

A LABOR OF LOVE OF LABOR

For Magda McHale

For a workshop on "Engagement in the 21st Century"

Center for Integrated Studies

State University of New York

Buffalo Hilton Hotel, Buffalo, New York

October 25, 1996

Jim Dator

Under the title, "The end of economic man," are the following words:

In advanced societies where the strongest conventions are anchored in wealth and property, the most characteristic break with past values has occurred in this area.

Human labor is no longer directly related to the production of material goods in these societies; yet most of their fiscal difficulties emanate from obsolete models of the relation of such energy to productivity.

We assess volumes of goods produced relative to man-hours employed in their production, although even in the least automated process this is not a very direct relationship. ... In a fully automated plant, the sole forming determinant is *information* as programmed into the tools. In the final analysis, the only unique input into the production process is human knowledge.

...

From this time forward, man may potentially produce in abundance all his material life-sustaining requirements without the need to exact human labor in equable return. In effect, since science and technology are directly based on the availability of all recorded human knowledge, all human equity is already invested in the whole process. ... It is therefore a realistic, rather than merely philosophical, premise that the only universal credit card for access to the fruits of the whole enterprise is membership in the human race.

...

This is not to denigrate individual enterprise, but to suggest that its present and future characteristics may not be defined narrowly in terms of economic profit and material wealth gain. It may be as vigorously pursued in terms of other types of rewards. For example, though we classically define our free enterprise system as those in which economic self-interest or direct profit are the main risk incentives and regulatory mechanisms, over 75 percent of their industry is large-scale corporate enterprise tied to banks, insurance, and public finance. The largest ventures--aerospace, communications, and defense--are those in which risk is minimal, profit margins are fixed, and the free market relation is hardly evident!

...

Much of our futures concern is arrayed around the value of work in the determination of future roles in society. But when we examine the theories more closely, we find that there is a considerable residue of earlier intellectual attitudes to the rise of industry lagging behind the sophisticated critiques and empirical researches that have outmoded them. Much of the sociology of work and leisure is still primarily the study of those social roles that arise from the classification of men by gainful occupation, or in which all other activity is interpreted in relation to work, as traditionally defined. They are based on the

[obsolete] model of economic man.

...

[But] work, as previously defined, is no longer the central life interest. It has lost its relation to the compulsive work ethic, to the principle of nationality and efficiency, and the notion of time as money, that is, as a scarce commodity and socially significant unit.

...

Clearly, all our notions of the supposed virtues of imposed hard work and self-profit are based largely on the economics of scarcity and on previous standards of marginal survival.

We retain [these] illusions and compulsions [only] because we cannot [imagine and] design other support for the social edifice.

[From John McHale, The Future of the Future, Chapter VI, "Toward a Planetary Society," New York: George Braziller, 1969, pp. 176-83]

About the same time, in 1966, someone else wrote as follows:

Money was intended as a means of determining the social distribution of goods and services during the period when the demand for these items outran the supply. This condition no longer holds in the United States, in most of the West, or in Japan. The old basic economic principle, the scarcity of resources, no longer applies. Labor, which is necessary for the production of economic value, is no longer the monopoly of man. Indeed, as the whole argument over automation makes abundantly clear, man is being increasingly freed from the necessity of labor, and it is not utterly irresponsible, I believe, to predict that man may be freed entirely from all labor, both manual and mental. ... I see no technological reason why machines cannot be created which will take over all the labor functions of man, including repair and planning. And I see no reason why we should be horrified at the prospect or why we should endeavor to prevent it. Instead, my point is that instead of rigidly protecting old forms and values, we should begin encouraging the development of roles and personalities that can live gracefully in this environment which is becoming so greatly different from the past.

...

The present development of a total-credit economy coupled with massive public relief for the unemployed is a transitional response to this. Few Americans "own" the many goods they have in their homes. Many are paying for their possessions on time, with nothing down and years to pay, and more will continue to do so. Banks are now encouraging overdrafts, and finance companies are not only eager to loan, but extremely reluctant to repossess in the event of payment defaults. Better you should wreck your auto and have to purchase another than that the finance company should have to repossess it. They do not want your old car any more than you do.

...

Then why keep the money system [at all]? Value produced by machines is still value. Goods produced by machines are still desirable goods. Why not do away with the credit system and permit persons to obtain the goods they want regardless of their "ability to pay". That their labor is not now needed (it once was!) is surely not their fault. They are excellent consumers--let them have the goods they want and which the manufacturers would like to give them.

...

Life goals for most people living today have been structured predominately around their "work". All our socializing institutions have, quite properly in the industrializing period, stressed the value of work. But I have already suggested that work is becoming no longer economically necessary, and hence no longer socially desirable. Yet, as now socialized, man must work. When they do not, they will literally die. ... So completely are we work-oriented that we destroy ourselves without it. This is the case not only in the West. A survey I conducted in Tokyo, Japan, showed that over 90% of the respondents said they would prefer to work rather than live without working even if all their economic needs were taken care of.

...

Culture-shock is a common disease now of persons who move from one society to another that is different from their own. But imagine what will occur as the transition that I have been outlining takes place! Thus, it should be clear that I am not contending that the future situation is Utopian. The world of the cybernetic, post-money, and completely situational ethics society will not be "better" or "worse" from our own, and may well be beyond our present comprehension. One obvious difficulty will be what people will do with their leisure.

...

The transitional period will be extremely rocky--it will be both unpleasant and exhilarating--for all concerned. The suffering, whether caused by the attempts of the resisters to exterminate the modifiers or by the modifiers attempting to suppress the resisters, will be immense and unavoidable.

[From James Allen Dator, "Oh, we belong to a cybernetic, post-money, situational ethics society, my baby and me," which appeared in much abbreviated form in The Futurist, August 1967, p. 53f, under the title, "Valullessness and the Plastic Personality."]

So what do you think. Were we right or wrong? Do those words sound prophetic or pathetic? Are we any closer to my cybernetic, post-money, situational-ethics society now than we were 30 years ago? Or are we in fact already in it? Isn't this what "post-modernity" is all about anyway?

Clearly present technology is even more capable of freeing humans from all manual and mental labor than it was thirty years ago, and I don't expect future technology to reverse this capability.

Clearly we live in a world under the spell of economic beliefs that are even more false, or at least grandly mythic, than they were then. Global capitalism has triumphed everywhere, and is set to storm into the 21st Century unimpeded by any other force or fiction.

Yet, John McHale very clearly pointed out in the section I quoted above that the "magic of the marketplace" explained only a tiny fraction of what was actually going on thirty years ago, even in the US, while the real economy was basically a command economy driven largely by military spending.

Even inspite of the end of the Cold War, and all plausible reasons for national defense, the command economy continues apace because in fact the world capitalist economy would collapse were it not for military welfare and deficit spending, not only by governments, but (and very importantly) by each and every one of us.

We humans clearly are now needed, if at all, not as producers of anything worthwhile, but as consumers of that which is produced without our attention, independent of our needs, and as a consequence of massive, pervasive, and extraordinarily clever and wildly entertaining exercises in brainwashing, called advertising.

Whatever jobs exist are found, as John anticipated, only in the vastly expanded and endless redefined "service" sector. But most of that is make-work of the most vapid sort as well.

As I sit, as I often do, in the Red Carpet Clubs of the world, listening to thousands of Willie Lomaxes whine into someone's voicemail about their failure to sell or buy some widget or other, it is all I can do to refrain from shouting, "For Christ sake, will you shut up and get a life!" But of course, I suppose it is not their fault they believe and act as they do. Could it be mine? Could I be utterly wrong in my analysis? Is their labor even more valuable and necessary than I can comprehend? Highly likely, I suppose.

Yet, when all is said and done, I do conclude that John and I were correct. We are now living in the world we anticipated. Nonetheless, the forces of inertia, denial, and especially greed are substantially stronger than we--or at least I--imagined.

Goodnight, John. Happy birthday, Magda.