Response to, “A Future Without Work”

Recently, Antonio Melonio published an article on Medium titled, A Future Without Work. The piece describes a future utopia brought to us by “Fully automated luxury communism”, a term credited to Aaron Bastani. Let’s examine some of the core arguments presented in this piece and what would be the downstream effects.

The first argument presented by Melonio is that people can be replaced by machines. He argues that robots “…do not get tired, do not make mistakes, do not form unions, do not demand wage increases, and do not become pregnant” (Melonio). The error in this argument is immediately clear. Robots do make mistakes. Further, in most cases, it requires human intervention to correct those mistakes. The argument is a simple one and easy enough to clear up, but it also sheds light on the opinion and bias the author holds.

The next argument is that technological innovation will allow all humans to live in luxury and be free to do whatever we please. The goal is that all our needs are taken care of for us and since the workweek is reduced to almost zero, we are free to pursue any whim that might catch our eye. However, as soon as the reader starts to consider the ripple effects of this utopic vision, it becomes obvious why it couldn’t and shouldn’t be our future. How does Melonio define luxury? One's idea of a luxurious life surely depends on one's lived experience. Whose lived experience are we using as a baseline? The problem we run into from the beginning is that if we use an ultra-rich, western idea of luxury we can see that the resources needed to produce such a life are limited and thus cannot be afforded to every human on earth. One might argue this is what makes it a luxury in the first place. Alternatively, if we use a third-world understanding of luxury, that would require a large amount of the human population to live in what they would otherwise consider poverty. Which idea of luxury is our reference point?

However, the article has an even bigger blind spot. It fails to recognize what a job means for an employee. It means leverage.

Think about this. If all resources are evenly distributed and access to all products is guaranteed to every human, who will be in charge of enforcing that policy? If the utopic dream is for this to be delegated to a decentralized, purely democratic process, then you end up with not only mob rule, but the natural greed and fallibility of human nature entering the process. If the ideal is for a central governing body to manage to make sure every human has the exact same as every other human, as would be expected in an automated and communist future, then the system is at risk by that very government. If you give up your right to work and pursue your own wealth and goods, what happens when resources get scarce? The governing body would inform the global population that their daily rations of any given resource will be reduced. In light of the recent trucker protests in response to government action, what happens when the governing body institutes a law or mandate you find offensive or outright wrong?

This is not a vision of utopia. Why? Because with no ownership or control over the means of production, what are you going to do about government overreach or abuse? The author seems to assume that the only reason jobs exist is because capitalism needs cheap labor to hoard its wealth. Melanio and Bastani fail to see what power there is in being responsible for the production of goods and services, never mind misunderstanding the incentive structure. The power is being able to disrupt the supply chain as leverage against an authoritarian government. All it takes is thinking a couple steps downstream to see how destructive these ideas are.

Works Cited

Melonio, Antonio. “A Future Without Work | Antonio Melonio’s Cosmos.” *Medium*, 29 Mar. 2022, antoniomelonio-cosmos.medium.com/a-future-without-work-8af514e5106b.