



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Politics of AI

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Frodeman, Robert. "The Politics of AI." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7, no. 1 (2018): 48-49.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3To> (provided by WordPress)

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has been a cheerleader for technology for decades. He begins an early 2018 [column](#) by declaring that he wants to take a break from the wall-to-wall Trump commentary. Instead, ‘While You Were Sleeping’ consists of an account of the latest computer wizardry that’s occurring under our noses. What Friedman misses is that he is still writing about Trump after all.

His focus is on quantum computing. Friedman revisits a lab he had been to a mere two years earlier; on the earlier visit he had come away impressed, but feeling that “this was Star Wars stuff — a galaxy and many years far away.” To his surprise, however, the technology had moved quicker than anticipated: “clearly quantum computing has gone from science fiction to nonfiction faster than most anyone expected.”

Friedman hears that quantum computers will work 100,000 times faster than the fastest computers today, and will be able to solve unimaginably complex problems. Wonders await — such as the NSA’s ability to crack the hardest encryption codes. Not that there is any reason for us to worry about that; the NSA has our best interests at heart. And in any case, the Chinese are working on quantum computing, too.

Friedman does note that this increase in computing power will lead to the supplanting of “middle-skill and even high-skill work.” Which he allows could pose a problem. Fortunately, there is a solution at hand: education! Our educational system simply needs to adapt to the imperatives of technology. This means not only K-12 education, and community colleges and universities, but also lifelong worker training. Friedman reports on an interview with IBM CEO Ginni Rometty, who told him:

"Every job will require some technology, and therefore we'll need to revamp education. The K-12 curriculum is obvious, but it's the adult retraining — lifelong learning systems — that will be even more important.... Some jobs will be displaced, but 100 percent of jobs will be augmented by AI."

Rometty notes that technology companies “are inventing these technologies, so we have the responsibility to help people adapt to it — and I don’t mean just giving them tablets or P.C.s, but lifelong learning systems.”

For that’s how it works: people adapt to technology, rather than the other way around. And what if our job gets outsourced or taken over by a machine? Friedman then turns to education-to-work expert Heather McGowan: workers “must reach up and learn a new skill or in some ways expand our capabilities as humans in order to fully realize our collaborative potential.” Education must become “a continuous process where the focused outcome is the ability to learn and adapt with agency as opposed to the transactional action of acquiring a set skill.” It all sounds rather rigorous, frog-marched into the future for our own good.

Which should have brought Friedman back to Trump. Friedman and Rometty and McGowan are failing to connect the results of the last election. Clinton lost the crucial states

of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan by a total of 80,000 votes. Clinton lost these states in large part because of the disaffection of white, non-college educated voters, people who have been hurt by previous technological development, who are angry about being marginalized by the ‘system’, and who pine for the good old days, when America was Great and they had a decent paycheck. Of course, Clinton knew all this, which is why her platform, Friedman-like, proposed a whole series of worker re-education programs. But somehow the coal miners were not interested in becoming computer programmers or dental hygienists. They preferred to remain coal miners – or actually, *not* coal miners. And Trump rode their anger to the White House.

Commentators like Friedman might usefully spend some of their time speculating on how our politics will be affected as worker displacement moves up the socio-economic scale.

At root, Friedman and his cohorts remain children of the Enlightenment: universal education remains the solution to the political problems caused by run-amok technological advance. This, however, assumes that ‘all men are created equal’ – and not only in their ability, but also in their willingness to become educated, and then reeducated again, and once again. They do not seem to have considered the possibility that a sizeable minority of Americans—or any other nationality—will remain resistant to constant epistemic revolution, and that rather than engaging in ‘lifelong learning’ are likely to channel their displacement by artificial intelligence into angry, reactionary politics.

And as AI ascends the skills level, the number of the politically roused is likely to increase, helped along by the demagogue’s traditional arts, now married to the focus-group phrases of Frank Luntz. Perhaps the machinations of turning ‘estate tax’ into ‘death tax’ won’t fool the more sophisticated. It’s an experiment that we are running now, with a middle-class tax cut just passed by Congress, but which diminishes each year until it turns into a tax increase in a few years. But how many will notice the latest scam?

The problem, however, is that even if those of us who live in non-shithole countries manage to get with the educational program, that still leaves “countries like Egypt, Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, China and India — where huge numbers of youths are already unemployed because they lack the education for even this middle-skill work THAT’S [sic] now being automated.” A large cohort of angry, displaced young men ripe for apocalyptic recruitment. I wonder what Friedman’s solution is to that.

The point that no one seems willing to raise is whether it might be time to question the cultural imperative of constant innovation.

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