

Los Angeles Times

October 11, 1995

PERSPECTIVE ON TECHNOLOGY; What's a Human Worth in a Workless World?; The displacement of black Americans when manufacturing shrunk will cross racial lines in the Information Age

By Jeremy Rifkin

A new study reports that one in three black men in their 20s are imprisoned, on probation or on parole in the United States. The breakdown of the African American family and drug abuse are often cited as the immediate causes of the increase in crime. Yet, a look back at the economic roots of the present crisis offers a far more telling explanation for the current plight facing African American men. Their story needs to be retold, as it is an object lesson for what may lie in store for young white males in the years ahead.

In the mid 1950s, automation began taking its toll in the nation's manufacturing sector. Hardest hit were unskilled jobs in the very industries where black workers were concentrated. Between 1953 and 1962, 1.6 million blue-collar jobs were lost in the manufacturing sector. While the unemployment rate for black Americans had never exceeded 8.5% between 1947 and 1953 and the white rate of unemployment had never gone beyond 4.6%, by 1964, blacks were experiencing an unemployment rate of 12% while white unemployment was only 5.9%.

Writing in 1964, civil rights activist Tom Kahn quipped, "It is as if racism, having put the Negro in his economic place, stepped aside to watch technology destroy that place."

The introduction of computers and numerical control technology on the factory floor in the 1960s accelerated the displacement process.

Sidney Wilhelm summed up the historical significance of what had taken place at the time in his book, "Who Needs The Negro?": "With the onset of automation, the Negro moves out of his historical state of oppression into one of uselessness. Increasingly, he is not so much economically exploited as he is irrelevant. . . . The dominant whites no longer need to exploit the black minority. As automation proceeds, it will be easier for the former to disregard the latter."

Thirty years later, African American men are being incarcerated in unprecedented numbers. While drug-related crime is the immediate cause for the rise in criminal activity, underneath lies a far more menacing reality: an entire people rendered powerless and hopeless by a society that no longer needs their labor.

Today, the same technological and economic forces are beginning to affect large numbers of white male workers with potentially ominous consequences for society at-large. Sophisticated computers, telecommunications, robotics and other Information Age

technologies are fast replacing human beings in virtually every sector and industry. Near workerless factories and "virtual" companies loom on the horizon.

While the emerging "knowledge sector" and new markets abroad will create some new jobs, they will likely be far too few to absorb the millions of workers displaced by the new technologies. That's because the new Information Age economy is based on the use of ever smaller elite work forces combined with automated technologies to process goods and services, while the industrial economy relied on mass human labor to produce goods and services.

The steady decline of mass labor threatens to undermine the very foundations of modern society. For nearly 200 years, the heart of the social contract and the measure of individual human worth have centered on the value of each person's labor. How does society even begin to adjust to a new economic era in which most people's labor is increasingly devalued and even made worthless?

Every nation will have to grapple with the question of what to do with the millions of people whose labor is needed less, or not at all. The growth of the penal economy is one way to address the growing social unrest, crime and violence. If we continue along that path, we are likely to see increasing numbers of both white and black males in jail in the years to come. The alternative is a soul-searching, nationwide debate on how best to share the vast productivity gains of the emerging Information Age to give every American both a place and stake in the economic future of the country.

We are being swept up into a powerful technology revolution that offers the promise of a great social transformation, unlike any in history. The new high technology revolution could mean fewer hours of work and greater benefits for millions. For the first time in modern history, large numbers of human beings could be liberated from long hours in the formal marketplace to be free to pursue family responsibilities, civic obligations and leisure activities.

If however, the productivity gains of the Information Age are not shared, but rather used primarily to enhance corporate profit, chances are that the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots will lead to widespread social disintegration and increased crime and imprisonment on a scale previously unknown in America.

Credit: Jeremy Rifkin is the author of "The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era" (Tarcher/Putnam, 1995)