

## Reaching Classless Utopia Through Jobless Dystopia

### James Boggs's Vision of the Transformative Potentialities of Automation and the Redundant Subalterns of the Rust Belt

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*“America today is headed towards an automated society, and it cannot be stopped by featherbedding, by refusal to work overtime, by sabotage, or by shortening the work week by a few hours ... The dilemma before the workers and the American people is: How can we have automation and still earn our livings? It is not simply a question of retraining or changing from one form of work to another. For automation definitely eliminates the need for a vast number of workers ... But about all the unemployed? What will society do about them?” (Boggs 2009, 35; 29).*

In 2019, this scenario sounds familiar to us. For instance, Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang frequently invokes it as part of his campaign to implement what he calls the “Freedom Dividend,” or the Universal Basic Income. According to Yang, a Universal Basic Income for every American—employed or not—would be society’s answer to the specter of automation-induced mass unemployment which is looming on the horizon. As increasingly smarter machines are pushing more and more Americans out of their jobs, a UBI would allow them to sustain themselves while adjusting to a radically different world.

But the words above are not Yang’s. In fact, they were uttered 65 years ago by a Black autoworker, labor organizer, and radical intellectual from Detroit—James Boggs.

In my paper, I want to revisit James Boggs’s reflections on the challenges and possibilities of automation which can be found in his 1963 book *The American Revolution: Pages from A Negro Worker’s Notebook*. I would argue that even 65 years later, Boggs’s take on automation still makes for a valuable contribution to our current debate on smart machines and the future of work. Boggs emphasized that automation might have more to offer than just technological unemployment—it has transformative potentialities that reach

beyond the vision of the Universal Basic Income. Automation might allow us to dismantle three core components of our current capitalist social order: The violence of wage-labor, producerism, and the destructive logic of racial capitalism.

Before I will analyze what Boggs has to say about these three issues, I want to briefly put *The American Revolution* in its historical context. When the book was published in 1963, the US and Europe were in the middle of an extensive debate on the social and economic implications of automation. As historian Amy Sue Bix has pointed out, in the US this debate oscillated between two poles: Anxiety and Utopian anticipation. Boggs's *The American Revolution* could be located neatly between these two poles.

The book was informed by Boggs's own experiences in Detroit's auto plants. When it was published, Boggs had worked at Chrysler's for more than two decades. Boggs starts the *The American Revolution* by talking about the rise and fall of the UAW, the United Auto Workers union. Boggs himself was a UAW member and organizer of many years. For him, the UAW had lost most of its emancipatory potential, however. The union had curbed its own power when, after WWII, it started to hand control over the production process back to management in exchange for better wages and benefits for its constituents. Management had used its strengthened position to remodel production in its own favor—often with the blessing of the union. This had discredited the UAW in the eyes of many workers, Boggs's included.

But the real blow for the union and the workers came when management started to introduce automation to the plants. For the workers, this had two devastating effects. First, the pace of production rapidly increased. Automation led to "man-o-mation" as Boggs called it (24). Humans had to work like machines to keep up with them. Yet, even more devastating

was that automation started to push an increasing number of workers out of the plants onto the streets. New machinery and the reorganized production process had simply made their jobs redundant. As more and more workers lost their jobs, the UAW lost more and more of its members. This further decreased the union's power.

But the important point for Boggs was automation and its ramifications. What automation did to the workers in the plants was nothing new. Jobs being shed as a result of the further mechanization of production has been a key aspect of capitalist development. Yet, the technological unemployment automation brought about had a new quality. In the past, workers made redundant by technological advances could simply pick up a new job somewhere else. But the growing expansion of automation to all sectors of the economy precludes such a job migration. As robots take over more and more jobs, redundant humans "have nowhere to go," Boggs underlined. They become what he called "the outsiders" – a social group which stands outside the production process and finds no way to reenter it.

Since capital has no need for them anymore, the expendables of automation form a permanent surplus population. Their ranks are bound to grow as automation spreads. This has grave implications for American society: Who is going to feed the expendables, if there are less and less people who still hold a job? For Boggs it's clear that the spread of automation pushes American society to the brink: "The growing number of the permanently unemployed is the ultimate crisis of the American bourgeoisie" (31).

I admit that it is hard to see anything good emerging from this dystopian scenario. Yet, as a self-taught Marxist, Boggs had learned to think dialectically about crisis. Automation might seriously corrode the established order of things. But in doing so, it creates conditions for emancipatory possibilities. This is what I mean by the transformative potentialities Boggs

pointed to in his reflections on automation. These potentialities might allow us to take on three crucial components of the capitalist social order: The violence of wage labor, the ideology of producerism, and the destructive logic of racial capitalism. What do I mean by that?

First, the violence of wage labor. Marx and others have pointed out that wage labor is inherently violent. For one, it is a social relation which rests on exploitation. Capitalists exploit the labor power of workers to accumulate more capital. Workers produce commodities for capitalists which the latter sell on the market for a profit. The workers are never fully compensated for the full amount of the labor that goes into the commodities they produce. This is how capitalists can make a profit.

Yet, there is an even deeper level of violence in wage labor. Today, the great majority of us dependent on wage labor to ensure our survival. In a capitalist economy, the basic things we need to survive—like food, shelter, and so on—have been turned into commodities. They are produced as commodities and must be bought as commodities. Wage labor therefore becomes socially and existentially necessary: On the one hand, wage labor produces the things all of us need to survive. It is socially necessary. On the other hand, the wage we receive for our labor grants us access to these things. Wage labor is existentially necessary. Particularly, the latter dependency is inherently violent. Having or not having access to wage labor becomes an existential question under capitalism. Our very survival can depend on it.

To bring this back to Boggs and automation, Boggs repeatedly highlights in *The American Revolution* that automation might allow us to do away with our existential dependency on wage labor. When the great majority of the commodities we need to survive

are produced by robots, wage labor is no longer socially necessary (41). We can have material abundance without the necessity of human labor.

If that is the case, we also need to devise ways to provide people with access to the commodities that the robots produce. The wage won't do that anymore because less and less people will still be earning one. Remember, Boggs sees automation turning an increasing number of people from wage laborers into 'outsiders,' that is people who stand outside the production process and find no way to reenter it. As this surplus population grows, wage labor can no longer function as the central means to secure access to the commodities we need to survive. Eventually, other means must be devised. The Universal Basic Income is one of them.

However, the important point here is that Boggs shows us that the detrimental effects of automation might present us with a truly transformative possibility. The rise of the robots might allow us to do away with our social and existential dependency on wage labor. This would enable us to end the violence that is inherent in this double dependency. This is a point that present-day commentators on automation, like Aaron Bastani, also emphasize.

Connected to this, Boggs indicated another transformative possibility that automation might present us with. As automation replaces more and more human workers with robots, it undermines an ideology which critical theorists like Kathi Weeks have called 'producerism.'

Today, a person's social and individual value is predominately defined in terms of the person's ability to be productive. Under capitalism this means being able to participate in the production of commodities. One's social standing and the extent of one's liberties greatly depends on that. Those who don't have the ability to participate in commodity production are socially stigmatized. This pertains to the unemployed, the unemployable, and

even those who work outside of the realm of wage labor. In this context, producerism is often used to justify disciplinary measures. Those who are “unproductive” might see their means for self-expression and sometimes even their liberties restricted. “Those who don’t work, shall not eat,” as the old saying goes.

But producerism is also active on a personal level. Internalized, producerism brings people to define themselves in terms of their productiveness. One’s sense of self-worth becomes directly dependent on whether one is being productive or not.

By radically reducing the need for human labor, automation obviously undermines the general premise of producerism. How can one’s social and individual value still largely depend on one’s productivity if the opportunities to do “productive work” are gravely diminished? Automation therefore has the potential to path the way to a profound transformation of values. In the jobless future of the fully automated society, people must “divorce the right to a full life completely from the question of work,” as Boggs put it (47). Instead of continuing to define people based on their usefulness as producers, their very humanity can be put in the center. “Now that man is being eliminated from the productive process, a new standard of value must be found,” Boggs argues. This new standard, “can only be man’s value as a human being” (47).

Thus, Boggs emphasized that automation has the potential to revolutionize the means of production to such an extent that we gain the opportunity do away with the inhumane ideology of producerism.

A third transformative potentiality Boggs hinted at in connection to automation is that automation has potential to create a situation which allows us to transcend the destructive logic of racial capitalism. What is ‘racial capitalism’? Drawing on the work of Cedric Robinson

and others, sociologist Gargi Bhattacharyya has stressed that capitalism operates through the process of 'racialization.' In the name of capitalist development, populations are differentiated based on socially constructed categories. A group's claims to general well-being, social possibilities, and sometimes even bare survival can differ substantially from those of another. This creates a social and economic dynamic of inclusion versus exclusion that capitalism thrives on.

Even though 'racialization' implies 'race' as the main producer of difference, other social categories such as gender, class, or dis/ability are equally mobilized. It is "the logic of 'race'" that is at work in 'racial capitalism,' as Bhattacharyya puts it (x). By that she means the "techniques of othering and exclusion" characteristic of 'race,' which create both "unpassable boundaries" and "embodied otherness" (2).

The production of difference through 'racialization' provides the ideological and material basis for marginalization and destruction in the name of capitalist development. Some populations and the places they inhabit are deemed more expendable to capitalism than others. In fact, capitalism has the tendency to produce these expendable people and places in the name of expansion somewhere else. Destruction goes hand in hand with production.

The displacement of workers through automation and the creation of the Rust Belt are two good examples for the destructive logic of racial capitalism. As historian Thomas Sugrue has pointed out for Detroit, the workers made redundant there by the introduction of new machinery were predominantly Black and female. In the 1950s, Detroit was the ground zero of automation. But what happened there also happened throughout the region which soon came to be called the Rust Belt. Automation, a crucial catalyst for the emergence of the Rust

Belt, targeted particularly the kind of jobs that Black and female workers had access to. Thus, the expendables of automation that Boggs called ‘the outsiders’ were a racialized surplus population. Their expendability had been established on the basis of their racialized difference.

Boggs argued that due to their absolute marginalization in society, “the outsiders” have the potential to become a transformative social force. Workers who still stood inside the production process were rather interested in preserving the economic and social system of racial capitalism. Their jobs depend on it. But those who were permanently pushed out of production don’t. Therefore, it was clear to Boggs that fundamental change in society “can only be brought about by actions and forces outside of the work process” (58).

The new society must be a radically different one, Boggs stressed. After all, the work process and the social order it was embedded in was being undermined by automation. Therefore, those who had been outcasted by the technological advancement of the old society “have to find a new concept of how to live and let live among human beings” (51).

Boggs himself points to the Marxist utopia of a classless society. The material abundance produced by automation has made such a society *materially* possible, he maintained. Yet, a *political* force was necessary to bring it about. For Boggs, the expendables of automation constituted this political force. They had been pushed into a position that made it necessary for them to go against the destructive dynamics of racial capitalism. If they want to be absorbed back into society, the outsiders must advocate for a society *beyond* the racialized boundaries of racial capitalism. In this context, Boggs referred to the struggle for civil rights. He wasn’t surprised that ‘the outsiders’ had joined this struggle in



great numbers. After all, the struggle for the extension of civil rights was one of the biggest efforts undertaken in the US to go against the destructive dynamics of racial capitalism.

After talking so much about the transformative potentialities that James Boggs pointed to in his reflections on automation, a reality check might be advisable. Since the publication of *The American Revolution*, the US has *not* become the fully automated society of full unemployment that Boggs predicted. Even though “the outsiders” actually exist today, and even though many of them have struggled very hard to make American society more humane, they were *not* able to be the revolutionary force that Boggs imagined. The “military-economic-police bloc,” as Boggs called it (92), made sure that many of them have been structurally confined, psychologically demoralized, or physically incarcerated over the past decades. Some of them have fared even worse. As of now, automation has not helped us to overcome the violence of wage labor. And producerism and the destructive logic of racial capitalism are still with us today.

Our world has clearly changed since James Boggs completed *The American Revolution*. But it is a very different world than the one he imagined. Yet, I hope that I have been able to make you interested in Boggs’s book, particularly in his reflections on the challenges and possibilities of automation. In the face of our contemporary discussions of this topic, Boggs points us to some of the transformative potentialities that we need to consider. The push for the Universal Basic Income might be a good start. But in order to turn the evolution of the means of production brought about by technological change into a socially transformative force, we need to go beyond the Universal Basic Income. Digitalization and artificial intelligence might allow us to do that.

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*If you are interested in learning more about James Boggs and his thoughts on automation, I can only highly recommend the 2011 issue of the journal Souls on The American Revolution. Particularly, the pieces by Cedric Johnson, Matthew Birkhold, and Stephen Ward have greatly influenced my ideas here. Thank you very much!*