

## Book Review

Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard  
*Entropy: A New World View*  
New York. Viking, 1980

Jeremy Rifkin with Nicanor Perlas  
*Algeny*  
New York: Viking, 1983

Jeremy Rifkin  
*The End of Work. The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*  
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons

Review by Howard Doughty

The promotion and interpretation of social change are activities that can bring fame and fortune to the wise, the clever, the opportunistic and the fraudulent alike. When seeking to analyze or advocate major societal shifts, we do well to examine the substance of the proffered insight and the political, social and moral values that sustain our sages of choice. Eugenacists who sought to understand and enhance the general level of human intelligence, ethical development and physical viability, are a case in point.

An accurate assessment of eugenics as a strategy for human improvement, for example, might have come sooner if we had noted that this radical application of scientific-sounding theory was equally endorsed by virulent racists up to and including Adolf Hitler, prudent liberals such as US. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendel Holmes, and British socialists such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb. The oddity of this consensus among non-scientists ought to have alerted more of the sceptical among us to the possibility of what might be politely called a practical "contradiction." Had we understood this mendacious pseudo-science earlier, many might have suffered less. We should have known better.

More recently, the current generation of emerging social leaders could surely have been spared at least some confusion had they taken notice that those who seemed in the forefront of progress and innovation were devoted to principles that belied the popular version of their litanies. So, Marshall McLuhan, the media guru, was a deeply traditional Roman Catholic who believed that our society could best be salvaged by the mass destruction of television sets. Alvin Toffler, who invited us to a mirthful ride along *The Third Wave*, has been an inspiration mainly to Newt Gingrich. And Timothy Leary, who preached (for healthy fees) the abandonment of materialism and the transcendence of the ego in a vial of LSD, turned out to be so narcissistic that he urged his followers to experience his death vicariously as he passed away on his website. These and uncounted other once fashionable icons of popular social analysis did far less damage than the high priests of unnatural selection but it remains questionable how much they - whether

through their mistakes or our misapprehensions - added to our comprehension of change. We could have known better.

Now, it is especially important that we do. That we are in the midst of a process of social, economic and technological change is apparent to all. That there are thousands of aspirant advisors eager to explain what is going on and how we might best survive and prosper in the new age is likewise clear. Variouslly described as the "Information society," the "global society," the "high-tech" society, or the "post-industrial," "post-modern," "post-communist", "post-capitalist," "post-literate" or, more simply, the "posthumous society," it is plain to all that something more than a bad case of the millennial heebie-jeebies is going on. Still when we hear about "cyber-this" and "hyper-that" and "mega-something else," we should be on our guard. When prophets vie for our disposable conference dollars, we must know better.

### ***Enter Jeremy Rifkin.***

President of the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, DC, Rifkin is a prolific author. He takes as his subject very large ideas associated with very large problems. He then distills them into spectacularly straightforward formulae and resolves them with a grand admixture of optimism, virtue and single-mindedness.

Sometimes he can be dead right. At just the moment when the environment was topping the public opinion polls as our most serious problem, he produced *Entropy*. This book affirmed that Rudolph Clausius' Second Law of Thermodynamics, commonly known as the law of entropy, is "the supreme law of nature and governs everything we do." It says, quite simply, that the universe is winding down. Matter is irrevocably moving from order to disorder. Eventually, even subatomic particles will decay. At a temperature of absolute zero, all energy will be dissipated, all movement will cease. This import of this assertion is of some significance.

Cosmologically, entropy means that not only we as individuals and as a species will cease to exist but that the earth, the solar system, the galaxies and the universe itself will reach their end. More practically and more proximately, it means that renewable resources have gone the way of the free lunch: there is no such thing! Rifkin successfully argues that the worldviews of human cultures to date have not only been empirically incorrect but downright pathological. Our understanding of nature has been quite literally insane. Even if we view the final extinction with equanimity, our puny acts of heroism in the interest of keeping our little planet in business for a few extra eons by means of recycling, solar energy and so on, anything short of a massive, reduction in the energy we use and the toxicity we create is pointless. We must make unprecedented sacrifices in our material standard of living and, in the long run, even that is foredoomed.

Through amusing anecdotes, carefully selected data, and clever arguments (his step-by-step analysis of the waste and pollution required to bring a loaf of white bread to a grocer's shelf is merely one of a number of wickedly delightful exercises), Rifkin's tale is almost too persuasive. So, when he tries to relieve the despair by offering hope in the form of "love," of the "savoring" of experience while it lasts, of an ethic of "self-sacrifice," of "faith in the ultimate goodness of the [cosmic] process" and an improbable notion that there is a "master plan" shrouded in "mysteries," it is much too little, much too late to assure redemption. Still, whether

or not the fate of the universe is to run out of steam and not as others tell us, to have the "big bang" reach a point of maximum elasticity and "big collapse," Rifkin's science is at least enough to prompt us to re-think our human projects in the here and now.

If Jeremy Rifkin can be deadly right, he can also be dead wrong. In *Algeny*, he took poor aim at biotechnology. "As dangerous as the arms race," the most awesome innovation "since the discovery of fire," Rifkin's supporters (including future U.S. Vice-President Al Gore) breathlessly received his "brilliant" and "daring" call for a Boy Scout approach to genetic engineering. His message? Be prepared!

Rifkin's analysis of biotechnology may, of course, have been well-intentioned. He said that he wanted human beings to modify our apparent technological goal of total mastery of nature. He asked us to choose ecology over engineering. He wished us to fight a war over values. "The resacralization of nature," he intoned, "stands before us as the great mission of the coming age." And what strategy should be used to achieve this mission? One word: "Sacrifice".

But what is to be sacrificed? A cure for genetically-transmitted disease? A stronger strain of wheat? A race of supermen? According to Stephen Jay Gould, the popular Harvard paleontologist, the sacrifice has already been made: it is any claim Rifkin may have had to intellectual integrity. Gould's harsh judgement, rendered in the January 1985 issue of *Discovery* magazine, merits full quotation: "I regard *Algeny* as a cleverly constructed tract of anti-intellectual propaganda masquerading as scholarship. Among books promoted as serious intellectual statements by important thinkers, I don't think I have ever read a shoddier work. Damned shame, too, because the deep issue is troubling and I do not disagree with Rifkin's basic pleas for respecting the integrity of evolutionary lineages. But devious means compromise good ends, and we shall have to save Rifkin's humane conclusion from his own lamentable tactics."

What got Gould so upset was the fact that, in order to advance his own wish to ban genetic research (he is a vocal critic of genetic engineering who has won a number of court cases), Rifkin has fashioned an argument against biological science that puts him in the same camp as "creation scientists". Darwin and Darwinian evolution, Rifkin holds, are mere by-products of 19th century industrial capitalism. Ignoring the fact that evolution is not a theory but a raw datum, he carries on a relentless attack on science as a form of knowledge by misrepresenting Darwinism, misunderstanding scientific procedures, mischaracterizing his opposition, misquoting his opponents, and mistaking the most elementary realities. As Gould recites: "*Algeny* is full of ludicrous, simple errors - I particularly enjoyed Rifkin's account of Darwin in the Galapagos. After describing the 'great masses' of vultures, condors, vampire bats, and jaguars, that Darwin saw on these islands, Rifkin writes: "It was a savage, primeval scene, menacing in every detail. Everywhere there was bloodletting, and the ferocious, unremittent battle for survival. The air was dank and foul, and the thick stench of volcanic ash veiled the islands with a kind of ghoulish drape." "Well," says Gould, "I guess Rifkin has never been there"

It is now fifteen years later. Rifkin has been active. He has maintained his interest in the fate of humanity and the environment (e.g., *Beyond Beef* [1993]), but he has now ventured into another field of controversial discourse and has addressed *The End of Work*. Is this most recent and increasingly influential effort an example of wisdom or fraud? Does he continue to be clever,

or is he merely opportunistic? Just as in the books previously cited, Rifkin deals with a matter of immense importance. Energy and biotechnology are crucial issues; so is the economy.

The response of much of the business community has been equivocal. Fortune, with characteristic subtlety, affirmed: "Rifkin is a bit of a nut." A little more substantially but equally predictably, the International Herald Tribune dismissed Rifkin's book as an "updated version of the Luddite argument" and, adding insult to insult, noted that "Karl Marx pushed this line [and] Karl Marx was... wrong." Other less ideologically-driven members of the business elite take his diagnosis of the labour market more seriously.

Much of what Rifkin says is, of course, neither wrong nor particularly new. Commentators from Harry Braverman in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) to Stanford University researchers Henry Levine and Russell Rumberger have understood that the so-called third industrial revolution involves both the reduction of employment and the deskilling of many jobs that are left. The "knowledge society" certainly provides interesting work for a few highly trained computer wizards but, as Levine and Rumberger pointed out 15 years ago and more, the real growth opportunities are among janitors and sextons, nurse's aides and orderlies, sales clerks, cashiers and restaurant servers. As well, free international trade encourages the decline in wage levels, environmental standards, health and safety regulation, and the kind of political sovereignty necessary to permit those countries still possessing the political will to build national social programs and economic infrastructures.

Accordingly, these assessments are more commonly transformed into "challenges," which is to say that corporate apologists do not deny the problems but claim that they are "temporary dislocations" and that a sufficient commitment to organizational fluidity, ongoing education and technological innovation will lead to an ever more prosperous future. Thus, what Doug Renwood charmingly calls the "digiterati" - the intellectual élite of *Wired* magazine - urge us to plunge merrily into the laissez-faire world of the web, confident that "trickle-down" technology will save us (and that, in any case, we have no choice).

The dystopian diagnosis offered by Rifkin has appeared often enough in literature. Kurt Vonnegut, for instance, said much that Rifkin says in his 1952 novel *Player Piano*. Unlike Vonnegut (to say nothing of Marx or the Luddites), however, Rifkin has a prognosis and a plan for palliative care.

On the one hand, he argues that work as we know it is done for. We have, of course experienced economic shocks before. Agriculture put lots of hunters out of work but created jobs on farms. Manufacturing put lots of farmers out of work but created jobs in industry. Automation put lots of factory workers out of work but created jobs in the service sector. But now, as the service sector is re-engineered and downsized where will the new jobs arise?

Rifkin argues that the answer lies right under our noses in the detritus of the immediate past. What seems a calamity isn't. We must only reflect on the Chinese word for crisis. It is composed of two characters: danger and opportunity. The danger is plain for those with eyes to see. Jobs are no longer being created by big business and the jobs created by small business are insecure; as well, jobs are no longer being created by government and the services government

has provided are vulnerable. So, what we need is yes, more sacrifice but also a reaffirmation of those old stand-bys, resilience, self-reliance and mutual aid.

If business and government can no longer provide prosperity and civility, it is up to us to take advantage of the opportunities opening up in the so-called "third" or "social" sector if we are to overcome the dangers present before us. The appeal to the community is heartwarming and not entirely beyond credibility as we note, for example, how well and effectively unorganized Canadians have responded to several natural disasters over the past year.

What were once acts of charity and what are now sheltered under the umbrella term of volunteerism are seen by Rifkin and others as a neglected source of social change, social transformation and "work." By empowering the third sector, by supporting NGOs with funds no longer needed by diminished governments, and by turning unprofitable but socially necessary projects away from self-cannibalizing corporations, untold numbers of people could be given useful work and be financially supported through a host of available and apparently pragmatic strategies.

Rifkin repeats a suggestion from free market economist Milton Friedman for a "negative income tax" as a covert form of guaranteed annual income. He urges the resuscitation of grants to volunteer groups modeled on the Peace Corps in the US and CUSO in Canada. He endorses forms of "Workfare" and asks that governments simultaneously reduce the anxiety of public sector workers by cutting the work week to 30 hours. Job sharing & decreased spending for defense and corporate subsidies, and a "value-added" tax on nonessential goods and services will help put the social economy over the top. "Preparing for the decline of mass formal work in the market economy," says Rifkin, "will require a fundamental restructuring of the nature of human participation in society."

### **Yes, again Rifkin has a large idea about a large problem.**

His description of the problem should not be seriously contested. Neophiliacs who remain sanguine about the extent of meaningful job creation in the "global economy" are becoming ever fewer. In the absence of some alternative, what, in a recent issue of the *Journal of Economic Issues*, Emily Northrop disarmingly calls "workplace turbulence" and "crime from the marginalized" are apt to shatter the complacency of even the most wealthy. Troubling only is the degree to which Rifkin and others like him have acquiesced in the idea of inevitability and the received definition of a set of problems that might have other solutions if couched in terms of a contest over power.

By focusing on abstractions such as globalization and technology, a belief in a sort of secular predestination is bolstered. Writes Henwood: "The end of work crowd may be deepening the sense of resignation that lubricates the austerity agenda, rather than encouraging a challenge to it." If this is so then efforts by trade unions, consumer groups, ecologists and isolated individuals to cope with or adapt to alleged "realities" can become exercises in self-defeat. If this is not so, then one consequence of accepting Rifkin's grand alternative vision is that we will have to accept on faith the willingness of both government and the corporate sector to understand and do their parts.

Economist J. van Gigch explained in a recent edition of *Human Resource Management* that firms in the new economy have a "responsibility to give employees security and training" and optimistically suggested that they would fulfill this duty. This echoes Daniel Bell's conviction, expressed 25 years ago in *The Post-Industrial Society*, that the firm of the future would display responsibility to its employees, to its community and to the environment, with the balance of decision making shifting toward the acceptance of moral obligations. In Rifkin, faith in benevolent powers again coexists with an ethic of selflessness to point the way to human decency.

In the alternative, it may be, as Henwood insists in a contribution to the leftist periodical, *Monthly Review*, that "Capitalism is fundamentally still the same beast that Ricardo and Marx described - a rudely expansive, ceaselessly innovative system... and one based on a fundamental hostility of the classes and a brutally destructive appropriation of nature."

In either case, Rifkin has set the problem of work well. Both self-serving champions of the unfettered market and unreconstructed Marxian skeptics will take equal shots at Rifkin's appeal to altruism and somewhat inflated ideals and that, alone, may suggest that he got something right or that he has at least raised important questions in a popularly accessible format. He may not have achieved wisdom but neither has he indulged in fraudulence.

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