Algorithmic Futures – Between the End of Work and the Desire for Recognition

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The widespread automation of jobs could lead to a crisis of identity and self-esteem in humans, as recognition for socially useful activities is essential to human identity. Loss of recognition has been associated with social turmoil and the emergence of populist and authoritarian regimes. The new technological elites may pave the way for new struggles for recognition if the narrative of radical expendability remains unchallenged.

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Abstract

The widespread automation of jobs could lead to a crisis of identity and self-esteem in humans, as recognition for socially useful activities is essential to human identity. Loss of recognition has been associated with social turmoil and the emergence of populist and authoritarian regimes. The new technological elites may pave the way for new struggles for recognition if the narrative of radical expendability remains unchallenged.

We find ourselves at a pivotal moment in human history where, for the first time, we have at our disposal decision-making machines that match or exceed the average human in almost all tasks (and even surpass them in others). The horizon of possibilities that Artificial Intelligence (AI) opens to us is exciting but at the same time unsettling. As automation becomes more prevalent, uncertainty about the future of society increases, and it is difficult to predict what the world will look like in just a few years.

However, one possibility that seems quite likely is that soon, in a matter of a few years or perhaps months, automation algorithms will get so good that there would be little to no justification, from a technical or economic perspective, for employing humans in most occupations, even those which one might think would be safe from automation, like journalism (or activities that involve writing in general), media design, law practice, and so on.

Faced with this possibility, some techno-optimist visionaries approach the somewhat Marxist fantasy of a world without scarcity and the need to work. They dream of a society populated by algorithms and other machines, where each individual is free to live their life without the burden of work and with the right to pursue their own interests, just as Marx wanted: to be free to "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, criticize in the evening."

However, the Fourth Revolution, as some call it, may also lead to a less promising scenario. It is one in which human obsolescence leads to a profound crisis of identity and self-esteem in millions of people, due to the collapse of the idea of merit and the value of each individual's contribution to society. Social tension may ensue, compromising social stability at an unprecedented level.

The narrative of radical expendability is implied in many depictions of the game-changing benefits of AI: from health promotion to scientific research, manufacturing, financial services, and so on, and what this narrative is telling most people is that the skills they have acquired and honed over decades are no longer useful and that the activities that were at the center of their self-image as productive individuals can be performed (better) by a mindless algorithm. Moreover, this is presented with an aura of inevitability and rationality that resembles the inexorability which Mark Fisher used to associate with the ideology of capitalist realism.

The idea of personal merit is deeply rooted in Western culture. This idea holds that our success in life depends fundamentally on our personal talents and efforts. We

get from the world what we put into it, and this has been an idea that organizes our judgments of blame and appreciation, our attributions of responsibility, and, in a deep sense, contributes to the consolidation of our own identity.

This last idea is one that I believe we are not fully considering. "By their fruits ye shall know them", tells the proverb. But it is important to observe the identity-forming reference of this sentence: it is not only that we make ourselves deserving of reward or punishment for what we do, but that this exercise activates the gaze of others, who are now able to recognize our own value. Thus, our own identity is shaped by the recognition of others towards our talent.

Not coincidentally, the struggle for recognition is a central concept in political philosophy. We can trace its roots back to Plato, who described the parts of the human soul and recognized that between reason and appetites, there was a third part, thymos, which relates to the desire to be seen by others in our just dimension, but also to the destructive anger for the contempt of others, and with the search for honour. This is the source of our longing to be recognized and valued by others.

Automation, and its ideological association with the inevitability of radical expendability, threatens to deprive most individuals in society of the sense of proper recognition that results from the competent exercise of their talents, and the idea that someone can deserve something for their preparation, skills, or talent. This threat calls into question the very notion that human beings can perform valuable work and, with it, an important source of recognition and self-esteem.

This possibility suggests a path for the future of the algorithmic society that is quite different from the one proposed by techno-optimism. Instead of a future free of work, we may find ourselves in a scenario of the struggle for self-esteem, a war against machines for identity and recognition by those who, in addition to losing their place in the knowledge society and their source of income, will lose an important source of self-respect.

Some scholars have argued that struggles for identity and recognition are at the root of the current social turmoil and are mainly responsible for the emergence of authoritarian and populist regimes all over the world. For example, Michael Sandel and Francis Fukuyama point out, in different works, that the triumph of neoliberalism in the 90s led to a politics of resentment among those sectors that not only had not benefited from the new scenario of the transnational economy but were now seen by society as occupying a subordinate position.

If we take the example of the United States, the "losers of globalization" were mostly the low-educated, low-class whites who had been left out of the system and the pathways to social recognition. Their situation, within a framework of ethics of effort and merit that is recognisable foundational in American culture, was depicted as their own fault for not having trained their talents and having nothing to offer in the new scenario; and the new successful professionals that were thriving in the new globalized value chains made sure to let them know. As we know, the resentment and thymotic anger from this situation left the stage ready for a populist politician to take the reins of resentment and channel revenge: Donald Trump.

The elites that lead the development of AI today seem dangerously similar to the triumphant elites of the 90s. Multimillionaires who boast a culture of personal merit, who brag about their own talent and enormous capacity for work. Additionally, this new elite knowingly flirts with a Promethean fire that could destroy humanity (in a recent survey, many developers responded that there is at least a 10% chance of eliminating humanity). This exercise of unlimited hubris can only add insult to injury.

In this scenario, an alternative to the techno-optimistic vision of the future is presented to us. Instead of a future Eden without work, we can envision a society in which the struggle for recognition leads to strong social destabilization and the emergence of new identity leaderships. AI can be a driving force in the construction of a good society, but it can also accelerate social collapse if the ideological nature of the narrative of inevitable radical expendability remains uncovered and, most importantly, unchallenged.

The system is processing…

About the Author

Luis L García Valiña is a philosopher and writer based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. With expertise in American pragmatism, political philosophy and ethics, he is currently interested in exploring the impact of artificial intelligence on medicine, society, and politics.