

Robots and the Renaissance of the Liberal Arts

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The following encouraging discussion is not a typical approach for me. I am a political theorist who teaches and conducts research on environmental political theory. So you can imagine that throughout my career I have been immersed in negativity. The state of the global environment for the last 50 years has been one of steady decline and deterioration, and with dire predictions regarding climate change plus the recent Presidential election, you might expect me to be quite pessimistic, and you would be correct! My classes are pervaded by looming doom and gloom, and I usually end up talking about how to cope with bad developments happening now and worse predictions for the future.

In addition to this grim environmental picture, liberal arts speakers at commencements this year have reason to lament all the challenges we face in the liberal arts today: declining student enrollments and closing down of liberal arts departments for lack of students; a Presidential budget proposal that eliminates the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities; higher tuition forcing students to choose “practical” majors that generate immediate jobs and income after graduation to pay off college debt; declining book sales in the liberal arts making publishers reluctant to publish books in these fields; and, finally, the increase in careerism in college epitomized by a family member at graduation asking the ubiquitous question: “What are you going to do with your major in the Liberal Arts?” All this preoccupation with careerism

and money is reinforced by business leaders offering start-up cash to chosen honorees to skip college altogether, deeming it a bad investment of time and money.

I could easily provide a prolonged lamentation or rant about the dismal fate of the university liberal arts with justified anger at the decadence and immorality of our flawed society. Instead, I would like to do something radical and new for me at the other end of the continuum: be enthusiastic and constructive. It is easy to be optimistic when things are going well, but when doom and gloom prevail, it takes a great stretch of the imagination to be positive about the future of the university liberal arts and the lives of today's graduates. Since this is my first try at a positive outlook, I will let the reader judge if there is any solid ground for my upbeat vision of the renaissance of the liberal arts and of their role in the lives of our students or whether I am merely engaged in groundless denial and wishful thinking.

I have entitled these remarks: "Robots and the Renaissance of the Liberal Arts." As far as I know, no one is writing now about the rebirth of the university liberal arts—and by this term I mean: the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and creative arts. Virtually all commentators suggest these academic fields, excepting the sciences that are part of the frenzy over STEM subjects, are comatose and near-death, especially the humanities, as this publication has been prominent in publishing such statements of demise of these academic fields.

What could possibly give me grounds for optimism amidst the grim circumstances recounted earlier? The answer lies in the first part of my title: the unlikely world of robots and artificial intelligence. This is a long story, too long to tell in detail at this time, but I shall try to sketch out for you not only a positive vision of the future of the liberal arts but, most important for this year's graduates, an upbeat depiction of the betterment of their future lives as well.

No doubt you have heard about driverless cars, robots, and programmed machines doing the work of humans: the so-called “the next Industrial revolution.”

A brief personal story will illustrate this world-changing development. When I was growing up my older sister had a job as a teenager at the local library branch as a “shelver”. She took returned books and placed them back on the appropriate library shelf, according to the Dewey Decimal System, now updated to the Library of Congress classification system. While our University library was under renovation, a machine, call it a “robot,” was programmed to find and replace books in our book storage facility. Presto, the job of library shelver was gone!

Recently, I read about robots that can be programmed to flip hamburgers, and Domino’s Pizza has begun using robots to deliver its pizzas in Germany and the Netherlands. Today, robots assist in precision surgeries, such as brain and heart surgeries, assemble automobiles, explore outer space, provide financial advice, mow lawns in Dallas, process 200,000 packages a day in China, go where there is danger for humans in nuclear power leaks, bomb disposals, etc. I have even read about—but this is not the proper place to discuss—robots being tested to serve as sex partners. You get the idea: increasingly, robots are being used to replace human labor throughout our society and their use will accelerate as time and research advance.

Millions of engineers today are working hard to replace humans with machines—just as the first Industrial revolution replaced animal and human power with machines. I have seen predictions by corporate consulting firms that between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of all existing jobs will be replaced by robots or artificially intelligent-created machines in the next 15 years. Right now about 10% of all jobs in the United States are being done by robots, so this is not a science fiction

tale, but an actual development right now and will increase significantly in the near future impacting the work lives of this year's graduates and current undergraduates.

Therefore, the paramount question arises: how will the political systems in the developed world react to lack of jobs in the future? I think there is a good chance they will turn to an old idea in Western political thought proposed in the United States in the 1970s during the Presidency of Richard Nixon: separate income from work with State-provided Basic Income. This is radical within the type of neoliberal capitalism we have known since Ronald Reagan, but can we really ignore, dismiss or blame people who are willing to work but for whom there are no jobs? This dynamic was at work in the election of Donald Trump who said that the top three campaign issues in the 2016 election were: "jobs, jobs and jobs." And we all know what unemployed people can do in the developed world: make trouble for political elites, and even vote for reality tv stars!

It is in this context that the idea symbolized by the acronym, "UBI" enters. This stands for: "universal basic income." This policy essentially consists of the State giving people with no jobs a minimum income without the stigma of "welfare" as previously implemented, but out of recognition that in the 21st century the robotized economy has many fewer jobs than workers in the developed world.

Switzerland voted last year on a UBI referendum and narrowly defeated it 52-48%; the State of Alaska has its Permanent Fund for all of its residents; Finland is now experimenting with a limited UBI policy providing a monthly income to families with no work, and other countries are considering such UBI policies.

Yes, the future might be characterized by reduced or no work and UBI, but what does that have to do with the proposed renaissance of the university liberal arts? The answer lies in a brief essay by the great 20th century economist, John Maynard Keynes, and a question I asked my students this semester. Keynes predicted in 1930 that within 100 years the work week would be 15 hours a week because of increased productivity. He was probably not thinking of robotization specifically, but he had the basic idea of machines replacing human workers and solving the economic problem of survival and the need to work long hours per week.

Following Keynes' analysis, I asked a class if they worked a 15-hour work week--three 5-hour work days with a living wage--what would they do with their 4-day weekends every week? There was a stunned silence in the room. None of the students had ever been asked such a question before, thinking that long hours of overwork would be their life's burden. After an extended and awkward pause, one student finally said he would play video games. I replied that this sounds fine for a few weeks or even a few months, but could he spend his entire life playing video games, or would he want to? After that, two other answers were given: helping other people who were in need, and traveling. I commended the students for their thoughtful replies but those were the only answers the class could come up with.

Here is where the university liberal arts enter the discussion in a crucial way, as I see it. In a world with either no work and UBI, or very short work weeks and very long weekends, college as preparation for a job is replaced with college as the preparation for life. In such a world with no or little work, careerism in education, so dominant currently, is dead. With its demise and fundamentally changed social conditions, a vital opportunity emerges for the renaissance of liberal arts. These subjects, especially the supposed moribund humanities, are best suited for

the preparation of meaningful life, especially a life where the ancient Greek idea of “leisure” is applicable. This is a time of doing what is intrinsically valuable to a person, instead of the current weak and passive meaning of “idle time” in the context of needing recovery from overwork, meaning merely “time I’m off work,” usually spent on video entertainment, social media, or shopping.

Consider a life without work altogether or with the Keynesian 15-hours. Art or music history, the study of other languages and cultures, the physical nature of our planet, current or ancient Western and non-Western literature, human or natural history, the history of ideas, philosophy, and so on, can come become relevant and vital. The liberal arts are equipped to make our lives more meaningful and rewarding when we do not need passive rest and recovery time from our daily work. Genuine leisure in the Greek sense can be challenging and active, but we may engage in the activity because of the special inherent enjoyment it brings. Such leisure expresses the individual’s personality and values, and can provide meaning and joy in one’s life.

So, bring on the robots, let them serve me food, drive my car, get my books, cut my grass, and whatever else I need--except replacing my wife—and let us recognize that in such a robotized world with UBI, we start to live meaningful and valuable lives without work and not merely exist to work and relax with no leisure time!

In such a future, the careerism of the university and the resulting downgrading of the liberal arts become outdated, like a typewriter or Model T car. Once the crucial social importance of the liberal arts is understood as a way of adapting to robots and the UBI, a renaissance of the liberal arts can evolve, improving the lives of our college graduates. It will prepare them for non-working, time-abundant lives replacing a work-obsessed society that will become obsolete.

Instead of students dreading their aunt or grandfather asking the predictable question at Commencement: “What are you going to do with their liberal arts major?” they will be able to reply confidently and happily that they will enjoy the activities that their liberal arts major prepared them for and, look forward to having more time in their post-graduate life to study, engage, and enjoy their liberal arts studies and related leisure time activities. And, if by chance, things do not turn out the way I envision, remember that I am unaccustomed to optimism, and hope you prefer this robot- and UBI-based vision of the renaissance of the liberal arts and the leisure society to yet another elegy for these academic fields.