The Age of Access:

The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life Is a Paid-For Experience

by Jeremy Rifkin

The Nine Lives of Capitalism

Do you remember when sending a letter to a friend across the Atlantic took a week? When research involved thumbing through endless note cards, arranged alphabetically by author in your local library? When buying new clothes or booking a holiday vacation meant having to go to the store? Few developments have changed our lives more profoundly than computer technology and the advent of the information age. Activities once demanding our physical presence and much of our time can now be accomplished by the touch of a button. Human interactions are increasingly channeled through remote connections via electronic media. Technological advances not only change how we relate to one another, but also how we restructure the economic, political, and cultural fabric of our society.

Virtually every activity, author Jeremy Rifkin argues in his new book, The Age of Access, has become a "paid-for" experience. We increasingly pay for using things rather than for the things themselves. Capitalism is entering a new phase characterized by a search for continuous access to an ever-expanding array of services and cultural experiences—from global travel and tourism to entertainment and wellness programs—through vast commercial networks, many operating in cyberspace. As a consequence, Rifkin warns that contractual types of relationships increasingly replace traditional social relationships based on faith, empathy, and solidarity. Market exchanges between buyers and sellers in goods and services are transposed to the trading of ideas and images. In the new network economy, suppliers provide access to information, knowledge, experience, and fantasies to temporary users. In this era of "hypercapitalism," Rifkin conjectures, "it is human time that is being commodified, not places or things. Services always invoke a relationship between human beings as opposed to a relationship between a human being and a thing. Access to one another, as social beings, becomes increasingly mediated by pecuniary relationships" (p. 84).

Rifkin divides The Age of Access into two parts and twelve chapters. The strength of the book lies in its provocative yet easy to understand argument, to which most Americans should readily relate. He skillfully captures the excitement of the postindustrial era and points to many of its pitfalls, which, if ignored, could lead to cultural paralysis. Chapters 1, 10, and 12 are particularly intriguing as they lay out the key argument. The remainder of the book presents useful, though somewhat lengthy and at times repetitive, illustrations.

More than a century ago, Karl Marx prophesied that capitalism would inevitably produce its own destruction. By contrast, Rifkin shows that capitalism is reinventing itself. In the process, he argues, new forms of institutional power are developing that are potentially more dangerous than those that dominated the industrial age. While the workers' alienation from their products defined Marx's capitalist economy, the network economy is characterized by an "alienation of property." Negotiated exchanges between sellers and buyers are becoming less frequent, and network markets neither develop nor depend upon trust between buyer and seller. Instead, today's consumers are caught in an exchange system lacking reciprocity or any type of future commitment. The ability to control and sell thoughts, Rifkin cautions, "is the ultimate expression of the new commercial prowess" (p. 55).

While industrial capitalists pooled resources in an attempt to monopolize product markets, network capitalists monopolize ideas. For instance, "the fact that the franchise owns the physical capital, employs the labor, and produces the product or service is not as important as the fact that the intangible aspects that define the essence of the business remain the property of the franchiser" (p. 60). Hypercapitalism replaces the Marxian class divide with a new

dependency of users and lessees on a network of suppliers who possess know-how, concepts, ideas, brands, or operating formulas. “The customer becomes mobilized and embedded within a dense web of ongoing commercial relationships and may become totally dependent on commercial forces that he or she little understands and over which he or she has less and less control” (p. 103).

As a result, power is shifting from industrial capitalists (like General Motors, Sears, Texaco, etc.) to “cultural capitalists,” who mine cultural resources and repackage them as commodities and entertainment (AOL, Time Warner, Viacom, Disney, Sony, etc.). Culture itself, Rifkin prognosticates, is becoming absorbed in the economy, and only commercial bonds will be left to hold society together. Consequently, power “belongs to the gatekeepers who control both access to the popular culture and the geographic and cyberspace networks that expropriate, repackage, and commodify the culture in the form of paid-for personal entertainment and experiences” (p. 177). But, Rifkin asks daringly, can civilization survive when only the commercial sphere remains the primary arbiter of human life? If human thought becomes the most important commodity, what happens to ideas that may not be commercially attractive? When “every individual’s life is commodified twenty-four hours a day, what is left for relationships of a noncommercial nature—relationships based on kinship, neighborliness, shared cultural interests, religious affiliation, ethnic identification, and fraternal civic involvement?” (p. 112).

Not only economic relations are transformed in the information age. Change is all-encompassing, reshaping our sense of who we are and how we perceive ourselves. “To belong ...is to be connected to the many networks that make up the new global economy” (p. 111). But belonging to multiple networks means taking on multiple personae, “short-lived fragmented frames of consciousness used to negotiate whatever virtual world or network they happen to be in at a particular moment of time” (p. 13). Hypercapitalism becomes a manifestation of postmodernity, characterized by a multitude of subjective, contextual realities.

If there is no fixed and knowable reality but only the individual realities we create by the way each of us participates in and experiences the world around us, then the idea of an overarching metanarrative—an all encompassing view of reality—must not exist. The world ...is a human construct. We create it ...by the stories we concoct to explain it and by the way we choose to live in it. ...It is a world created by language and held together by metaphors and agreed-upon shared meanings, all of which can and do change with the passage of time (p. 193).

The information age human being is a work in progress. Being, in the Hegelian sense, gives way to becoming. Rifkin sees both danger and tremendous opportunity in this “fall from historical consciousness.” Although ownership and traditional identifications with home and country have given rise throughout history to ethnocentrism and xenophobism, the postmodern consciousness with its fragmented sense of being “might engender a new sense of empathy for others and, in the process, help lay the foundation for cultural renewal” (p. 213).

Rifkin demonstrates extensively how hypercapitalism undermines social trust. His remedies, although resembling visionary public policy recommendations, fall short of providing practical solutions. He suggests that by utilizing the prospects of networking and information exchange, public policy must recreate trust by focusing on culture. New commercial networks must be balanced with new cultural networks, new virtual experiences with new real experiences, and new commercial amusements with new cultural rituals. Rifkin correctly points out that “the farther removed one is from the lived experience of another human being, the less likely he or she will be able to empathize” (p. 246). We are unwillingly reminded of GeorgeW. Bush’s call for “compassionate conservatism.” And Rifkin’s suggestions for how to achieve such an empathetic network society are as elusive as Bush’s. The core for reestablishing social trust lies in education. Public education must provide students with the skills they need to succeed in the network economy, but it must also deepen “the core identity of students to include a sense of their relationship to the culture” (p. 255). Unfortunately, readers are left wondering about concrete steps for this type of cultural education.

Individuals who are already part of the network economy can best master the age of access. But what about those without access? The divide accelerates the much-discussed gaps between the haves and have-nots and the connected and the disconnected. With new power relations, are there new forms of structural violence? Is there a possibility for a new global class struggle? Industrial age capitalism was defined by the dialectical relationship between capitalist and worker, a system that, Karl Marx had hoped, would inevitably bring about its own end. Are the disconnected the new dialectical other sowing the seeds of destruction? The answer is no! They do not define the new economy. They are not part of it, nor do they need to be. Hypercapitalism seems to work with or without the disenfranchised. Worse than being exploited, the disconnected are and can be forgotten. Alienation of the worker from the product and continued exploitation by the industrialist would bring about the end of capitalism. In contrast, the age of access is characterized by the destruction of human relationships, the alienation of the people from one another.

Rifkin's argument resembles that of Francis Fukuyama, who argued recently that the information age has disrupted the postindustrial society and has left people searching for a sense of community. While access to information increases freedom and equality, it also undermines traditional hierarchies that have structured social life for centuries. Fukuyama conjectures that since the 1960s America has been experiencing a severe disruption in social values—manifested, for instance, in increasing divorce and crime rates and a decline in family values and confidence in government—leading to a loss in social trust. As a result, he argues, people may turn to religion (in all its new age forms) as one possibility to repair the social fabric. For Marx, religion was the opium of the masses because it provided a refuge from the hardships of one's daily existence. Concern for a better and more humane afterlife became a way of coping with our plight in the here and now.

Rifkin does not mention religion, but individuals in the age of access may turn to cyberspace for relief. Taking on access identities, those various "online personae" technology users create also make them members of virtual communities, "where the routine formation of multiple identities undermines any notion of a real and unitary self" (p. 210). Is cyberspace becoming the opium of the masses in the age of access? Hypercapitalism may be a new "higher stage of capitalism." But will it bring about the destruction of an already disrupted society? Although we may not know the answer to this question for a while—after all, capitalism has been declared dead many times before—Marxists may have reason to rejoice. Rifkin's book may just provide them a new angle for revisiting many of Marx's ideas.