

Book Review

Jason Resnikoff (2021) *Labor's End: How the Promise of Automation Degraded Work*. Working Class in American History Series. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. viii@251 pp. ISBN (paper) 9780252086298, (e-book) 9780252053214. US\$24.95 (paper), US\$14.95 (e-book).

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A century after Arthur Pound (1922) published *The Iron Man in History*, considered the first study of automation, Jason Resnikoff has written a comprehensive history of the same topic and American labour. He argues that although automation promised more leisure, a term he finds problematic because it insinuates that work is the default setting of mankind, it actually degrades work. The book is a history of the automation discourse just as much as of automation itself. The author traces a paradox: though automation was supposed to make for a better society, it actually led to the speeding up and increased exploitation of labour. Many automation analysts were starry-eyed, believing in a utopian world of less work for the same amount of pay. Some believed it would lead to idleness and a lack of purpose, as machines would fill all the roles humans heretofore had. Freedom was thus incompatible with work. But automation could create “a race of natural slaves constitutionally incapable of rebellion” (p. 143). Humanity would be turned into “cheerful robots”, as C. Wright Mills described them (p. 160).

Resnikoff's book is much-needed, as modern discussion on automation in the labour movement is scant at best. Historians have largely ignored it. Meant for specialists, this book will serve as a reference for all future historians looking to study automation. Resnikoff disagrees with the “technological determinist milieu” put forward by earlier commentators (p. 1). He argues, “The current use of the idea of ‘automation’ allows critics to sidestep the question of how power should be distributed at the workplace today and to speak instead of the possible effects of one type of mechanism on another” (p. 192). For Resnikoff, globalisation and overproduction, not automation, were the main sources of job loss: “When at the turn of the twenty-first century, managers shipped factories to the right to work South, to Mexico, and to China, they left in pursuit not of ‘automation’ but cheap human labor” (p. 6).

Labor's End is well-sourced, relying heavily on the Walter P. Reuther Archive of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University. Resnikoff visited the JFK Presidential Library, Harvard Business School Baker Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, National Archives, New York University Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive while researching the book. These archives are relatively common among labour and business historians, but Resnikoff is the first to look at them through the lens of automation.

The term “automation” was coined by a Ford engineer in 1947. The writer argues this was basically the same as what used to be called mechanisation, decentralisation and speedup. The

technology sped up workers, not slowed them down. The post-war goal seemed to be to eliminate workers altogether. Yet union officials who opposed automation were made out to be obstacles on the road to progress (p. 23). For many in the labour movement, “automation” was merely another word for “mechanised speedup” (p. 27). To be against automation was to be against progress, progress no union official wanted to impede: “But rather than fight progress by contesting the nature of these historical changes, the UAW [United Auto Workers] hoped to place itself at the head of the revolution and to guarantee for its members a share of the wealth the new industrial order would bring” (p. 24). In other words, “industrial progress meant the abolition of human labor from industry, and in particular, manual labor” (p. 2). The UAW contract of 1949 allowed management to determine the pace of work (p. 10).

Many saw automation as an opportunity to liberate humanity. Automation was used as an apolitical technical word, not a controversial political opinion that was subject to debate. As a political ideology, automation posed a threat to the idea of full employment. Automation was inevitable, it was progress. Corporations were scheming in any way possible to reduce labour. Simple-minded workers would have no idea how to handle their free time. Alternatively, some thought that automation would lead to a workerless utopia. This all would lead to a “truly democratic society” (p. 118). For thinkers like James Boggs, automation was the precondition for revolution, which would lead to communism and black liberation (p. 120). Yet, for others, automation meant the end of the work ethic that had defined post-war America. For the author, these jobs were not lost to machines, but rather to other workers (p. 189). Personally, I find historian Lewis Mumford’s conclusion closest to the truth: “As for the eventual assemblage of a completely automated world society, only innocents could contemplate such a goal as the highest culmination of human evolution” (p. 163). There will always be nefarious actors trying to manipulate systems of automation for social control.

Resnikoff ends the book with a warning on “surveillance capitalism” and the ways in which new technologies of control can be used by large corporations. This has become especially true in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased use of automation by multinational corporations. For example, Amazon rolled out a [“distant assistant”](#) during the pandemic to ensure that employees remain six feet away from each other. This shows how the owners of capital have exploited the pandemic for personal gain, paving the way for unprecedented surveillance capitalism. Robotisation means that workers are under far more control and surveillance than ever before. Unfortunately, the machines do not do the work, but rather speed up the workers. Future scholars should look at corporate “innovation” through a sceptical lens.

Instead of feeling powerless in the face of the third wave of automation, the author believes workers should feel empowered. “Free people do not ask others, ‘What will happen to us?’ They ask themselves, ‘What do we want?’” (p. 192). As the book progresses, however, it appears the opposite is true, and workers are powerless over the changing structure of industry. I am far less optimistic than Resnikoff on the future effects of automation on the working class. His analysis and refocus on the past – that automation led both to less jobs and harder work – portends poorly for the future.

Reference

Pound, Arthur (1922) *The Iron Man in Industry: An Outline of the Significance of Automatic Machinery*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press.

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