

A fascinating feature article in The Observer 29/4/12 put together by a Carole Cadwalladr nearly gets us believing that in the very near future everything is going to be rosy on Planet Earth all thanks to an exponential growth in science and technology. To achieve this remarkable feat of human engineering, many of the top brains in computing and science plus a liberal sprinkling of forward thinking entrepreneurs and philanthropic billionaires have gathered together in a high powered, can-do think tank, enigmatically called the Singularity University, in order to brain storm all those stubborn earthly problems like poverty, hunger, disease and environmental degradation. Throw in a huge dollop of blue-sky thinking and hey-presto all those nasty little obstacles to human progress can be dealt a terminal blow. Cadwalladr is not entirely convinced and neither am I.

All the big boys are there at the party, sorry University Microsoft, Google and even NASA. And the underlying theme of this brand new Silicon Valley university is the belief that we are truly on the verge of defeating scarcity and moving irrevocably into the sunny uplands of never-ending abundance. The explosion of new science and the exponential growth in the power of computing will do this magic trick, along of course, with the best, most open and dynamic minds in the United States of America. And of course, being the United States of America and living in the age of the internet, anyone with enough time and money can enrol in this new style, no problem is too big, university.

Could they just be right? We would all like to think so everybody that is except the very corporations that have a vested interest in maintaining a

perpetual state of human scarcity. There ain't no profit in a world where we just have to press a button and out pops our every need. In fact, it could be argued with some conviction that we have already reached the technological point where we could indeed provide abundance for all the planet's seven billion citizens not to mention the five billion extra bodies that are due to make an appearance over the next hundred years.

Let's look at the ledger sheet. We have an infinite supply of solar and other renewable energies yet still the big oil companies imprison us in the finite and therefore profitable black stuff that is slowly but surely killing the planet. We already have a sufficient level of information technology to be able to deal with an equitable distribution of the world's resources, yet still we have vast disparities of wealth where some two billion of our fellow citizens are on the very edge of subsistence while a global elite swan around in their private yachts and jets. We already have the medical science to eliminate many diseases that ravage the planet yet still millions fall prey to entirely curable maladies such as dysentery and cholera. We certainly have the technology to purify water yet still millions of children die each year for lack of clean drinking water and basic sanitation. Why even the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans had developed sewage systems far in advance to that available to many of our fellow citizens of the 21st century. In other words we already have the technology to overcome global scarcity yet we have a planet more unequal than ever. The only conclusion we can draw is that technology is not the decisive factor but rather something in how we organise ourselves.

In short, it is blindingly obvious that it is the socio-economic system we commonly refer to as free market capitalism, that is holding back human progress. It wasn't always thus. In its earlier manifestations, capitalism was a great liberating force, casting aside a thousand years of stagnant feudalism and drawing into its orbit all that was innovative and dynamic. Admittedly, it created then, as it does now, winners and losers, but on balance we are forced to concede that capitalism in its youthful stage drove humanity significantly closer to a mastery over both the ravages of nature and the brutalities of human existence itself. Paradoxically that very force of human ingenuity and progress has turned, in its moribund old age, into its opposite, and now increasingly, it is a break on progress, the profit motive

everywhere standing in the way of rational decision making. And the percentage of winners is rapidly declining in the face of a tide of human impoverishment and misery. The big corporations have become a remote global elite while the rest of us scarp around for crumbs. It's not surprising that the big CEO's are queuing up to enrol at the Singularity University they want to be in the front line for the next generation of money-making technology.

The high-flyers at the Silicon Valley super campus talk of 3D photocopiers that are capable of copying any real object at the press of a button. They talk of galactic and even intergalactic travel. They conjure up Sci-Fi robots out-performing humans in every sphere. They even fantasise that the child has already been born that will live forever. But what they don't seem to want to discuss is just how we can create a socio-economic system that will ensure that our collective human achievements, which are the intellectual property of all mankind, will bring material and cultural benefits to all mankind. It doesn't seem to be on their syllabus anywhere.

If you haven't already wondered, the name singularity refers to a point in time (in about 20-30 years according to some scientists) when artificial intelligence matches and then outpaces human intellectual capacity. As some AI specialists already point out, in many respects, we have already reached that point. It is a bleak thought that perhaps the only way we humans will ever overcome our tribal, selfish instincts is by evolving into robotic machines. Karl Marx, way back in the 19th century, was adamant that only the conditions of material abundance could provide the basis for a communal organisation of society. If we have indeed reached, or at least come close to that point, then all that is now required is to bring the means of production including our common intellectual resources into common ownership and then we could be on the edge of something a whole lot more rational, more egalitarian, more humane than what we have managed over the past 10,000 years. But then I always was a bit of a dreamer!

Towards the end of this captivating article Cadwalladr quotes a reticent British venture capitalist;

The technology is astounding but theres some potentially lethal side-effects, aren't there? Every solution has unintended consequences. And there are very real ethical and regulatory issues to consider, and which are just

being glossed over. The thing is that I don't trust the market to do it. But then I don't trust government either. There needs to be international ethical oversight. There's simply enormous power that's about to be unleashed. DARPA

(US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) isn't here for fun.

This urgent need for international ethical oversight is unlikely to come while global corporations bestride the planet. The only oversight they're interested in is their profit margin. Unless we want to succumb to what Cadwalladr terms, Silicon Valley techno-utopianism we will have to demand, not just oversight and regulation but fully enforceable and transparent social ownership of all intellectual and physical resources on the planet. What we need now more than anything, is a university exclusively dedicated to finding solutions to that most pressing of human tasks social ownership. Sporting Polemics will be one of the first to enrol.

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