

Technological Progress and Humanity: Essay 2, The American Dream: Uneconomic Man vs. Economic Man

Freedom, the seduction of technology and humanity's future

By Bruce Cuthbertson

America was built on the idea that we can and have always invented the future. It's perhaps our core defining value.

It's also a value that's led to our unwavering belief that the Yellow Brick Road will ultimately lead us to a better world, where technology lifts humanity up. But, as I suggested in Part 1 of this series, it's a utopian myth.

We're drawn along by the dream of what the Emerald City means to us, what it offers behind its high walls. It's the American Dream. But its promise of vast rewards is only ever realized by a select few, the innovation lottery winners. The rest of humanity, most of us outside the gates to the Emerald City, are forced individually to struggle for mere survival in the isolationist and individualistic capitalist system in order to hang onto the threads of marginally middle-class lives.

In this, and largely to our detriment, we've rationalized the pursuit of wealth above all other values. We've watched the decline of the middle class and the divide between the rich and the poor deepen. We've seen two opposing ideologies of what America means (and what America should be) split the country and its people apart. It's not surprising that American patriotism is at its lowest point in history.

In part two of this essay, I look closer at freedom as an economic distinction and its meaning for the American Dream. Further, I look at the seduction of technology; the shortening half-life of products; how innovation works; and the future of our humanity.

Freedom has Become an Economic Term

In today's capitalism, we all, or rather each of us, pursues the self-focused dream of attaining wealth and economic prosperity individually, not collectively. The idea of Silicon Valley draws us in, to join in the pursuit of inventing the future and possibly of winning the innovation lottery or at least working for those who do. We fear the world might pass us by and we fear what we would lose if it does. This is what freedom has come to mean to us. In this, we've slowly lost our

connection to a collective humanity; to what it means even to be American; to our shared values and ideals.

Freedom has become synonymous with capitalism's values and this form of capitalism pits us against each other. We look out for ourselves and our families and that's about it. There's no moral foundation anymore, no guiding humanitarian principles, no shared value system beyond our economic structure. We've shifted from a free market economy to a free market society, where the values of the market have replaced what were once our human values (our humanity).

Our values have become almost purely in line with Libertarian ideology. And as Toko-pa Turner pointed out, we were complicit in letting this value system destroy all our other value systems and all the other myths that help guide us toward finding meaning in life. We bought into a mythology of aloneness, a mythology of exploiting every available resource in the name of never-ending economic growth, a mythology that freedom and wealth are the same thing. And we've discovered in this mythology a wasteland.

The very idea of economic survival is always a looming threat and instead of standing up together and providing together, we fight in isolation for our small piece. Even if we're successful, it's never enough. Wealth cannot fulfill our need for purpose, our desire to thrive. We can distract and comfort ourselves in material wealth, but we still feel an emptiness of meaning. Although we struggle in isolation and we feel desperately alone in the world, we go along. We accept it mostly because even in our aloneness, we're still members of a tribe. That membership gives us something to lose and we become risk averse. We fear being outcast from our communities (our jobs, our industries, our peer groups) and losing any status and stability we've managed to achieve for ourselves.

Perhaps we should be reminded of what American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes once pointed out, that "uneconomic man" is vital to our very humanity.

"Art, philosophy, charity, the search for the North Pole, the delirium of every moment in man's experience—all alike mean uneconomic expenditure—mean waste—mean a step toward death. The justification of art is not that it offers prizes to those who succeed in the economic struggle, to those who in an economic sense have produced the most... The justification is in art itself, whatever its economic effect. It gratifies the appetite which in some noble spirits is stronger than the appetite for food."

Instead of focusing our intents on providing nutrition to human purpose, to art and philosophy, to our humanity, we are stuck in the pursuit of economic survival and wealth.

This form of capitalism uses innovation, the innovation lottery, the invention of the future and the ideology of economic freedom to motivate each of us to think more selfishly about our own wellbeing and our own survival and advancement. And that selfish tendency is reinforced as the stakes become greater with the accelerating decline of the middle class and the growing divide

between the rich and poor. The internal and external worlds of our lives begin to mirror each other in their emptiness.

Freedom, in today's America, no longer means freedom from repression. It doesn't even mean that we're created equal and have inalienable rights. It's almost purely economic. It means our freedom is about having a natural right (above even a legal right) to pursue and defend economic riches, even at the cost of society's wellbeing and worse, at the cost of losing our inner need for meaning and purpose. We give up the human in ourselves. And more, it means that true freedom can only be achieved economically.

The Elusive Dream of America

The American Dream is an anthem both to the pursuit of selfish individualistic and isolationist economic prosperity and to the excesses of materialism in our culture. Or rather, we entrepreneurs and innovators, leaders and workers, collaborators and contributors (all of us) strive to get ahead by producing goods and technologies that seldom provide real value or sustained happiness to society.

As the velocity of technological progress increases, the half-life of products will get shorter and shorter, which not only means that the happiness we get from those products is diminishing, but also means that our ecological footprint will get bigger.

We produce ever increasing numbers of gadgets and material things, which we purchase in the belief they will make our lives easier and ourselves happier. Then we replace these gadgets with new gadgets each year. Our lives aren't made simpler by technology, but put into perpetual change.

We run faster and faster toward an imagined Nirvana, a peaceful plateau of existence where life promises to be simple and fulfilling, perhaps where our appetites for the external, for stimulation, are finally appeased. Is this what the American Dream has become? Even as we recognize that we're not making progress, especially as technology becomes more and more a facet of each and every minute of our lives, we lack the inspiration, vision and leadership to find a new way.

What is innovation, Really?

Although we glamorize innovation as the means for discovering new horizons and inventing the future, it's not that. In practice, innovation is almost entirely about finding, solving and exploiting market and operational inefficiencies for profit. It's an economic concept.

Innovation is a form of cleverness, cleverness at dissecting systems and searching out those inefficiencies to correct or improve. It atomizes the world, breaks everything down into pieces and looks to fix or enhance one specific component of a system in isolation, to provide a new gadget or mechanism or possibly a relationship algorithm based on finding correlations in mass data.

Innovation happens through the act of breaking things apart or what is called reductionist science. It is not holistic and its solutions rarely address the whole of an issue or problem. Counter to what we often think, innovation often increases complexity in systems and at a macro level, it increases systemic relationships across the whole of civilization and existence; it doesn't lead to simplicity; though we sell it to ourselves as making life easier and simpler.

Also, as we strive for technological progress, much of technology and innovation is geared toward creating goods and services that are substitutes for existing goods and services, even when they might seem revolutionary or profound at first. For example, are the banking apps on our phones really an innovation to solve a new problem or are they simply a substitute to accomplish what we could already accomplish previously by other means. They might be a shortcut, but still a substitute. As substitutes, they don't impact our happiness much, especially over the long term.

Life with Technology

Innovation has always been revered as producing goods that will drive the economy forward. There's a ubiquity of technology in our lives and across our culture, but the reality is that most innovation and most technology applications do little to enhance our lives or humanity in any meaningful way.

Technology is marketed as offering simplicity and convenience, such as with those banking apps. We easily perceive the benefits as making our lives easier; they've saved us time or money in accomplishing some task. But we've somehow been able to ignore the real trade off; that technology largely introduces complexity to the systems that surround us, that we live within a systemic network of increasingly connected machines that are having greater and greater influence over everything we do in life. We understand the positive network effects, but we often overlook the externalities associated with it, which are largely composed of the time we contribute to creating the value of the network.

We might save time in accomplishing that one task (e.g. banking), but we've contributed countless hours of each and every day to support the complex network of machines that enables those timesaving and money-saving tasks. It might be a fair tradeoff, but we've become beholden to the entire complex system and haven't accounted for the actual cost of our total commitment in time and money, as we spend the days and hours and subsequently, the years of our lives surrounded by our machines. And we're unable to escape the influences and engagement of those systems. That moment passed us by.

Political theorist and popular intellectual [Jodi Dean](#) argues we unwittingly provide free labor to create and support those social network systems for the profit of those companies and industries (those innovators). She and others are absolutely right in their critiques, even if some of those criticisms call for alternatives that come across as naïvely academic (theoretical). Solutions to capitalism's problems probably won't be found at the extremes, which cater to unrealistic utopian ideals. If we learned anything from neo-classical economics, it is that the world is messy and people are unpredictable. No amount of refining and finessing of

mathematical equations in an economic setting can make the purely theoretical fit the complexities of life and choice; thus, utopias of any sort (which we might view as theoretical expressions of frictionless economic perfection) will always fall short.

We can become enthralled by a technology that makes a singular task easier or provides momentary gratification, but we don't recognize the consequences and externalities, even the micro and personal side effects, of adapting so completely to the world of machines around us.

That's partly why the materialism we immerse ourselves in is so unfulfilling. Our skills in innovation are often wasted on creating superficial short-term, feel-good-for-a-moment solutions. But it's worse. We continue to look for meaning (the Garden) in the external pursuit of infinity and not within.

Technology in Business: Competitive Advantage or a Zero-Sum Game?

In our industries, we create technologies that supposedly improve corporate and industry efficiencies. As business leaders, we believe that innovative technology can lead to greater margins by streamlining processes. But that turns out not to be the case.

Business leaders look to technology for competitive advantage. Unfortunately for them, technology is usually a zero-sum game. It can provide only short-term advantage.

Ultimately, it leads to an arms race toward zero margins, as companies go through cycles of trying to gain advantage with tech or trying to keep up with their competitors, while industry margins narrow and profits migrate out of their industry into the tech industry. Their fear of becoming obsolete from disruption and technology keeps the arms race going. And eventually, that fear becomes self-fulfilling as they enable the migration of revenues out of their industry.

Long-term competitive advantage doesn't come from technology, but from focusing on the soft (and hard to quantify) sciences in our companies: creating common shared core values, improving employee happiness and engagement, connecting with our communities. But many leaders and shareholders are so focused on the short term and wanting quick, quantifiable results that they won't make an investment in the long-term sustainability of their companies.

The Seduction of Technology

We're mesmerized by what technology promises, what possibilities it might offer, for us, for our businesses, for the future because our faith in technology gives us a sense of control, a belief that we understand the nature of things. This sense goes all the way back to the Enlightenment, where our belief in a theory of everything enticed us with a promise of control over nature.

But this idea of control in business is a mirage, a belief that gives us a false sense of security about the health of our organizations, that we think we can manage by numbers, data and algorithms alone.

Jobs that once took human judgment are being replaced by robots and algorithms.

We once believed technology would increase productivity in the economic equation. But we've discovered its promise hasn't been realized in the real world. Productivity hasn't increased much over the last generation. As we discussed in Part 1, technology lessens the value of labor, which might partly explain productivity's dampened growth.

Further, technology largely shifts monies (rents) from existing labor to the companies that create the technology. And it increases those rents because technology doesn't streamline and increase efficiency so much as it adds complexity to systems and creates industry and economy-wide (systemic) interdependencies.

In essence, costs rise as both profits and wealth migrate away from the labor force to the innovators of technology. That's why we're drawn to Silicon Valley where society's wealth is assembling and why STEM schools are the latest trend in education. People are desperate to survive and for their children to survive within this economic paradigm. And in this, we start to lose our humanity, from both the disappearance of humanities curriculum and from adopting this survivalist mindset.

That's not to say reductionist science isn't of value. Of course, it is. We can make incremental progress in fighting disease or creating advanced supply chains to move resources around the world to help feed civilization. We can explore the boundaries of human potential, of insight and our capacity to solve problems.

Let's be reminded, however, of what American philosopher John Dewey said. "(Science) lends itself with equal impartiality to the kindly offices of medicine and hygiene and the destructive deeds of war."

Humanity's Future

The future was once a canvas for our imaginations as children and even now, it remains within us today, nourishing the child in us as adults. We can't ignore what it means to us, as part of our own myth.

A friend, who's a tech humanist and innovation expert, probably disagrees with at least some of my perspective. He correctly points out that we've made profound progress toward eliminating the most extreme poverty and in feeding the world's population. He's right. It's something to celebrate, but we can also aggrieve the dysfunctions we still witness.

The method of reductionist science seeks truth and understanding by breaking systems into smaller and smaller components. Technology pursues solutions through analysis (breaking things apart), not synthesis (combining things together into the whole).

But we can't address humanity's problems this way, through reductionist science and intuition. Ultimately, innovation and the progress of technology is evolutionary. We lack control over what direction they will go and how they will impact humanity.

We can't become better humans through reductionist science and technological solutions and a blind determination for progress. We can't discover or fulfill our individual purpose in life. And despite our want to understand the mysteries of the universe and life itself, reductive materialism, for all the dreams we have, will never be able to give us the answer to our biggest (or maybe our only) question: *What's the meaning of existence?*

The process of creative destruction, and its use of innovation in the economic equation, is ultimately not sustainable. At some point, the damage (in job losses, in destroyed industries, in our ability to even participate in the economy, in the loss of our values and our humanity) will overwhelm the gains of innovation, unless we change.

Technology has grown beyond what people even 30 or 40 years ago ever even imagined, but we haven't kept pace. We lack the tools (emotional, psychological, intellectual, spiritual) and wisdom to handle the growth and progress of technology.

Dewey recognized our inability to step back and recognize what civilization is becoming. "Science through its applications is manufacturing the conditions of our institutions at such a speed that we are too bewildered to know what sort of civilization is in process of making," wrote Dewey in *Philosophy and Civilization*. "Because of this confusion, we cannot even draw up a ledger account of social gains and losses due to the operation of science."

We've lacked the perceptive ability to recognize incremental declines over the past 40 years as the Reagan experiment in laissez-faire capitalism persistently divided us, undermined our institutions, withered away our once united patriotism and humanity, and brought into question the very ideal of American liberal democracy.

There's one elusive truth that evades our theory of everything, that we'll never find by reductive materialism or abductive reasoning or the scientific method.

We'll find that truth only in our myths and in our arts, by a synthesis of the whole, by projecting ourselves outward onto the world around us. If we want to find meaning or purpose, we'll need to find myths that inspire us to be ourselves; that reflect the best in us; that connect us with a collective consciousness; that drive away our loneliness and the despair of isolation; that plant trees of meaning and inspiration, not only as signposts to find our way but also to begin to re-nourish the wasteland that we wander through. We'll need to rediscover the uneconomic man within us.

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