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TO NORBERT WIENER

*whose wisdom and humanity is the foundation
upon which the age of cyberculture
shall be built*

The Negro and Cybernation

To visualize the future rôle of Negroes in a cybernated society, one must review, if only briefly, their past rôle in American society and what this means at the present stage of industrial development.

Historically, the rôle of the Negro inside this society has been like the rôle of a scavenger. That is, the Negro has been entitled to the leavings, the cast-offs of the whites: jobs which the whites did not want any more or refused to do at all; housing that the whites had moved out of; neighborhoods that whites no longer considered good enough for them; schools that they had abandoned.

In each industry where machinery played a vital rôle, the Negro played a special rôle—that of being the last to be recruited and usually only on an emergency basis, e.g., war.

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With the Negroes to take over the leavings, it has been possible for white Americans to continue to graduate or progress upwards as the country developed, in very real terms, getting better jobs, better housing, better schools and neighborhoods with every year and always at the expense of the Negroes. The country itself was able to develop because there was the Negro inside the society to fill the void left by those moving upwards, so that there was no waste of obsolete homes, jobs, schools. This is the process that has been taking place ever since the early economic development of the country, in agriculture and in industry.

In the eighteenth century, when tobacco was the main cash crop in the South, Negroes were becoming obsolete as crop-tenders, and in fact, there was widespread consideration of discontinuing the import and the use of slaves and even talk of sending them back to Africa. At this juncture, however, a machine was invented which was to establish the pattern for all future utilization of labor up to the present. This machine was the cotton gin, invented by Eli Whitney, which made it possible for mass labor to be used in the cotton fields. This led to a tremendous demand for slaves.

Ever since, each invention or improvement in machinery has created a need for more manpower. This need for more labor, side by side with the development of new machinery, has played a key role in the rapid economic advancement of the country, attracting wave after wave of immigrants to the labor force who, in turn, became the source of increased capital for future investment.

In each industry where machinery played this vital rôle, the Negro played a special rôle—that of being the last to be recruited and usually only on an emergency basis, *e.g.*, war. Only in agriculture was he the first mass force. Elsewhere he has been relegated to the most menial, manual labor under the worst conditions, *e.g.*, foundry, pick and shovel in the mines, rolling mills, furnace rooms, janitors, material handlers. Thus, in the work process, within American society, the rôle of the Negro has been that of the scavenger. He got the jobs which white Americans would not do, which they considered beneath their dignity, which they had abandoned, or in dying industries.

NO MORE "NEGRO JOBS"

NOW, HOWEVER, CYBERNATION—*i.e.*, automation with nerve centers operated not by man but by computing machines—is eliminating the "Negro jobs." Thus it is also destroying the process, the ladder, by means of which white workers moved up, leaving the dregs behind to the Negroes. Thus, in the last four years, the employment of Negroes expanded primarily in the civil service and social service arenas—jobs in local, state, and federal government in teaching and social work. Meanwhile, very few Negroes have been hired into industry, mainly because few of them have been taking up in college the kind of technical courses needed in these highly developed industries. Rather, Negroes have been taking, for the most part, courses in those fields which have been open to them—*e.g.* civil and social service and teaching. However, even here, except for teaching, higher standards have been set for them than those in practice when these jobs were "white jobs." For example, two years of college has become the standard for a Negro clerk typist in civil service work, whereas, years ago when whites dominated this field, a high school education was the standard.

Today, very few college-trained whites are going into these civil and social service jobs. Instead they are going into scientific research and development—for industry, for government—on the basis of the new and highly developed technological level of modern industry. Meanwhile, few Negroes are being admitted into these fields except on a token basis.

Because the difference between Negro and white employment today is so flagrant, many Negroes are demanding that their children get the technological education that will equip them to do what whites are doing. This thinking among Negroes compares to what is taking place in the civil rights field in general, where the great majority of Negroes still believe that all they have to do is have the same thing whites have, and be like whites, and that this will solve their problem.

THE OBSOLETE OCCUPATIONAL RÔLE

MEANWHILE, HOWEVER, EVEN WHITES are going to find out increasingly that despite their technological education, cybernation is going to make their occupational rôle obsolete. The computing machines itself is going to take over more and more of the work that now requires a highly technical education.

On the other hand, the Negro, who has been going more and more into the fields of education, social and civil service, is going into the fields where the important decisions will be made about the structure of society at the stage of cybernation. These fields have been vacated by whites primarily because material accumulation and industrial development have been regarded as the apex of our society while politics and social work have been looked down upon.

This means that Negroes, who can never become a major factor in technology from the vocational aspect, will become a major factor in determining the final disposition of the results of technology, *i.e.*, in the revolutionary and political arena where decisions will be made that govern the use of things rather than how they are to be produced. And these are the most important decisions in a cybercultural society.

Suppose, for example, that General Dynamics or another development corporation is contemplating the production of the kind of electronic equipment that would displace the vast majority of General Motors workers on all levels. The important question would not be whether this *could* be done technically. Rather, it would be what is going to happen to all these former General Motors employees, and how they are to be able to exist without their employment. In other words, the main question would be

a political question, not a technical question.

Thus the rôle Negroes are going to play in a cybercultural society is not determined by what they consciously want, *i.e.*, to be employed technically like whites, but by the pace and the manner in which cybernation is taking over. At this time, after all these years of systematic relegation to the rôle of scavenger, it is impossible for Negroes to be integrated into the industrial structure on an equal basis. Integration, at best, will be only a token not a solution for our old problems. Whereas, in past periods, there was a fairly wide range of jobs at the bottom of society which Negroes could fill as scavengers, today there is no bottom left *inside* the industrial structure. Negroes are still at the bottom—but on the *outside* rather than on the *inside*. And being on this bottom, the Negroes are going to be forced, more and more, to struggle in the political arena for the right to share what is achieved inside the economic arena.

THE BLESSINGS OF TECHNOLOGY

TECHNOLOGY BRINGS WITH it one major blessing: when it reaches the stage of cybernation it does leave an arena at the bottom for people. Inside production, exploitation becomes the exploitation of machines rather than of men. But when the exploitation of people *inside* the production process is no longer possible, the exploitation of the consumer in the market place begins. Those who control the productive machinery cannot exercise the same controls over the consuming have-nots that they have had over those who labored inside the production process. Being outside the production process, the have-nots can choose to exercise their political powers.

Thus, because the Negroes have been, and still are, the scavengers in the economic arena—"the last hired and the first fired"—they are in the best position to break with the economic tradition that has dominated the United States and that is becoming outmoded. The strategic position of the Negroes is on two levels: (1) whenever they are gaining employment, they do so in civil and social service and in educational fields; and (2) when they are losing employment and are thrown outside any employment

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possibility, they constitute a mass force with the most concentrated political needs. And, because they have the least to gain from this society, they also have the least responsibility to this society.

It is absolutely absurd to think that the Negroes, having been economically deprived for so long, will catch up economically with the whites, and achieve equality with them on a vocational basis. It is equally absurd to think that the whites, having entrenched themselves both physically and emotionally so deep within the economic structure, will be able to catch up with the Negroes in terms of political orientation or the concentration on human relations. Thus the Negroes, by virtue of their past experience, are better prepared for life and leadership in the new cybercultural society than the whites.

About the Author . . .

JAMES BOGGS was born in Marion Junction, Alabama. He never dreamed of becoming President or a locomotive engineer, for he grew up in a world where the white folks are gentlemen by day and Ku Klux Klanners at night. Even today.

When he was seventeen, Jim took off for the North. He bummed his way through the Western part of the country, working in the hop fields of Washington (State), cutting ice in Minnesota. In Detroit he worked on WPA until World War II. Then he had his chance to get into the automobile plants. He has been an autoworker ever since.

He has been a thinker since he was born, and a rebel for as long as he can remember.

Mr. Boggs is a member of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution.

