

How Should Society Adapt To The Autonomy Of Labour?

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I declare that the work presented in this essay is my own and that it has not been submitted for assessment on any other module.

Abstract

Automation of labour is changing the world: we must think about the implications of such a significant change lest we suffer from mass worker redundancy and unemployment. As a society, we must question whether this is the means to a catalyst that may enable us to build a system where workers are free to pursue fulfilling labour or a world in which corporations are free to displace the workforce to inflate profit margins. To realise how we must adapt to such a dramatic shift in our mode of production, we must consider several things: how automation works in our current society; how automation is being implemented today; and then finally, how we can start to build a policy that tackles the problems evaluated from the analysis of our current conditions.

The term “automation” was first used by Del S. Harder to describe the Ford Motor Company’s production, describing it as “the automatic handling of parts between progressive production processes”. [19] [12] This shift in how the production line operated in 1947 resulted in many workers finding themselves replaced by machinery. This occurred as the consequence of the theory developed by F.W. Taylor (1914), which aimed to increase efficiency by analysing and optimising the production line. We may also use this term to refer to the kind of systems in which there is a considerable variation of mechanical, electrical or computerised mechanism for human labour.

Since 1947, the prevalence of automation in the workplace to make the modes of production more efficient has dramatically increased. Technological advancements mean that machines are beginning to automate tasks outside the production line, however, the proportion of jobs at low and medium risk of automation has risen: those high at risk of automation is now at 7.4% [1].

Automation of labour in industry is changing the world. As a society, we must question whether this is the means to a catalyst that may enable us to build a system where workers are free to pursue fulfilling labour or a world in which corporations are free to displace the workforce to inflate profit margins. We cannot predict when such a large-scale job loss will occur, but governments and legislators of the world must begin to prepare for when these substantial labour market shifts inevitably happen. For us to prepare, we must first consider how automation works in our current society; how automation has already been implemented; and then finally how we can start to build a policy that tackles the problems evaluated from the analysis of our current conditions.

Automation under a corporatist economic system encourages bosses to generate larger profit margins by replacing human labour with low maintenance robotics or software. Allowing industry to make the mode of production more efficient alongside the option to cut worker labour costs ensures the current trend of automating labour will not stop anytime soon while generating profit is the primary goal of corporations. In fact, in the United States, 47 percent of all current jobs have the potential to be fully automated by 2033 [15]. Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee argue in “The Second Machine Age” that “...there has never been a better time to be a worker with special skills or the right education because these people can use technology to create and capture value. However, there has never been a worse time to be a worker with only ‘ordinary’ skills and abilities to offer, because computers, robots, and other digital technologies are acquiring these skills and abilities at an extraordinary rate.” [14]. However, even traditionally highly skilled professions such as doctors, lawyers and even journalists may be at risk of automation [11] if technology continues to advance at the rate it is currently doing so - and enough capital owners willing to invest. The “better time” described will be short-lived unless there is action to mitigate the harmful consequences of automation.

If it is the case such that no policy is put in place to help workers displaced by automation, what should be the greatest liberator of monotonous labour from workers will instead be the greatest oppressor of the worldwide working class. Large quantities of workers will be made jobless to the advantage of those who receive the profits. A study in the Journal of Political Economy echoes this sentiment by stating that automation has robust disadvantages on employment and wages: “One more robot per thousand workers reduces the employment-to-population ratio by 0.2 percentage points and wages by 0.42 percent.” [13] A study indicated that 72% of Americans are worried about the increasing automation in society. Swedes, in juxtaposition, support automation and artificial intelligence, with 80% seeing it as a good thing [16]. Likely this is attributed to the powerful worker unions and the more robust national safety net present in so many Scandinavian countries. Worker unions can help workers adapt and reskill to new technologies and prepare them for successful transitions into the automated workplace. The Culinary Workers Union Local 226 in Las Vegas managed to negotiate with hotels to secure language to protect workers when employers introduce new technologies [2]. These protections include mandatory free retraining, free training for new jobs created due to automation, and advanced notification of up to 6 months of new technology implementation that may result in layoffs or reduction in hours.

Amazon is one of the largest online retailers and a frontrunner in introducing greater automation into their production line. After an onslaught of criticism of their working conditions[3], especially in regards to their factories, Amazon pushed to automate their warehouses more and more to tackle long employee hours. We can study Amazon's practices to analyse how a successful corporation implements automation: and whether it succeeds in providing benefits for both employee and owner. To protect employee job safety, Amazon decided to retrain employees to supervise the new machinery. In addition, according to equity theory (developed by J.S. Adams), people can be motivated or demotivated based on what they feel is fair. One can assume that Amazon workers will feel driven due to the reduced workload that comes with the same wage. Because of this, Amazon is often praised for effectively implementing automation for both employee and management, though its "Hands off the Wheel"[4] program aims to accomplish more with staff rather than doing the same with fewer employees. The fact that automation has slightly increased worker morale is merely an added benefit to Amazon, however, and many workers still report incredibly exhausting conditions with unrealistic and unattainable goals. It is easy to be critical of Amazon's transition to automation: worker productivity tracked by automated systems may issue warnings and termination orders based on a worker production. For a worker to avoid termination, employees report going without bathroom breaks to meet quotas (which may be up to 100 packages an hour). One year approximately 300 full-time workers in Baltimore were fired since they failed to meet productivity quotas [5]. This figure represents more than 10 per cent of the fulfilment centre's workforce, fired by an automated system with no human involvement. While an exploration into Amazon's plans to shift towards an automatic production line reveals a valid way to retain employees: it comes at the cost of strict quotas for employees that result in job instability, stress and anxiety for the same wage. When the means of production is automated the worker becomes more expendable. Without strong worker protections or unions (which amazon consciously attempts to discourage), the workers receive the same wage with more responsibilities; extra profits made from the increased efficiency will enrich the owners of the means of production. Regardless, this model assumes that the company can create positions for employees to grow. For many corporations, this will be unfeasible and broader legislation must be considered to protect employees nationwide.

UBI (Universal Basic Income) is a policy position steadily growing in popularity, with liberal politicians and parties such as Andrew Yang (2020 Presidential Democratic Candidate) and the Liberal Democrat party in the UK supporting such an idea. The policy outlines a theoretical governmental program that would deliver a periodic payment to all citizens without requirement [6]. The idea of such an income would be to supplement other revenues of income to support a person's basic needs. The proposal of UBI is becoming more popular partially due to the implications of automation towards the future of work. If automation reduces the number of jobs available, a basic income may help alleviate such problems. Some even theorise it may be a stepping stone to a resource-based economy or post-scarcity [7]. However, after examination, we can conclude that a basic income is not sufficient at eliminating all the issues automation causes. Basic income reduces the value of work to mere income: abstracting labour to purely being a way to earn money may result in people getting stuck on basic income for extended periods. If people leave the labour market and live on basic income, the chances of re-entering that market become very slim. Basic income also ignores the problem of inequality: in an autonomous economy, the owners of the means of production will become incredibly wealthy as production becomes more efficient. This economy would produce a new underclass stuck at the basic income level while a class of economic elite would reap the benefits of highly efficient, autonomous production. Economist Douglas Rushkoff, a professor of Digital Economics at the City University of New York, has stated that he sees basic income as "a sophisticated way for corporations to get richer at the expense of public money" [18]. In addition, a basic income risks inefficient allocation of wealth since funds are provided to people who do not need it. In addition, the funding for such a program would most likely fall on flat taxes and the abolition of public welfare provisions. If this is the case, economists argue such an income at the expense of social security makes little sense [8]. Instead, a policy agenda that works to provide a more comprehensive and adaptive solution that works to empower workers in an autonomous economy should be designed and implemented.

If universal basic income is not the solution, Henning Meyer (research associate at LSE) proposes a radically different idea: democratising capital ownership [9]. If the owners of the means of automated production are the ones who benefit from this autonomous system, then as many people as possible should have ownership stakes. In addition, there are research papers that claim worker ownership and participation can enhance economic development in low-opportunity communities due to the greater incentive to participate [20] [17]. In the case of Amazon, if the workers who input the labour that

supplements the autonomous production of the machinery each have shared ownership, everyone may benefit from the increased efficiency. Not only does this help avoid a new incredibly wealthy class, but workers will individually become less reliant on income from wages due to the socialised capital returns. Education systems would also need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy by focussing on the economic realities of automation. Teaching creativity, analytical and social skills will become incredibly important as technical skills slowly become automated processes.

Automation is the next big step in human development, it is inevitably something that will only grow in popularity and proficiency. With the introduction of the mass automation of what was once human labour, it is evident that society will have to make significant changes to accommodate the redundancy of many positions in the workplace. With such a radical change in modern production, it is clear that whatever policy society chooses to implement will need to be radical to protect and empower the masses of those who will be affected by autonomy. Noam Chomsky, cognitive scientist, philosopher, political activist and well-known academic has said: "Any on Earth boring, destructive, dangerous work should be automated to the extent possible. That frees people up to do better work, more creative work, more fulfilling work, safer work." [10] which echoes the optimistic idea that automation could be the great liberator that transforms labour from an act of desperation into an act of passion. Under a society where everyone can benefit from the advantages of autonomous production through worker ownership of companies, the shift towards such an economy seems significantly less daunting. Chomsky echoes this sentiment "Turn the auto industry over to the workforce, and the stakeholders, the community. Let them have control. Let them think through what they ought to do. Maybe they'll decide on the sensible thing.". Prescribing the solution to the challenges automation will manifest is difficult, but it seems clear that the best outcome is one in which everyone can benefit. When the party that benefits are the one who controls the autonomous production, surely it follows that we should move to a society in which each worker has a stake in their workplace and can share in the benefits of human ingenuity.

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