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## Technology and Economic Imperialism

**Welcome to the Machine**

by ROB URIE

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The oft called ‘knowledge’ economy brought into being in the ‘developed’ West in the 1990s is composed of several industries that are broadly related but also quite specific unto themselves— artificial intelligence, telecommunications, finance, information technology and digital commerce- the Internet. More broadly, these can be divided into ‘finance’— Wall Street, insurance and real estate; and ‘technology,’ modes and methods of operational interaction with the world. One branch of these technologies in particular, the algorithmic ‘intelligent’ technology of computing tied together through global telecommunications infrastructure, is widely considered by Western economists to be a second ‘industrial age,’ a group of innovations that revolutionized the way the world ‘works.’ The development and growth of these industries was coincident with the revival of the political economy of neo-liberalism and the return of finance capitalism in its most intrusive and destructive forms. And finance— Wall Street, played a prominent role in inserting these new technologies into global political economy.

Finance and information technology are ‘Cartesian’ capitalism reconstituted in its purest form, the form, function and facilitation of the ‘rational’ interaction of ‘economic man’ with ‘the world’ of capitalist theory. Finance is the ‘fluid’ of capitalism, the Aristotelian ether that unites commerce and suspends it in a body of metaphysical equivalence, the ‘this equals that’ that facilitates the aggregation of claims on ‘the world.’ The ‘intelligence’ of ‘intelligent’ machines is algorithmic, the product of instructions written in mathematical languages to be operationally efficient, the reconstitution of ‘time is money’ into machine action. Not coincidentally, finance and technology are the twin ‘explanations’ offered by capitalist economists for the stupendous fortunes suddenly found in the pockets and bank accounts of a group of actual persons so small it could barely fill an island of modest size. And to be clear, these fortunes are ‘claims’ in the sense they are socially circumscribed rather than ‘possessed,’ aggregations of contracts, representations and rights that depend on social accedence for their ‘value.’

The typical frame of ‘technology’ in Western economics is as method / mode of economic ‘efficiency’ in capitalist production. Opponents of technology are ‘Luddites,’ labor displaced by technology whose blame is ‘misplaced’ because making more from less— economic efficiency, makes ‘the world’ better off. The ‘tradeoff’ offered is that this displaced labor can now buy lower priced goods made possible through ‘technology.’ And if the new found absence of a paycheck hinders those directly displaced from reaping economic benefit then the economic ‘system’ is argued to benefit. Finance, ‘money,’ is the fluid and metric of equivalence here, the object of ‘system’ that renders irrelevant whose pocket it ends up in. The fact of displacement is its own proof, the backward induction that technology found the right target. This theoretical sleight of hand is wholly circular—economic efficiency made possible through technology benefits the economic system, labor displaced by technology is part of this economic system and therefore displaced labor benefits from being displaced. However, ‘technology’ as method, mode and machine never displaced anyone— it is the object of social struggle, not its actor.

Like science and mathematics, technology is claimed to be ideologically ‘neutral,’ the tool / act that builds the toaster oven more efficiently and makes it ‘work’ for Libertarians and Communists alike. As it evolved from Cartesian metaphysics, the Anglo-American philosophical tradition places the use of technology (tools) as the central characteristic that ‘separates’ humans from animals. Why such a separation is needed gets to the heart of the metaphysical construct— so profound is her alienation that technology is the only link economic man has to ‘the world’ s/he needs for sustenance. This operational mode of relating makes technology essential to the internal logic of capitalism as ‘rational’ reconstitution of economic man’s ‘imperative’ in ‘the world.’ The circular relation of technology to ‘profit’ is through economic ‘efficiency’ as the

theorized metric of competent interaction with ‘the world.’ The efficiency of firing ten million workers employed in manufacturing in the West and hiring ten million workers to do the same work at lower wages in other countries is measured by the profit ‘earned’ from doing so. Technology as ‘ways of doing things’ is a strategy of social circumscription, the circular ‘proof’ that social wealth finds ‘its’ way into the ‘right’ pockets. And Western technology is so deeply instantiated into modern political economy that imagining different ways of relating to ‘the world’ faces the hurdle of establishing ‘practical’ alternatives.

As with capitalism broadly considered, the challenge for technologists is the indissociable relation of technology to both wanted and unwanted outcomes—the ‘efficiency’ of technology depends on counting only ‘its’ ‘intended’ consequences. This is in part why the Cartesian fluid of ‘profit’ is so frequently put forward as ‘its’ own proof of economic ‘efficiency’—any look at the broader results of capitalist production quickly renders narrow ‘proofs’ implausible. The technologies of the ‘tech revolution’ were by and large developed with public resources in government laboratories or with government funds and then sold to ‘private’ interests. The great ‘tech’ fortunes were built with the stolen labor of imperial consequence, the ‘states of nature’ that evolved from three centuries of imperial dysfunction imposed from without on ‘developing’ economies for the purpose of economic extraction. Left un-represented in the capitalist apologetics of Western economics are the indigenous economies that were replaced at the end of a gun, the ‘technologies’ developed through history and relation that were built from the specificities of time, place and social relations. Technology as it is conceived in capitalist theory is the fact / act of economic imperialism—‘its’ object is ‘the world’ and its perspective is from the metaphysical ether as radical alienation.

The knowledge of the ‘knowledge’ economy is operational, the uniting of thought ‘objects’ with operational technologies to accomplish specific tasks. ‘Knowledge’ workers are technocrats of capitalist enterprise, the ‘inputs’ that are also ‘outputs’ in the sense that the ‘objects’ and modes of their knowledge are ‘externally’ given, the creators whose realm of creation is the task at hand. These technocrats— e.g. financial ‘engineers,’ computer programmers or investment bankers, are no more likely to ‘know’ carpentry, how to make ‘fine art,’ or the history of Slovakia than anyone else. ‘Knowledge’ in this sense is as technology in particular mode of capitalist production, the ‘creation’ that is its own product. The ‘machines’ of this technology are both inputs and outputs, the ‘useful tools’ that require that ‘users’ become tools in return, that we learn ‘their’ rules and methods before they become ‘useful’ to us. Strategies of monopoly are everywhere in evidence in the gadgets that are both ‘essential’ and that each require the commitment of learning their particular, incommensurate operational rules and ‘languages.’ The

‘knowledge’ of knowledge work is the competent learning of these rules, the development of operational competence within given realms of economic production. Like ‘labor’ and ‘capital’ in Western economic theory, this ‘knowledge’ reacts as / through technology to market imperative as created creation in the service of externally given task.

The reactive nature of this knowledge and ‘its’ technologies are a function of capitalist metaphysics— technology as both method and objectified method are premised on ‘operation’ as the transmogrification of thought through method into action ‘on / in’ the world. The premise is that input ‘operated’ on through technology is its ‘total’ output. This again is how / why ‘profit’ is so logical / useful a ‘cleanser’ as metric of technological ‘efficiency.’ This technology is both ways of doing things and the reconstitution of method in concrete form— a toaster ‘toasts,’ a computer ‘computes’ and insurance ‘insures.’ Back in ‘the world’ manufacturing toasters and computers produces ‘unintended’ toxic waste, the energy used to transport and operate them contributes to global warming, their production and use have social consequences and the ‘product’ of insurance requires negotiation based in asymmetrical social power to be brought into being— for claims to be paid. By staking social claim to only its ‘intended’ product the ‘unintended’ consequences of capitalist production are made orphans, the unwanted detritus that ‘technology’ as relation of input to output so conveniently circumscribes away from visibility. The ‘knowledge’ of knowledge work is of the already known, of the product of inputs competently acted on. Technology is the method of parsing output into seen and unseen bundles, the well-reasoned conclusion that follows from its eternally implausible premise.

A primary conceit of modern capitalist economics is that the automation of ‘routine’ functions with algorithmic machines is ‘efficient,’ that it ‘frees’ labor to do more ‘meaningful’ work— ‘knowledge’ work. Left unstated is that these routine tasks were made routine by this ‘knowledge’ applied through technology, ‘rationalization,’ and that the externally circumscribed ‘choice’ of ‘system’ is between different types of rationalized production, between machines and rationalized labor. This newly ‘freed’ ‘routine’ labor is placed in competition with other ‘routine’ labor in the present and with knowledge workers whose work has been made routine in ‘the future.’ ‘Knowledge’ work is the temporary ‘privilege’ of rationalization, the routine of making production routine. The implied ‘goal’ of technology as capitalist enterprise is to get all of we ‘messy’ people out of the way, to either make us ‘like’ machines or to just go away. In considering the social conditions of production the capacity to make labor ‘predictable,’ willing and able to ‘be’ technology, comprises the basis of this ‘equivalence.’ ‘Multi-tasking,’ the analog of algorithmic ‘efficiency’ applied to labor, is technology as backward induction, the thoughtless thought of the ‘intelligent’ machine. Knowledge work is the reconstitution of capitalist

imperative as ‘self’ realization. It is the act of producing the social conditions of un-knowledge, the de-thinking of economic production.

To be clear, this is not ‘fear’ that machines and machine ‘thought’ will overtake ‘us,’ that ‘they’ might really be ‘smarter’ than we are. ‘Intelligent’ machines were / are insipid delusion from the get-go, Cartesian ‘brain in a vat’ hallucinations premised on the circular conceit that constructing them to perform tasks that are imperative within a particular epic of capitalism lends credence to the ‘intelligence’ of capitalism as political economy. The logical ‘position’ of this ‘intelligence’ acting ‘on’ ‘the world’ is of paradox, the objectification of the ‘selves’ doing the objectifying. The metaphysical frame of ‘economic man’ has its ‘selves’ acting on the very same world that they exist in, acting ‘on’ themselves as objects of exploitation. ‘Intelligent’ machines are the objectification of this objectification, the automation of the technologies of exploitation from the perspective of radical alienation. They are ‘useful’ by forcing a particular conformity—conformity with the requirements of ‘rationalized’ economic production, by training ‘us’ to fully participate in our own exploitation. The work of ‘knowledge’ workers is ultimately to reduce ‘their’ jobs to their machine analog as routine function and then ‘rationally,’ as ‘objective’ observers, choose between their continued employment and replacing themselves with ‘intelligent’ machines. The only ‘logical’ conclusion of knowledge work is to either cut ‘its’ own pay or to fire itself.

It is hardly an accident that the single largest use the Internet has been put to is the distribution of pornography. The Internet is ‘information’ as metaphysical thought objects dissociated from ‘the world’ and put forward as new forms of completeness, the reconstitution of the Cartesian netherworld in machine ‘space.’ Pornography is the decontextualization of the social relations of ‘being’ together in ‘the world’ to reframe them as ‘commodity’ complete with the metaphysical categories needed to sell the invariance of ‘product.’ The exponential increase in the quantity and availability of pornography is coincident with the re-emergence of ideological capitalism and it broadly reflects the social relations of capitalist production. Specific social relations are obliterated in favor of theories of eternal interchangeability in metaphysical equivalence, the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends and neighbors recontextualized as fuck ‘objects’ in categories of dissociated body parts and ‘acts.’ Pornography is the technology of self-exploitation; the forgoing of the touch of the hand, the smell of the hair, the shared meals and bad days to retreat to the society of the ‘self,’ the exchange of life among the living for the ‘clarity’ of exile. As with toaster ovens and lint rollers, there is no information about its social production provided in its fact. And as with these ‘products,’ the exchange of money promises absolution, the contrived ignorance that serves dual purpose as ‘self’ knowledge. As metaphor

for the Cartesian metaphysics of capitalism, machine intelligence doesn't 'need' us and it never will.

Beginning around 1980 Wall Street found new confluence with technology to produce the 'fluid' of transactable equivalence needed to radically alter the existing relations of economic production. The challenge in doing so is that plausible alternatives needed to be created from 'nothing' and finance was the means to this end. Whereas in 'the world' 'labor' exists in the embedded context of time, space, geography, social relations, history and culture, money 'liquefies' the capitalist 'production function' to provide the illusion of metaphysical equivalence across these dimensions. Through this illusion labor in the U.S. was placed in implausible 'competition' with labor embedded in other political economy— in Mexico, India and China, where the barriers to factual competition include geography, national boundaries, language and existing social relations. Through the creation of metaphysical equivalence the money of finance reduces these factual barriers to 'price.' It is 'efficient' to fire highly paid manufacturing workers in the West and hire low paid workers to do the same work ten thousand miles away because the only metric used to determine this efficiency is 'profit.' And profit is a simple accounting exercise— if costs 'fall' while revenues hold steady then profit increases. Profit is the only metric visible to capitalist economists because it is the one denominated in the 'currency' of metaphysical equivalence. Rococo theories of capitalist fantasy like 'comparative advantage' are put forward as the 'thought objects' of theoretical debate when what is missing from the economic accounting is a full, or even partial, social accounting.

As with technology, 'money' is claimed by Western economists to be ideologically 'neutral' and a near fact-of-nature in capitalist political economy. Banks and bankers create most of the money in existence by making loans. These loans in turn create the contrived economic 'imperative' that 'technology' responds to. Beginning in the 1980s 'leveraged buyouts' were used to loot companies through the incurring of debt against company assets that 'forced' them to be reconfigured so that the financiers and executives doing the reconfiguring could award themselves extravagant payouts and stock options. These reconfigured companies used the fact of their purposely incurred debt to abrogate obligations to employees— to 'take back' negotiated wages and benefits for which labor had already been 'exchanged,' so as to 'convert' them into pay for financiers and corporate executives. The indebtedness was presented as fact of nature and used to replace existing economic relations with 'technologies' that fed off the contrived imperative of lowering 'costs.' It is finance that makes social obligations fungible, convertible into 'money' to affect transfer of 'ownership.' Finance is the 'technology' that diverts 'profits' into one pile and their social consequences into another.

