

In the shadow of the fourth industrial revolution. – A thought-piece.

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One generally perceives excitement when presentations on the so called, fourth industrial revolution occur. The impression is one of advancement through innovation. While it cannot be denied that technology has been influential in gains for humanity, it also casts long shadows. These shadows have economic, social and ecological dimensions to them. One way of entering this debate is to think of the impacts of globalisation – an inherent concept in our thinking about the fourth industrial revolution.

Globalisation has associated with it some awesome capabilities. These include the global logistics networks, the global information networks, advanced robotics, the infrastructure of manufacturing and retail, generative innovation, with ubiquitous malls, and marketing probably being one of its most impressive capabilities. This leads to enormous power in promoting consumerism. Nations compete to create favourable conditions through liberalising their economies to provide havens for globalised growth.

But is it growth in the critical sense of the word? If we create a balance sheet between the positives and negatives of globalisation what will that balance sheet look like? We need to balance the global reach of product lines against the costs of vast logistic chains. We need to balance cheap synthetic goods against the quality of natural products. We need to balance sweat shops against local craftsmanship. Above all we have to balance social and environmental degradation against the skewed benefits of economic participation and holistic well-being.

The long shadow of the economic sun of the fourth industrial revolution is cast by those benefiting from the associated consumerism both as creators of capital and consumers of their goods. They benefit from the accumulation and structural strength of the various capitals that they are part of. In the shadow are those who are employed at subsistence level, or worse still, those without employment and whose work is nullified by the globalised market place, lost to the robotic culture. For them the shadow is long and the shadow is dark.

Can we compare this pessimistic view with a radical alternative? Could we use our technological nous to focus on the provision of the basics? Such basics would include:

- A fundamental emphasis on extensive data density and innovation in relation to all primary human needs – namely education and health for a start. This data density would need our education and medical practitioners to be educated accordingly so that they can maximise the applications of the data manipulation and interpretation potential at their disposal. In education we already have seen the MOOG phenomenon. Learners need support in learning how to learn and apply, not what to learn. The medical applications of data management are awesome and turnaround time is becoming shorter and shorter. A national health system using leapfrog technology holds real promise.
- The manufacture of a basic set of low cost “smart” gadgets to allow for universal access to information of relevance to primary activities such as agriculture.
- The reinvention of local markets based on expertise development and craft applications in areas such as natural product harvesting and product development.

The stranglehold of our global masters is intense. They own the infrastructure of the age in which we live. They own the rights to the (genetically modified) seeds we plant. Their goal is the commodification and control of whatever they can. The environment they see is one of consumers and the higher net worth of those consumers, the better. They own the information networks and the logistics systems. They are surrounded by the envious who use the foul means of greed and corruption to access power through wealth. The gospel preached is that of ease, access and accumulation and success measures in the number of toys in your collection and the number of noughts in your wealth profile.

As a systems thinker I know that the most powerful yet difficult thing in the world to change is individual mind-sets and the cognitive and material structures we create as a consequence of our individual and cultural learning and the socio- economic path dependency in which it is carried. While the

fourth industrial revolution is embedded in a shift of technology informed economic consciousness, the survival of humanity lies in a more fundamental shift of consciousness where inclusive illumination for the well-being of all replaces the shadows caused by exclusive monopolisation of the six capitals.