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On Informatism

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Knowledge, says the conventional wisdom, is power, and in the post-industrial society only those who understand the complex techno-economic system are equipped to play roles of leadership. Thus, politicians and advertisers are powerful because they understand mass psychology; lawyers are powerful because they understand the legal process; and technocrats are powerful because they understand modern technology.

Computers process information, information means knowledge, and knowledge is power; therefore, computers lead to power. This idea has gradually become widely known, causing in its spread some unease and even alarm. Some concerned people have suggested a code of ethics for computer personnel, while others want strict safeguards on the application of computers, especially to data centralization.

Computers also mean automation—the replacement of manual and low-level clerical workers by machines.

In time, the forecasters say, only those who can work with computers will be able to find jobs. Those who do not will, in the computerized society of the future, be excluded from both work and power. To make the picture less repelling, however, the pundits hasten to point out that the computerized society will be a society of leisure. There will be no need for soul-destroying assembly work. The bright people will work, and work for everyone's benefit. The not-so-bright will have all the time they want to enjoy themselves, for there will be nothing else for them to do.

I have coined the word "informatism" for the above idea, both in its general form ("information is power") and its more restricted form ("power to the information processors"). Anyone who shares this belief is an "informatist," just as the communist believes in communism and the capitalist in capitalism. An informatist is not, obviously, identical to an "informatician"—someone who has expertise in computing—since one can believe in informatism without being an expert, or can be an expert without accepting informatism. However, I think it would be fair to say that most informaticians feel comfortable with informatism without being militant informatists. They view the prospect of the

computerized society with equanimity or even complacency, for what can be more reasonable than the rule of the brightest? Especially, let it be repeated, the brightest ruling for the benefit of everyone?

It should be clear, however, that the computerized society will not be a society of equality. There will be the class of informaticians and a class made up of everybody else. But, say the informatists, selection will be strictly on the basis of merit, and no one will be arbitrarily condemned to the lower echelons of society. The education system will pick out the brightest youngsters and train them appropriately. Those who display the requisite brilliance and dedication will rise to the top. But even those who fail to make the grade will in no way face bleak futures. They will be, if nothing else, at least comfortable consumers, and will be spared all responsibilities of work and leadership.

But if it is going to be so pleasant to fail, then why should anyone wish to succeed at all? Obviously, there must be some way of rewarding the brilliant people who run the computers. There will also have to be several different kinds of rewards, since different people are motivated by different things. Some like power; others simply enjoy work; yet others are attracted by the prestige associated with work. Those who are not sufficiently motivated by any of the above will have to be, in the last resort, rewarded with material benefits. Mere consumers, for example, will receive free the basic necessities of life and something more for enjoyment (the usual formula of "bread and circuses"), while certain goods of restricted supply will be reserved for the informaticians, with the best receiving the most.

In short, it would be more reasonable to expect the computerized society to be one of great inequality. The informaticians will monopolize wealth, prestige, and power, as well as the most important and interesting types of work.

It can be argued that this is a perfectly rational way of organizing things. We should realize, however, that the scheme is neither more nor less rational than any other organization of society in history. During the middle ages it was rational for peasants to submit themselves to some nobleman-warrior and live under his protection, for that was the only available protection from continuous strife. Before the age of science it was rational for men, surrounded as they were by a

mysterious and frightening natural world, to bow before priests in the hope of salvation. Getting closer to home, to those who own the means of production (i.e., capital) it seems perfectly reasonable that they should receive a return from their property even if they do not work to earn it. The notion that they exploit workers is in their eyes quite ludicrous, for should not the workers be grateful for receiving employment and livelihood? Obviously, the workers see things quite differently.

For much the same reason, however rational the computerized society may appear to the informaticians, it will be unwise for them to assume that the rest of the society will share their perception. There will always be men who prefer to rule in hell than serve in heaven—even a computerized one. "Anti-informatist" attitudes are not necessarily foolish and irrational. Anthropologists often argue that the most stable societies are those in

which men live by hunting. Needless to say, in such societies it would be the strongest, rather than the most brainy, who come out on top.

To put it differently, the computerized society, with computer experts at the top, is no more than yet another version of the search for a utopia. It is another attempt at finding the ultimate "social contract" under which everyone plays an appropriate part and receives a "just" reward. Like any other society, it will employ a set of norms to select members of the ruling class and reward them, using as the major criterion cerebral brilliance rather than noble birth or ownership of property. To the ruling class it is "just" that such norms are observed, and any attempt to circumvent them is "wrong." To members of the subordinate class the very existence of the norms is "unjust," in that any society based on such norms must work to their disadvantage. Justice can be

achieved only if the society is organized differently. Efforts to educate the subordinate class to be "realistic" and "well-adjusted" and to "consider the interest of the society as a whole," however well meant, will only be taken by some as devious attempts at misleading the subordinate class into passive acceptance of its own inferior status. But whether its members will, as Marx says, acquire "class consciousness" and overthrow the ruling class to establish a new social order benefitting themselves, will depend on many factors. The degree of inequality, the state of human knowledge, or the social and political environment may or may not lead to the formation of a suitable alternative society.

So, in their search for utopia, let the informatists beware. The computerized society of the future may very well turn out to be a better one than those of the past, but no one should take this for granted. ■

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