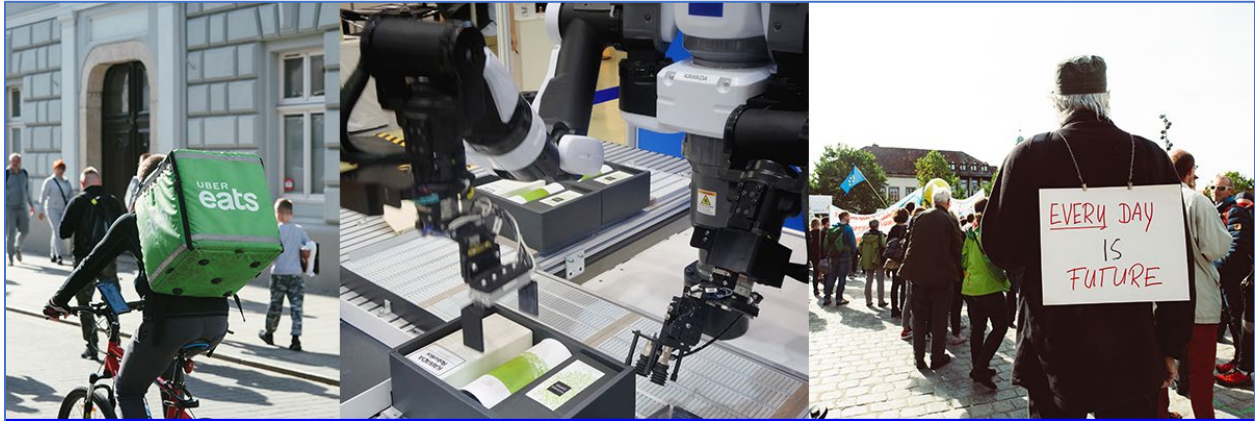


Society for the few ... not the many: gigs, robots and the continuing undermining of democratic society



Kai Pilger | possessed-photography | Markus Spiske on Unsplash

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Two trends: gigs and robots

Consider two trends that are being featured in recent news and Internet publications ...

1. The gig economy (see Bloomberg article below).

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-02-17/gig-economy-coming-for-millions-of-u-s-jobs-after-california-s-uber-lyft-vote?utm_source=pocket-newtab

2. The coming robot revolution (use your favorite Internet search engine to find out more about replacing disease susceptible workers with machines that cannot fall sick ...

Short term economic thinking ...

Employers in North America, and perhaps the world, seem hell bent on a management path which distributes an ever-decreasing portion of a society's output to working people. These trends are driven by the short-term profit and loss thinking that have led to executive bonus structures which reward quarterly and annual management actions. Business leaders are always on look out for ways to decrease the portion of the revenue for profit organizations generate to the people who do the work which produces that revenue. As a result, average real income continues to fall decade after decade. The income gap between the elite and the average citizen continues to grow.

The evolution of the human brain ... and modern economic thinking

All of this is based on a short-term vision of how economics work in modern societies. That short-term vision has its roots in human evolution. Humans are driven by two overwhelming tendencies that are buried deep down in the part of our brains which evolved over hundreds of thousands of years of tribal life.

1. The **annual cycle** is the single most important one driving human life. What used to be an annual hunting, migration, and agricultural response to seasonal change has in the world wide adoption of an annual accounting cycle and yearly calculation of profit and loss. This way of thinking spans all modern societies, regardless of their religious or cultural roots. It is one of the most widely shared cognitive models driving modern life.

2. Tribal societies were and are places where **tribal elites are entitled to a larger than average share of the collective output** of the tribe. This drive actually seems to have originated in the instinctive social dynamics of animal packs and herds. The social dominants eat first, to their fill, before the rest of the members of the collective.

Rational thinking is not protecting us from these negatives of tribal societal dynamics ...

We as human lay claim to being guided by rational ways of thinking in our economics. But the adopters of 'gig' and 'robots' are not thinking in long term rational ways. Instead, these relentless drives to 'gig' and 'robotics' in many modern economies are justified by short term benefits to the few: the shareholders. Neither drive considers the wide spread societal impacts of this 'employee' job destruction. The responsibility for these consequences is transferred to 'others', or to the 'individuals impacted' or to 'society'.

Technology is neutral– its adaption is driven by ethical beliefs and values ...

I spent most of my career as an information technology leader. I chose this career path because I bought into the promise of technology to benefit all across a society. I reacted to the leftist leanings of some of my university peers. They saw capitalism as socially negative. I saw it as a powerhouse, innovation driving engine. I believed that democracy would somehow act to counteract the worst dynamics of capitalism's past history: the relentless social and economic exploitation of the many by the few.

In the last decades of my life, I am finding myself once again drawn towards what are labelled as 'leftist' ideas by members of our socially exploiting elite. I still believe that the innovation driven by capitalist economic models will be beneficial to human societies in general. I was an early Internet champion because I saw ways in which its ability to span distance could bring knowledge sharing and collaboration benefits to the many, both nationally and internationally. The promise of the Internet has also been used to drive crime, exploitation, greed, and social manipulation of the few.

I no longer believe that democracy in and of itself acts as a corrective for capitalist exploitation in world in which the Internet has become a dominant media for social communication. The power of the Internet is being used by those who seek to undermine democracy, as well as those who seek to support it. Technology remains neutral. The goals and intents of its users do not. They remain human.

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The limits of 21st Capitalism as a democratic system

21st Century capitalism's devotion to short term profit and loss, annual accounting, and the growing economic inequality between its stakeholders, are grounded in the tribalistic, annual cycle, underpinnings of human evolution.

The way in which the capitalism of the 21st Century distributes the results of social collaboration is undermining an economic model which has huge potential for us as a species. The capitalism model of organization – stratified hierarchy and its industry-based competition for within economic segments – are powerful ones for driving human innovation.

The addition of an 'operate only to the benefit of the shareholders' element in 21st Capitalism derives from our tribal, annual cycle-based parts of our brains, not the rational ones. We need to update our models of capitalism with elements that provide a better consideration of the longer-term, over years, often unanticipated consequences, of maximizing short-term annual shareholder wealth.

History teaches ... but today's society ignores

History has shown us that modern societies in which the rewards of social collaboration do not improve the life of the average member of society over time lead to internal violent revolution and external war. Both should be unthinkable to us, given what we know about the destructive power of modern personal weaponry and the species extinction potential of modern military technology. Yet many people in our societies continue to glory a vision of personal violence and societal war that owe more to a romantic view of the past than a realistic assessment of the future.

A modern socially effective, ethical framework

A few, elegant moral social principles could provide some powerful constraints to these democracy destroying trends.

- 1. A society must collaborate for the benefit of all its members.**

The most efficient way to measure this in a modern society is the year over year increase in the wealth and the health of the average citizen, not societal GDP or other such abstractions.

2. We have a **moral obligation not exploit natural resources in a way that does NOT destroys the ecological balance we leave our children**, and our children's children, and so on into the future.

The welfare of future generations is one of the few things we have in common as internationally competing societies. Without adhering to this principle, we face a bleak future of growing ecological uncertainty and potential nuclear war.

3. The **collective wealth produced by a society must be distributed in a society in a way that recognizes economic leadership AND the contribution of the average individual** to the production of that wealth.

We need individuals to lead in societies. But social leaders cannot benefit from their leadership in ways that exploit or undermine the ability of the average individual to live without economic or health based or violence from others fear.

4. **No one individual has the moral right to use the destructive power of modern technology to engage in the killing of other individuals** through personal violence or inter-society war.

Our civil legal codes all seem to treat self defense as the only justification for killing another human being. Yet political leaders regular engage in actions that lead to the death of large numbers of others. We need to expand our international courts and enforcement mechanics to hold such sociopathic leaders accountable. Even better, we need to refine our political processes to keep such individuals from becoming political leaders in the first place.

5. **Politics is a moral profession that must be guided by rationally bounded social dialogue.** T

Politics has become a capitalistic business. Fund raising on the Internet become a business with one of the highest return on investment available in modern societies. Appeal to peoples; fears, send them a series of e-mails (each of which costs fractions of a penny to send) and reap the financial rewards. Too many people enter politics for this and the other sources of economic gain that have led to the modern business of lobbying politicians.

The job of the modern politician is to facilitate the complex dialogues needed, both nationally and internationally, needed to shape a collective human vision that guides into a more beneficial future.

6. News delivery and social commentary needs to move from being a 'ego' driven to a 'facilitating' feedback business in democracies.

We need to use the Internet to establish widely communicated 'social score cards' in which electors can provide feedback to elected democratic politicians, government bureaucrats, and others involved in the delivery of social services on a more frequent basis than an election every 4 or so years. We also need to reform the polling and news media businesses to take responsibility for creating and operating such feedback processes.

Instead, today they largely serve as a medium for ego-driven personal opinion trading. The Internet as a technology has the power to create such 'widely shared, continuously updated, wide reaching' score cards. It is time for more media companies to see this as their future business, not pandering to the egos who are today's media stars.

Even when social governance meets such standards, we as societies will make mistakes because we cannot always see the unanticipated long term ecological and economic consequences of our short term, well-intended actions.

Societies survive in the 'intermediate', not the short term or long term. We are always making compromises in our societal actions in our attempts to maximize the short term without negatively impacting the long term.

7. Individuals who engage in governance purely for their personal ego and economic gratification are dangerous and destructive of the collective well being of the human species.

They should be judged as such. Democratic governance and social dialogue processes need to recognize this, and move beyond 'the tribally oriented' allegiance dynamics buried deep in our evolved parts of our lower brains.

We are different as individuals

Not all of us have the kind of personal cognitive psychodynamics that are driven by the consideration of such generalized, abstract principles of social fairness. Many of us treat the immediate, the concrete, and the impact on us as individuals and family members.

as having far more personal importance than these kinds of abstract ethical ideals. These ideals are not more 'right' or 'truthful' in some abstract sense. They can contribute to the complex social dialogues we need to reach out into the future. They can provide structures which allow us to disagree and to seek consensus on what we do socially and economically. But they are not truths in the sense that material facts are true or false. They are ideals that guide our dialogue as we struggle with being socially sensitive human being rather than socially exploitative one.

A future generation based ethical base for human kind ...

Religion may have serviced this purpose for relatively isolated societies in the past. But religion is too close to our evolved tribal dynamics to provide one common such framework for the globe. The future well being of our children, and the future generations of their children, is one concern we can all share around the global. A 'child' based moral code offers us hope, not despair, as a species.

1. No child chooses to be born.
2. No child chooses the nation in which it born.
3. No child chooses to be born into a life of poverty, disease, and violence.
4. We as adults face a collective responsibility to the children we add to the globe.
5. We are collectively responsible for their future well being.

Not accepting this responsibility is a sign of a certain level of moral depravity on the part of a modern adult.

“Gigs” and ‘robots’ are not in themselves bad, but some of the intents might be ...

Un-self-aware tribal oriented 'distrust' dynamics, and the tribally based exploitation economics resulted in things like this promotion of a 'gig' economy in California. The idea of more 'gig based' work may be useful in coping with a fast moving, rapidly changing world. But without adding elements to it that consider ethical and fairness principles like the ones above, all we are doing is encouraging the dynamics which history shows destroys democratic societies.

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It is not enough to argue that adopting a gig-based and robot-based economy is justified because it increases the short term wealth of 'shareholders'. We must also ask how the way we will adopt them affect:

- the economic welfare of the average member of society,
- today's children and their off-spring,
- and the democratic health of our societies.

We need to dialogue ...

That will not be an easy or single thread dialogue. It is not guaranteed to provide us with all of the insights we need to avoid some unanticipated, long term consequences of the actions we choose to implement around 'gigs' and 'robots'. But if and when we do undertake these dialogues, we will be accepting our collective responsibility as members of a democratic society.

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Who is Roelf Woldring?

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Founder and CEO
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