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Abstract

The impact of technology on the processes of production affects every aspect of American life, and most especially the long-range employment prospects of the American worker.

KEYWORDS: technology, unemployment, genocide

Technology, Unemployment and Genocide

Richard L. Rubenstein*

The impact of technology on the processes of production affects every aspect of American life, and most especially the long-range employment prospects of the American worker. Unfortunately, this development is seldom given the consideration it deserves by political decisionmakers. Whether or not we regard as practical the proposals incorporated into the workers' Bill of Rights proposed by the International Association of Machinists, it is the merit of the proposal to focus our attention on the need for a coherent national response to the problem of technologically-induced mass unemployment. Given the limitations of the current symposium, it is obviously impossible to deal with every aspect of the question. I therefore propose to limit myself primarily to a consideration of the relationship between unemployment and genocide.

I take genocide to mean the calculated and premeditated extermination of a target population on the initiative of political authorities. Mass unemployment and genocide can be seen as related phenomena. Both are consequences of the rationalization of the economy and society which has characterized the modern period. Put differently, both are outcomes of the modernization process. Briefly stated, it is my hypothesis that the worldwide transformation of the traditional, subsistence agrarian economies to economies in which all forms of production have been progressively rationalized has resulted in the rise of mass populations entirely redundant to any conceivable production process and the bureaucratic and technological structures required for their elimination.

A program of mass extermination can be seen as a state-sponsored program of population elimination. Genocide is by no means the only method available to public authorities to implement such a program. It is, however, the most radical. Official encouragement of mass emigration, colonization schemes, imperialist ventures, mass expulsion, and apartheid policies have served as alternative methods employed by state authorities to eliminate an unwanted target population. Moreover, a

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population targeted for elimination need not itself be vocationally redundant as long as its riddance is perceived to be a benefit by political decisionmakers. For example, a scarcity of job slots can easily lead to conflict concerning the distribution of available work. In the past, some governments have actively encouraged the departure of employed members of a minority group so that unemployed members of the dominant majority might secure the newly-vacated positions. In those cases in which the targeted minority was unwilling or unable to emigrate, the governments in question have often resorted to harsher methods of population elimination. This was the case in Poland in the 1930s where the Polish government saw the elimination of Poland's 3.5 million Jews, all of whom were publicly declared to be "surplus," as a necessary measure for making jobs available for Poland's woefully underemployed non-Jewish population.¹

Similarly, during Germany's post-World-War II *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, millions of foreign workers from Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia and Turkey were invited to migrate to Germany as *Gastarbeiter* or guest workers to fill the jobs Germans were unwilling or unable to take. Today, the German economy can no longer absorb the foreign workers and considerable agitation has developed for sending these workers and their families back to their native countries. Because of the still-fresh memories of Auschwitz, no responsible German official has actively supported the compulsory expulsion of the *Gastarbeiter*. Nevertheless, there is widespread sentiment in Germany that somehow the unwanted and unneeded foreigners must be encouraged to depart.² While this development may seem unrelated to the problem of genocide, the connection becomes clearer if we keep in mind that official encouragement of mass emigration and genocide have the same objective, namely the elimination of a target population, although there is obviously a vast difference in the method of implementation. Unfortunately, where public authorities perceive the objective to be a matter of necessity, failure to achieve the objective by relatively mild methods may lead to the employment of radical methods, especially in a period of acute social stress.

Nor have public authorities always exempted members of the majority ethnic group from their programs of population elimination when

1. This problem is discussed by CELIA S. HELLER, *ON THE EDGE OF DESTRUCTION: JEWS OF POLAND BETWEEN TWO WORLD WARS* (1977).

2. See John Nielsen, "Racism on the Rise," *Time*, Asian Edition, December 12, 1983.

the targeted group was perceived as redundant to the community's labor needs. Thus, during the nineteenth century large numbers of Englishmen, Italians and Germans were encouraged to emigrate by their own governments. With the modernization of both the agricultural and industrial sectors of the European economy, governments preferred to encourage emigration rather than face the social costs of a large, discontent, indigenous unemployed population. In many instances, authorities gave paupers funds sufficient to make the journey to North America but not to return.

A civilization that loses as many people through emigration as Europe did between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the beginning of World War I is a civilization in crisis. The statistics give us some idea of the dimensions of the crisis: between 1875 and 1880 as Europe was in the process of rapid industrialization, approximately 280,000 persons emigrated annually. The figure increased to 685,000 annually between 1880 and 1885; between 1885 and 1890 the annual average was 730,000. In the peak year of 1910, two million people left Europe! Nevertheless, the crisis of modernization and industrialization was somewhat disguised by the fact that there were vast areas available for European settlement and peoples of European origin enjoyed an absolute technological superiority over non-European peoples well into the twentieth century. This enabled Europe's surplus human beings: (1) to expand over very large areas of the earth with only minimal resistance from the indigenous populations; (2) exploitatively to dominate most European peoples, utilizing their labor and natural resources under conditions extremely favorable to the Europeans; (3) to create and maintain an industrial civilization in which most non-Europeans were customers rather than competitors. These conditions permitted a far greater expansion of the economies of the European peoples than would otherwise have been the case had all of the peoples of the world modernized simultaneously. Europe's technological headstart also permitted the absorption of more Europeans in the work force than would have otherwise been the case. Nevertheless, in spite of the never-to-be repeated advantages enjoyed by the Europeans, the continent was unable to escape the horrendous social dislocations of World Wars I and II, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, Italian Fascism and National Socialism.

Unfortunately, the problem of the mass population redundancy that plagued Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is now besetting most of the developing and developed nations alike. At present, the United States is engaged in a great national debate concern-

ing the nature of our response to the political upheavals taking place in Central America. There is general agreement that the roots of the political upheavals are to be found in the population explosion and the region's high unemployment.³ Indeed, the report of the Kissinger Commission discusses this issue under the sub-title, "Modernization and Poverty." Similarly, millions of Mexicans, rendered unemployed by the rationalization of Mexican agriculture and Mexico's population explosion have attempted to enter the United States in search of any kind of work. In so doing, they are acting as have other immigrants throughout the history of the United States.

Nevertheless, both the United States and the world at large are very different than what they were even a decade ago. Perhaps the most important single new fact is that the peoples of European origin are no longer technologically superior to non-Europeans, especially the peoples of the Orient. In addition to Japan; South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong have demonstrated a phenomenal capacity to compete with the West in developing a type of technological civilization originally endogenic to the west and exogenic to the Orient.⁴ Moreover, while Americans reflect on how to respond to Japanese industrial competition, they are almost completely unaware of the imminent challenge of South Korean competition. Within a very short time South Korea is likely to be one of the world's most important technological producers. This development is bound to have profound repercussions on the American economy. Whatever the outcome of the ongoing technological transformation of Asia, a transformation which is likely to benefit the United States as a Pacific Ocean power far more than Europe, it is obvious that societies of European origin can no longer solve the problem of surplus people by exporting them. This is especially true of the United States which was for many decades the solution rather than the problem.

Ironically, Adolf Hitler was one of the first European political leaders who understood that the problem of surplus people could not be solved by emigration. He states this with special clarity in a book

3. THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR VALUES IN PUBLIC POLICY, CENTRAL AMERICA IN CRISIS: A PROGRAM FOR ACTION; *see also* REPORT OF THE NATIONAL BIPARTISAN COMMISSION ON CENTRAL AMERICA 22-25 (January 1984).

4. *See* Roderick MacFarquar, "The Challenge of Post-Confucian Asia," *The Economist*, February 9, 1980; R. HOFHEINZ, JR., & A. CALDER, *THE EAST ASIA EDGE* (1981).

known in English as *Hitler's Secret Book*.⁵ As we know, his "solution" included genocide and wars of enslavement and extermination. Instead of exporting its surplus population to the New World where their demographic strength would be lost to the fatherland, Hitler proposed that Germany create a *Lebensraum*, a living space, on her eastern frontier by conquering and uprooting the indigenous Slavs. As we know, in the case of the Jews of Germany and Eastern Europe, they were exterminated outright. By vastly enlarging her territory, Germany could find a place for her surplus millions within her own borders. Hitler was determined that, whoever might be rendered redundant by advances in technology and population growth, it would not be healthy Germans.

A number of writers on the problems of black people have also understood the connection between unemployment and genocide. Sidney Wilhelm and Samuel Yette have suggested that at some time in the future an attempt might be made to exterminate America's unemployed blacks.⁶ Both writers have been accused of extreme paranoia. Such accusations miss the point. The problem of surplus people can be handled with relative ease in times of prosperity. The apprehensions expressed by these writers concern what might happen in a period of acute scarcity and social stress.

Let us consider the kind of scenario in which mass population elimination might become a tempting policy option. In a period of acute and seemingly insoluble hardship a future administration might conclude that a mass surplus population no longer serves the national interest even as a reserve labor force. As the micro-processor revolution accelerates, the value of unskilled labor is bound to diminish significantly in any event. If such a time of crisis ever comes, the problem of surplus people will admit of only a limited number of solutions. These boil down to redistribution of resources and work opportunities or some form of population elimination. The latter could involve the repatriation of "illegal" immigrants, whose number will have grown as the economic crisis worsens, mass warfare, and in the most extreme cases, actual extermination. As we have seen, in the past, governments have preferred to eliminate people through emigration rather than by the redistribution of resources. Absent the opportunities for emigration available to Europe in the nineteenth century, an American population

5. A. HITLER, *HITLER'S SECRET BOOK* (1983) (especially pages 13-25 and 70-74).

6. See S. WILHELM, *WHO NEEDS THE NEGRO?* (1971); and F. YETTE, *THE CHOICE: THE ISSUE OF BLACK SURVIVAL IN AMERICA* (1971).

elimination program, if ever initiated, would have fewer humane options. It would also be even less inhibited by any residual sense of community in view of the class, racial, ethnic, and ideological divisions, as well as the depersonalized instrumental business and bureaucratic ethos that pervades American public life. One might also note that native American Indians can, with justice, claim that there has already been an American population elimination program of major proportions.

It is this author's very tentative conviction that an American population elimination program would not employ large-scale death camps as its major instrument as did the National Socialists. Mass warfare would appear to be a more tempting policy option. Even the National Socialists and the Turks did not resort to outright extermination programs until they found themselves in the midst of a major war. In a severe crisis, desperate political leaders might first be tempted to lead the nation into war, perhaps only partly aware that they were more interested in destroying the enemy than in reducing their own surplus people. Elsewhere, I have argued that at some level the British, French, and German high commands in World War I intuitively understood that millions of their own soldiers had been rendered superfluous by industrial civilization and that such monstrous battles as Verdun and the Second Battle of the Somme, in which a total of 2.3 million men were lost by both sides, can be understood, to some extent, as exercises in state-sponsored programs of population elimination.⁷

Moreover, after a major war the reconstruction period can lead to a relatively prolonged period of prosperity and full employment. This was undoubtedly the case between the early 1950s and 1974. Thus, war might be perceived by policymakers as having the double "advantage" of eliminating surplus people and, by its very destructiveness, paving the way for a post-war boom of long duration. There is, of course, a major constraint on the use of warfare to eliminate surplus people, namely, the unpredictable extent of nuclear damage. Unfortunately, even that constraint might be overlooked by public authorities faced with a desperate and apparently insoluble social crisis. Perhaps the recent resurgence of a mass peace movement in the advanced industrial nations reflects a widespread intuition by millions of human beings of their potential superfluity and expendability in a period of rising unemployment.

There is much more that can and must be said on the issue of

7. See R. L. RUBENSTEIN, *THE CUNNING OF HISTORY: MASS DEATH AND THE AMERICAN FUTURE* (1975).

unemployment and genocide. I have endeavored to deal with the subject in greater depth elsewhere.⁸ In the present context, the urgency of the situation which has prompted the International Association of Machinists to propose a workers' Bill of Rights should be apparent. The merit of the proposal is that it addresses the very real crisis facing skilled American workers, especially in industries where microprocessor technology is likely to displace the vast majority of even the most skilled workers. Its weakness lies in its overly narrow focus on the American scene. In December 1983 this writer inspected the machine tool factories of Tong-il Industry Ltd. in Changwon, Korea. I saw a huge factory complex turning out computerized lathes, universal cylindrical grinding machines, vertical/horizontal milling machines and other machine tools. I also saw a new factory in which the tools could be manufactured by robots. Every computerized advance in manufacturing technique was being employed. The products were state of the art. They will undoubtedly compete with American products in the world market with every promise of a high degree of success.

There is simply no way that American manufacturers of comparable products can remain in business unless they automate to the same degree as the Koreans and the Japanese. Moreover, there is no way that state or Federal authorities can tax or otherwise penalize American manufacturers who automate, as the workers' Bill of Rights proposes. Indeed, under the best of circumstances, American manufacturers are going to find it difficult to remain in business unless they employ every conceivable labor-saving device available. Nor is there any certainty that there will be "labor cost savings" or "gains resulting from the new technology" to be shared with the workers, as the workers' Bill of Rights implies. On the contrary, given the cost advantage of the Japanese and the Koreans, whatever savings result from automation will have to be used to keep the American product competitive on the world market. Moreover, even if displaced workers are given training, it is by no means certain that there will be jobs in which to place them.

In short, there is an air of economic unrealism about the proposed workers' Bill of Rights. Nevertheless, the problems which moved the Machinist union to make the proposal are real and must be dealt with by government, capital and labor acting in concert if we are to survive as a responsible and humane society. Our fundamental problem is how

8. See R. L. RUBENSTEIN, *THE AGE OF TRIAGE: FEAR AND HOPE IN AN OVERCROWDED WORLD* (1983).

we can turn our productivity into a social asset capable of enriching both the material and spiritual aspects of our society. If we ignore the problem, we will in effect continue a line of development that has the effect of rendering millions of our fellow citizens vocationally redundant and socially useless.

I have only begun to formulate what I believe to be the indispensable preconditions for meeting the crisis. I can therefore only offer the briefest suggestion of what, in my opinion, may be required: (1) In order to remain competitive in the world market, especially in the face of ever more sophisticated competition from the Orient, American industry will have no choice but to utilize state-of-the-art automation to the full extent of its availability and economic feasibility. (2) Alternative forms of meaningful activity, such as university study to the graduate and post-doctoral level for an ever-expanding student population of all age groups, must be fully funded by public authorities. No other institution has demonstrated the ability to provide large masses of people with an alternative to the labor market which is as meaningful as that offered by American colleges and universities. Age ought to be no barrier to participation in any degree program. (3) American primary education must become at least as competent as that of Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore in imparting the tools necessary for work and leisure in a high-tech era. (4) As manufacturing processes become ever less labor-dependent, plans ought to be devised for the sharing of available work opportunities by a maximum number of workers even if this results in a significant reduction in the length of the normal work week. (5) Immigration laws should be stringently enforced. It will be difficult enough for American society to cope with the problems of its own citizens without being compelled to cope with those of its neighbors. Nevertheless, some provision must be made for the continued recruitment of talented foreigners for American industry and education. (6) As the value of labor inevitably diminishes with the continued use of sophisticated technology, some means of permitting labor to share in the fruits of capital must be devised. Put differently, productivity must enhance rather than diminish the well-being of the average citizen.

These ideas are obviously tentative and incomplete. Indeed, they may be as unrealistic as the workers' Bill of Rights. What is important is that serious attention be given *now* to the problem of technology and unemployment. Failure to do so will lead sooner or later to a catastrophic situation in which the worst-possible-case scenario I have outlined above is likely to be viewed by policymakers as the best possible case. Lest the scenarios seem extreme, I must remind my readers that

they have already taken place in this bloodiest of all human centuries. What we seek to avoid is not a first instance of monumental tragedy but a repetition. It is for that reason that I welcome the Machinists' proposal. It is as good a starting point as any.