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Beyond Left & Right

Radical Thought for Our Times

Edited and with an Introduction by
RICHARD KOSTELANETZ



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dislocations that will otherwise occur as we head into an age wherein automation can be either tyrant and malignant, or servant and benign.

CYBERNATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

by ROBERT THEOBALD

My use of the word cybernation instead of automation does not stem from a desire to *seem* to be saying something new. On the contrary, I use the word cybernation because it represents something quite different from automation. Automation was the process by which you could take a block of metal, put it in at one end of a series of machines and it would come out at the other, as a finished engine block, without the need for human intervention. Automated machinery could do some things fast and well; nevertheless, its potential to organize people out of work was limited because it was inflexible.

Cybernation, however, is highly flexible and will become more so as time passes. Cybernation is the process of linking a computer, which is effectively a machine which will make decisions, and using it to control automated machinery. These interlocking machine-systems can often be controlled by a few people sitting at computers, while the requirements for other workers are very small, for not only will the machines do all the work but the latest ones are being built practically to repair themselves. The potential to organize human beings out of work in order to increase the efficiency of machine-systems is already large and rapidly growing. In other words, the present type of change in

"Cybernation and Human Rights," by Robert Theobald. Reprinted from *Liberation*, August, 1964, by permission of the author.

technology cannot be considered merely a continuation of the organizational process of the last one hundred and fifty years—it means something completely new which is quietly taking place all around us. Cybernation involves a production revolution which has two major consequences. First, in the field of production it is challenging and will increasingly challenge the supremacy of man's mind, and it will do this just as surely as the industrial revolution challenged and overcame the supremacy of man's muscle. In the relatively near future the machine-systems will take over all repetitive physical and mental production tasks and huge numbers of people will be thrown out of work. It has been estimated by some authorities that as little as 10% or even 2% of the labor force will be required for conventional work in the future.

The idea that we can continue to aim at finding a job for everybody is obsolete. A large proportion of those born in the fifties and sixties have no prospect of ever holding an ordinary job. There is no role in today's economy for those teen-agers who are high-school dropouts and there is increasingly little place for those over fifty-five.

Such a picture seems bleak to many: they seem afraid that there will not be enough toil to go round. To me, on the other hand, it appears like the lifting of the curse of Adam, for it will no longer be necessary for man to earn his bread in the sweat of his brow. Machines could perform the productive toil and men could receive the resulting abundance, for machines would not only take over all the toil, they would also make it possible to turn out effectively unlimited quantities of both goods and services. U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has expressed it in the following terms:

The truth, the central stupendous truth, about developed countries today is that they can have—in anything but the shortest run—the kind and scale of resources they decide to have. . . . It is no longer resources that limit decisions. It is the decision that makes the resources. This is the fundamental revolutionary change—perhaps the most revolutionary mankind has ever known.

There is no need—and no excuse—for poverty in the America of the second half of the twentieth century. Why, then, does it

exist, and what can be done? Before I discuss this I want to present a few figures which will show that there is already too much unemployment, that there is the ability to produce more goods and services, and that we will have more unemployment and more ability to produce additional goods and services in coming years.

First, unemployment rates have remained around or above the excessive rate of 5.5% during the sixties. (The last few months have seen a decline to 5.1%.) The unemployment rate for teenagers has been rising steadily, reaching 17% in 1963; the unemployment rate for Negro teenagers was 27% in 1963, while the unemployment rate for teenagers in minority ghettos often exceeds 50%. Unemployment rates for Negroes are regularly above twice those for whites, whatever their occupation, educational level, age or sex. The unemployment position for other racial minorities is also unfavorable.

These official figures seriously underestimate the true extent of the unemployment problem. In 1962, in addition to the percentage of the labor force who were officially unemployed, nearly 4% of the labor force wanted full-time work but could only find part-time jobs. Methods of calculating unemployment rates—a person is only unemployed if he has actively sought a job recently—ignore the existence of a large group who would like to find jobs but who have not looked for them because they know there are no employment opportunities. Underestimation for this reason is particularly severe for people in groups whose unemployment rates are high—the young, the old and racial minorities. Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Labor, has stated that at least 350,000 young men between 14 and 24 have stopped looking for work. Many people in the depressed agricultural, mining and industrial areas, who officially hold jobs but who are actually grossly underemployed, would move if there were real prospects of finding work elsewhere. It is therefore reasonable to estimate that around eight million people are looking for jobs today as compared to the 3.6 million shown in the official statistics.

Even more serious is the fact that the number of people who have voluntarily removed themselves from the labor force is not static but increases continually. For these people the decision to stop looking for employment and to accept the fact that they

will never hold a job or will not hold a job again is largely irreversible, not only in economic but also in social and psychological terms. The older worker calls himself "retired"; he cannot accept work without affecting his social security status. The worker in prime years is forced onto relief: in most states the requirements for becoming a relief recipient bring about such fundamental alterations in an individual's total material situation that a reversal of the process is always difficult and often totally infeasible. The teenager knows that there is no place for him in the labor force but at the same time is unaware of any realistic alternative avenue for self-fulfillment.

Statistical evidence of these trends appears in the decline in the proportion of people claiming to be in the labor force. The recent apparent stabilization, and indeed decline, of the unemployment rate is therefore misleading: it is primarily a reflection of the discouragement and defeat of people who cannot find employment rather than a measure of the economy's success in creating enough jobs for all those who want to find a place in the labor force.

Second, we could produce far more goods and services if we would only find more ways to allow people to buy them—for the past eight years there has been the potential to produce some sixty billion dollars of additional goods and services. We are able every year to produce at least another thirty billion dollars of additional goods and services; this will rise to forty billion dollars per year before the end of the sixties, fifty billion dollars during the first half of the seventies, and at least sixty billion dollars well before the end of the seventies. We will be able to produce an additional one hundred and fifty billion dollars of extra goods and services every year by the end of the century. The children born in 1964 will only be about half way through their lives at this time. I should add that these estimates are certainly conservative.

Third, the forward movement of cybernation is raising the skill level of the machine. If a human being is to compete with such machines, he must *at least* possess a high school diploma. The Department of Labor has estimated, however, that on the basis of present trends as many as thirty per cent of *all* students will be high school drop-outs in this decade.

Fourth, a permanently depressed class is developing in the United States. Scattered throughout the land, some thirty-eight million Americans, or almost one-fifth of the population, are living in a condition of chronic poverty which is daily becoming more evident to the rest of the nation. The percentage of total income received by the poorest 20% of the population has fallen from 4.9% to 4.7% since 1944. Movement out of the ranks of the poor is increasingly difficult, for it depends on an adequate education, while conscription of new and apparently permanent recruits continues.

The best summary of the effects of these trends was perhaps made by the Secretary of Labor at the beginning of 1964:

The confluence of surging population and driving technology is splitting the American labor force into tens of millions of "haves" and millions of "have-nots." In our economy of sixty-nine million jobs, those with wanted skills enjoy opportunity and earning power. But the others face a new and stark problem—exclusion on a permanent basis, both as producers and consumers, from economic life. This division of people threatens to create a human slag-heap. We cannot tolerate the development of a separate nation of the poor, the unskilled, the jobless, living within another nation of the well-off, the trained and the employed.

Is it surprising that the news media are full of reports of violence? There is no need to remind you of these reports nor of the climate which has created them—we all live too close to these problems. But I want to discuss with you the response, or rather the reaction, which is growing among many people. I will quote from the police chief, William H. Parker, in Los Angeles. This report appeared in the magazine *U.S. News and World Report* in April, 1964, in the form of a question and answer interview.

Question: *Has the crime picture changed much in [the last 37 years]?*

Answer: *Not only has the crime picture changed, but the entire attitude of the American people toward crime, I think, has undergone quite a definite change. I think there is a tendency to accept crime as part of the American scene, and to tolerate it.*

Question: *Do you mean that people now feel that wrong-doing is normal?*

Answer: *More than that—they seem to think that we must have a certain amount of crime not only because of man's inherent weakness, but because we are enlarging upon the scope of individual liberty.*

Question: *America might have a choice, eventually, between a criminal state and a police state?*

Answer: *I believe that will become the option before us if crime becomes so troublesome that we are no longer able to control it.*

But Chief Parker did not mention what is to me the most serious aspect of the present situation. He did not deal with the passive apathy of individuals recently demonstrated in several notorious cases in the New York area. In one of these, at least 38 people failed to call the police although they became progressively more aware that a woman was being murdered in the street below their windows. He did not deal with the fact that there is now a desire to witness violence, to participate vicariously, as when a crowd of forty interested spectators remained indifferent to the appeals of an 18-year-old bruised and bloodied office worker as she tried to escape from a rapist. (Only the accidental arrival of two policemen eventually resulted in her rescue.)

It is understandable, if regrettable, when those accidentally present at the scene of a crime or disaster flee through fear. It is incomprehensible as rational behavior when they remain as interested spectators or even active participants. During an attempted suicide which took place in Albany recently, numerous spectators participated in this novel type of sports-event, urging the mentally-disturbed youth to jump to his death and betting on the outcome. Two comments reported in *The New York Times* are hardly believable: "I wish he'd do it and get it over with. If he doesn't hurry up we're going to miss our last bus." And another: "I hope he jumps on this side. We couldn't see him if he jumped over there."

I believe this indifference to violence, and indeed increasing encouragement of it, are products of a society which is rapidly coming to regard inter-race conflict as inevitable; a society which fails to challenge the individual to anything more than economic goals and responsibilities and which has now deprived many people of even an opportunity to achieve the self-respect which would result from reaching these economic goals. Although we

are confronted with the symptoms of incipient total breakdown in our society, we are unwilling to face reality. We refuse to recognize that the survival of American values depends on fundamental changes which will reverse the process toward alienation. We refuse to recognize that the economically poor and the culturally alienated, who are the young and the minorities, have and should have little interest in the goals our society presently espouses. Instead of looking for the new and better society that cybernation makes possible we continue the drift into a worse society: we then propose that the way to arrest this drift is through measures which must necessarily be categorized as movements toward a centralized authoritarian state: teen-age curfews and all-day seven-day-a-week retention of children within the confines of the school plant.

Some Proposals

Now I want to set out a program which might suffice to reverse the drift toward a centralized authoritarian state.

The first necessity is to guarantee every individual within the United States a decent standard of living whether he can find work or not. We should provide every individual with an absolute constitutional right to an income adequate to allow him to live with dignity. No governmental agency, judicial body or other organization whatsoever should have the power to suspend or limit any payments by this guarantee. Such an absolute constitutional right to an income will recognize that in an economy where many jobs already represent make-work in any social, and indeed economic, sense and where the requirements for workers will decrease in coming years, it is nonsensical to base the right to an income on an ability to find a job.

Many people have attacked this proposal, but their arguments have failed to convince me. I remain quite sure that the guaranteed income is the first necessary step if we are to achieve the new and better society made possible by cybernation, that it is the only practical means of preserving our fundamental goal of individual freedom, the only method of allowing the individual to make his own decisions and pursue his own interests. The guaranteed income is not one of many solutions to the problems of cybernation: on the contrary it is the economic prerequisite

for the solution of the real problems of the second half of the twentieth century, many of which have not yet even begun to be discussed in realistic terms.

The first of these problems is education. One of the key principles of the cybernated era is that society must make an unlimited commitment to produce the conditions in which every individual can develop his full intellectual potential. The acceptance of this principle would make me highly optimistic for the long run. I believe that we have so far developed only a tiny proportion of the potential of most human beings. I believe that acceptance of an absolute right to an income and complete education would allow a flowering of the spirit and mind whose dimensions cannot even be guessed today.

If we are to achieve the complete education of every individual, we must recognize that the student is "working" at least as relevantly as the man in the factory. The time has come when we must introduce the concept of a student salary, starting possibly at 14 and increasing with age, payable to all students attending school or university. This salary would be tangible proof of the recognition by society of the value of this young individual and its acceptance by the child would be a recognition by him of his obligation to the society which has accorded him this right.

Society must not only be concerned with the individual's mental abilities but also with his physical health. We must develop a system which will ensure that everybody can obtain the best medical care—both preventive and curative. Income levels should be seen as totally irrelevant to rights to health and life.

Rights to an income sufficient to live with dignity, to the opportunity to develop oneself fully and to obtain meaningful activity are only extensions of present values, although many people will be shocked by the direction of the proposed extension. However, the coming of the cybernated society not only forces us to live up to past ideals but it also requires the development of new human rights. I want to talk about the need for three rights which seem highly important to me. (There are others which should be mentioned if space permitted.)

The first of these new human rights is for the individual to be provided with guarantees about the quality of all the goods he purchases. It has always been a fundamental principle of market-

ing in the Western world that the purchaser should discover the quality, condition and quantity of the goods he is purchasing. The seller simply offers a product and it is held to be the responsibility of the purchaser to inform himself as to whether it is satisfactory. This is the famous legal doctrine of *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware).

Today, the consumer cannot reasonably be expected to examine a television set or any other complex product to discover if it is well made: the makers of many types of goods have recognized this fact and have steadily lengthened their periods of guarantee. We now need to take the next step and acknowledge that the total responsibility for determining whether a product is satisfactory lies with the seller and not with the buyer. Each seller should become responsible for the claims made on behalf of his product and should be forced to refund some multiple of the purchase price if the product does not meet his claims. In some cases, when injury to the purchaser results, the seller should be liable for damages. The manufacturer will therefore have a direct financial interest in living up to the claims made for his product.

In upper Manhattan, we are all used to the shoddy-goods salesman with the foot in the door on a Sunday afternoon or late on a weekday evening. We fail to translate our momentary irritation into terms of national waste. The proposed human right would not only minimize the time wasted by the individual in purchasing repair or replacement: it would also meet desirable social criteria. The time and money the manufacturer saves by selling unsatisfactory products is wasted many times over by the troubles of the user. We need a productive system which will turn out goods which will render the services for which they were designed with the minimum possible number of breakdowns.

In addition, the long-run necessity, if mankind is to survive on this planet, is maximum economy in the use of raw materials. Every pressure should therefore be placed on the manufacturer to maximize the life of the product. This measure would be a first step in this direction.

The second new human right is the right to buy from any seller. Originally the buyer and seller were in close human contact and they naturally wished to choose to whom they would sell and from whom they would buy. Today, business desires to move

goods and services at a profit without entangling social problems. As a result it is not only desirable but also necessary for society to state that in return for the right granted the businessman to sell goods and services, he has the obligation to serve all comers. Those who do not want to accept the obligation to sell to all comers should not be granted the right to sell at all.

It is, of course, *only* the establishment of such a principle in law which will provide a completely satisfactory answer to present discrimination practices. It is an answer which must be eventually passed as a constitutional amendment: it must be clearly recognized that private property ceases to be private *just as soon as* the individual or company makes the decision to sell to the public.

It would be naïve, of course, to expect that these new rights, and many others, could be effectively established without a major reform in our legal system. Today, the government has all the resources in a criminal case: the private individual, unless he is wealthy, has no opportunity to hire legal talent of comparable skill. In a civil case, the large corporation controls enough funds to hire a battery of lawyers; the private individual rarely has enough resources to match this ability to spend. We require a new institution: the public defender. Public defenders would be paid by the government and would have the power of government officials but their responsibility would be to take the cases of the private individual whose interests they felt had been unjustly damaged by the use of private and governmental power. They would possess enough resources to challenge the large institution effectively. A system similar to this has already been established in Scandinavia, and Arthur Goldberg has proposed it be introduced into the United States.

The third new human right is that every individual should have the right to receive information undistorted by desires to mislead for the purposes of private gain. This is, in today's world, a very novel proposal for it means that society must develop effective sanctions against individuals and groups who distort information deliberately. That such a proposal seems novel is perhaps a good measure of the degree of malfunction in our society. The framers of the American Constitution intended that the right of free speech and a free press should be a method of achieving free debate, not

a justification of deliberate distortion with consequent fragmentation of the society.

What types of distortion am I condemning? I condemn the advertisers who play on the weakness of the individual in order to increase their sales. I condemn the propagandists of any country who unhesitatingly distort the unfavorable and bury the undesirable news. I condemn the academics who distort the truth as they see it in order to gain reputations or power. On the other hand, I do not condemn but resolutely uphold the right of the individual to put forward all the truth as he sees it, however unpalatable it may be. I believe, indeed, that we must smooth the path of individuals who are willing to dissent, for the costs of disagreement with existing social norms are always high. The granting of an absolute constitutional right to an income will be helpful here.

Indeed, I go further. The existence of lively controversy which allows the discovery of the truth in constantly changing circumstances is one of the prime necessities of today. Only a lively democracy can lead to the adoption of appropriate policies to deal with changing situations. Concentration of power in the hands of a few not only is against our past ideals but also fails to meet present necessities.

I would like to suggest that this is, in fact the major role which has been played by the civil rights movement in recent years, and particularly in recent months. The attention of the civil rights groups themselves, and of outside observers, has been concentrated on the degree of success or failure achieved in striving for stated goals. There is a considerable feeling that they have consistently fallen short of their goals and this has been called failure. This is an excessively naïve view of social change. Very few commentators discuss the real success of the civil rights movement—the fact that it has, almost single-handed, wrested America out of the apathy in which it was mired and forced it to face the problems of unemployment and inadequate education, the problems of poverty, and the long-run dangers of cybernation. The drive of the civil rights movement is forcing America to re-examine itself and to recognize that the rights of the Negro cannot be achieved without fundamental social and economic change. The civil rights movement has provided America with another chance, and pos-

sibly its last one, to recognize that in conditions of abundance every citizen both can and should be provided with the means to obtain enough food; clothing, shelter, education and health care: in effect to be a first class citizen.

Martin Luther King has taken this theme and proposed in his new book "... that the United States launch a broad-based and gigantic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged." He adds: "It is a matter of simple justice that the United States, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor. A Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged could mark the rise of a new era, in which the full resources of the society could be used to attack the tenacious poverty which so paradoxically exists in the midst of plenty."

How can this goal be achieved? Clearly the civil rights movement must be joined by other supporting groups. Only if all those who are concerned with the improvement of our society unite to bring about major change will it be possible to achieve the pace of development in social values which will allow us to benefit from technology and consequent abundance rather than be destroyed by it.

The civil rights and labor movements stand, indeed, at a cross-roads. They can become the rallying point for true social change, for demands which in any other period of history would clearly have been Utopian but which are today completely practical and indeed essential. The decision to take the route proposed would deprive the civil rights movement of the support of some sections. It would alienate those who are only concerned with obtaining justice for the Negro, who refuse to recognize that justice for the Negro cannot be secured in a society which does not secure justice for all its citizens; in the same way that present injustice to the Negro is progressively involving injustice to others. In addition, this decision would deprive the unions of the support of those who are concerned solely with people who still are, or might become, union members.

If we plan and carry out the necessary actions our common future has a brighter aspect but we must face up to the unkind fact that much of the potential benefit from cybernation and abundance will be reaped not by us but by our children. We are

in many ways the truly lost generation: we are torn adrift from the certainties by which our parents still lived and we will never fully understand the new set of apparent certainties which will seem totally natural to the children growing up today. These children, in their turn, will never understand how we could have allowed our defunct concepts of economics to prevent us from providing everybody with food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care.

In one sense, we will remain chained to our past, unable to enter the promised land. But our generation, and *only* our generation, can bring humanity to this promised land. The challenge is uniquely ours: if we fail to rise to it we will destroy our values, the values of our children and very possibly the whole world. If we succeed we have laid the groundwork for the Great Society.
