

## 5. From Homo Faber to Homo Sapiens

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The last century has brought a surprising turn of events. **A hundred years ago many believed that we would witness the end of capitalism and the triumph of labor. However, the opposite has proven true:** work is slowly but steadily disappearing because of automation while, alongside industrial and financial capital, a new form of capital has emerged—docume-dia capital. If the considerations made so far hold even a modicum of credibility, this new capital could transform into a human heritage that addresses the demands of social justice far more effectively than the notion of the end of capital and the triumph of labor. Before we delve into the concrete proposal of Webfare, we must contemplate what will take the place of labor in defining human nature.

### 5.1 Relativization

I use “**labor**” and “**work**” interchangeably and define them as any act of an organism, usually a human, capable of producing potential value by interacting with technical apparatuses such as oars, plows, pens, or computer keyboards. Thus, a natural function such as walking becomes work when it involves pulling a cart, thereby producing value (if the cart is a rickshaw, for instance). Conversely, any value production transforms an interaction between organisms and mechanisms into labor as is the case, for instance, when a smartwatch records my biometrics while I sleep. However, while for the time being it might not seem prudent to abandon the concept of “labor” altogether, it should be immediately

pointed out that what platforms capitalize on is seldom underpaid labor but non-coercive mobilization. Labor is the production of value, which **suggests that the production of goods—the activity of *homo faber*—is but one moment in the relationship of humans to labor or, conversely, that labor is just one epoch of human history.** It is indeed a conceptual error to claim—as is often done—that we are the product, since we do not live in a slave economy. But it is not an error to claim that we are *producers*, namely, that we work, often for free, and financing out of our own pockets the means of production while producing documents in collaboration with the Web, much like the textile workers in Manchester during the time of Marx produced cloth in cooperation with looms.

It is true that we might not know how to use those documents and that they wouldn't even be collected without the major internet companies. But it is also true that, without us, the documents would not exist. This situation reproduces the classic relationship between capital and labor, with a very important variation, namely that this labor is not remunerated, and indeed, not even recognized as such. **It is therefore necessary to relativize the status of labor as an alleged absolute of humanity.** Even the tombs of the Cro-Magnon contained jewelry and hinted at differences in status. However, ever since the emergence of agriculture in the 'fertile crescent,' humanity has differentiated between the privileged who benefit from good education and intergenerational inheritance of wealth, and the dispossessed and potentially damned of the earth.

Over time, certain mechanisms were abandoned that were meant to bridge social disparities as in the case of debt forgiveness when a new ruler would ascend the throne in Mesopotamia. This because debt relationships were no longer incurred between the ruler and the subjects but among equal citizens. From that moment on, the difference between those born into wealth and the dispossessed became a constant in the social world, often justified by attributing such differences to natural factors such as caste, race, gender, or divine providence. None of us find this fair. In principle, we reject it, although we all experience moments of superiority or subalternity in our lives. Yet we are not genuinely astonished by the fact that there are the rich and the poor, whether in the Global South or in our backyard. If we accept in fact what we reject in law,

it is because the law has yet to rectify the fact. **It is worth noting that the society of *homo faber* for most of its history conferred merits regardless of labor.** In traditional societies, being noble, a priest, or a soldier used to entail merit independent of labor, and this still holds true to some extent for religious figures and military personnel. Let us not forget that until half a century ago, it was considered normal for half of humanity—women—not to work in a formally recognized way but to dedicate themselves to family care.

## 5.2 Rarefaction

**The picture that emerges is truly paradoxical: the twentieth century as the century of labor, identifying formal engagement in production or service as constitutive of the identity of every adult human being, is also the century that ends with the prophecy of the end of labor.** A prophecy that, for once, is coming true, although it does not take much to predict that plumbers will still be around for decades, and that professional athletes, generals, priests, psychoanalysts, and porn stars will probably continue to work in an almost entirely automated society. Our task, therefore, is to sketch the evolving forms of humanity in the era of the rarefaction of *homo faber*.

**Let us start with an obvious fact: Production and distribution will increasingly be handled by robots, machines designed for work (*pa6oma*). And as data is efficiently used to automate work processes, it is the workers who will disappear.** If one were to observe contemporary society with an outsider's perspective, they might feel as if they were witnessing a world of hunters and gatherers, bustling and moving, perhaps even toiling, but mostly engaged in contemplating and manipulating small objects that they never put down. **Rather than a disappearance of *homo faber*, we are witnessing his rarefaction.** A reimagining of the Benedictine rule *ora et labora* may soon sideline the labor: codex copying has been an automated activity for centuries, and agricultural workers in Italy who only a century ago comprised half of the nation's workforce, now make up only 2%. During the age of geographical discoveries, Eu-

ropeans who came into contact with the inhabitants of Santo Domingo or New Caledonia, that is, with hunter-gatherers, described them as idle people merely taking advantage of nature's bounty. If one of our ancestors from the early twentieth century were to come back from the dead, they would describe us as even lazier than the Caribs or Canachi. Instead of sweating in fields and workshops, we sit in bars or on trains, merely fiddling with our cell phones, and we only break a sweat to burn calories while running for sport.

Let us delve deeper into the characteristics of this rarefaction, which is, of course, also a transformation. Automation and digitalization have reduced the number of medium-paying jobs and widened the gap between high-paying and low-paying jobs, as what is done at the two extremes cannot be automated. Considering this situation, one might be tempted to say that few things seem as certain as these two axioms: the future of work lies in technical-scientific specialization, and the middle class, if it not on the brink of extinction, will soon disappear. Now, both axioms are false. As we read in the report *Il Futuro delle Competenze in Italia (The Future of Skills in Italy)*, the result of research conducted by Ernst and Young, Pearson Italia, and ManpowerGroup, the jobs of the future will largely involve an eclectic hybridization of skills with a strong humanistic component. By 2030, the middle class will increase by 2 billion, reaching 5.3 billion, representing 61.6% of the world's population estimated at 8.6 billion. The spontaneous question arises of how we will live, how we will survive, if in the meantime (according to the report) 43.50% (345 professions) are in decline, 20.30% (161 professions) are stable, and only 36.20% (287 professions) are predicted to grow. Strictly speaking, rather than witnessing the growth of the middle class, we could be facing universal poverty.

When humans were seen as imperfect appendages to scythes, hammers, typewriters, and bureaucratic counters, manpower was an important commodity; now, this is no longer the case, and those occupations are often paid much less. It is also true that among the new jobs there are some that involve relatively simple tasks such as pizza home delivery that are not yet within the capabilities of machines but that give the impression of a future of work not much different from the industrial past,

albeit with fewer rights. It is unlikely, however, that it will end this way, and those tasks will eventually be performed by drones and artificial intelligence following investments in research and development based on a simple and decisive argument: machines, which neither die nor have rights, are more cost-effective than any human. This opens an even more troubling dystopia—that of a world of outcasts where machines have entirely replaced humans, perhaps even in consumption. But to say this is to misunderstand the nature of automation.

Let us take a moment to reflect. Automation is the response to human needs and needs cannot be automated; therefore, the more automation advances, the more machines become dependent on humans. A stick is a useful tool even for a chimpanzee, but it would not know what to do with a cell phone. From this simple insight, we can understand the nature of the jobs of the future. In an influential 2013 article examining the impact of computerization on work, Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne<sup>1</sup> analyzed 702 occupations and found an advantage in creative and specialized jobs. In essence, this is predictable: the invention of photography was supposed to make painters disappear; instead, in the medium term, it is photographers who disappeared. But there is much more in the case of *Il futuro delle competenze in Italia*.<sup>2</sup> The most valuable assets of the future are primarily relational and new jobs emerge from this humanistic-technological foundation, on the basis of three processes: The first process involves the creation of jobs that did not previously exist and that require a mix of psychological and technological skills for the design, for instance, of the interfaces of self-driving cars or virtual assistants. The second process concerns the destruction of old jobs to make way for new ones: the various specializations of several

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- 1 Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, "The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?" Working paper published by the Oxford Martin Programme on the Impact of Future Technology, September 1, 2013, <https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/publications/the-future-of-employment/>
  - 2 At the international level, see the data collected by the OECD, "Data on the Future of Work," <https://www.oecd.org/future-of-work/reports-and-data/data-infographics.htm>, last accessed July 26, 2023.

workers are merged into a single position that entails the integration and coordination of assembly robots. The third is a process of mutation, where a profession develops by adopting characteristics from other professions (we can be sure that without computer science we would not discover vaccines as quickly).

Describing these new jobs requires lengthy periphrases because they are all the result of hybridization, a process of merging skills that will affect many traditional jobs, and not only journalists or corporate lawyers, but manual workers and maintenance staff too. Only a human can tell whether a stretch of highway needs repair, even though, in performing the task, they will merely control machines and check their results. According to the report, dentists (one of the oldest professions in the world), notaries, lawyers, architects, and psychologists are immune to hybridization. However, their way of working has changed: dentists use 3D scanning technologies, and it is precisely this use of technology that makes a profession hybrid. The impact on architecture is similarly enormous.<sup>3</sup> Yet one thing is clear: while a few years ago, no one could have imagined that designing interfaces could be a job and being a typist would cease to be one, as technology evolves, humans will still have toothaches, depressions, arguments, as well as the need for homes and mortgages to buy them.

One problem remains though, namely, that those with a low-level education and obsolete training will struggle to fit into this new world of hybridization of complex technological and humanistic skills. But even in those cases, being human and not a machine will protect them from being replaced, not only because humans possess the understanding and empathy that machines lack (instead of acting like delivery drones, they could advantageously replace the hideous companion robots that are currently being designed); but also because all humans possess something irreplaceable and uniquely human: the organic need for consumption and the value of production that it generates through

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3 Mario Carpo, *The Second Digital Turn: Design Beyond Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017) and *Beyond Digital: Design and Automation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2023).

their mobilization on the Web—a priceless and irreplaceable value, if we know how to recognize it, at a time when humans have stopped imitating machines and machines just cannot stop imitating humans.

### 5.3 Mobilization

There is a further aspect worth considering. A rudimentary technology such as chipping flint to make a scraper marked the beginning of humanity by turning humans into appendages of machines. This applies to the combination of human, plow, and oxen too, where physical strength, patience, discipline, self-forgetfulness, and alienation were demanded just as in the human-hammer-anvil feedback system or the assembly line, where humans perform tasks easily replaceable by automatons. A more advanced technique involves using humans for regulation purposes only in theory. In practice, the transformation of workers into machine controllers and then into intellectuals emancipated from the grips of capital has not taken place. This because automation has also extended to the intellectual functions of the supervisors, i.e., to the regulators and controllers themselves. The idea of workers as controllers, plausible at the time when Marx wrote what is known today as “The Fragment on Machines,” is now problematic because machine learning aims to replace humans in any control task. If anything, humans are necessary precisely in such tasks where it is not their higher cognitive abilities that count but merely the ability to perform a simple task (such as recognition). Why? Because these are easy for organisms but extremely complicated for mechanisms.

Considering the direction that technology is taking, let us restate again what has been said thus far: **There is one function where humans as organisms can never be replaced, namely need and the resulting consumption as the *exclusive* characteristic of the living.** To fully grasp this is to arrive at a revolutionary conclusion because, in the world of classical production, physical effort and human endeavor (i.e., merit) always prevailed. However, when production is automated or automatable, consumption becomes the most precious asset, the goal without

which the production process would be meaningless. **Less and less mere cogs in a machine, but now and always the origin and goal of mechanisms, we mobilize, that is, we practice our normal forms of life that, when recorded on the Web, produce data, i.e., value.**

Mobilization is the condition in which humans in developed countries find themselves. As the demand for laborious and alienating work decreases, humanity does not become passive, as in the dystopian vision of a world vegetating in front of a screen. Rather, we become producers of documents. We are mobilized when we spend time on the web and are therefore productive not for ourselves but for others. Whether we occupy our time with writing nonsense, overeat, idle around, or torment others, we are never bored because we always have a smartphone or a similar device in our hands. The point is not the value of what we do but the value that can be derived from the interpretation and capitalization of the data we produce. Can we call “labor” a mobilization that can also occur *sur place*? For the moment, since we are in the middle of the ford, the answer is affirmative.

With the concept of “mobilization,” I hope to have provided some answers to many pressing questions. What happens with work when *homo faber* is gradually left in the tool shed? Moreover, does it become something else or simply disappear? It is too early to say. Globally, *homo faber* is still the most widespread species in the human fauna, but, as we have seen, in our parts he is becoming rarified. Some traditional jobs will survive, as new ones will likely emerge, but not as many as those that will have disappeared, nor will they be as appealing.<sup>4</sup> Others may be paid much less than they used to because reduced demand. However, it is highly probable that automation will render a significant portion of our current jobs unnecessary, just as it happened with agricultural jobs, which, let us not forget, a century ago employed the

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4 Darrell M. West, “What Happens if Robots Take the Jobs? The Impact of Emerging Technologies on Employment and Public Policy,” *Brookings*, October 26, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-happens-if-robots-take-the-jobs-the-impact-of-emerging-technologies-on-employment-and-public-policy/>

majority of the human population. Indeed, many sections of society are negatively affected by the ongoing transformation<sup>5</sup> and by the devaluation of traditional jobs.<sup>6</sup> So much so that, the concept of work in the future—assuming and not conceding that there will be work,<sup>7</sup> which, all things considered, is still preferable to the more widespread prophecy of a jobless future—cannot be confined to the traditional modern wage labor, primarily because that type of work is becoming increasingly rare. One point, however, should not be forgotten: there is nothing noble or beautiful in toil. In the context of their literary endeavors, it remains an undeniable truth that neither Gabriele D'Annunzio, with his notion of *bella fatica* (“beautiful labor”), nor Giacomo Leopardi, with his *sudate carte* (“sweat-soaked pages”), would have been willing to toil and sweat in any other way than with the pen.

Those who advocate a return to the factories do not speak for themselves but for others, simply checking the empty box of the human identified with the industrial worker. This explains the stigma that today affects the so-called “shit jobs,” positions somehow considered one level above “bullshit jobs,”<sup>8</sup> as if taking dictation for eight hours for a modest salary (also known as a typist) were not a garbage job from our contemporary perspective, or as if the blessed days of the assembly line or galley rowing were not far worse than garbage jobs. There is also nothing beautiful in dreaming of an idyllic primitivism.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Luis Garicano and Esteban Rossi-Hansberg, “Organization and Inequality in a Knowledge Economy,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 121:4 (2016): 1383–1435.

6 Laura Abrandi, Carlo Cambini, and Laura Rondi, “Artificial Intelligence, Firms and Consumer Behavior: A Survey,” *Journal of Economic Surveys* 36 (2022): 969–991.

7 Daniel Susskind, *A World Without Work: Technology, Automation, and How We Should Respond* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

8 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs. A Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

9 James Suzman, *Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

## 5.4 Valorization

**“Consumers of the world, unite!”** Considering what has been said so far, this is neither an ironic nor a paradoxical message. Rather, it is a realistic and essential slogan at a time when workers are disappearing, and their union would only result in negative capital and a great financial liability. In contrast, the union of consumers generates the human heritage. Even those who, traditionally, had to start out with nothing but their own bodies can now become producers and owners of data, provided they are connected to some recording apparatus. In this context, the process of valorization does not come from replacing the body with the spirit, as in the rhetoric of creativity, but through the capitalization and appreciation of the most ubiquitous feature of the human that is shifting from the production of goods to the production of value.

The internal purpose (need) instructs an external purpose, thus creating an automaton. Without this projection, the automaton has no *raison d'être*, and it is upon this principle that the superiority of the human over technology is founded. Technology exists to fulfill human needs, not the other way around. The origin of human servitude is not to be found in the submission to a Golem, but in the subalternity of human beings who depend for their livelihood on the *placet* of systems that they themselves have nurtured. In other words, we are victims to an ignorance for which we alone are responsible. To understand this is to open ourselves to a kingdom of heaven—the human heritage, which is more diverse, liberal, and less tediously moralistic than what came before. Moral value and economic value are but two sides of the same coin, the same currency. The key lies in the currency, this trace that underlies value. **The process of economic valorization is also a process of cultural growth or education.**

The soul became the human soul not when it reached a certain brain mass, but when, through a series of fortuitous circumstances that we can retrospectively read as humanity's manifest destiny, it acquired technical supplements allowing it to overcome its shortcomings. The essence of the human as “the not yet determined animal” must therefore be sought

in these technical supplements rather than organic foundations.<sup>10</sup> The latter make us equal to any other animal, while the supplement (what we are not and do not have) makes us what we are and points us towards what we must become. In this sense, the metaphysical meaning of original sin is simple: **Humans are the undetermined animal, intrinsically in need of progress.** To ignore this task that humanity has pursued thus far is to avoid engaging in a philosophy of history that strives for improvement, namely the very idea that Kant accurately referred to as “the education of the will,” the only remedy for the endless will to power.

Of course, nothing perfectly straight can be made from the crooked timber of humanity, but humans are the only animals that can be educated. If I teach a horse to perform circus tricks, I turn it into a clown; if I teach a child to read and write, I make it more human. The problem, today as always, is that we are not educated enough, bound by the constraints of past habits, outdated perspectives, and even conceptual errors and superstitions. Consequently, the imperative for the new world that lies ahead—while not necessarily a utopia (a somewhat boring place, after all)—is undeniably the pursuit of a better and more equitable society than the one we leave behind. This requires shifting our focus from concerns over automation to concerns about education.

Addressing the pressing social and environmental issues at hand does not call for less progress, globalization, or capital, but rather demands the opposite: greater progress precisely because it would be pursued with awareness; a globalization that addresses the fears of a humanity feeling marginalized amidst an ever-changing world; and a new form of capital that empowers us to tackle challenges presented by an omnipotent nature. In this broader context, to recognize that in some ways we are subservient to nature like any other organism but masters of technology unlike other living beings or mechanisms is to restore political agency and, consequently, a sense of responsibility towards humans. It is not about depressing development but harnessing its

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10 Cf. Arnold Gehlen, 1957, *Man in the Age of Technology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). Plessner, Darwin, and Gehlen all agree that we are more able because we are weaker.

potential for the collective improvement of humanity, leading to what is effectively a happy growth.

The term *finis hominis* does not mean the *end* of humankind as catastrophists suggest, but the *end-goal* of humans—the pursuit of happiness. More than just happiness, it is a question of justice. And without a philosophy of history there can be no real justice because justice is teleological, it is done with something in mind, and this something can only be an organism. Justice does not apply to mechanisms or to something that is not alive. We honor the dead for the life they once hosted, and we think about future generations because they will inherit the world we shape. But to recognize the richness that lies in our finitude is to understand that, unlike machines, **we pursue ends precisely because we end.**