

PRO-CHOICE

The Promise of Technology

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I am flattered to have my work so finely examined by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. For this, I must thank the authors. I find, however, that I do not have much to say directly in reply to their analysis. The authors still find Karl Marx's ideas relevant, even though the world in which Marx was so astute is rapidly vanishing. I think Marx was right, once, when the world of atoms ruled. But Marx completely missed the boat in understanding how the world of ideas differs from a world where land, materials, and resources were the engines of wealth. He no longer is a useful guide in this new economy, and I make no apologies for completely ignoring him.

Ideas, unlike materials, or land, or even labor, are infinite. If I have an idea, and I give it to you, then we both have the idea. If you then share it with your friend, then all three of us have an idea. Your friend can share it with many others, and, the more who share the idea, the more valuable that idea can become. None of this is true about steel, or oil, or gold. And each idea I give to you will most likely spark a few more ideas in both our heads, so that rather than having one less idea when I transfer it to another person, I have many more than when I started. The infinitude of ideas expands in many directions.

At the same time, copies of things—both physical copies and intangible copies—increasingly become less important, less valuable. We can make copies of music, books, movies, software, and other intangibles with so little effort that it is straining our legal framework. We can even make copies of tangible things with increasing ease, so that more and more of them are being given away for free or for very little. Anything that can be copied—a chair, a basketball, an apple, an umbrella—will be copied more cheaply each year. That means that those things that cannot be copied will become the true currency, the true sources of wealth. What can-not be copied? Trust. Authenticity. Immediacy. Presence. Experience. Relationships.

These warm, fuzzy, and soft intangibles are what become valuable in a world of abundant copies. Trust cannot be downloaded or installed. Experience cannot be transmitted. Authenticity cannot be duplicated on a machine. They have to be grown, layered in, built up, and nurtured. This is one reason why wilderness can only increase in value in a highly technological society. It cannot be copied or transmitted; it can only be experienced. We will quickly see the true value of the wild take off as we fill our world with cheap copies.

And the things we manufacture of atoms—things of steel and petrochemicals and fiber—will only have value in proportion to the amount of intelligence, organization, innovation, design, and love put into them. The value of their atoms will plummet. The value of their relationships will skyrocket.

This is good news for humans everywhere. It means that the scarcities and uneven distribution of material resources in the world will matter less. It means that ideas—which can occur in almost anyone's mind regardless of skin color or even education—can now play off the differences in the world: the more different one's background, the more different and valuable one's idea. Differences are the engines in the world of ideas. And it means that as copies become cheap, humans are liberated to pursue novelties and to flee from the rote.

This ongoing overthrow of the atomic world creates huge changes in the organization of our institutions. No longer are we bound by physical adjacencies. We can still have local neighborhoods, but we do not have to. We can bind ourselves in many, many more dimensions than were possible before the advent of communication technologies that permit easy copies and easy connections. Yet, we can still bind ourselves in the physical world. Retail stores will never go away. Cities will not die. Books on shelves will always endure. These interfaces are too highly evolved and work too well to disappear. This is not even to mention relationships such as families that again become centers of power in a relationship world.

The gift that technology brings is not happiness or utopia. What technology brings is only increasing opportunities. New ways to assemble our lives, new paths for exploration, new combinations of old ideas, new ways to love and hate, harm and help, build and destroy. Particular technologies will not make us happy and sane, nor will particular organizations, nor particular places on earth. The path to better lives is to increase the possible places to be, to expand the possible ways to organize institutions and companies, to amplify the number of opportunities for all. And we know of no other force able to expand possibilities as much as technology. In fact, we may even go so far as to say that a definition of technology is "that which increases options."

I am all for increased options, everywhere, and for everyone. Bring on the technology!