

Fisher, Mark. *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*, edited by Matt Colquhoun, Repeater, 2020.

Mueller, Gavin. *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right about Why You Hate Your Job*, Verso, 2021.

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As Mark Fisher's titular, ambiguously named farewell playlist suggests, across the Left there is a strong consciousness of the obsolescence of labor. *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*, a collection of Fisher's five final lectures named after his seminar at Goldsmiths, teems with this knowledge. As with most of Fisher's works, it radiates a deep desire to rekindle futuristic tendencies in pop culture and construct a positive leftist project for a radically transformed future. Each of the five chapters, or seminars, is dedicated to reckoning with particular political issues that have led to the present malaise of what Fisher terms "capitalist realism."

The first chapter, which simultaneously serves as an introduction to the course, analyzes three different outlooks on the future, Srnicek and Williams's accelerationist one, Gibson-Graham's appeal for economic diversity and new affects, and Paul Mason's open source politics. In the second lecture Fisher couples Herbert Marcuse and Ellen Willis to shed light on the failure of the 60s counterculture. In the third lecture he analyzes the concept of consciousness raising, proposing that the subordinated are the only social group that can develop a consciousness and in so doing change objective reality. In the fourth lecture he tackles the splitting that occurred between class and all other forms of consciousness, which brought about today's identity politics largely divorced from class concerns. In the fifth, he grapples

with a seemingly inimical text – Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, in which Lyotard infamously argues that workers experience *jouissance* in their own exploitation.

As Fisher mentions numerous times, the syllabus does not contain any texts by Deleuze and Guattari, yet the whole course is heavily indebted to their writings. One of the concepts in their works which the course recurrently explores is that of acceleration. Relying on Srnicek and Williams's book *Inventing the Future*, Fisher seems to be arguing in favor of an accelerationist viewpoint according to which automation can usher in a labor-free future with plenty of leisure time to be used at will, although he does not condemn seemingly “folk localist” projects as readily as Srnicek and Williams do. This is a point which Gavin Mueller strongly contends with in his recent publication *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right about Why You Hate Your Job*.

In this work, Mueller notes that numerous contemporary leftist writings rest on the premise that automation will be liberating for workers. From the aforementioned *Inventing the Future*, through Peter Frase's *Four Futures*, which, as Mueller notices, holds automation as a constant in all of its four projected planetary futures, to probably the most radically techno-optimistic book of the bunch, Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, which maintains that a fully automated future with artificial food and asteroid mining is not only desirable, but readily available, most leftist authors hold that automation will break workers free from the necessity to work and allow them, aided by some form of guaranteed income, a better, leisurely future. However, Mueller's point of view is quite different. In his viewpoint, “to be a good Marxist is to also be a Luddite.”

Mueller's argument against automation escapes the trap of “folk localism,” as described by Srnicek and Williams. He rejects fantasies of a pre-technological world and reunion with a pure, natural human essence. Mueller's argument is that technology is never value-neutral and that it reproduces the power structures which develop it, always managing to divide and defeat workers who try to fight it. He contends with “full automators” views and reminds his readers that automation is never full, and that rather than eliminating jobs, it simply recomposes the labor market and polarizes work into highly paid occupations and the lowest paid jobs that cannot be automated away. The middle tier occupations are completely wiped out except for a stratum of work that remains ineradicable. He goes on to argue that automation reproduces productivist values inherent to capitalism and latently adheres to a teleological belief that technological advancement is necessary and necessarily good. His goal, in line with what he perceives as essential for any Marxist writing, is thus to outline various workers' struggles

related to automation in order to understand them and be able to theorize ways out of them. He goes on to outline the history of the original Luddite movement as well as many other instances of workers' sabotage of machines like Wobblies in the US, or the subversive 80s IT magazine *Processed World*, which, for him, serve not only to disrupt work, but also to forge a shared consciousness.

Mueller makes a lot of very compelling points, for example, he argues that introducing scientific methods into work organization was never done with the intention to find ideal ways to organize work, but to limit the workers' power to disrupt the work process. He also astutely describes how some processes, such as self-checkout at grocery stores, pose as automation, but actually proliferate unpaid labor, where customer labor replaces that of unemployed cashiers. As is ultimately revealed in the final pages of *Breaking Things at Work*, Mueller adheres to a degrowth perspective. He proposes to replace the accumulation of capital with an output similar to that from the 60s or 70s and focus on technological maintenance rather than innovation.

However, as Fisher points out relying on Lyotard, there is no outside or previous state to which we can retreat in the combat with capitalism. To take one example – even if we fully ceased emitting carbon dioxide, we would still be unable to stop, let alone reverse, climate change. What's even more, and what Mueller does not at any point take into account, is the *jouissance* of capitalism, the fact that humankind would not so readily give up on their comfort and consumerist abundance. Moreover, Mueller does not make it fully clear how technology necessarily entails power asymmetry. For example, when he disputes the belief of certain feminists, such as Shulamith Firestone, that technology could enhance women's political position and denaturalize gender, by saying this would only give more power to the male-dominated field of science, it remains unclear why in a socially transformed world science should stay fixed as a male-dominated domain.

Breaking Things at Work, thus, fails to fully articulate its critique and remains too entangled in the present to be able to imagine current injustices ever being reversed. Although Fisher grapples with far more complex and nihilistic theories, he manages to distill a positive project out of them. Sadly, his exploration ended before he could provide us with more than glimpses into what he believed was a pathway out of capitalist realism, but it leaves an exciting, and much more potent blueprint for future considerations than Mueller's retreat to the past.