

# The Human Project

Luciano Floridi

Luciano Floridi on what technological unemployment might mean.

In 1930, John Maynard Keynes published a masterpiece that should be compulsory reading for any educated person, a short essay entitled: *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*. It was an attempt to see what life would be like if peace, prosperity, and techno-scientific developments were increasingly part of humanity's future. Of course, things went otherwise. The Great Depression began in the same year, and World War II soon followed. In the subsequent decades other disasters, conflicts, and crises awaited humanity. Yet the fact that history took such terrible and tragic steps back does not in any way detract from Keynes' brilliant insights.

According to Keynes, roughly around the time of the Renaissance, techno-scientific development, capital growth, and the mechanism of compound interest determined a sudden change in history, after which the rate of improvement in standards of living began to accelerate steadily and progressively. If left undisturbed, and Keynes knew very well that this conditional often was a counterfactual, these three factors are sufficient to solve “the economic problem, [that is] *the struggle for subsistence ... the primary, most pressing problem of the human race* – not only of the human race, but of the whole of the biological kingdom from the beginnings of life in its most primitive forms” (my emphasis).

Keynes thought that the economic problem was not going to be eliminated for at least another hundred years, but also that progress towards its solution was incremental, resilient, and relentless. So he argued that the economic problem, despite its magnitude and significance, is not humanity's “permanent problem”. He was right, at least in principle, for nature and human stupidity may of course make a wreckage of any attempt to solve the economic problem.

Solving the economic problem has been part of the human project since day one. It was the plan when we invented the wheel and the plough. It was still the plan even when we plundered, pillaged, killed, raped, and enslaved each other. For millennia we just did not have the necessary resources and often squandered whatever few of them we had painfully accumulated. We had to wait for the right breakthroughs in science, technology and capital and for the investment of billions of person-hours. These assets started paying off at the beginning of the modern era, leading to Keynes' reflections in the 30s. By then, as Keynes wrote, there was “no harm in making mild preparations for our destiny”.

Solving the economic problem, however, is coupled to a second problem, which Keynes with remarkable acumen, called “technological unemployment”. This too has always been part of the human project: “We are being afflicted with a new disease of which some readers may not yet have heard the name, but of which they will hear a great deal in the years to come – namely, *technological unemployment*. This means unemployment due to our discovery of means of economising the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour. But this is only a temporary phase of maladjustment. All this means in the long run *that mankind is solving its economic problem*” (emphasis in the original text).

Massive and fast shifts in the workforce from one sector to another in a matter of a few decades make “technological unemployment” a macroscopic issue but, following Keynes, we should not mistake this issue for the fundamental problem that needs to be addressed. For it is rather the welcome, if painful, evidence that the economic problem is being solved. It is a cost worth paying, although not without caution. For there is a third problem envisaged by Keynes as the really permanent one and as a direct consequence of technological unemployment. It is a most significant component of the human project. Let me call it the problem of “leisure occupation”: “Thus we have been expressly evolved by nature – with all our impulses and deepest instincts – for the purpose of solving the economic problem. If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose ... Thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with *his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure*, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well”(my emphasis).

Technological unemployment is what we have been planning all along, by relying on animals, other humans, science, technology, capital and compound interest. We have been trying to make ourselves redundant since time unmemorable so that we may be leisurely occupied. We have toiled hard in order not to toil anymore. But now that this historical opportunity is enjoyed by, or at least within reach for, a growing number of people during increasingly larger portions of their lives, we have been caught unprepared. Those of us who enjoy some free time are often awful investors in it. We waste it or kill it, seemingly oblivious of the titanic efforts and sacrifices made by past generations in order to place us in such fortunate circumstances.

In the leisure society, the risk is that there will be countless people bored and demotivated, undecided about what to do with their free time, their days at school, their weekends, their vacations, their bank holidays, and their retirement. The mildly optimistic reply is that some of us will learn to live a life of leisure worth living (education is the key here), and those of us who will not will still be left with

the opportunity of making the most of their leisure if they wish. Unfortunately, two more problems will become increasingly pressing. Keynes does not discuss them in his essay, but they are clearly visible in our times.

In the long run, next century or next millennium, technological unemployment will turn into leisure occupation only if we will succeed in decoupling unemployment from lack of income, the consequent social unrest, and the related erosion of personal dignity, insofar as having a paid job is still seen in our recent culture as synonymous with having a role in society. Call this the “resource problem”. In other contexts, Keynes thought that solving the “resource problem” was possible and worth striving for. I agree unreservedly. A society in which a minimal degree of financial independence and social welfare is guaranteed to all citizens will finally shift the existential problem of purpose from disoccupation (unemployment) to inoccupation. But for this to occur, the problem of inequality will have to be solved. For as long as our society is organised in such a way as to promote and privilege rare “local maxima”, that is, few, immense accumulations of wealth, the leisure society will remain a utopia. The solution is a better design of the mechanisms that facilitate the distribution and circulation of wealth. In other words, the possibility of a leisure society is based on a re-design of the taxing system that minimises local maxima, as current debates on inequality and tax reform in the US testify.

There is then the “political problem”. We may transform a potential “liberal and leisure society” into an actual “illiberal lazy society”, in which the Biblical “painful toil” is replaced by shallow entertainment as the ultimate source of existential distraction. It may seem a merely philosophical point, or even a problem worth having. But underestimating the risk of political distraction means being less able to explain (and hence find an answer to) why a society’s economic growth may not be followed by any liberal and democratic improvement. “Bread and games” (*panem et circenses*) has been a successful strategy of political appeasement and diversion whenever power has had the means to afford it. Today, this translates into a specific threshold in the growth of national GDP above which unemployment is not a problem, standard of living increases, hopes for a better life for oneself or at least one’s children are kept alive if not fulfilled, social unrest is avoided, so democratic, liberal demands are postponed, and various forms of illiberalism can be ignored or tolerated. We know that in China this figure is around 7% annual growth.

Solving the economic problem through technological unemployment, sustainable growth and fair redistribution of wealth, in order to arrive at a liberal, democratic, leisure society, in which education helps people to use their time (stay in the educational system), make the most of it (high-qualified skills for the increasingly specialised jobs), and enjoy it (abilities to find occupations and appreciate one’s

leisure): this is the blueprint not for utopia but for the human project we have been pursuing for a long time and that is worth all of our efforts.

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