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The future isn't working

Technology will destroy the world order, and society as we know it will unravel, warns [Ian Angell](#)

I have a very simple message. Today's institutions were born in the social, economic and political realities of the machine age; they have passed their sell-by date. New technology has changed everything: politics, economics and society as a whole. I mean real change, not the nice neat change that snake-oil salesmen peddle in their "change management seminars". This is not a nice tidy transition, but a severe and total dislocation with the past.

Just consider the state of employment, or rather unemployment. Our notion of 'job' is a product of the industrial age and has ceased to have any meaning. Nobel Laureate Wassily Leontief says that because of new technology, the role of human labour will diminish "in the same way that the horse in farm work was eliminated by tractors". Those who do not want to believe him say that he overlooks the fact that the masses are the market. If we don't pay them, then who will buy the goods?

Paying workers to be the market that buys the products of work is circular reasoning, a defiance of economic gravity. How can a community survive by taking in its own washing?

This unstable equilibrium is being supported by economic growth within semi-closed markets and by the west's piracy of the third world's resources.

Now that computers have replaced labour as the engine of production, however, the anti-gravity force of growth has been disconnected from employment. Growth is a measure of a production process that no longer employs labour, only machine-minders.

As markets become more and more integrated, we in the west can no longer steal off the third world. Nearly a century ago Lenin recognised that a well-paid market is created not by all workers, but by *our* workers, and to hell with starvation and deprivation it causes around the world.

Today, however, according to the International Labour Organization, a billion new workers have entered the global labour market. With 20% of the world's population living on less than a dollar a day, any labour that is needed can be bought more cheaply from the third world. In the information age the status quo

of the west, and its arrogance is finished.

Goodhart's Law strikes again. Charles Goodhart, a distinguished Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics, made this celebrated reflection: "any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed on it for control purposes".

What Goodhart is saying is that you cannot mix up cause and effect. Any observed regularity in society is an effect, but the moment you use it as the basis of control you are assuming it has some universal validity. You are claiming it is a cause; worse that the cause actually causes itself!

That markets need the earning power of workers is itself a transitory form of stability from an age before computerized production. The statement could not even have been formulated 300 years ago. How could it? It is an observation of a regularity that has occurred only very recently.

Not so long ago, the way we today use the terms 'market' and 'work' today would have made no sense at all. No doubt the champions of the status quo of the time were smugly disproving the first glimmer of the idea that workers should be paid well so as to maintain the market.

Because of computing and telecommunication technology, the once solid ground of today's societies and today's markets is shifting. Increasingly, we are losing faith in the status quo. We know something is radically wrong, but we are blinded by our misguided societal rituals, and are unable to recognise just what the real problems are.

These problems are the effect of the break-up of our underlying order, not the cause. They are the consequences of old power structures now become impotent. The community itself has only a transitory stability. Individuals and groups who have nothing to gain from continued membership as the old community unravels will look for the security of alternative communities forming in cyberspace.

You may not like what I am saying. You may disagree. But you have been warned. Don't take the easy option and join the legion of lying politicians who are moving the deck-chairs on the Titanic. The iceberg is still out there! Noel Coward observed: "It's discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit." I for one am not discouraged.