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Is that a singularity in your pocket or are you just happy to see me enslaved?: Transhumanism's class problem

Phoenix Insurgent

2009

The Financial Times reports today¹ that well-known technophilic and Google co-founder Larry Page has gotten together with X-Prize top dog Peter Diamandis to form what they are dubbing the “Singularity University”.² The SU, to be headed up by long-time technology writer (and originator of the Singularity concept) Ray Kurzweil, aims to prepare society for the day, not far off they claim, when the pace of technological and scientific change will increase to such a point that machines themselves will take over their own development, ushering in a very religious-sounding era of allegedly benevolent social change in which poverty, war and other problems will finally be solved by technology — rather than exacerbated (the prevailing sad state of affairs).

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Retrieved on 9 April 2010 from
firesneverextinguished.blogspot.com

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¹ www.ft.com

² singularity-university.org

I'm often quite amused by the religious nature of the technophilic view, not leastwise because its advocates masquerade so often as the emissaries of pure, logical thought. And yet, despite the obvious fact that human social systems impact both the development, distribution and application of technological "advances", the vast majority of transhumanists develop their theories of technological change as if class, empire and governments (among other things) simply don't exist. As if when this "new" era comes, it won't reflect the class interests of the people who developed it, as it does now. Somehow we're to believe that the product of a hierarchical class society will somehow, and quite magically it seems, produce a technological utopia that liberates the whole of humanity from tyranny and want — even though it's being developed by the very people who *benefit* from a system of tyranny and want.

Thus, their faith (and it's hard to use another word for it) in the benevolence of technological change is an interesting position to take because it is quite clear that we live in an era in which all the global apocalypses that hang over our heads are not waiting to be conquered by technology, but are in fact the direct result of technology. Nuclear war, industrial war, famine, ecological collapse and so much else have resulted precisely because of the interactions between the state, capitalism and technology, not despite them. And continuing scientific and technological advancements have not solved our social problems. In fact, most problems in the world await relatively simple solutions, not technological in the least, which the boosters of technological change, namely corporations and governments, oppose. For instance, the expropriation of the wealth and power of the elite requires no new technology.

Indeed, there is a larger gap between rich and poor in the world now than there was a hundred years ago. Likewise in the US. Hell, there's greater disparity in the US now than there was 35 years ago, the dawn of the computer age. In order to support the transhumanist position, one has to ignore the evidence that surrounds us every day.

GMO has not fed the world. People starve (or in India kill themselves with pesticide) because GMO dispaces them from their lands and livelihoods. People are more alienated than ever before, even though they are Twittering and MySpacing away at record pace. Highly technological warfare has killed a million in Iraq alone in the last six years while the Iraqis demand not a high tech society, but one free from imperial domination. Their problem would be solved by US withdrawal, not by smart bombs and retina scans. The easiest way to defeat malaria in southeast Asia is with mosquito netting, but instead anti-malaria drugs have created super strains. The emergence of the internet has allowed for the large scale tracking of humans as never before, truly a benefit to tyrannical regimes everywhere, such as the one in China with whom Google has so avidly cooperated with, complying with the so-called Great Firewall of China. The development of cheap cameras and wireless internet has brought us a surveillance society constantly under the watchful eye of authority. And yet the cameras somehow do not record when an unarmed Black man is executed by the police in plain view. And on and on.

The truth is, the failings of technology are myriad and everywhere to see, and yet its boosters, technological fundamentalists, continue to point to the future and say that someday it will finally deliver, even though they indicate no mechanism that will guarantee such an outcome. But the distribution of technology reflects class lines, just like the distribution of money. If the social relationships between classes don't change, why would the application of power (technology) change? Diamandis, perhaps, hopes that we'll all just forget to notice the relationship between the spaceships in his X Prize competition and nuclear missiles. But the fact is, if the class system remains, the result will benefit the class. His project doesn't exist in a vacuum, and neither does technology as a whole. If he researches rocket systems, he is benefiting from and contributing to nuclear warfare. Not surprisingly, both these two characters in particular sit atop the financial pyramid.

So, do Page and Diamandis imagine a world, not far off, when the power of technology will shake the capitalist system to its core, overturning class relations and freeing all of humanity? Do they hope for a world in which they can be free of their billions? Again, it doesn't require any technological advancement to accomplish a better redistribution of wealth, but if Diamandis hopes for an age without his abundant largess, it wasn't evident at a talk he gave at a forum hosted by the The Center for Technology Commercialization at the USC Business Masters Program, entitled "Space Billionaires: Educating the Next Generation of Entrepreneurs."

And it doesn't take too much of an imagination to understand the implications for human freedom that would come from Page's pet project, artificial intelligence. Page described AI as "the ultimate search engine — it would understand everything on the web. It would understand **exactly what you wanted** [my emphasis]." While he smiles as he delivers the line, perhaps imagining his own post singularity God-being in whatever second life he hopes to create, he obviously forgets what such a system would mean for those of us living our real lives in the real world dominated by powerful states and greedy capitalists made more powerful by their all-knowing computers (assuming the computers wouldn't just kill us all to begin with).

It's worth asking, would social change be possible at all in a world dominated by omniscient AI, or would an all-knowing elite be able to track everything, preventing any opposition and therefore transferring all power in the system to themselves? In such a situation, would everyone who wasn't in the Singular Elite become total slaves? Not having a countervailing force to compel them to relinquish even a little bit of their power, what possible reason would the elite have for providing the rest of us any rights at all under their technological "utopia"?

In an interview with *Fortune Magazine*, Page lamented,

You see, tyranny and holocaust (both racial and global) are never far removed from these kinds of programs. For more on this, I recommend reading Kirkpatrick Sale's excellent book "Fire of His Genius : Robert Fulton and the American Dream" which describes the link between the steamboat and the genocidal war against Native peoples in the North America.

But these comments also reveal a colossal disconnect in the heads of transhumanists like Diamandis and Page. They indeed mistake their own position, tremendously privileged both in terms of wealth and power, for the class position of everyone else. Note his statement about being happy to be slave labor for a space mission. Really? Does he think that goes for the rest of us, too? These are the people who will deliver us technological liberation.

Just consider the term "transhumanist." It's hard to imagine a term more fitting for a group of wealthy nerds uncomfortable in their own skin, isn't it? Like any good fundamentalist, they are ready to let slip this mortal coil for their reward in the great beyond. Still trying to escape from their dork high school personas, these new Masters of the Universe have mistaken their rewards under the capitalist system for a glimpse of our common liberation rather than what it really is — a snapshot of our current misery. They hope to impose their uncomfortableness and their own desire for liberation from their sad human lives onto us. But their liberation comes at our expense, in this world and in the Singularity.

Their Singularity isn't big enough for the rest of us. Perhaps that's the real reason behind the name.

If you ask an economist what's driven economic growth, it's been major advances in things that mattered — the mechanization of farming, mass manufacturing, things like that. The problem is, our society is not organized around doing that. People are not working on things that could have that kind of influence.³

Not surprisingly, he has a one-sided view of the events he describes even as he expresses every capitalists dream: to reorder society according to his needs. Firstly, he uses the passive voice to describe what in reality was a very violent attack by the capitalists on the lives of what would become workers. Secondly, the decomposition of the emerging working class that capitalists imposed through the rise of mass manufacture can only be ignored if, like Page, you don't recognize the hand of Capital at all in relation to the application of technology. This despite the many ways in which Google itself both creates and bends to the will of Capital, whether in its ad placement or in its censorship and regulation of YouTube, one of its many properties. Content on the internet must reflect the constraints of Capital like any other resource.

For instance, taking one of Page's examples, beyond just workers, mass manufacture changed all our lives, including those sometimes left out of the system of waged work like women and children, who found their lives, too, reorganized around the capitalist ethic of consumerism and later manufacture and commodity capitalism. Like the Singularity, consumerism and mass production promised the workers of the world great things, too. And so, the suburbs grew and the cars rolled off the assembly lines. And families were fragmented and lives became empty. But this new form of organization served the needs of Capital just fine.

Page also doesn't seem to remember that people resisted, often violently, those interventions into their lives. He doesn't realize

³ money.cnn.com

that capitalists use technology as a means for the maintenance of their power through the reorganization of the working class to better suit the needs of Capital and that those actions have far-ranging affects that are very often not positive for the bulk of people affected by them. Affects that, like the Singularity, do not have in-built mechanisms for the democratic participation of the great mass of people. Lacking them, how can we expect democratic tendencies to manifest? Since Capital is a dictatorship, isn't it much more likely that a high tech society like the one transhumanists desire would much more likely resemble tyranny than freedom?

What democratic mechanisms exist in modern technological development lie primarily in the realm of one dollar one vote, a playing field that obviously privileges the opinions of people like Page and Diamandis over those of regular people and probably explains their comfort with that as a standard. Further, those without access to massive amounts of capital find themselves entirely out of the game when it comes to technological development.

Whatever other democratic mechanisms may exist in the future — assuming any would emerge — would have to be imposed by the rest of society, much the way that workers fought to impose some sort of democratic structure on industrial capitalism through their self-organization and resistance. And, given the class position of these two capitalists in particular, we can be safe in betting that they would oppose such means were they to arise.

In fact, there is little reason to believe that Page and Diamandis really believe in liberation for the masses via technology. Consider comments made, and later retracted under pressure, by Diamandis at a talk on examples from history with regard to his alleged goal of opening up space to more people. One unfortunate example he chose: the German V2 program under the Nazis.

DIAMANDIS: If you look back at what von Braun did in Nazi Germany It was incredible what you can do with literally a dictatorship. Look at the numbers.

6,000 V-2s built. 6,000 missiles were built in Nazi Germany. The recurring cost was \$13,000 a launch for those vehicles. You can bring the cost down with mass production. We'll come back to what will drive ...

[Multiple audience comments — including me — “SLAVE LABOR”]

DIAMANDIS: Yea, and slave labor, Sorry.

[NERVOUS LAUGHTER]

DIAMANDIS: But you know — again to you the rest of us would happily be slave labor for that mission. Can you erase that from the video tape?

[NERVOUS LAUGHTER]

DIAMANDIS: But the fact of the matter is that mass production of rockets is possible if you have a real marketplace. And war is not a good one. Moving forward though ...⁴

Yeah, that's right, he said it. Slave labor. But it's not a bad example, really, is it? It certainly is a revelatory one. And it goes not just for Nazi Germany. Although Diamandis nervously claims at the end of that excerpt that war is not a good market, he knows he's lying. After all, if slavery was good for the development of the Nazi missile program, surely the Nazi state was as well. High technology depends on the nanny state for guaranteed markets for its goods and services. And the state, always looking for a way to expand its power and to defend its class constituency, happily provides. After all, once WWII was over the US fought hard to gather as many Nazi scientists as possible for it's own Cold War nuclear missile program, sometimes referred to in popular discourse by its doublethink titles of the Space Program or the Energy Department.

⁴ www.nasawatch.com