

Beyond Automation

50 Years Later & The Rise of the Precariat

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The effect of automation on employment was first brought to the public's attention by a 1964 report, *The Triple Revolution*, issued by a California-based liberal think tank, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

The report asserted that technological developments were leading to almost unlimited productive capacity. But this was also reducing the number of manual jobs needed, increasing the level of skills needed for available jobs, and creating much more unemployment.

The authors of the report urged the U.S. government to remedy this situation by creating more jobs through large-scale public works, building low-cost housing, improving public transit and electrical power systems. They also recommended policies fostering redistribution of income, union representation for the unemployed, and government management of technology deployment.

The view that automation would have devastating effects on the economy was not speculative, as it was already decimating the workforce in mass production factories like the auto plants. James Boggs, one of the thirty-six signatories to *The Triple Revolution*, witnessed the first effects in Detroit, and wrote *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* (Monthly Review Press, 1963) to document this phenomenon.

George and Louise Crowley, Seattle radicals active in the 1960s, attempted to redefine the class struggle for an age of automation. They were members of a vibrant group who published the *Seattle Group Bulletin* during that period. It is now online and should introduce their ideas to a contemporary audience.* The Crowleys published an essay titled "Beyond Automation" in the Marxist journal *Monthly Review* of November, 1964, which responded to *The Triple Revolution* and proclaimed the inevitability of an anarchist revolution.

Reading the Crowleys' article today, over fifty years after its publication, may astound those who think that "the end of work," "the society of abundance," and a "guaranteed basic income" are only contemporary responses to the fear that robots are coming to eat our jobs.

For instance, from the opening paragraphs of their prophetic essay: "The abundant society cybernation (today, computerization) eliminates need[s] for social constraint, including the constraint to produce according to one's abilities. It points instead to the freest conceivable exercise of individual options in production and consumption as in all human activities. It points away from private ownership of the means of production, but not towards their collective ownership; rather, it suggests that the fully automated productive complex, operating independently to supply whatever people may demand of it, needs no ownership nor management at all. Who owns the air?"

The pace of the Crowleys' utopianism continued:

"As the [*Triple Revolution*] stated, it is the income-through-jobs link that acts as the main brake on the capacity of a cybernated productive system. This link must be broken. The traditional dictum (however modified) that he who does not work shall not eat is postulated on an economy of scarcity, in which the labor of all is needed to sustain the community...It is not jobs that are needed for the transition, but income."

However, George and Louise Crowley were utopians and revolutionaries, and followed the path of the authors of *The Triple Revolution* only so far. They had no faith in “planning agencies under democratic control” nor did they see science as wholly benevolent.

In fact, though today we find it difficult to imagine “enlightened” capitalists, when vapid, egomaniacal billionaires plague the media, the Crowleys did imagine such an animal that enclosed “automation’s surplus production...to impose paralysis” on the population first with economic crumbs and, further, with more efficient means via genetic manipulation. The total domination of the commodity-economy and the spectacle that facilitates its incursion into the rhythm of everyday life had not yet washed ashore in the US, though it was already creating waves in Europe.

The Crowleys dismissed the liberalism of the Center’s prognosis and searched for an agent of change in a world where work, and therefore the working class, would diminish as a force in remaking society. They found traces of hope developing throughout the world, with liberation struggles abroad and at home, a movement for change beyond the immediate demands to a vision of a new society. What is called The Civil Rights Movement and placed in a box made for it, not by us, but by others, was in 1964 a very open-ended social rebellion.

The Crowleys, in their attempt to reconfigure the class struggle, re-thought the rebellion of blacks within the context of class organization of society and in that context blacks filled the role of the lumpenproletariat. The lumpens were derided by Marx as the “rotting mass.” And in his day they were the discarded slough of “the decaying aristocracy, the peasantry and the distressed petty bourgeoisie.” The proletariat on the other hand was entirely consumed by the expanding factory system—nothing to be discarded there.

Today, however, there is a different reality. The proletariat is a tripartite entity with a small section elevated to the ranks of high paid technicians and managers, a somewhat larger, for now, middle section that resembles the old working class and a distended third section which the Crowleys called the new lumpenproletariat.

Today, this sector of the population is commonly called the precariat—the precariously employed (or not) proletariat succulently defined by British activist academic Guy Standing in *A Precariat Charter*.

To quote the Crowleys again: “...now the overwhelming mass of lumpens comes from the working class. They are the hard-core unemployed and the young people who will never find jobs; they are the ex-miners of Appalachia and the ex-autoworkers of Detroit. A great many of them are Negro, many are Puerto Rican, Mexican-American and Indian. It is absurd to call these people workers. They do not work; they do not expect to work again; as they adapt to their new conditions of life, they do not want to work.”

There is an eeriness to these words today. The current skills of the media bleat that we are approaching “full employment,” but which reality is more believable—the cooked statistical one promising prosperity around the corner, or the foresight of the Crowleys?

It is necessary to reject the palliatives of the spectacle. Computerization will not create more jobs than it displaces. And of the jobs that it does create? Well, we know where the grandchildren of the 60s lumpens will work. They will slog to jobs essentially like those their grandparents worked when they lost their union jobs. Or, they will be in prison. Or, they will die trying to create a life on the fringes of legality.

It is necessary to be clear, however, about technology in a way that the Crowleys were not. Fifty years ago, an abundant society was no more an illusion than when Paul Lafargue wrote *The Right to be Lazy* eight decades earlier.

Capitalist technology does not exist to be of service to humanity, in fact, it is killing many of us. The Crowleys proposed in their introduction to “Beyond Automation,” that technology could free us from labor by taking control of it. But now it is necessary to rethink how we want to live. An emphasis on technology deflects us from thinking about our real needs first. After we determine the shape of our lives in the realm of freedom, then we can devise the tools we need for its realization.

* <http://www.seattlebulletin.org/>

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