Fully Automated Luxury Communism - A Review

By David McMullen

A review of *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* by Aaron Bastani, Verso, 288 pages (June, 2019)

It has to be a game changer when a book espousing communism is the talk of the town. It has done this by putting the discussion on a firm footing. Communism is luxury for all and the end of work. Bastani calls it Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC) and hence the name of his book. And who could possibly be opposed to that? Marx, as Bastani reminds us, called it moving from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. Also, in true Marxist fashion, he points out that we have had to endure the capitalist phase as a precondition, and only after this purgatory can we move on to communism. It needs capitalism to bring us to this point where full automation and universal luxury are just a hop, skip and jump down the road. Communism is not some utopia that could have happened any old time. Its time is only now in sight.

This also cuts rather nicely through the "communism has been tried and failed" narrative. No one can seriously claim that a society based on full automation and shared abundance has failed. It definitely has not been tried and it is easy to imagine it being a smash hit.

Fully Automated

I think Bastani is right when he says: "It turns out that any repetitive endeavour – whatever the industry – can be automated within the context of rising digitisation."

Automation has already made considerable inroads into manufacturing and there is a lot more to come. In construction work it is only just beginning. Robots keep getting smarter and more adept. We are also seeing more general-purpose ones that can be slotted in anywhere in production, and can do virtually anything, simply by being "shown" what to do.

Autonomous robots that are mobile, agile and dexterous will start appearing everywhere. So, we will one day see them hopping out of furniture vans, ambulances and fire trucks, and roaming around hospitals. Autonomous vehicles are almost upon us. This will mean driver-free taxis, buses, trucks, vans and construction vehicles. Shelf stacking and order filling in retail and wholesale will be people-free zone. There will be no checkout staff in shops and more of our shopping will be done online.

Notwithstanding all these dramatic changes, job loss from automation may not be quite as precipitous as Bastani and others may imagine. An automated process still requires some humans and often only part of a particular job is affected. Also, with economic growth, fresh jobs will emerge in the growing industries and these will include new ones that start off requiring more people because it will take time to automate their processes.

But whatever the pace, there is no disputing the general direction. So, with increasing automation we should not have to do much work to produce quite a high living standard. As a result, there will be less pressing need to spend much time doing work that we would prefer not to do. Although, at the same time, with increasing automation, the remaining work will tend to generally be more cerebral and inherently interesting. Indeed, it will become a part of all-round free development once we get rid of the oppressive work relations of capitalism - the bossiness and excessive division of labor. Everyone will choose a mix of

work and non-work that best suits them. Life will become more the exercise of freedom and less that of necessity.

One could talk extensively here about motivation and incentives. But the main point is that financial inducements will play a diminishing role as work becomes more fun, and one's slice of a big and increasing pie becomes more or less equal, and more and more separated from work contribution.

What Bastani is saying about automation and the production process is a refreshing change from the usual "left" chatter about how capitalism "deskills" workers. This entrenched nonsense is readily refuted by the fact that a high proportion of young people undergo some kind of post-secondary education. Workers are becoming more, not less, equipped to be their own masters.

Luxury for All

His story about luxury for all focuses on five developments that will make a big difference in ending scarcity. These are the great increase in productivity from automation, an abundance of energy from the sun and of minerals from space, huge health spending eliminated by genetic engineering that makes us less illness prone, and animal-free meat reducing our demand for land and water. So, communism will be shared luxury not shared poverty.

The weakness of this abundance message is that it does not break completely with the Green Blob. It does to a considerable extent of course. You cannot be singing the praises for economic growth, genetic engineering and automation without doing so. However, there is a lot of renewable energy nonsense; and he concedes too much to the limits-to-growth crowd.

Renewable Folly

Bastani seems to think relying on renewable energy is going to be a breeze. The rays of the sun will provide limitless energy. Solar panels are cheap as chips and offshore wind can compete with coal power. At the same time the intermittency problem is being solved by using lithium ion batteries for storage. And all these technologies are bound to get cheaper.

I'll just focus on batteries and storage here. While batteries can deal with short-term smoothing, they are far too expensive to deal with seasonal changes or extended periods of little sun or wind. Saying they are far too expensive is to put it mildly. Let's look at the battery facility recently installed in South Australia by Elon Musk to see how costly it would be. It provides 100MW of power for one hour and cost AU$90million (US$68 million).

In Australia, energy use of all types (electricity, fuel, heat) is around 200GWh per hour on average. Backing that up for an hour, would require 2,000 of those facilities and cost US$180 billion. For 36 hours, the figure would be US$4.9 trillion. That is around three years GDP! And also keep in mind that batteries don't last forever. So, to deal with intermittency, the cost of batteries would have to fall to a tiny fraction of their present level.

Now what about other storage options? Where it is available, pump hydro is generally deemed to be the cheapest choice, although still absurdly expensive. In Australia, pumped storage would "only" cost something in the order of US$500 billion, extrapolating from the expected cost of Snowy 2. However, there are serious doubts about the adequacy of potential pumped hydro capacity in highly populated regions like Europe, North America and China.

Hydrogen has been described as the solution to longer term storage. However, this would have to be hellishly expensive and is still a very immature technology. First you have the cost of converting electricity to hydrogen and then transporting and storing it. This would provide fuel for electricity generating capacity that would kick in when there is a falloff in sun and wind. There will be times when these "free" resources will be quite low, so, you would be looking at a close to complete duplication of electricity generation capacity, with facilities that can turn hydrogen into electricity.

Duplication could be reduced by concentrating solar and wind farms in the better endowed regions and having them produce hydrogen for the less endowed ones. However, instead of duplication you would have electricity being used to produce hydrogen that is then often used to produce electricity. This would require lots more investment in this immature technology and greater energy conversion loss.

Longer transmission lines could to some extent be an alternative to storage. These would require new technologies, huge investments and often having the electricity switch in problematic regions. Such an arrangement also means massive duplication. Let's look at a simple example to show this problem. Say the world is divided into two regions with each having daylight when the other is in the dark. If they relied on battery storage, each region would install enough solar panels to produce its total requirement and batteries to make the power available when it is needed and not just when it produced. If instead, each relies on the other overnight, they both have to have the capacity to meet its daytime needs and the other's nighttime needs. So instead of storage you have double the number of solar panels as well as very long transmission lines.

It is difficult not to conclude that if renewable energy achieves a high proportion of energy provision, and all the coal and nuclear power plants are closed down, the only economic way of dealing with intermittency will be stand-by gas turbines. That would mean costly duplication and still leave us with a lot of CO2 emissions.

But it gets worse. If we stick with the notion that renewables are the solution, we will stay with fossil fuel because the former is just too expensive. And this is without even considering Bastani's proposal for a One World Tax that would be imposed on richer countries to bribe poorer ones into using renewable energy. The bigger the cost gap, the bigger the bribe will have to be. Contributing to the gap is the fact that some of these countries including China and India have lots of brand-new coal power plants.

If we are worried about the climate, we need to stop subsidizing the roll out of renewable energy and start spending big on research and development that will cheapen emission-free energy and make us more weather proof. This spending is very low at the moment and a mere fraction of what we presently spend on subsidizing the deployment of solar panels and wind turbines.

No LImits

Bastani tells a great story about how we no longer have to worry about limits to growth because of the imminent possibility of getting minerals from space. All the minerals we use are abundant on asteroids and meteorites, and we are developing the robotics and cheap rockets we need to harvest them. We will start off with the asteroids that hang around our neighborhood and then move on to the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter.

However, he undermines his resource optimism by accepting the pessimistic view of earthly resources expounded by the so-called Club of Rome. This leaves open the prospect of a resource collapse before we have had time to get the space mining show on the road.

Although, full marks to Bastani for his implicit rejection of the idea that lots of production will inevitably lead to waste overload, which is the second arrow in the limits-to-growth quiver.

Despite these shortcomings, FALC is still quite a break with the green movement.

> To the green movement of the twentieth century [FALC] is heretical. Yet it is they who, for too long, unwisely echoed the claim that ‘small is beautiful’ and that the only way to save our planet was to retreat from modernity itself.

His support for technofix should give greenies the willies. He mentions the motor vehicle saving us from mountains of horse manure, the agricultural Green Revolution of the 1960s and 70s preventing mass famines, and the present development of synthetic meat saving land and water.

Bastani makes disrespectful comments about Malthus, Jevons and Ehrlich, and even blasphemes against Gaia:

> Our ambitions must be Promethean because our technology is already making us gods – so we might as well get good at it.

Together with delightful deficiencies in the green department, the book also has a thoroughly refreshing absence of identity politics. The words "racism" and "racist" only appear once each in the text while there is no reference to white privilege. "Women" only appears twice, while "sexist" and "sexism" are completely absent. "Men" appears nine times in non-disparaging ways. LGBTs, gays and lesbians go unmentioned.

Start of a New Discussion

Detractors will no doubt have a field day going through the policy recommendations at the end of the book. These include municipal protectionism, renationalizing industries and what he calls Universal Basic Services which would provide free housing, medical care, education and public transport. The case for FALC does not hinge on the merits of this stuff. Although, once a serious radical movement re-emerges, it will have to quickly get up to speed on what to do when it takes over the reins of government.

Then we have a whole historical period of transition that may prove rather tortuous. Automation and abundance are nowhere near complete on a global scale; and even if they were, it will take time for people to recover from capitalism and become fully functioning. So, in the meantime all kinds of blackguards will try to reverse the process with the assistance of dimwits.

Despite its delusions about renewable energy, I am thoroughly delighted by the book's message that automation and abundance are the basis for communism, and by the whole FALC meme which is starting to force all sorts of people to debate the matter.

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