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Book Review

Most Notorious Victory, by Ben B. Seligman, 1966. (New York: *The Free Press.*)

"With the victory of the machine—a most notorious victory—the attainment of human autonomy is at best moot." With these words the last sentence of the book explains its title, and encapsulates its theme. The author, an economist concerned with labour relations, sets out to attack the facile utopianism of those who see automation in offices and factories leading inevitably towards a better life, where all will have more goods *and* more leisure to enjoy them, and be delivered from dirt, danger and drudgery in their daily tasks.

The book is divided into four parts, each having three chapters. The first part surveys the developments of industrialization, and in particular of computers listing their uses from elementary book-keeping to artificial intelligence. Readers of this *Journal* could skip Part 1, for it is clearly the part in which the ratio of the author's knowledge to their own is at its lowest. At times, data are regurgitated rather than shown to be significant. For example, what does it profit a layman to learn that "The transistor is a device for transferring signals through a varistor", with no explanation of varistor? The snark was a boojum, you see. Again, as an example of the pitfalls of addressing expert and lay readers simultaneously, after explaining what a computer word is, and that it can represent either an instruction or a quantity, the author adds, darkly: "There are, of course, other systems as well, like those in IBM's 7080".

The second part of the book is devoted to demonstrating by examples that in America automatic machines—computers especially—are steadily permeating all areas of men's work; and that, contrary to what is widely believed, their use *is* giving rise to unemployment, even if this sometimes appears as premature retirement or delayed recruitment of school leavers. A surfeit of cases is quoted to illustrate employers' callousness in their relentless pursuit of efficiency and productivity.

The third part deals with various attempts to solve the labour problems posed by automation: so far unsuccessful, and in the author's view, likely to remain so. Neither the trade unions' work-sharing and retraining, nor the employers' insurance and relocation funds, nor the government's attempts to increase demand or to help depressed areas, have been effective. And, Professor Seligman clearly doubts whether they or their economic advisers yet appreciate that their methods are not geared high enough to tackle the speed of technological change. The technologists and systems analysts who promote this change are taken to task for leaving their humanity at home when they go to work. The "neutral artificers" of top management he calls them, whose interests lie solely in efficiency and securing the widest scope for the satisfactory display of their technical skills.

Professor Seligman would no doubt agree with that other American critic of the affluent society that business has become an end in itself; that giant corporations now foster their own growth, in expanding the power and the careers of their managers, and do so independently of their customers and their owners alike; that in this situation technology acts as a sorcerer's apprentice; and that those economists who should be sounding the alarm are still reading the signs of the times in terms of concepts appropriate to those halcyon textbook days of free-markets and the barter of shoes for cabbages.

In Part 4, the book restates its theme. Professor Seligman challenges the comfortable concepts that automation is only more of the old mechanization; that it creates more, and more interesting, work than it destroys; that it will advance so slowly that all will be well with a little redeployment and the gentle expansion of leisure. This part is the most philosophical, and in it the author shows his keen concern that men's work should help to bring meaning to their lives, and to integrate them into society. He notes that a man's work is widely used as a indication of his worth and his status, and argues that automation is a major threat in our age, by depriving men of the opportunity to work—or to work to create a product rather than to add infinitesimally to an uncomprehended process. And, he is concerned that the pursuit of affluence has dulled our concern for these things—that having eyes we see not.

The author's method of piling example upon example, reference upon reference (there must be more than a thousand at the end of the book, and many ephemeral), may irritate; and he would have done well to heed the advice of his countryman Oliver Wendell Holmes that "A moment's insight is sometimes worth a life's experience". Nevertheless, his subject is serious and seriously treated, and computer men would do well to read this challenge to their almost automatic assumption that computers are good, and more computers better.

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