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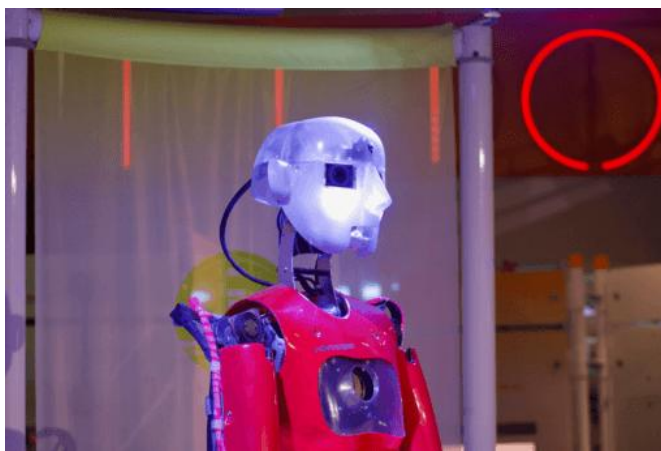
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The Rise of the Robots and the End of Capitalism?

By Dan Corjescu
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Recently, there has been much speculation concerning automation and its anticipated effects on human life. This philosophical essay seeks to broaden, as much as possible, the ongoing surge of supposition. It will seek to contextualize the impending “rise of the robots” within a broader framework that includes potential future advances in genetics, industry, space, and science in general. Furthermore, it will seek to understand these trends with reference to some philosophical ideas that have been provided to us by Marx and, to a lesser extent, Hegel.

To begin with: let us ask two rhetorical questions. Did the car, airplane, nuclear power, the internet, and the computer end work as such or did it transform it? Secondly, can we consider these technological breakthroughs to have been in the profoundest sense of the word “revolutionary”? I think, without much undo reflection, that the answer to both these questions should be in the affirmative. Yes, in the Twentieth century, the nature of work was qualitatively transformed.

It is without question that these machines/processes dramatically increased the productive powers of the human race. They helped to significantly contribute to a dramatic rise in the standard of living of millions of people throughout the world, although certainly not all of them. And they did this within the social, political, economic system known as liberal-world capitalism.

Ever since Marx we have known that this global social system of production is crucially sustained by the nexus of science and industry. Marx also taught us that the increase of productive powers and the technical advances that they would necessitate would inevitably lead to a qualitative change in the social relations of production. Indeed, he famously prophesied a world revolution that would effectively accomplish this task of leading mankind from the historically less developed stage of capitalism to its more fully formed next stage: socialism with the final stage, communism, to occur much later.

Marx wrote very little about communism and about the paths that mankind would take to reach it since true to his Hegelian heritage there was no hint of the material bases necessary for such speculation. In contrast to the Nineteenth century however, I will argue that we are approaching a world which material basis is fast coalescing into a possible suggestion, if not of world socialism per se, then of a next highly significant stage of capitalism.

At this point we should remind ourselves that the moral end point of Marxism was the liberation of man from drudgery, from work which did not enhance his own self, but not a total liberation from work itself. Marx would certainly take a dim view, if he were alive today, of those who interpret the coming of socialism as a liberation from work. In fact, what Marx envisioned was not a world where work was abolished but where meaningful activity flourished. Man, at least according to Marx, was not meant to sit idly at home receiving a dole from an administrative state as some today would seem to interpret him.

It has been more than a century and a half since Marx wrote his famous manifesto. Since that time, capitalism has suffered major crises and undergone significant transformations but has not, in no sense, waned in overall importance. In fact, it has increased its sway and effect over the whole world in ways far more entrenched than was evident even in the classical free market era of the Nineteenth century. This, too, Marx anticipated. According to Marx, capitalism was not to begin its final transformation into socialism until it had spread to every part of the globe, until it had transformed literally every traditional society and commodified it.

It would not be too incendiary I think to say that perhaps we have reached the point of capitalism’s supreme earthly reach. The world has been subsumed under its systemic organization and concomitant totalizing ideology. As Francis Fukuyama famously put it, echoing

as he was the thought of Kojève, liberal-capitalism strode the world as a colossus and still does. Again, this would not have come as a surprise to Marx.

Some of the interesting questions now facing us, I think, from a neo-Marxist perspective is: will capitalism transform itself into socialism spontaneously without revolution? Without a period of the dictatorship of the proletariat? Will this transformation be, as Marx expected it would be, a hybrid of the old and new system?

To attempt to answer these questions, we should first make it clear that the forces of production and the scientific manipulation of life continues apace. For example, in genetics, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that we stand at the threshold of the transformation of the human genome itself. Man not only making his own social and political destiny. But man making his very own self. This, too, I think would not have surprised Marx in that he saw the inner logic of man taking control over his own life; so taking control in a fundamental, rational way of his own body would be a natural next step; however fraught with potential danger. The impending genetic revolution will, as no political/social revolution before it, possibly change the very nature of what it means to be human.

Secondly, although much derided as the perennial “future source” of unlimited energy that never comes, fusion, is now closer than ever. It’s eventual realization, a hope which governments have invested billions in, will bring the costs of energy down to radically low levels. This inevitably will have vast freeing cost effects on the productivity and possibilities available to human life in general.

Thirdly, some of the richest men in the world are competing to provide for the next step in space travel: asteroid mining and space tourism. They are rapidly approaching the necessary technological innovations, such as cheap reusable rockets, to make their seemingly science fiction like dreams become the stuff of reality. With the eventual creation of cheaper rockets and the requisite space infrastructure, capitalism will have reached an eventful phase in its development: it’s expansion, manipulation, and creation of multiple new markets beyond this planet. Yet, again, science and the capitalist system that uses it would have expanded into a new phase the end of which would be, perhaps, far into the future.

What I am arguing here is that the imminent triple “revolutions” in genetics, energy, and space travel will usher in a new stage in the development of capitalism. It will, in all probability not usher in a new age of social relations relative to production; since after all; capitalism through such innovations would drastically enhance its material basis and thus scope for action.

Thus, the “rise of the robots” is a false specter haunting the contemporary imagination. Robotization, not any more than genetic engineering, or fusion energy, or asteroid mining or even quantum computers will not do away with work per se; quite the contrary it will, as it has always done, radically revolutionize its nature. New types of work will be created to meet new material conditions. To be sure, the new work will require more education and more skills but that is a good thing. Dull work, “meaningless” work, dehumanizing work will more rapidly than gradually become a thing of the past. In fact, we can view this transformation as revealing a fundamental trend inherent in capitalism and the general scientific organization and basis of

society. An ever more complex society requiring ever more skilled and informed workers. A world where instead of working as it were on the outside of things we are working more from within their centers.

What do I mean exactly by this last sentence? I want to say that as society, through capitalistic structure and endeavor, becomes ever more complicated it will require not only a more highly skilled work force but a more self-satisfied one. This is already happening in many Western countries where satisfaction garnered from ones labor stands high on the list for reasons to work at all. People increasingly demand to be challenged and satisfied by their work. This is a demand which springs from the ever growing complexity of capitalism itself.

Thus I think that those leftists, and some even on the right, who believe that man and his work will soon become redundant are wrong. Those who call for a guaranteed living wage I think are fundamentally misguided about Marx's ideas about work. Work, as Aristotle, Hegel, and of course Marx rightly believed was crucial to the development of the human personality. The goal was not to be free from it entirely; but "only" not alienated by it. To work hard and gain personal satisfaction therefrom would have been thoroughly encouraged by Marx and Engels. Those on the left who offer a vision of state subsidized indolence would actually be the purveyors of a dim world of desperation, alienation, and asociality.. Indeed, everything must be done to enhance the skills and perspectives of future workers to meet the challenges of an advanced capitalist society where the chance for new avenues of production and thus new and more creatively satisfying work will be possible.

Here we are also offered a chance to reinterpret the Marxist vision of a world moving away from capitalism through the total realization of its inner possibilities to a world moving ever closer to a "socialism of self-satisfaction" where increasingly people would move into more complex, creative occupations that would require the use of the total human being rather than just the dumbest part of her. Thus, I have argued that technological progress is not the enemy. Premature intellectual defeatism and with it the discounting of the possibility of human beings being able to rise to the challenges of the new is the real threat that we now face.