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Forcing Marx Into the Automation Debate

Eric Fleischmann

October 11th, 2018

Automation, the reduction and/or removal of human participation in processes and procedures, has been a topic of economic discussion since the Industrial Revolution. The general dispute has been about whether or not automation will lead to mass unemployment. Acknowledging but passing over the primitivist perspective, in the 20th and 21st century, two camps have taken form, although the ideas behind each have existed for quite some time.

On the one side stand those who believe that technological advancement has never and therefore will never lead to the mass unemployment envisioned by techno-pessimists. Their ranks are often represented by professional economists as well as right-wing and centrist libertarians. As Murray N. Rothbard asks in *Science, Technology, and Government*:

Who was displaced by the steam shovel? How many millions of ditch diggers are now out of work because of it? Where are the billions of unemployed that are supposed to have been caused by the replacement of

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Retrieved on 2/1/22 from <https://c4ss.org/content/51353>

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the human pack animal by the wagon and the truck?
Where are they, if the doctrine of technological unemployment is correct?

There is certainly historical precedent that fears about technology-induced unemployment are unfounded. *Reason* magazine science correspondent Ronald Bailey points out numerous examples in his article “Are Robots Going to Steal Our Jobs?” These range from Queen Elizabeth’s refusal to grant a patent for the stocking frame knitting machine in 1589 for fear it would deprive subjects of work, to the 19th century luddites who smashed industrial weaving machines so they could keep their livelihoods. As Bailey points out, these panics were seemingly over nothing because overall employment is still going strong today.

The opposing group in this ongoing debate consists of those who believe that automation will indeed lead to mass unemployment. Interestingly enough some of the most vocal proponents of this view-point in the contemporary era are not luddites or industrial conservatives, but rather those very technologists and Silicon-Valley-types who are pushing technology forward at a rapid pace. Microsoft founder Bill Gates has proposed taxing companies that make use of robots in order to slow automation and put resources towards other occupations. The most well-known solution to the robot takeover of the work-force is the institution of a universal basic income. Zoltan Istvan—founder of the United States Transhumanist Party and presidential candidate—and Elon Musk—head of SpaceX, Tesla, Neuralink, and PayPal—have both spoken in favor of UBI in the face of large-scale automation. The idea is that since a massive segment of the population will be rendered jobless, the government should provide a replacement for the income generally taken in by a household through work.

The perspective that both these camps seem to ignore has been around for nearing 200 years. It fundamentally influenced the modern world but has largely been left out of its mainstream discourse,

except for the odd comment by the aforementioned Mr. Musk. That is the Marxist view. While avoiding certain tendencies towards historical determinism, there are key insights to be gained from Karl Marx's historical materialism. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx observes that "social relations are closely bound up with productive forces" and "the same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations." The central point being made is that societies are structured by their material conditions, by who possesses the means of production.

Furthermore, Marx states in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that "the totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness." In the case of automation, the means of production are clearly the robots and from a Marxist-influenced position the problem created by these machines is not centrally one of employment but one of power. Even if it does not cause mass unemployment—but even more so if it does—automation will lead to the emergence of new and the exacerbation of old social divisions. Those who have greater access to these technologies will be able to further shape the world economically, politically, socially, and legally for those who do not. It can be expected that many will be barred from such ownership through intellectual property and other such state-capitalist measures. It will not matter if there is a universal basic income, because even with the purchasing power provided, people must spend money on physical commodities and within a society both defined by forces in the hands of an ever-smaller number of capitalists.

This is certainly not a new or particularly groundbreaking social criticism—for that one should look into Professor Adrian Smith and his ideas regarding post-automation—but it is important to try to push it into the modern dialogue. The mainstream left certainly is not going to as it seems to have forgotten about real material so-

cial change in favor of neoliberalism masquerading as social justice. Lastly, it feels necessary to mention Norbert Wiener—MIT professor, mathematician, and the father of cybernetics. In his book *The Human Use of Human Beings* he writes that the real danger of automation is “that such machines, though helpless by themselves, may be used by a human being or a block of human beings to increase their control over the rest of the human race.” Although Wiener was not a Marxist this is the sentiment that should be emulated when adding Marx to the automation debate.

The central problem is not whether it will cause mass unemployment or whether a universal basic income should be instituted—although these are important to consider. The potential threat posed by automation is that of power-relations and control. The question to be asked is “who will own the future?”