

Rise of the Robots – Downfall of Humans?

What purpose does our economy serve—why do we seek greater profit? What does profit do for an individual, an institution, or a civilization? Does capitalism work in the way we imagine—and if not, what should we do about it?



On its surface—literally, on the cover—Martin Ford’s 2015 book *Rise of the Robots* would appear to be an unambitious, objective socio-economic look at one relatively small niche of the economy: that portion which has been automated by machines we call “robots.” From the very first page, however, it becomes clear that Ford’s ambitions extend well beyond describing life as it is today, or even simply extrapolating the likely consequence of developing better Artificial Intelligence and robotics. *Rise of the Robots* is far more important than its publishers and reviewers give it credit (and they give it quite a good deal of well-earned credit): it claims that the economy as we know it is going to be the engine by which humans develop themselves out of jobs, which, according to the logic of capitalism, means humans will soon have no purpose or use. In other words, if true, *Rise of the Robots* is also the most accessible, well-researched, and exhaustively documented argument *against* market-driven capitalism the world has ever seen.

Humanity’s greatest crimes have come about through misbegotten attempts at progress. Racial, economic or religious Utopias like Mormonism, the USA, Israel and other more extreme examples like China, Soviet Russia, ISIS and Nazi Germany inevitably require that some suffer or die so that others can prosper. Furthermore, human-driven climate change, the exhaustion of underground water sources and the poisoning of

Earth's environment all occurred so that people might drive reliable automobiles, avoid starvation, eat healthily, keep the hot part hot and the cold part cold and live without fear in places that see excessive temperature or hostile climates.

Ford claims the following: the automation of our economy is one such well-meaning catastrophe, and it is already more or less inevitable. He observes that whereas the means never existed before to make human labor obsolete, we are fast approaching a time when that is possible—and that the time it will take to make it possible is decreasing (we're making more progress, faster, than ever before). Technological innovation will, at last, make almost all forms of human labor obsolete. His evidence for this is compelling—that, in the last 15 years, most of the traditional manufacturing and industrial jobs once held by humans have been replaced by robots. Not just in America, either—overseas as well, in those places that manufacturing and industrial jobs fled during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. In other words, basic manufacturing isn't coming back to America, it's *no longer an option for humans*. Ford then goes on to provide convincing and compelling evidence that this change is already underway in other fields, including (among many others) that of journalism, the medium in which you're probably reading this right now.

So, reading *Rise of the Robots*, one is quickly convinced that Ford is correct, and our obsolescence as a species is inevitable. The robots are coming for most jobs—and, at some point, your own, whether you're a bureaucrat, a lawyer, a lab technician, a writer, in retail, a pilot, a soldier, a farmer, a banker, an investor, or a manager, to name some of the possible jobs humans can now hold but won't in the future. In fact, all but the most skillful, capable humans will find themselves locked out of the job market, leaving room only for the most capable or those who happen to be sufficiently wealthy or happen to be entrepreneurs when the job market closes, permanently.

He offers some possible and sensible paths ahead for legislators and intellectuals, but all face many deep cultural and economic challenges from those who stand to profit from automation. The strongest businesses today, the engines of America's economy, would hardly approve of "a living wage" for all American citizens, let alone global citizens. Universal health care is panned as absurd—the notion that anyone could gather sufficient political willpower in the USA to lay the framework for our inevitable *and near* post-human labor market is risible.

Paradoxically, the very moment at which it will be too late to predict or control our dependence on robot labor will also be the moment at which it will also become irreversible. And when one considers humanity's spotty track record with empathy toward the sick, poor, weak or vulnerable (humans, in this future scenario), it seems unlikely that those devices designed by the most profit-minded among us will have motivation or inclination to preserve the lives that made them possible.