

Wealth Gap, Death Trap

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“Off-peopling,” or the transfer of human tasks into intelligent electronic and electromechanical systems, is currently proceeding in a very unbalanced way – enriching the already privileged while perpetuating the plight of the poor and weakening the middle class. In the United States and the world at large, the “wealth gap” has been widening lately, with little sign of slowing its expansion. The current unbalanced off-peopling has many disturbing components. Four key ones could lead us toward a two-tier world of have’s and have not’s. This lopsided world, if not avoided, carries the risk of backlash followed by genocide in the name of security.

1. **Work, in most traditional forms, is becoming obsolete – with little attention given to creating viable economic alternatives.** Farming now accounts for less than 2% of the U.S. workforce, and is rapidly shrinking as a means of livelihood in China and elsewhere, as industrialization advances. Manufacturing, office work, retail sales, customer service, and quantifiable knowledge work could join the “2% club” as early as 2050, at least in advanced nations such as the U.S. There will be massive dislocation and backlash unless steps are taken now.
2. **Income disparity is approaching a flashpoint.** The gulf between rich and poor has been increasing in the U.S. and other industrialized or industrializing nations. Particularly worrisome hotspots of inequality are the United States (because of its military might, which is susceptible to misuse through misplaced anger by a disenfranchised electorate); China (because of the sheer size of its population and its growing economic clout), and the Middle East (because of its energy dominance combined with ignitable religious fanaticism).
3. **Through biotech and electronics, the “augmented human” is fast emerging.** Improving healthcare has increased the average lifespan in the U.S. to 77. This could start to decrease as the wealth gap grows. However, for the wealthy minority, life spans promise to lengthen dramatically, to well beyond 100. Biotechnology and related electronic technology promise to transform privileged individuals into superior specimens much less susceptible to the ravages of aging, disease, accident, or disability. In addition, human cell augmentation – through micro and nano methods – will give some of us powers that people never had before, yielding performance beyond that delivered by steroids or mood-enhancing drugs. Already, a rich American of 80 may appear younger than a starved Sudanese of 40. Between now and 2050, very long life spans will be sought by some. (Already many Americans are buying “cryonic preservation” insurance policies in a quest for near immortality.) Improving human health and longevity is a good thing, of course; the problem comes from the schism between two increasingly different “species.” An emerging “superior race” is not likely to survive the backlash of a majority that is left behind in squalor.
4. **The environment is degrading to a point of no return.** In the U.S. we eat contaminated salmon and try not to think about it. In China and India, people drink water polluted by unrestricted industry, and die of cancer. Global warming, air pollution, soil contamination, and many other dangers loom. Unless the

degradation is reversed, humanity's "home" will become increasingly inhospitable and in spots uninhabitable. In the absence of corrective action, a point of no return may be reached well before 2100.

Consequences of one or a combination of these four trends will be enough to destroy civilization. The fourth, death through environmental collapse, will have no defense after a point of no return. Violent repercussions of the first three could possibly be combated by massive defenses that could only be called genocidal. These extreme defenses are not likely to work, however. Millions of hopeless, disaffected people will have the power to "do us all in" through nuclear, biological, or other modes of mass death. It will be as if the world has become a "bomber" strapping explosives to its chest and setting them off in suicidal desperation.

A point of no return could soon be reached in areas other than the environment. As unbalanced off-peopling increases the wealth gap, more or the disadvantaged will be driven to crime and terrorism – for economic if not ideological reasons. Already, thanks to America's income disparity, the U.S. has a greater proportion of its population behind bars than any other nation on earth. Domestic terrorism has not taken hold here, except for eco-terrorism in the West, but could flare up at any time as al-Queda-trained immigrants recruit local malcontents. On the global stage, pre-emptive actions such as Iraq could become routine, initiated by Russia, Israel, Iran, Pakistan, India, and others as well as the U.S.

Business, along with affluent living, could become a gated activity. Security costs could soon rival employee-benefits costs, with less and less money available to hire and protect costly employees. Unbalanced off-peopling, hostile to employment, could accelerate out of apparent necessity. This would of course make the problem progressively worse. At some point, perhaps less than twenty years from now, the possibility of a turnaround might no longer exist.

The time for action is now. The only effective "defense" against the impending death trap is to close the growing wealth gap and structure our economies so all can participate, contribute, and benefit. We'll have one world, it seems, or none.

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