Review - Four Futures: Life After Capitalism

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Four Futures: Life After Capitalism
By Peter Frase
Verso, 2016

Capitalism's Eternal Present

Peter Frase's book, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*, undermines a central tenet of capitalist ideology in the post-Cold War period: that there is no alternative to capitalism. The most iconic example of this argument is Frances Fukuyama's (1989) contention that the end of the Cold War marked the end of ideological conflict and thus history. With the collapse of communism, capitalism no longer had an external rival and history, conceived as ideological conflict, stopped moving. The eternal present of capitalism dawned. Progressive thought had to situate itself within this horizon. A notable example of this is John Isbister's (2004) reflections of justice and capitalism. Isbister reconciled capitalism with justice and discounted alternative social orders because "Capitalism is growing in power, scope and achievements" and so "there is no exit; we have to learn to manage what we have" (2004: 50).

But what we have may prove to be ephemeral. Frase remarks that "we can't go back to the past and we can't even hold on to what we have now. Something new is coming" (2016: 150). The basis for this contention lies with the unfolding consequences of climate change and the automation of production through robotics and artificial intelligence. Capitalism has unleashed forces beyond its control. We are sliding into the chaos of a deepening crisis of capitalism without any clear conception of what might lie beyond it. The value of Frase's book is to illuminate the possible institutional structures that might emerge beyond the immediate horizons of the present. What he offers is not an extrapolation of current trends into the future, but a reflection on structural possibilities tied to robotization and climate change. Frase's innovative move is to consider a set of possible outcomes that combine hierarchy or equality with scarcity or abundance. One can have abundance with hierarchy or equality or scarcity with hierarchy or equality. These conceptions of the future open a political space in which we can imagine possible worlds beyond capitalism – as opposed to being stuck within the eternal present of capitalism.

Abundant Futures

To survey Frase's possible futures, consider firstly how abundance might manifest itself in a world of either equality or scarcity. In Marxist terminology, abundance stems from the growth of the forces of production. These signify human mastery over nature and the release of human beings from a realm of necessity in which they are compelled to work in order to survive. Automation and robotization diminish this compulsion, but they don't, by themselves, eliminate capitalism's oppressive relations of production. What would do the trick is not the violent overthrow of capitalism, but what Andre Gorz terms "non-reformist reforms" (Frase, 2016: 51), an example of which is a universal basic income (UBI). In its most radical form, the UBI would de-commodify labor and precipitate a fundamental shift in market incentives. High levels of remuneration would be required to get people to do undesirable work. But they would do desirable work for less or even for free to the extent that the UBI freed them from economic insecurity. Increased wages for undesirable work would spur automation. Automation, in turn, would generate technologies that can be cheaply shared and reproduced between people. Having direct access to productive technology in order to produce and reproduce one's material existence would render the UBI dispensable. People no longer need to work

for others because the forces of production have become socialized. Now labor is a freely undertaken activity. Inequality is not eliminated from society, but it is uncoupled from class inequalities. One might expect the emergence of a myriad of status hierarchies that are aligned with different values, aspirations, and capacities that human beings have. Reputational economies might displace capitalist ones, but within a context of economic emancipation.

The prospect of *abundance with hierarchy*, on the other hand, stems from continued private ownership of the means of production through intellectual property rights (IPRs). IPRs represent the continuity of capitalist expropriation, which Frase traces back to the Enclosure Movement. Capital creates itself by privatizing the commons through the assertion of property rights and then organizing production on the basis of private ownership of the means of production. The figure that Frase focuses on here is the rentier who passively accepts rewards of ownership as opposed to the entrepreneur who creates wealth through innovation. The two roles are not mutually exclusive. Firms that generate wealth through innovation are able to realize long-term rents from the control of innovations by licensing to others the right to copy the ideas that they possess (Frase, 2016: 81). The automation of production engenders not only abundance, but decentralization on the basis of a technological capacity to reproduce images and objects through new information technologies, exemplified by the advent of the 3-D printer. But access to these technologies requires the payment of royalties and licensing fees, which means that people still need to generate incomes. The necessity to make money remains, but the sources of income dwindle as a consequence of the automation of production. The jobs of the future might lie with the creative classes, which churn out new innovations, more lawyers, who enforce compliance with intellectual property rights, and more guards, who maintain security in the midst of rising inequality and exclusion. But these occupational categories stop well short of full employment and, ironically, many of these jobs can be automated as well.

Scarce Futures

Frase's abundant futures – both egalitarian and hierarchical – assume that nature does not constrain the production of wealth. Green theorists counter that endless growth on the planet of finite resource is simply not possible. From Frase's perspective, the resulting ecological crisis is not about the survival of humanity per se, but rather who survives. In making this point, Frase is attempting to dispel leftist fatalism ("we are all doomed"), which derails a much needed re-thinking the human relationship with nature and the management of scarcity (Frase, 2016: 101). These undertakings would be the central features of a socialist future that reconciles equality with scarcity. To do this, says Frase, we should avoid the idea that the preservation of nature can only be accomplished by restricting the reach of development. The two are not really separate and the far-reaching effects of climate change render them less so. We will have to intervene within the inner-workings of nature in order to create conditions in which human societies can continue to flourish. This opens the door to proposals that sometimes elicit the censure of environmentalists: carbon-capture technologies, geo-engineering, and the development of various nanotechnologies that can interact with a destabilized natural world. Frase's pragmatism extends to the management of scarcity. We ought not to reject markets in favor of state planning in the administration of the scarcity. Markets are only problematic to the extent that they are anchored in economic inequalities. Under the auspices of a UBI, however, they can function as a quasi-planning device, enabling people that compose a market place of equals – via the UBI – to formulate preferences that would be compatible with the constraints of "an ecologically limited world" (Frase, 2016: 118).

This socialist administration of scarcity presumes the erosion of capitalist hierarchy. What if hierarchy persists in the face of climate change induced scarcity? Historically, capitalist hierarchy has been tempered by the fact that capitalists need people to engage in labor. But the automation of production diminishes this need. Both the automation of production and climate change will engender massive population displacement. These are people that, from the perspective of the elites, become increasingly disposable. The elite still need to secure living spaces and various systems of circulation of goods, investment, ideas and valued people. This entails moving superfluous people out of way and repressing dangerous movements and individuals. Repression, Frase contends, can readily morph into a program of extermination because people that are rendered superfluous are not likely to remain politically inert. In the midst of automation and scarcity, they will clamor for some form of income. These demands may impede elite affluence. Worse yet, they might escalate into calls for a redistribution of wealth, making the masses not only useless but dangerous. "Someone will eventually get the idea that is would be better to get rid of them," remarks Frase (2016:

124). The fate of the non-elite might be the same as the fate of horses after the advent of the car, which was mass extinction (Frase, 2016: 127).

Complex Futures

Frase treats this eventuality as a pragmatic calculation that elites might be driven to make. Indeed, elite preferences for policies of mass incarceration, militarized policing, and remote controlled killing (via drones) prefigure the shift from repression to extermination (Frase, 2016: 132-143). Frase's argument centers the relationship between how actors calculate costs and benefits in the midst of deep structural change. Throughout the book, social structures and the incentives they generate for social action are foregrounded. In the case of egalitarian futures, social structures become reconfigured through policy innovations. In the hierarchical futures, social structures consist of existing class relations modified by automation and climate change. Nowhere in Frase, however, is there a discussion of how a politics of recognition might shape a politics of distribution.[1] Status hierarchies mediate class domination and fundamentally shape decision-making within political communities. A discussion of the interrelationships between class and status offers a point of access for engaging and further developing the main ideas in Frase's text.

Another limitation of Frase's text is that his futures are formulated within the framework of a generic capitalist society with no effort to theorize these futures within the context of International Relations. This is a limitation that IR theorists might address by considering the significance of inter-state conflict and the importance of the nation-state as a still significant location of political community. Clearly, the alternative futures that Frase discusses are going to be shaped by the continuing existence of the international state system. Frase remarks that the future is not a matter of one of four possibilities emerging: "…we could get them all and there are paths that lead from each one to all of the others" (2016: 149). Reality is ambiguous and pluralistic. IR's focus on multiple political communities attempting to define their identities, pursue their interests and secure their existence offers a framework for understanding how climate change and automation will operate as forces of fundamental change in the world. Frase's *Four Futures* is able to move our thinking beyond the immediate horizons of the capitalist present, but a critical engagement between IR theory and Frase could shed light on the complex ways in which these futures may manifest themselves.

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[1] The relationship between a politics of distribution and recognition is discussed in Fraser (2017).

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