

Automation's threat to human workers keeps accelerating

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Automation's capacity to replace humans, already evident in such traditional blue-collar strongholds as fast food and manufacturing, increasingly affects white-collar workers, too. Martin Ford's "Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future" (Basic Books) conveys this issue's scope and seriousness, suggesting a "solution" that's sure to be controversial.

Neither a Luddite nor a socialist, Ford holds undergraduate computer and graduate business degrees. His quarter-century of high-tech experience includes founding a Silicon Valley software-development firm. Ford warns that increasingly flexible machines pose an economic threat so profound that they could force a "fundamental restructuring" to maintain prosperity.

Ford maintains that this technological revolution isn't likely to follow the pattern of its predecessors, which saw displaced workers adapt to new, different jobs. That's because computerized machines have such varied uses and can even learn from humans, who are more expensive to employ, less reliable and harder to manage. And if machines displace enough human workers and consumers, declining economic demand could endanger capitalism itself, he says.

Ford proposes a guaranteed basic income as the answer. Making what he calls a "conservative argument" for that idea to counter those who consider it a socialistic way of achieving "equal outcomes," he cites Friedrich Hayek as supporting the concept and calls it "a safety net coupled with individual freedom of choice" that would "give everyone the means to go out and participate in the market."

Ford says little about smart machines' capacity to enhance workers' skills and productivity, as New Scientist editor Sumit Paul-Choudhury noted in The Wall Street Journal. His review also

says Ford's "copious examples, striking though they are, add up to no more than strong circumstantial evidence" for his claim that this technological revolution is different.

"Rise of the Robots" doesn't make a slam-dunk case for a basic income guarantee. But it does make clear the need to come to grips with ever more rapidly advancing technology and its effects on how people make a living and how the economy functions.

BIGGER THAN THEY THINK

"The Global Village Myth: Distance, War, and the Limits of Power" by Patrick Porter (Georgetown University Press) — The author, a strategy and security scholar at the U.K.'s University of Exeter, disagrees with U.S. foreign-policy and military leaders who fear that technology and globalization are shrinking the world, making America and its allies more vulnerable than ever and driving them to respond with "domino theories," less-than-sober debate and pre-emptive actions. Maintaining that "total" security is not achievable and that the world hasn't changed as much as these elites contend it has, he explores the downsides of their security strategy, including reliance on drone warfare, emphasis on cyber war, erosion of civil liberties and the notion that any unrest anywhere threatens U.S. security everywhere. Whether readers agree or disagree with the author's ideas — which he will discuss Tuesday at a Cato Institute event in Washington — they'll find "The Global Village Myth" thought-provoking.

FAITH-BASED TIPPLING

"Drinking with the Saints: The Sinner's Guide to a Holy Happy Hour" by Michael P. Foley (Regnery History) — Readers need not be Catholics to enjoy this book, which advocates moderation, reverence, conviviality and discerning palates. The author, a Baylor University scholar who taught for three years at Notre Dame and holds a Boston College doctorate in Catholic theology, offers a guide to the Catholic liturgical calendar's feast days and holidays. He suggests appropriate libations for each and sheds light on Catholic connections to the development of various alcoholic beverages. More than 370 entries offer recipes for nearly 350 cocktails, including 28 original concoctions. They cover beers, ales, wines and liqueurs, too. Foley notes that medieval monks perfected beer, champagne pioneer Dom Perignon was a Benedictine and California's wine industry, which began with grapes brought by Franciscans, was revived after Prohibition largely by the efforts of a Christian Brothers member who taught chemistry.

IN THE PIPELINE

Forthcoming titles from both ends of the political spectrum:

Conservative

- "Will College Pay Off? A Guide to the Most Important Financial Decision You'll Ever Make" by Peter Cappelli (PublicAffairs, June 9)

- “Conservative Heroes: Fourteen Leaders Who Shaped America, from Jefferson to Reagan” by Garland S. Tucker III, foreword by Amity Shlaes (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, June 15)
- “The Queen: The Epic Ambition of Hillary Clinton and the Coming of a Second ‘Clinton Era’” by Hugh Hewitt (Center Street, June 16)
- “The State of the American Mind: 16 Leading Critics on the New Anti-Intellectualism” edited by Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow (Templeton Press, June 16)
- “Cushing's Coup: The True Story of How Lt. Col. James Cushing and His Filipino Guerrillas Captured Japan's Plan Z” by Dirk Jan Barreveld (Casemate, June 19)

Liberal

- “Sociology, Capitalism, Critique” by Hartmut Rosa, Stephan Lessenich and Klaus Dorre, translated by Jan-Peter Herrmann and Loren Balhorn (Verso, available Tuesday)
- “We Are All Migrants: Political Action and the Ubiquitous Condition of Migrant-hood” by Gregory Feldman (Stanford Briefs, Wednesday)
- “Living Ideology in Cuba: Socialism in Principle and Practice” by Katherine A. Gordy (University of Michigan Press, Thursday)
- “‘Red Ellen’ Wilkinson: Her Ideas, Movements and World” by Matt Perry (Manchester University Press, June 1)
- “We Don't Quit!: Stories of UAW Global Solidarity” by Don Stillman (International Union, UAW, June 5)