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The machine and the discovery of society

Society's invisible tissue did not truly come to light before it had been dyed through contact with machinery. Technology thus partly created, partly revealed the existence of an interpersonal structure around us that had a consistence of its own -- not any more a mere aggregate of persons, nor even a Hobbesian Leviathan built of human magots but a reality, not in its changing forms but in its abiding existence as unshakeable as death.

The dislocation of peasant life in the English countryside caused by the enclosure of the commons had given early evidence that "improvement" would interfere with the people's "habitation." The machine put teeth into that process. Improved pumps sent little children into the coal pits. The growth of mushroom towns came down as a blight on the village and turned the very subsidies to a miserable living wage into a bane. Even Poor Law Reform was preferable to such a living death, and began to raise real wages at the price of moral torture administered with scientific cruelty. Luddism had proved an antidote to the mechanical inventions at the price of violence -- and inevitable ultimate defeat. The building industry fired by speculation produced a necropolis of slums. Inadequate wages led to gin ally, prostitution and a steep rise in infant mortality, consumption and crime. Eventually an enormous increase in utilitarian goods began to bridge the economic chasm created between the classes.

In the meantime, from entirely unexpected quarters a new peril arose from the advance of the centralization of mechanical power. The pooling of water supply, lighting, heating, transportation, sewerage, hospitals, doctors, police together with a host of domestic servicing facilities cast existence into the mould of a compulsive solidarity. The organic substance of society was acquiring a crustacean rigidity, with maybe tens of millions of lives hanging on a strategic gadget. Fear permeated the minds and a readiness to submit to unlimited power was generated with househigh rotating presses spurting information into the flames of excitement. Even this paled in our days when the machine started on still an other move that magazine writers had been storing up as a dope to their flagging imagination: it split the atom. Simultaneously speech and motion were transmitted to be heard and seen whatever the throngs of virtually captive audiences were to be told or shown. These instruments of a collective mastering of the minds were put at the disposal of public officers and private firms to use in an emergency, which was now expected at any hour. The machine had run the gamut.

Each effect of the novel mechanism had thrown into profile some new feature of that uncovered entity, society. The traditional Christianity of the Eighteenth Century kindled an evangelical fervor in the common people which exalted ^{under the sign of the cross} the sufferings inflicted on them by mine and mill. John Wesley's faith, Hannah Moore's gift for public relations were called on the scene to exercise the demons of the pit-head. The apologetics of the Church charged the individual himself with the guilt that accounted for his sufferings. His sinfulness was located by Malthus in his animal proclivity for procreation, that organic source of the reality of society as manifested in the iron laws that must breed war, vice, pestilence and crime. Ricardo recognized in

this coarse grain of creation the sufficient cause for low wages. The crushing moral burden with which evangelical Christianity had loaded the poor man was seen by Ricardo better fitted for the broad shoulders of society. Henceforth every move by which technology could be said to affect the fate or form of mankind opened up a new chapter in social philosophy. The Luddites were the last to make the machine in person responsible for its misdeeds, and smashed it. The so-called Utopians resigned themselves to the technological revolution and were optimistic in regard to the chances of social adjustment. Owen himself invented a series of practices and devices by which the brutalization of the worker, his degradation on the cheap, the humiliation of uncertain employment, the awkwardness of inappropriate work clothes, the ugliness and insalubrity of industrial towns, the shrinking of personal standards involved in bench work could be avoided. Fourier believed the machine would open up an age of scientific miracles. Psychological laws would reveal the mathematical series of the fugue as the universal key to harmony in division of labor as well as everything else. The natural instincts and personal propensities of men -- and children -- cleverly exploited through scientific management with a humanitarian intent would result in painless production. Saint Simon made workers and their employers partners in a common venture, leaving the solution of their possible conflicts to a constitutionalized industrial order of the future.

The new interest focussed directly on society and the leeway it allowed to the individual as a member of it. The pessimists argued figures and facts, pointing to the precision with which arithmetical series fell short of geometrical ones and the laws of marginal utility would cut down all workers' wages to the rational minimum; optimists

instruments of production that were actually responsible for the manifest emergence of society in modern times. Society's ideal content was declared to assert itself by rebelling against the limitations under which the private ownership of the means of production placed the creative power of the new technology. The socialist conception was born with its enthusiastic acceptance of the machine in the name of progress. The Hegelian idealism inherent in Marxism released the nuclear explosion of a concept of progress which did not cease to revolve around freedom for all its mobilizing of the material equipment of society in the service of progress. For technology had not been the prime mover in the appearance of society, but it also represented that part in its anatomy which was truly characteristic.