

BENEATH THE BEYOND

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William Griffen in his article "Beyond Technology,"¹ rages against the machine in the form of computers and information technology (CIT). His raging unfolds on three levels. At the most basic level Griffen purports to provide evidence in support of his views. The question here becomes, how strong is his evidence? On a second level, Griffen proposes a view of society and our social system that he thinks explains a whole host of social situations. On this level, the question becomes, how adequate is this theory to explain our current situation? Finally, on a third and, if I might say so, deeper level, Griffen assumes throughout his article a metaphysical view of the world and of the relations of human beings to that world. My aim is to evaluate his evidence and to bring into focus some of the assumptions he makes about society and the world that are questionable.

Viewed as a reasoned defense of a position, Griffen's article is sorely lacking. He relies upon a host of fallacies at crucial points in his argument. One can find *ad hominem*, *post hoc*, appeal to emotions, strawmen, and false alternative fallacies. His phalanx of fallacious arguments begins on the first page in which supporters of the Industrial Revolution are called "stark, raving mad." (p. 95) This is quite obviously an *ad hominem* argument that does not address the issue in question. A similar *ad hominem* is used to say that the views of those who believe that technology is neutral are "stupidity plain and simple." (p. 99) On the first page one can also witness a *post hoc* fallacy in which it seems to be argued that a host of problems have arisen after the Industrial Revolution; therefore, it follows that the Industrial Revolution is the cause of these problems. More evidence is needed to support this contention.

The whole tone of the article is one of extreme emotional dis-

ness. He dismisses views as “nonsense,” (p. 96) without providing any evidence that they are nonsensical. He asserts that life is more “threadbare” (p. 95), the environment is “rapidly degrading,” computer technology has “mindless momentum” (p. 98) society pursues “carelessly examined ends,” (p. 99) the workplace lacks “democratic solutions” (p. 97), and the individuals who participate in market economies are like marionettes (p. 101). In each of these assertions, he relies upon emotionally-laden words in the place of clear argumentation. He seems to assume throughout the article that either production is for profit or it is for human needs, such that if it is one, it cannot be the other. This seems to me a blatant fallacy of false alternative. He also relies upon a strawman argument when he reduces the complex question of technological change to the displacement of five temps from the job market to welfare. Finally, he also commits the fallacy of division when he seems to argue that because no one controls the whole economic system; therefore, it follows that no one controls any part of it. (p. 97) In criticizing Griffen’s article from the logical point of view, I have, perhaps, done it an injustice, because I think it was meant to be a rhetorical piece exciting the audience to action and not a reasoned argument. Evaluated from this point of view, it is surely a powerful attempt at persuasion.

This leads us to the second level of his article, what view of society and human beings underlies Griffen’s article? His basic arguments seems to go something like this:

1. All the major parts of the current economic system are a threat to the planet.
2. Industrialism is a major part of the current economic system.
3. Therefore, industrialism is a threat to the planet.
4. (CIT) is a form of industrialism.
5. Therefore CIT is a threat to the planet.

Several questions arise at this point: when is something a threat to the planet, what is his conception of the current economic system, what is industrialism, what is the relation between industrialism and the current economic system, and finally what is the relationship between CIT and industrialism? Let us briefly deal with some of these.

The basic structure of the theoretical part of Griffen's article is to begin by identifying a set of current social problems, proposing a causal explanation for these problems in terms of the current economic system, and then presenting a solution (at least implicitly) to these problems by abolishing the cause of them.

The problems that concern Griffen can be classified into three major groups. The first set are problems of "social justice." These include sexism, poverty, injustice, inequality, and exploitation. The second set are problems of environmental degradation. These include extinction of species, deforestation, soil erosion, global warming, pollution, oil spills, toxic waste, urban congestion, and overpopulation. The third set are problems of alienation, which seems to include lack of autonomy and of workplace democracy. The first question that could be asked is, are these all indeed problems? Let's take one issue for a moment—global warming. There is certainly disagreement over whether it is happening or not. Also, even if it is, it might not be undesirable. A somewhat warmer planet might be more inhabitable for human beings in addition to expanding the areas suitable for food production. Further, many of these problems seem to exist in any given social system, and thus cannot be caused by one particular type of social system. This is certainly a plethora of problems to have a single cause. Or does it have a single cause? Although Griffen entitles his article, "Beyond Technology," I think it would have been better titled "Beyond Capitalism." Although at times it seems that all these problems are caused by technology, it turns out that technology is controlled by the social system in which it is embedded. Thus, technology is merely an intermediate cause, and the ultimate cause of all these problems, then, is the economic system of competitive capitalism. He is not entirely consistent here, because at one point (p. 101) he talks about technological

determinism, which would make technology the ultimate cause and not the social system in which the technology exists.

What conception does Griffen have of this economic system? According to him, we have a growth economy (p. 100). What does this mean exactly? According to Griffen, our economy has an established and unfair pattern of distribution (p. 96), it perpetuates growth (p. 96), concentrates wealth in an unjust manner (p. 96), is structured so the few rent the labor of the many (p. 97), has a workplace hierarchy that prevents democracy (p.97), marginalizes and exploits workers (p.97) , sacrifices real wealth to symbols of wealth (p. 98), and doesn't respond to human guidance (p. 100). All these accusations are pretty much a common part of the warmed-over (some would say moldy) Marxist medley of accusations against competitive capitalism. It seems that this framework is going to need a tremendous amount of reworking and rethinking if it is to present itself as a viable alternative. Griffen, however, just assumes its validity.

An appraisal of Marx's thought is certainly beyond this review. However, a few remarks are in order. The whole contest and debate between capitalism and communism was one between two philosophies that had the pretension of bringing civilization to the world in terms of the cultural forms and norms of a particular way of life. Initially with Marx, capitalism was represented by the Anglo-Saxon cultural complex. Within this complex, the warrior ethos was very highly developed. As a result, this cultural complex was based on conflict and alliance, and the civilizing mission for such a cultural complex came to be conceived of as the subjecting of this conflict and competition to rules. Thus, individuals were to move from a state of total conflict in which there were no rules (a State of Nature) to one in which there were rules that provided social fortresses (individual rights) that would protect the individual competitors and distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of conflict and competition. Marx confused market relations with one specific form of market relations, namely the Anglo-Saxon model. However, as history has shown, different cultures have developed quite different

market economies as economic relations have become modified to fit into various cultural complexes. Thus, the French, the Germans, the Japanese and even the Chinese, to mention a few, have quite different types of market economies because they have quite different cultures. The Anglo-Saxon model has not come to dominate the world, as Anglo-Saxon capitalism would have you believe.

Marx and Marxism arose as a philosophical protest against the cultural and economic world of Anglo-Saxon capitalism. During times of rapid social change or among marginal individuals, i.e., individuals excluded from the social structure, cultural revitalization movements can arise. During such processes, new identities are created, as utopian images of society are developed. These images provide, supposedly, a plan for how society can be re-created after the present social order has collapsed and/or been destroyed. Such movements are characterized by millenarianism and messianism. Modern communism can trace its origins back to Joachim of Fiore in the thirteenth century, and his three-fold process of human liberation. He influenced the various Radical Protestant movements, who in turn influenced the modern communistic movements. Marx undertook to secularize this tradition. In his version, those who were marginal in the current order, the proletarians, were going to rise up and destroy the whole capitalistic order. The Revolutionary Spirit would take possession of the masses and lead them to the New Jerusalem. It is no accident that Marxists and communist movements existed among nations that had been colonized, since these movements represented cultural reconstitutions in which colonization was prevented or ended and indigenous cultural forms were re-worked. Marxism in essence served as the intellectual justification for a host of nationalistic, cultural revitalization movements among cultures whose history and way of life was not compatible with the Anglo-Saxon version of the market economy. (Fascism served the same function for other European cultures with different histories and different cultural complexes.) Russia on the eve of the Russian revolution was experiencing a type of cultural occupation, as the upper classes were thoroughly Westernized and had a rather dismal view of the indigenous Russian cul-

ture. Communists countered this by praising Russian achievements in every field and attempting to destroy every other ethnic or cultural group, just like Anglo-Saxon capitalism did.

Once the debate between capitalism (i.e., the Anglo-Saxon version of market relations) and communism is seen for what it truly is, (i.e. a cultural conflict), then it can be seen that both lost. Neither became nor could become world-dominating systems. Once this conflict is seen as a cultural one, then one can also understand what the real nature of human existence is, human beings live an inherently cultural mode of existence. Since there will always be a plurality of cultures, there will always be a plurality of ways of solving the problems of being a human being.

What is the problem of being a human being? There is probably no more basic human quest than the attempt to discover or impose order on a seemingly disorderly world. Human beings typically develop a distinction between an orderly cosmos in which human beings and action can flourish and a disorderly chaos in which human beings and action can't flourish. With order comes predictability and certainty, while with disorder comes unpredictability and uncertainty. With unpredictability and uncertainty comes risk. Different individuals and different cultures inhabit different worlds. Some inhabit a "china shop" world in which the slightest wrong move can lead to catastrophe. This is the world that Griffen seems to inhabit. From this perspective the world is "a terrifying unforgiving place and the least jolt may trigger its complete collapse."² Others live in a world of extreme flexibility which can rebound from nearly anything that is done to it. The world is like the children's play room at The Discovery Zone; one can jump all over it and it returns for more. At the core of the difference between Griffen and his Marxism and the competitive individualism of Anglo-Saxon capitalism is this fundamental difference in the conception of the world. Griffen's view is risk-averse, while competitive individualism embraces risk.

A society that can adapt to new situations and find solutions to

new problems need both kinds of individuals and world-views (as well as others) to serve as checks and balances on each other. A society without risk-taking individualists stagnates, as happened to the Soviet Union. Actually, what happens is that the activity of the risk taking individualist goes underground and spawns a black market, which can corrupt a society to the core. The Russians are currently dealing with this problem as the fall of communism has just unmasked the underground market that had existed during the Soviet era. A society in which the risk-taking individualists are completely in charge would create so much disorder and chaos that most people would not be able to find a meaningful mode of existence with such a system of uncertainty. The problem for each historical epoch is to strike the proper balance between various problem-solving strategies that are essential for social existence. During the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy under the Anglo-Saxon model, Marxism served to point out the plight of those who did not participate fully in the benefits of these changes. Big business, big labor, and big nation-states arose and served as checks and balances, more or less successful, on each other.

We are now entering another era of transition in which the mass production era will be replaced by a robotic, computerized mode of production in which batch production and market and social fragmentation will increase to the detriment of large entities, whether big business, big labor, or big nation-states. A new definition of humanity and of human existence is emerging that will replace the definition based upon mass production, which replaced the agrarian one, which replaced the hunter-gatherer one. With the increase in information technology, cultures no longer need to be tied to a specific geographic region, and smaller groups will be able to preserve and perpetuate their cultural differences. Social fragmentation and decentralization will probably be the most likely outcome. Individuals who lack the proper skills to enter the information world and to acknowledge and appreciate cultural differences will be left behind as they become unskilled relative to the new requirements of social existence. The difficulty before us as educators is to move our students

into this new era while developing within them a sensitivity to the needs of those who are experiencing difficulties making this transition. Griffen's voice in the wilderness can serve to awaken us to these responsibilities. However, I am afraid that humans will never get "Beyond Technology," since one of the ways that we have made ourselves human is through our technology, and it is through technology, in combination with cultural forms, that human existence will continue to re-create itself in the future.

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ENDNOTES

1. William Griffen, "Beyond Technology," *Educational Change* (Spring, 1996), pp. 95-103.
2. Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory*, (Boulder, San Francisco, & Oxford: Westview Press, 1990), p. 26.