

SO MUCH OF the world we know has been bound up in the process of selling and buying things in the marketplace that we can't imagine any other way of structuring human affairs. The marketplace is a pervasive force in our lives: if markets are healthy, we feel buoyed; if they weaken, we despair. We are taught that acquiring and accumulating property are integral parts of our earthly sojourn and that who we are is, at least to some degree, a reflection of what we own.

Now the foundation of modern life is beginning to disintegrate. The market institution which drove humanity to ideological battles, revolutions and wars is slowly dying out in the wake of a new constellation of economic realities that is moving society to rethink the kinds of bond and boundary that will define human relations in the coming century.

In the new era, markets are making way for networks, and ownership is steadily being replaced by access. Companies and consumers are beginning to abandon the central reality of modern economic life — the market exchange of property between buyers and sellers. Instead, suppliers hold on to property in the new economy and lease, rent or charge an admission fee, subscription or membership dues for its use. The exchange of property between buyers and sellers — the most important feature of the modern market system — gives way to access between servers and clients operating in a network relationship. Many companies no longer sell things to one another but rather pool and share their collective resources creating vast supplier-user networks.

In the new network economy, both physical and intellectual property are more likely to be accessed by businesses rather than exchanged. Ownership of physical capital, once the heart of the industrial way of life, becomes increasingly marginal to the economic process. Intellectual capital, on the other hand, is the driving force of the new era and much coveted.

Not surprisingly, the new means

AGE OF ACCESS

Can civilization survive when only the commercial sphere is left as the primary mediator of human life?

JEREMY RIFKIN

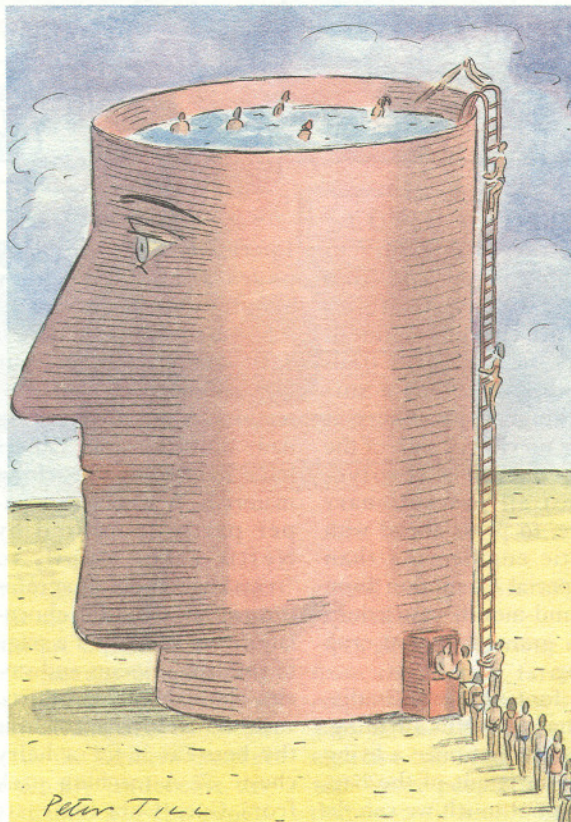


ILLUSTRATION: PETER TILL

of organizing economic life brings with it different ways of concentrating economic power in fewer corporate hands. In the era of networks, suppliers who amass valuable intellectual capital are beginning to exercise control over the conditions and terms by which users secure access to critical ideas, knowledge and expertise.

THE CHANGES TAKING place in the structuring of economic relationships are part of an even larger transformation occurring in the nature of the capitalist system. We are making a long-term shift from industrial to cultural production. Commerce in the future will involve the marketing of a vast array of cultural experiences rather than of traditional industrial-based goods and services. Global travel and tourism, theme cities and parks, destination entertainment centres, wellness, fashion and cuisine, professional sports and games, gambling, music, film, television, the virtual worlds of cyberspace and electronically mediated entertainment of every kind are fast becoming the centre of a new hyper-capitalism that trades in access to cultural experiences.

The metamorphosis from industrial production to cultural capitalism is being accompanied by an equally significant shift from the work ethic to the play ethic. The Age of Access is about the commodification of play — namely the marketing of cultural resources including rituals, the arts, festivals, social movements, spiritual and fraternal activity, and more. Transnational media companies with communications networks that span the globe are mining local cultural resources in every part of the world and repackaging them as cultural commodities and entertainment.

Cultural resources risk over-exploitation and depletion at the hands of commerce just as natural resources did during the Industrial Age. Finding a sustainable way to preserve and enhance the rich cultural diversity that is the lifeblood of civilization in a global network economy increasingly based on paid access to commodified cultural experiences is one of the primary political tasks of the new century.

The richest fifth of the world's population now spends almost as much of its income accessing cultural experiences as on buying manufactured goods and basic services. We are making the transition into what economists call an 'experience economy' — a world in which each

person's own life becomes, in effect, a commercial market. Selling access to cultural experiences is testimony to the single-minded determination of the commercial sphere to make all relations commercial ones.

The capitalist journey, which began with the commodification of space and material, is ending with the commodification of human time and duration. The selling of culture in the form of paid-for human activity is quickly leading to a world where pecuniary human relationships are substituting for traditional social relationships. Imagine a world where virtually every activity outside the confines of family relations is a paid-for experience: we increasingly buy others' time, their regard and affection, their sympathy and attention. We buy enlightenment and play, grooming and grace and everything in between. Even the passing of time itself is on the clock. Life is becoming more and more commodified, and communications, communion and commerce are becoming indistinguishable.

When everyone is embedded in commercial networks of one sort or another, cultural time wanes, leaving humanity with only commercial bonds to hold civilization together. This is the crisis of post-modernity. Can civilization survive where only the commercial sphere is left as the primary mediator of human life?

THE AGE OF ACCESS is bringing with it a new type of human being. The young people of the new 'protean' generation are comfortable conducting business and engaging in social activity in the worlds of electronic commerce and cyberspace and they adapt easily to the many simulated worlds that make up the cultural economy. Theirs is a world that is more theatrical than ideological and more oriented towards a play ethos than towards a work ethos. For them, access is already a way of life. People of the twenty-first century are as likely to perceive themselves as nodes embedded in networks of shared interests as they are to perceive themselves as autonomous agents in a Darwinian world of competitive survival. For them, personal freedom will be about the right to be included in webs of mutual relationships.

Just as the printing press altered human consciousness over the past

several hundred years, the computer will likely have a similar effect on consciousness over the next two centuries. Psychologists and sociologists are already beginning to note a change taking place in cognitive development among youngsters in the so-called 'dotcom' generation. A small but increasing number of young people who are growing up in front of computer screens and spending much of their time in chat rooms and simulated environments appear to be developing what psychologists call 'multiple personas' — short-lived fragmented frames of consciousness, each used to negotiate whatever virtual world or network they happen to be in at any particular moment of time.

Some observers worry that dot-comers may begin to experience reality as little more than shifting story lines and entertainments and that they might lack both the deeply anchored socializing experience and extended attention span necessary to form a coherent frame of reference for understanding and adapting to the world around them. Others see the development in a more positive light as a freeing-up of the human consciousness to be more playful, more flexible and transient in order to accommodate the fast-moving and ever-changing realities that people experience.

Today's children, the optimists argue, are growing up in a world of networks and connectivity in which combative notions of 'mine' and 'thine', so characteristic of a propertied market economy, are giving way to a more interdependent and embedded means of perceiving reality — one more co-operative than competitive and more wedded to systems thinking.

In truth it is far too early to know where the new consciousness will lead. On the one hand, the commercial forces are both powerful and seductive and already are bringing large numbers of people into the new worlds of cultural production. On the other hand, many young people are using their new-found senses of relatedness and connectivity to challenge an unbridled commercial ethic and create new communities of shared interests. Whether the forces of cultural commerce will ultimately prevail or a renewed cultural realm is able to strike a balance between the two

spheres is open to question.

THE GENERATION GAP is being accompanied by an equally profound economic and social gap. While one-fifth of the world's population is migrating to cyberspace and access relationships, the rest of humanity is still caught up in the world of physical scarcity. For the poor, life remains a daily struggle for survival and being propertied is an immediate preoccupation, and for some, only a distant goal. Their world is far removed from fibre-optic cables, satellite uplinks, cellular phones, computer screens and cyberspace networks. Although difficult for many of us to comprehend, more than half of the human race has never made a phone call.

The gap between the possessed and the dispossessed is wide, but the gap between the connected and the disconnected is even wider. The world is fast developing into two distinct civilizations — those living outside the electronic gates of cyberspace and those living on the inside, in a second earthly sphere above the *terra mater*, suspended in the ether of cyberspace. The migration of human commerce and social life to the realm of cyberspace isolates one part of the human population from the rest in ways never before imaginable. The separation of humanity into two different spheres of existence — the so-called digital divide — represents a defining moment in history. When one segment of the human population is no longer able even to communicate with the other in time and space, the question of access takes on a political import of historic proportions.

The shifts from geography to cyberspace, industrial to cultural capitalism, and ownership to access are going to force a wholesale rethinking of the social contract. A portion of humanity has already embarked on this new journey in which the material dematerializes and commodifying time becomes more important than expropriating space. Access is becoming a conceptual tool for rethinking our worldview as well as our economic view, making it the single most powerful metaphor of the coming age. ●

Extracted from Jeremy Rifkin's new book *The Age of Access*, Penguin Books, £8.99 pb.