

Book Review

Automation and the Future of Work

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Benanav, A. (2020). *Automation and the Future of Work*. London: Verso.

The capitalist economy—once imagined as a perpetual machine for continuous growth—is seriously malfunctioning. Yet, the malaise is not recent or temporary, but one that has been developing over 50 years. A sequence of short-term growth bubbles, mini-booms and the buttressing efforts of the state have served to mask that the machine has been breaking down since the late 1960s. The so-called ‘advanced’ economies are deeply inveigled in what Wolfgang Streeck has called ‘a continuous process of gradual decay, protracted but apparently all the more inexorable’ (2014, p. 38).

Aaron Benanav’s book is a further timely corrective to those who would insist on the transient, temporary nature of the capitalist downturn. Like Streeck, he sees entrenched atrophy and decay, evidenced in the slow, stuttering performance of national economies over half a century, and the diminishing capacity of capitalist societies to lift themselves from the stagnant mire. The focus here, however, is on the direct consequences for jobs and work. Benanav first shows how the overall rate of output growth has been in steady decline for decades and how this has led directly to entrenched un- and under-employment for large swathes of skilled and unskilled workers. His argument is that shrinking numbers of good jobs (and the concomitant proliferation of bad, precarious, or partial jobs) is attributable to the long-term weakening of the economy as a whole—at the global scale. The data on this is presented convincingly. However, the main point of this book is to use this insight to challenge the more common and popularly held belief that the real reason for the lowering demand for labour is not ingrained economic decline but technological change through *automation*.

It is often assumed by both lay and expert observers that increased joblessness is primarily a function of automation—the acquisition of cheaper technologies that reduce requirements for human labour; aka ‘computerisation’ or the ‘the rise of the robots.’ But, as Benanav repeatedly insists, while automation *has* occurred, this is not the main reason jobs are being lost. Further, while absolute increases in labour productivity growth (the amount produced by each worker) appears to show automation in action, the actual rates of increase in labour productivity have been overall diminishing, over time—even with mass automation. Japan’s rate of labour productivity growth is currently about a fifth of what it was in the early 1970s, for example; Germany’s about half. Further, the rate of labour productivity growth only appears to be increasing when one looks at the rapid decline in the overall rate of output growth, against which labour productivity is compared. So, if labour productivity rises by 3% but overall demand for output rises by only 2% then jobs will likely be lost—regardless of productivity gains. Citing Robert Solow’s quip that the computer age is everywhere to be seen ‘except in the productivity statistics’ (p. 17), Benanav’s main argument therefore is that it is the overall decline in output that is driving job losses and underemployment, not technology *per se*.

Armed with this insight, Benanav's then deploys it in open-ended speculation on the 'future of work.' Here, he takes issue with both Right and Left variants of the 'automation discourse'—the idea that technological innovation is leading societies inexorably towards jobless futures where human labour becomes redundant or obsolete. In much of this discourse there is a strong techno-utopian leaning that imagines 'universal' automation will free up workers to either live freer and more fulfilled lives in the leisured solidarity of the convivial community (Leftist variants) or else exist as free, non-dependent citizens with an unhindered personal liberty (Rightist variants)—all shorn of commitments to endless and numbing work. Here, UBI is often tendered across the political spectrum as a straightforward solution to the problem of unwaged life. Yet, on both the technically afforded post-work society, and on UBI, Benanav offers a counter-argument. Just as work is not becoming obsolete (workers are consistently under-employed rather than fully unemployed, or else subsist through other myriad, variously consistent or unstable working means), neither are all jobs amenable to automation. Furthermore, work will always remain socially necessary—in whatever societies we inhabit. There are useful insights here on the need for democratic forms of work sharing—not dissimilar to the ideas underpinning 'contributive justice' elsewhere developed by Paul Gomberg (2007) and others. When it comes to UBI, the point is made that while it might helpfully break the link between work and income, and provided a minimal floor for subsistence, if the fundamentals of the machine remain intact—unfettered profit-making in growth-oriented capitalism—then UBI is likely to 'empower workers' at the expense of 'disempowering capital' (p. 78) and provide people with 'no greater role in shaping the wider social conditions' (p. 78) under which they live. Benanav's persuasive claim is that without system change then it is unlikely that any 'silver bullets' (be it UBI, or full automation) will be effective enough to occasion the radical, progressive change that is now required. What is needed is a fundamental and democratic transformation in the arrangements of a failing political economy, where people are first prioritised before any putative tools or instruments of progress:

'By focusing on technological progress rather than the conquest of production, automation theorists end up largely abandoning [the] basic precondition of generating a post-scarcity world (...) the abolition of private property and monetary exchange in favour of planned cooperation (...) Instead of presupposing a fully automated economy and imagining the possibilities for a better and freer world created out of it, we could *begin* from a world of generalized human dignity, and then consider the technical changes needed to realize that world' (p. 82).

A better world of work and non-work will best be obtained through 'social struggle rather than administrative intervention' (p. 12), so concludes this thought-provoking and highly engaging book.

Time to power up.

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