepare for mass action to block a Tory reaction. He had seen the spread of overt dictatorships between the wars to do just that. Moreover, Tawney was an expert on the English Revolution of the 1640s which set up the example of cutting off the head of God's Anointed to rewrite property relations. Those victories were consolidated by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with the invasion of 30,000 Dutch troops to install William of Orange on the English throne. The huntin', shootin' and fishin' squires harboured no doubts about the efficacy of violence.

The fact that the socialist alternative has been off the agenda is a marker of our difficulties in attaining the political revolution necessary for an utterly transformed socio-economic order. Nothing is to be gained from avoiding the truth that the achievement of state power in Australia is less likely today than at anytime since 1788.

The British army began threatening to a coup against a Corbyn-led government when he had come no closer to power than leadership of a parliamentary party dominated by MPs who would do the dirty work themselves should any U.K government attempt to disrupt the 'special relationship' with the U.S. warfare state.

The paradox is that what had been unrealisable before 1970 was still imaginable. Now, what is economically possible is rarely imagined. Today, socialism is not imagined largely because it is impossible to see how the states behind the global corporates can be smashed. Their firepower is overwhelming and their willingness to employ it undiminished.

Must acceptance of the Marxist-Leninist recognition of the state as organised class violence raised to an obligatory norm in the law result in **despair? As it has for the first generation of Italy's workerists in Mario Tronti and Negri.** Given the massive over-kill in the hands of capital, what can we do except amuse ourselves to death with digital gadgets and on social media? Faced with a comparable imbalance of class forces in fascist Italy, Antonio Gramsci reflected on 'Pessimism of the will and optimism of the intellect'. If that saying means not throwing ourselves onto lines of police bayonets but rebuilding an anti-capitalist movement brick by brick with a scientific analysis of the laws of accumulation of capital then we must be all for it. Yet we also need some optimism of the will – a rekindling of the utopian promise of socialism's pioneers that the way we live now is not the best of which our species is capable. Some pessimism of the intellect is called for if we are to integrate a scientific critique of capital accumulation with moral fervor and not assume that the il-logic of capital is set in concrete. **It is here that the initial workerist impulses merit renewed consideration.**

A rational basis for why we must challenge the power of the state is that it can never leave us alone. The world is a million miles away from the days when

‘The emperor’s writ stops at the village gate.’ No one can survive a nuclear attack. No one can opt out of the current implosion of capital, neither billionaires like Malcolm Turnbull nor the labour lieutenants of capital like Shorten. A million dollars in a self-managed Super Fund is no guarantee against ending up in the poorhouse. Capital and labour must fight their way out at the expense of the other. No win-win operates here.

One more pre-condition holds. **Return to our correction of the difference between the architect and the bee.** The utopia of communism cannot be detailed in advance. The greatest creative effort ever from our species will be in learning what communism means as we build it. Whatever five-year plans we start out with will prove inadequate. Whether in the sphere of strategy or at the level of tactics, revolutionary socialists should harken to Engels: ‘Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first.’ The free association of individuals can be assured only through collective self-liberation.

The translation of co-operative satisfaction of needs to the enrichment of every domain of ‘sensuous human activity’.

A desire for a different kind of wealth and riches.