

INTERVIEW:

Technology, capitalism, and the future of the left

Nick Srnicek in conversation with Lise Butler

*Nick Srnicek, a radical political economist based in London, has emerged as one of the major contemporary left theorists of technology and capitalism in the twenty-first century. A leading advocate of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), his two books, *Inventing the Future* (2015) (with Alex Williams) and *Platform Capitalism* (2017) have been broadly influential, including for the current Labour leadership. His perspective is at once optimistic and cautious: recognising the potential of automation to enable a 'world without work', while warning that the left has barely begun to challenge corporate power over new technologies.*

Your work with Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future*, came out in 2015. What effect do you think it has had on the political landscape?

The book was timed well, in that it caught a wave of interest in this stuff, particularly basic income. Basic income was already being thought about by a number of different governments and being discussed by a number of different people. But what was missing was a proper left or Marxist take - there were liberal takes on the idea that emphasised work, there were right-wing takes which emphasised basic income as a replacement for the welfare state, but there wasn't a Marxist take saying here's why basic income can be quite a powerful tool for the working class. So, I think our book is unique in that way, tying together ideas about 'surplus population', ideas about technological change in capitalism, and a response that could nicely solve some of these issues.

The other thing I think we contributed to was not just basic income, but the broader post-work idea - things like the reduced working week, for example, which is now gaining a lot more interest. Some major unions in Germany are

now pushing for a 28-hour work week, and there's a number of think tanks here in the UK that have started to think about the impact of a shorter working week on wages and productivity.

The last thing I think the book has contributed to, is maybe the arguments around organisation. The book helped some people to articulate what had gone wrong with the left in terms of the way it has organised from the late nineties to up to 2010 or so, and why it was unable to generate any significant change. I like to think the book has had some impact in pushing people towards the hybrids – between party and movements – that are being developed now. Momentum is a good example of this, with its explicit commitment to the Labour Party, but also with its interest in carrying out activities that we'd typically associate with social movements or more activist groups. I think the future of effective political organisation is something much messier than just the horizontal/vertical binary that's dominated left thinking for some time now.

Discussions about the current state and future of work have become increasingly mainstream over the last few years. On the left, there are multiple initiatives grappling with automation and the gig economy, such as Tom Watson's Future of Work Commission, and projects by the IPPR and the Fabian Society. Do you think that these initiatives have correctly diagnosed the problems we're facing, and have begun to propose workable solutions? If not, why not?

I think there's a necessary limitation to these recent proposals, which is that they're nationally focused, and self-consciously so. But we're now trying to solve a global problem, and a global issue of surplus populations and automation which affects not just the developed world but also developing countries. Actually, automation will more significantly affect developing countries, because a lot of the jobs that have been outsourced to these countries are jobs that are quite easy to automate: low-wage manufacturing, low-wage service jobs, repetitive jobs that don't require a lot of creativity. Most estimates say that the impact of automation is going to be much worse in a country like Nigeria than it is in the UK.

This challenges a traditional pathway of development for these countries - the idea that you go from an agricultural based society to an industrialised manufac-

turing based economy, eventually moving to a de-industrialised service-based economy. What happens when you can't industrialise because the robots are doing all those jobs? That's a really big question for a lot of developing countries, and a really big question for development economics that not a lot of people are thinking about right now (with some exceptions like Dani Rodrik, who has been talking about premature de-industrialisation). I think that problem has not been grappled with at all by think tanks in rich countries, who are worried about their own citizens.

Do you have any interest in the proposals and ideas emerging from the Future of Work Commission?

Anything that's based upon the centrality of work and getting more people into jobs is not an adequate answer. I think the changing nature of capitalism means that it is increasingly unable to generate sufficient good jobs. The UK economy, for instance, can produce a lot of jobs but most of them are terrible. We've got lots of self-employment, lots of precarious work, lots of low-wage jobs, lots of in-work poverty. We don't have a lot of good jobs. And if we get any automation or any productivity increases in the British economy, then you'd have all these people unemployed because robots would be taking their jobs.

So, I think that's the choice today. Either you have higher unemployment and a higher productivity economy, or you have a low productivity, low wage, high employment economy like the UK has. Neither of them are particularly desirable. Neither are solved by trying to get people more jobs, because global capitalism is heading into a low-growth trajectory. We need to be thinking instead about how we can eliminate our reliance upon jobs.

How will Brexit interact with automation? Are we going to see a re-nationalisation of industrial production enabled by new technology?

There are two different tendencies at play here. One is that Brexit leads to less immigration, which leads to fewer workers, and therefore leads to a demand for more automation. You have an insufficient supply of workers, so you need robots to do your jobs. The other tendency, though, which is opposed to that, is uncertainty about the economy: the lack of growth in the economy and the lack of profits for companies means they just don't want to invest in anything. So,

they don't end up putting any money into automation, and they end up firing workers as the economy falls behind and possibly heads into recession. I think that second tendency is likely to be more dominant. Which means that the end result is, again, a low productivity, low wage, increasingly low-employment economy, as people suddenly get laid off. I think that's the most likely medium-term outcome of Brexit.

What do you think of proposals made for example by the IPPR for using worker ownership and sovereign wealth funds to create universal basic income based on capital dividends from firms rather than redistribution through the state? Is this a superior alternative, is it merely complimentary, or is it the wrong approach?

One thing that Alex and I never talked about when writing *Inventing the Future*, and we haven't talked about enough since, is the ownership issue, which I think is absolutely crucial.

What really frightened the capitalists in the 1970s was workers with a lot of strength suddenly pushing for ownership and control. The Meidner plan in Sweden, the Institute for Workers' Control and National Enterprise Board in the UK, *Strukturpolitik* in Germany: all of these were attempts to give workers ownership and democratic control over significant chunks of the economy. These ideas were part of a key strategic moment that actually could have gone beyond social democracy as we know it. There could have been a much greater change in capitalism, which contained the potential to move beyond it altogether. Capitalists recognised this at the time, and put their full force behind rejecting any application of these ideas. All of this illustrates how important ownership and democratic control are, and these sorts of proposals need to be updated and extended for our current times. IPPR is, I think, doing absolutely essential work on that sort of stuff.

To what extent do you think that the Corbyn leadership is grappling with the changing nature of work and the implications of automation?

I think that they fully get it, actually. I think the people around Corbyn understand this stuff, are paying attention to it, and are interested in radical solutions. You see this, for instance, with the 'New Economics' event series put on by McDonnell. They are continually inviting in people to offer radical ideas, and

then they are going out and trying to broaden the public discourse around these ideas as well. Which is what makes me optimistic about them, actually. I think they are aware of the current conjuncture. I think they are aware that traditional solutions won't work.

I also think they're aware of the challenges that will happen once they get into power. The war-gaming by McDonnell to prepare for potential capital flight is exactly what you want to do if you're preparing to try some radical ideas. A friend of mine has raised an important limit though, which is that Labour may recognise the threat from capital, but do they recognise the threat from conservative trade unions?

That's one area that may be overlooked at the present moment: what happens when trade unions are the ones who are holding back progress? Which I think is very likely to happen. We see it already with the dominant trade union reaction to immigration, which is to close up into a national bubble that blames foreigners for low wages. It's a complete abdication of basic leftist principles of international solidarity, and it harms every worker by playing them off against each other. I worry that a Corbyn government hasn't planned for the reactionary tendencies of some trade unions, and that they wouldn't be willing to take on those sorts of conservative stances.

Have you noticed more progressive moves on the part of trade unions? I know that the Fabian Society have set up the Changing Work Centre in partnership with the Community union. There's trade union presence on the Future of Work Commission. Could you take a more optimistic view of the role of trade unions in debates about the changing nature of work?

At the leadership level, I don't have any optimism. I think it's very much stuck in an old mindset: work is the ultimate good and that's the only thing they're able to provide. For them, the fight against automation is a fight to save jobs rather than a fight for free time. That being said, whenever I give a talk and I have union members come up to me afterwards, younger ones seem very interested in these sorts of ideas. I think that there is a generational difference there as well, that the older generation is stuck in very traditional workerist ideals, while the younger generation realises what's going on, realises that these

old solutions aren't going to work, and they're quite interested in alternative ways out. So, I'm hopeful maybe in the medium term, but in the short term, no.

Fears about the impact of automation and optimistic visions for a post-work society, including ideas for universal basic income, have a long history. Do have any thoughts on why these debates disappeared from the political mainstream after the 1960s and 1970s? Do you think today's debates about work and automation will have more staying power?

I think there are economic reasons and cultural reasons that these debates didn't end up going anywhere. These debates around robots taking all of our jobs re-occur every twenty years or so. People mock that repetition and say, well, what's to worry about, because we've had these fears before and they didn't turn out. I think that's the wrong way to look at it, because what happens is that the jobs that people are worried about *do* disappear. Manufacturing jobs *did* disappear, for instance. What was missed was that manufacturing jobs were replaced with service jobs – and there was a massive transformation in work and our relation to it. Just focusing on aggregate job numbers over long-term periods misses that. So you get this cyclical moment where a section of jobs are automated (or outsourced) and ideas about how to solve that problem become widely discussed. But then new jobs appear in some other sector, and despite the pain that transformation may cause for many people, the new jobs settle the question of what is to be done: get people into jobs, as we've always done.

The other reason for that earlier shift from post-work ideas is the cultural barriers they ran into, and I think this is particularly the case in the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s, they were talking about a basic income, it was quite popular, and Nixon was thinking about implementing one, but they didn't end up going with it because of the ways it was framed. The problem was that the salient categories that grounded welfare – the deserving/undeserving poor, most notably – were ignored by the basic income proposal. Everyone was equivalent in the policy's view, and everyone was deserving. But some groups of people – particularly white 'deserving' poor – resented being conflated with others – particularly black 'undeserving' poor. The racial divisions here meant that even though they would have benefited from the proposal, the white poor tended to reject the policy because they saw it as stigmatising them. The end

result is that the policy lost traction, some of the more pressing social crises abated, and the more radical solutions fell to the side.

The changing structure of capitalism also made some of those earlier worries about automation seem irrelevant. There was massive chaos throughout the 1970s, and then a relatively stable replacement by neoliberalism from the 1980s onwards. This provided people with enough jobs, with low wages but sufficient amounts of money (plus lots of extra credit) to be able to produce higher living standards. I think that was the solution to that crisis at that point in time. But there are bigger secular tendencies to capitalism that were obscured by the relative cyclical rebound after the 1970s. The trendline for growth amongst all the advanced capitalist countries has been in decline since then, and we've seen another dip in trendline growth since the 2008 crisis. And without growth, it becomes near impossible to try and return to the social democratic consensus which was, crucially, a consensus between labour and capital in the context of a unique period of rapid economic growth.

One of the major tendencies that we should/could have noticed earlier is the creation of 'surplus populations'. There's an interesting intellectual history to tell here too. The Marxist concepts of immiseration and the industrial reserve army – which suggested that capitalism would lead to workers facing worse conditions and outright expulsion from the economic cycle – were quite prominent prior to social democracy, the Second World War, and the welfare state. But then in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s they completely disappeared from most Marxist research because you have high-wage jobs, people working a lot, and it seems like capitalism can produce a sustainable consensus.

Notably though, the idea of 'surplus populations' stays with those who are facing the sharp end of capitalism - particularly with black Marxists, postcolonial thinkers, and feminist thinkers. They're the ones arguing that surplus populations and immiseration are essential parts of the crisis tendencies of capitalism. But for rich countries, for white, middle class men, it doesn't seem to be a major issue anymore, and so those traditional notions of capitalism's crisis tendencies tend to fade away.

In the last decade or so, I think we've seen a return of these earlier ideas as a way to make sense of contemporary conditions. I think Fredric Jameson sums

this up well when he declares *Capital* to be a book about unemployment – an idea that would have seemed absurd fifteen years ago, but seems like an incisive point now. The idea of a settled consensus for capitalism is completely gone, and it's increasingly obvious that capitalism produces a significant surplus population. I guess what I'm trying to say is that much of today's situation was eminently foreseeable, if only you were looking at the right thinkers!

Moving on to your more recent *Platform Capitalism*, what was the intellectual journey that led you to from *Inventing the Future* to this book?

Platform Capitalism was originally going to be almost a direct extension of *Inventing the Future*. It was going to look at how different technologies – not just automation technologies but things like the Internet of Things, 3D printing, all these new technologies – how they could be deployed in a post-capitalist world, what they would mean. But when I started to look at it more and more, I realised that there wasn't a critical take that engaged with this stuff from a political economy perspective. There was plenty of cultural critique and political critique, but no systematic take on how these related to changing conditions of capitalism. I also kept seeing the idea of platforms re-appearing over and over again, but I was never clear on what people were talking about. It seemed to have a different meaning for every author. In many ways the book was written as a way to clarify what that term means, and how it fits into a broader context of capitalism?

The other thing I wanted to analyse was the tendency for people to announce a massive new shift in capitalism. Contemporary academic production seems to demand that everyone declare radical shifts in order to brand an idea, but I wanted to take a more sensible, sober look at whether or not that's true, and what exactly is happening with platforms.

So that's what the book was all about: to ask what are platforms? How do they fit into a broader history of capitalism and how do they change capitalism? Is it a completely new type of capitalism, or is it something which is a continuation of earlier trends?

What's the relationship between 'platforms' and artificial intelligence?

The economic impacts of artificial intelligence are today often talked about

solely via its effect on automation, the idea that artificial intelligence can, to give one example, eliminate the need for human translators. But I think the more interesting effects of AI have to do with the internal structure of companies, intra-capitalist competition, and how they're reengineering the macro structure of the economy.

What's really interesting to me is in the past year or two, Google has started announcing itself in interviews as an AI-first company. It no longer positions itself as a search engine company. Likewise, Amazon is turning into an AI-first company. Facebook is turning into an AI-first company. Alibaba is turning into an AI-first company. There's a sort of convergence amongst all these major platforms, towards AI being their dominant focus.

I think this is for a couple of reasons. One is that only these major companies can do AI. The way that we do AI today, through machine learning, requires a lot of data. So, you have to throw a lot of data into these algorithms, train them, and then they can do these tasks. That means only companies with a lot of data can do it, which happens to be these major platforms that have been collecting all this data. So a handful of companies that can do AI are now competing against each other to have control over artificial intelligence, which allows them to improve their services and gain competitive advantage that way.

On current trends, I think AI will become something that will be owned by a few companies, and will be rented out to everyone else as a fee-based service. Every other company in the world will need it: it will be crucial to survive in the future of capitalism. But it will be dominated by one or two suppliers, Amazon and Google most likely (at least in the Western world). And that, I think, is a really interesting shift in intra-capitalist competition, is that these companies recognise the significance of AI as a general-purpose technology which isn't just applied to social media and search engines, but can also be applied to any industry in the world. It's going to be a crucial economic infrastructure, and a crucial tool of political power in the future. That's why I think Google sees itself as an AI-first company. That's why I think Amazon is interested in Alexa and stuff like that. They want all this data. They want to be able to train their algorithms, so they can have dominance five or ten years down the line.

Is there anything we can do about that?

One thing here is ownership over data. If you start thinking about who owns that data and it's not just immediately assumed that companies own that data, then it becomes much more difficult for them to be able to control the data, monopolise it, and build up systems of dominance.

I'll give an example: something like health data. You might train an algorithm on health data to be able to pick up, say, the likelihood of a tumour that's cancerous or not. Clearly a useful application of these technologies. If the ownership of that data is with the public, it should change the ownership status of any algorithm or app or service derived from the data. Rather than thinking about Google, for instance, as owning the data, the hardware/software to train algorithms, and the eventual user-facing products built from them – we might instead conceive of Google's role as something more akin to an algorithmic factory. Their training of an algorithm is a process which turns raw publicly-owned data into something which is more readily usable. They could easily be contracted and remunerated for performing this work on the original data, but with the proviso that the end product would have ownership maintained by the public whose data it is derived from. That's one way to push back against these companies that have control of it all. But solutions to these problems are an incredibly difficult thing to think about, and I think we're only at the beginning stages.

You conclude *Platform Capitalism* by suggesting that rather than just regulating corporate platforms, efforts should be made to create public platforms, platforms that are controlled by the people. How might said public platforms work?

The first thing to say is that I don't think there's any general approach. The idea that I have in mind is something like public ownership over these platforms. And I say *public* ownership because that doesn't necessarily mean national ownership. It could be local or cooperative ownership. It could be a regional thing, it could be an international thing. I think the scale is completely open for debate.

The other aspect is what it would mean to publicly own Facebook is different to what it would mean to publicly own Google, which is different to what it would mean to publicly own Uber. I don't think there's any general theory for public

ownership of these companies. Each one of these platforms is quite significantly different. With something like Uber, it's relatively easy to imagine a publicly-owned, TFL version that serves the people and is not for profit. Maybe something like a social network that is publicly owned, we can imagine that relatively easily. But then we start thinking about a search engine, it becomes a bit more difficult, or a global AI-first company? The challenges mount as we start to move up the hierarchy of platforms and as their global nature becomes more central to how they operate.

You say – in brackets – that public platforms should be ‘independent of the surveillance state’. How could this independence be established?

I think the point about the surveillance state is really important as well. How do we technologically and legally separate these data intensive platforms from a surveillance state that wants all this data? The nightmare scenario is something like China's social credits system that they're building, where all of this data that they're collecting from social media then gets filtered into the government, and then they give you a credit score on the basis of that, about how good of a citizen you are, and that determines parts of your life. (It's worth mentioning that many Western data brokers already do something like this.) That seems like a nightmare scenario, but it seems all-too plausible if the surveillance state and platforms are combined together.

We need two things at least: one is the legal rules to maintain separation, and there's a really good precedent here, which is the postal system. This is a system of public communication where people are transferring information between each other, which is often nationally owned and run. But we have legal rules in place in that the government can't just open up any piece of mail and look into it. And it's worked really well. So, we can do that in the same way with internet communications; it's the same sort of principles.

I think we also need technical rules as well. How do we build up firewalls between what the government can access and what we're doing online? There is encryption, for instance, and all these things that can make it incredibly difficult. There are ways to do it but we have to think about those and include those as well.

Does the political will exist, in your view, to make any of these changes, or to bring any of this to greater public scrutiny?

I never really liked the idea of political will, which is a bit too voluntarist for me. I think the relevant point is more about the conditions which are being shaped more and more towards this movement arising. Just in the past year, the amount of scrutiny that tech companies have faced is drastically different from two years ago. Two years ago, if you asked people what are the top, most loved brands: YouTube, Facebook, Amazon would have been up there. Now, there's a lot of discontent with those platforms. More people are becoming aware of the monopolising tendencies of these things. More people are recognising the amount of data they're collecting, and the implications of that as well. More people are learning about their political impacts, and these platforms are now starting to be challenged from all sides politically when they take a perceived wrong step. I think this is all inevitable for these companies for the very simple reason that they've becoming more woven into the everyday fabric of life. Whereas they were once a relatively bounded part of society, today they are becoming a common infrastructure, with the consequence that their actions are more heavily scrutinised.

Thanks so much for speaking with us Nick. To conclude, what are you working on now?

Helen Hester and I are finishing up a book called *After Work: The Fight for Free Time*. It is going to be out next year, and it'll be discussing social reproduction and post-work politics. The guiding idea being that post-work politics talks about waged work a lot, and it often tends to talk about male waged work a lot. It doesn't talk about unwaged work very much but this means that it misses a huge amount of work that society undertakes.

One of the things we've been finding, for instance, is that when you look at the amount of work time that is done in countries – the number of hours devoted to waged and unwaged labour – it's about 45 per cent unwaged and 55 per cent waged. So, if you just talk about post-work in terms of waged labour, you're missing almost half of the work that is being done in society, even just on a quantitative, simple measure. So, we want to talk about what it means for

post-work politics to apply to social reproduction. But the challenge there is that most of that work can't easily be automated, either because technically it can't be automated or morally we don't want to automate it. So the question driving the book is how do you apply post-work ideas to that sort of work?

We've got a few broad ideas. The first one is to make finer distinctions about automation. So, when you talk about the automation of care work, people typically think, 'No, you can't automate care work'. But that's such a blunt distinction between care work and non-care work. When you actually talk to care workers who do it for a living, and ask could particular tasks of your job be automated? They will say, actually, yes, a lot of their job could be automated. If your job is to look after elderly people, for example, then you might think about automating the task of organising and distributing medication for people. That could be automated easily and it would free elder care workers to do more human based work, rather than just a mechanical sorting of medication.

We also need to think about the social organisation of this work. Today it's centred upon the nuclear family, it's centred upon individual households, and that's such an inefficient and crude way to organise this work. In the book we're returning to these early 1900s communist arguments and experiments in collective living, social housing, the collective raising of children, and so on. On the basis of that, we're arguing that if you're going to build social housing today, maybe don't do it in an individualised way, but think about it in a collective way.

So you subscribe to those sorts of ideas?

Yes. Collective kitchens, collective theatre, collective maker spaces – so everyone can have a 3D printer they can all use. We can update these traditional ideas for the twenty-first century, but the same sorts of principles can again help us reduce the amount of labour we need to do.

Our third broad idea is the management of living standards. There is this interesting tendency in the history of domestic technologies where something like the dishwasher comes in, and you'd think it's going to reduce the amount of work that gets done, but what actually happens is that the standards of cleanliness just go up and up and up. And so it doesn't actually reduce work, it just means that the standards get higher, and you have to keep dishes and clothes

and the house cleaner than you ever had to beforehand. Over the course of the twentieth century, the amount of housework done per person has barely budged, despite all the new technologies introduced. This ratcheting up of standards tends to subtly intervene everywhere. Even when you look at a lot of post-work writing, oftentimes they'll talk about how glorious it will be that we can make these fantastic meals, once we don't have to worry about our jobs anymore.

We should recognise that this is a subtle re-imposition of work: that we need to make fantastic meals for all our friends, which can be great for some people who love cooking, but a nightmare for those who don't. We have to be wary about this re-imposition of higher and higher standards which compels us to do more and more social work. Childcare is a really good example as well. There's an interesting phenomenon in recent decades where parents are doing more and more waged work, but childcare hours are also going up – precisely the opposite of what you would expect. And that's because the competitive demands of contemporary childcare are forcing parents to ever more tightly manage their children's lives in some desperate attempt to optimise the perfect child. We need to be aware of these tendencies (and in this case, their market-driven origins) and we need to think about how to manage it in some sense. And that will help us reduce the work that goes into social reproduction as well. So those three things are some of the ways in which we can think about applying post-work to social reproduction.

Nick Srnicek is Lecturer in Digital Economy at Kings College London.

Lise Butler is Lecturer in Modern History at City, University of London.

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