

Is This a Machine Age?

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This is a machine age, an age in which the machine is the producer and the source of power, an age in which ownership of the tools of production gives the power to exploit, some observers say. The machine is the cause of great inequalities, they continue, and they conclude that the only solution is for the state to take over the control or ownership of the tools of production.

But is this a machine age, and does the machine give power to exploit?

In a little machine shop in the Bronx, a rendezvous for ingenious

mechanics, some wonderful and complicated glass blowing machines were being built. Rough iron castings and bars were being machined to odd shapes and beautiful finishes, being endowed, it seemed, with the

very skills of their creators. The work progressed rapidly under skillful management and finally the first group of a dozen machines began to function.

What a maze of moving parts, what intricate functions! A savage, unfamiliar with mechanics, would have thought them human. The delicate finished product came out in a smooth unbroken flow. Those who had had a hand in building the marvelous thing were proud of their effort, for here was the finished product, something to satisfy the creative instinct.

Then one day, without warning, work on the machines came to a sudden halt. Many of the workers were discharged, and those left were filled with fear that they, too, might have to go. What had happened? No one knew. On one floor stood three finished machines and piles of parts in various stages of completion.

Soon a junk man came and offered \$300 for the lot, machines and parts that had cost around a quarter of a million dollars. Then the story came out. A new machine had been perfected, one so superior to the old as to render it immediately obsolete and of no value save as scrap. There was no dishonesty involved. It was merely that engineers had not stopped thinking.

They had gone right ahead to produce something very much better. Progress begets progress, and nothing succeeds like success.

The foregoing is not an isolated case. Those who are familiar with production know that no man can monopolize ingeniousness. He can sometimes monopolize ideas for a period, but that is all. Occasionally it is better to keep some process or machine secret than to obtain a patent, for a patent makes an idea common knowledge. Very often a slight change in design or principle will completely destroy the value of a patent. At times it has almost

seemed advisable to pay men to stop thinking up new ideas, for fear the industrial organization could not stand the strain of the constant changes necessitated by improvements.

Does this experience seem to prove or disprove that this is a machine age, and that ownership of the tools of production (machines) gives the power to exploit? If it does anything, it tends to prove that it is becoming almost impossible to get monopolistic powers through the ownership of ideas, and that brains can never be monopolized.

Suppose that the state should assume ownership of the tools of production. What would become of those inventive geniuses who design and build machines? Would they, too, be controlled, or would they be allowed to make the state-owned machines obsolete by designing better ones?

The usual answer is that they would be permitted to produce for the state. The problem, however, is not so simple as that. Every one knows the stubborn resistance to change invariably offered by bureaucracy. What would be the incentive for invention? Without hope of special reward for special accomplishment, and sure on the other hand of powerful opposition, would inventive genius be willing to em-

ploy itself? No man can drive another to think. It is possible that voluntary production for the state might take place if and when a living can be secured as easily as a drink of water can be obtained today. But there is nothing to indicate that such a condition can ever be brought about by bureaucracy. The evidence, rather, is all to the contrary.

Most people know, and they have it had it brought home to them more clearly than ever since this war began, that the earth is the source of our raw materials. And practically every one, too, knows something of one or more of operations which, step by step, fit the raw materials for the satisfaction of human desires. But not so many, as yet, know how we may free natural resources and make them available to all. Many fear the machine, believing that it competes with labor and confers on its owners the power to exploit. But if today, when the earth is not free, the machine can do no more than this story, and thousands like it that could be written, would seem to show, how much less need we fear it when the earth is free and men are at liberty to produce?

This thought is particularly pertinent at this time while we are in the midst of a war which, more than anything else, is a war of production.