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The Manchester revolution

Paul Mason reimagines the Manchester of his birth in a postcapitalist age — and raises the challenge of getting there

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Imagine this: a child is born in a city where 40 per cent of the workforce make things with machines and manual labour. The dominant social relationship is the wage relation. The social contract is strong and mediated through taxation. Most services are provided by the state.

Sixty years later a child is born in the same city. Now only 10 per cent of the population are involved in manufacturing — and, of them, half are engaged in tasks that look more like science or computing. The forms of exploitation by capital are now primarily financial, with the wage relationship secondary to value extraction — via interest, monopoly pricing, under-paid work and the exploitation of behavioural data. Most services are provided via the market.

In the 250-year lifecycle of industrial capitalism, that 60-year chunk has clearly seen a major mutation. It's been driven by technology, globalisation and human development. And its social impact is clear.

In the 1960s, the streets of the city were quiet during the day and like the grave on Sundays. There was a clear dividing line between work and leisure. Today that city's streets buzz with open air cafes; the pavements are full of people conversing or consulting smart devices as they walk.

In the 1960s, a prominent scientist of the city had been recently persecuted for being privately gay. Today his face is on the £50 note and the city has an entire district devoted to gay culture.

The city is Manchester, on whose outskirts I was born in 1960. Renowned as ground zero of the industrial revolution, its current workforce dynamics are startling. Out of a working-age population of 1,760,000, 24 per cent work in finance and professional services; 20 per

cent work in health, education and social care; only 10 per cent work in manufacturing.

Beyond carbon and capitalism

The question is: what will Manchester look like in another 60 years? I want to conclude this series of essays by trying to imagine the best-case outcome of a transition beyond both carbon and capitalism in the birthplace of manufacturing.

It should be entirely possible, within 60 years, to automate manufacturing completely — reducing the workforce at most plants to a small oversight function. By then we should have gone far beyond simply automating human processes (as with the auto-industry robots which spot-weld like a giant human on speed): the processes themselves will be essentially non-human. We might 'grow' a metallic object or print it — just as turbofan blades are formed out of a single metal crystal under lab-like conditions today.

So maybe 95+ per cent of the workforce are concentrated in services, many of them human-to-human. Because we have eliminated financial speculation and automated many financial process — such as commercial banking, commercial law, accounting and forward markets — the financial workforce is also small. But the health, culture, sport and education workforce is large — eclipsing the business-services sector, just as it now eclipses manufacturing.

The 2020s were fought out as a battle between a profit-centred and a people-and-planet-centred economy.

Most people 'work' only two or three days per week — and work is, as today, a mixture of work and leisure. Karl Marx's famous reprimand to Charles Fourier — that work 'cannot become play' but only be reduced in time — has been disproved. But they were both right: automation has made working hours shorter and blurred the edges.

There are no tech monopolies — only a mixture of innovative small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs), which make traditional profits, and public-information utilities, which charge only the cost of production and maintenance.

Holistic healthcare (including mental health, physiotherapy and dentistry), education to degree level and city transport are all free. The average rent is around 5 per cent of the average wage (as in Red Vienna in the 1920s) — and the interest rate on mortgages is capped at around the

same level.

By 2080 the city has long-ago achieved a zero-net carbon target, and its progressive government is engaged in innovative processes to remove carbon from the atmosphere and make carbon reparations to the rest of the world.

Cultural and political struggle

The next question is: how did we get here?

First, we made the 2020-30 decade into a mass cultural and political struggle for a new kind of capitalism. Governments were formed which suppressed speculative finance; built a million new green social homes and began the greening of all remaining housing stock; subsidised the creation of new city transport systems and the removal of all petrol/diesel cars and trucks from the road; broke up or nationalised the tech monopolies, taking the registration of data into common ownership; consciously fostered the creation of a big, granular non-profit sector — including banks, retail outlets, health and social-care providers and cultural-production centres; and removed all coercion from the welfare system, merging state pensions and benefits into a single, modest basic income, enshrined as a right in the constitution.

The result, by 2030, was still capitalism. But the government had learnt how to measure it in a different way — not only calculating gross value added but measuring physical outputs, hours worked and productivity. If 'total economic utility' was divided in 2020 into 40 per cent state, 59 per cent market and 1 per cent non-profit, then by 2030 some 10 per cent of the economy was operating 'at cost'. Nominal gross domestic product had stabilised and begun to shrink.

As a result, the financial markets had begun to price in the suppression of speculation and the eventual end of the capital-accumulation process. In a word, they suffered a panic — over the prospect of a post-carbon and post-capitalist world — and the state and the central bank were forced to step in to save, stabilise and own the financial infrastructure, allowing speculative capital to fail. The entire rescue was funded through creating money at the central bank and monetising the national debt.

The 2020s were fought out as a battle between a profit-centred and a people-and-planet-centred economy. The radical social-democratic government, recognising the dangers of too rapid and dramatic state intervention, consciously fostered the regrowth of an SME-scale private sector, using public intervention and funding to crowd entrepreneurs out

of low-value operations and towards tech and social innovation.

The world economic system, which was already disintegrating by 2020, could not survive the simultaneous adoption of green post-capitalism by left-liberal and social-democratic parties. By 2030 it had fragmented into regional blocs — with Europe as the most successful, China embracing and absorbing most of Russia and central Asia and north America cohering into a fairly self-contained market.

To survive the battles of the 2020s, the left must imagine its own utopia.

After 2030 however, with financial globalisation suppressed, a new form of economic globalisation, based on travel, information-sharing and trade in raw materials, did revive.

Between 2030 and 2050 the city government of Manchester aggressively prioritised the idea of a just transition to zero-net-carbon status. It operated as a city-region, distributing major service entities such as the universities, research-and-development institutions and large healthcare facilities into the once-stagnant ex-industrial towns.

By 2040 Manchester city centre was vehicle-free, with bikes, trams and walking the dominant transport modes. Flight rationing remains in force but there are promising developments in mass, carbon-free, fuel-cell aviation, so the city decides to maintain Manchester airport, despite demands from radicals to rewild it.

The river Irwell, as dank in 2020 as when Friedrich Engels stared at it from Ducie Bridge, now has otters playing on its banks, and upriver — somewhere between Ramsbottom and Bacup — there are beavers. As for the social life of the city, it's as different to now as now is to the postwar age of Ena Sharples and Stan Ogden (characters in the Salford-based soap, Coronation Street) but I cannot predict how.

Lack of imagination

To survive the battles of the 2020s, the left must imagine its own utopia. But what is frustrating about the current focus on achieving carbon neutrality is the complete lack of imagination — among policymakers, scientists and protesters — about what the economy, as a precondition for achieving it, would look like.

In one sense, the failure of economic imagination is understandable. Economics as a mass academic discipline only took off during the last 60 years and its key tenet has been that…nothing different is possible. But

because the world is now forced to imagine capitalism without carbon, it must also be forced to contemplate an economy without compulsory work.

The objective is to make the economy carbon-free and circular in resource terms, to reduce hours worked and promote measurable increases in human health and happiness, to reintegrate the suburban rust belt with the centre and to find sustainable sources of food. Modelling and testing transition paths needs to become a deadly serious task.

The city is going to be the primary unit for making this transition: it is big enough to operate at scale yet small enough so that different transition paths can be tried in different cities, and so that the population can feel close to the decision-making and experience the outcomes directly.

In 1960, when I was born, Manchester looked and felt like an electrified version of its 19th-century self: there were still smokestacks, cobbled streets and coal fires. Today it feels like an era has passed. By the year 2080 a whole other qualitative transition needs to have happened. But it won't even begin unless we can imagine it.

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