

Big data, like Soylent Green, is made of people

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Ghost in the Machine

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Discussions of automation have, of late, seemed to bifurcate along two lines. The first line suggests that we, the puny humans, are doomed. The machines (the robots, bots, algorithms, algorithmic architectures...) have arrived and they are better than us. Therefore, they have or will soon win capitalism's great hierarchical and competitive race to the bottom. The second line of flight also suggests we are doomed, but this time by our own visions of utopia. Here is a vision of such intensive Taylorism and management that the words Taylorism and management misdirect the fantasy, sending us back to the wrong political economy—a political economy dependent on the disciplining of body for the relatively linear production of goods and commodities.

Our new automated utopia is not an assembly line, but a rather a vision in which machines of loving grace, interfaces of capture and algorithmic decision-making, become the very structures of determination that makes our lives possible. I don't know about you, but being, as Richard Brautigan wrote, "all watched over" in a "cybernetic ecology", where we are "joined back to nature" and "returned to our mammal brothers and sisters" sounds like its own form of hell, particularly when we take a feminist or post-colonialist approach to understanding such "nature."

Beyond this bifurcation of doom, we can also see—particularly in Frank's work on health care—that automation, in tandem with big data and ubiquitous computing, promises a form of personalized care that is actually predicated on the participation of a much larger and abstract social body. In the production of these massive data sets, upon which the promise of "progress" is predicated, we are actually sharing not only our data, but the very rhythms, circulations, palpitations, and mutations of our bodies so that the data sets can be "populated" with the very inhabitants that animate us. If there is any hope within these dooming scenarios, it is that we realize we do indeed need one another or rather that we have become deeply entangled in one another. Big data, like Soylent Green, is made of people. To me, the ubiquity of data acquisition and computation, suggests that we are in what is really quite a "weird solidarity" with one another, a solidarity that seems to surpass national and political boundaries and even economic interests.

However, this insight into solidarity does not seem to be the direction we are moving—in part, I think, because the conversation of automation is really a tangle of several conversations that speak to different levels of sociality and mingle a mix of human emotions (as of yet, we don't know how the algorithms feel.) As we talk about the coming "robot overlords" we can see this mixture in a fear of change and the sadness of loss or even a melancholy, as well as a speculative curiosity about potential new social relations and arrangements.

I would argue that we are in the midst of a crisis of the social imagination. The very concepts of

work, labor, time, and productivity are being pressured, but so are the very morality or ethics of this system—the Protestant ethics of capitalism—which are meant not only to insure that we desire to work, but which also to give rise to a private, individual, and accountable subject—or a subject capable of entering into contract relations, which, by the way, are the relations by which we have ascribed most enforceable rights. As big data and its possibilities for automation rewrite the relationship between labor, time, and subjectivity, I would say that contract relations will be pressured to the point of being quaint.

Lately, I have been noticing that a lot of writing about automation likes to equate the current human predicament to that of horses. For example, Noah Smith in the Atlantic last year wrote, “Now, humans will never be completely replaced, like horses were. Horses have no property rights or reproductive rights, nor the intelligence to enter into contracts.” But the terrain of rights—and the very subject who may participate in those rights—is precisely the terrain that is being reformulated by ubiquitous computing and automation. In a [paper](#) I recently co-authored with Patricia Clough, Josh Scannell and Benjamin Haber, we suggested that it is not only the bounded, private, individual subject of the liberal disciplinary society that is being pressured, but that the coupling of large scale databases and adaptive algorithms are calling forth a new “ontology of sociality itself.” This onto-logic is post-probabilistic, which means we aren’t talking about an easy empiricism of statistical outcomes, but rather an empiricism based in the desire or impulse to capture and redeploy the indeterminacy of life itself. As we wrote, “big data doesn’t care about you so much as the bits of seemingly random information that bodies generate or that they leave behind as a data trail; the aim is toprehend novelty.” Within this “datalogical turn”, as we call it, “there is not only a decentering of the human subject, but the definition of the bodily broadens beyond the human body. As such, we write, “bodily practices themselves instantiate as data, which in turn produces a surplus of bodily practices.”

So, on the one hand we have here a very abstract ontological challenge, as well as a very political and very practical problem on our hands. What do we do as we look to the end of work as the ideological apparatus of resource distribution? While we can debate whether or not new forms of human activities will be required or will emerge in relation to the machines of loving grace (for example, housekeeping technology certainly hasn’t reduced the need for housework), we do know that this ontological shift is being carried in on the heels of massive wealth capture and historically high levels of inequality—not only economic inequality, but political dispossession. As Smith writes:

For most of modern history, two-thirds of the income of most rich nations has gone to pay salaries and wages for people who work, while one-third has gone to pay dividends, capital gains, interest, rent, etc. to the people who own capital. This two-thirds/one-third division was so stable that people began to believe it would last forever. But in the past ten years, something has changed. Labor's share of income has steadily declined, falling by several percentage points since 2000. It now sits at around 60% or lower. The fall of labor income, and the rise of capital income, has contributed to America's growing inequality.

While Taylorism was always a system of control which was predicated on observation,

surveillance, and measurement (management is not simply to manage towards production, but to control for error), the automation we are speaking of here is entangled across spaces and times, and becomes increasing so as the boundaries that once marked the home, the factory, the school, the hospital... dissolve and blur into life itself. So, while automation will come with the promise of robotically generated abundance, the algorithmic architectures that are coming to underpin the material conditions of human life will also guarantee that those in power remain in power. On the one hand, therefore, we are in need of a rather immediate and radical politics to insure we make it through this transformation of sociality. This is perhaps a radical politics not to only demand wages and benefits and the stability of schedules from the owners of capital, but a politics of solidarity that can reconceptualize how and where value is being produced, as well as how and where humans reside among and with machines and algorithms.

Such a radical politics needs to ask different questions-- not are we doomed, but who and what is this "we"? What exactly is being automated or "being made to act" here?