

# Education for Jobless Society

Alexander M. Sidorkin<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 18 October 2016  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2016

**Abstract** The advent of societies with low employment rates will present a challenge to education. Education must move away from the discourse of skills and towards the discourse of meaning and motivation. The paper considers three kinds of non-waged optional labor that may form the basis of the future economy: prosumption, volunteering, and self-design. All three require the ability of a worker to make meaning of his or her own life.

**Keywords** Jobless society · Motivation · Twenty-first century skills

The twenty-first century skills framework<sup>1</sup> has captured imagination of policy makers around the world. It postulates that the share of manual and routine cognitive labor is declining, and the share of non-routine cognitive labor increases. Therefore, we must reform education to provide students with skills more appropriate in the new economy: global awareness, financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, civic literacy, health literacy, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, information literacy, media literacy, ICT literacy, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility, environmental literacy.<sup>2</sup> The aims of the framework are worthy; those behind it strive to democratize the intellectual labor, and to help economies at the same time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Partnership for the twenty-first century skills, <http://www.p21.org>, Assessment and Teaching of twenty-first century skills (ATC21S), <http://atc21s.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Partnership for the twenty-first century skills, <http://www.p21.org>.

---

✉ Alexander M. Sidorkin  
asidorkin@hse.ru

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Education, National Research University - Higher School of Economics, 16/10 Potapovskiy Pereulok, Moscow, Russia 101000

The framework looked indomitable just a few years ago, assuming a certain image of the future is true: the one where most adults are still hired employees. Yet the twenty-first century skills approach comes short in another future where most people do not work for wages. Their creative and productive impulses will be channeled through various species of human practices, which can summarily be called “optional labor.” I will consider here three kinds of optional labor: prosumption, volunteerism, and self-design. Humans will still create value through these and other work-like activities, and there will be an education helping them to do that. The advent of optional labor will have increasingly substantial impact on the entire economic order, and it will affect education in ways missed by the proponents of the twenty-first century skills. Education should prepare students for the world of optional labor, which involves, fundamentally, attending more to students’ ability to create meaning than to their skills.

The problem of preparation for non-routine cognitive work is difficult to address, for we have not yet learned how to measure such skills that include critical and creative thinking, emotional and social intelligence, let alone how to develop them in all children. Some of the most innovative work in educational assessment is being done to address the issue. For example, Patrick Griffin and his colleagues in Australia, have married data mining techniques with the item response theory to produce a working prototype of an instrument for measuring ability to collaborate, readiness to take other’s perspective, cooperative problem-solving ability, etc.<sup>3</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has two separate international projects: one on social and emotional skills, and another on creative and critical thinking. My sincere hope is that such attempts succeed and better instruments are developed. An even greater hope is that we eventually rearrange our educational systems to serve the development of twenty-first century skills in all children, regardless of social class and racial or ethnic background.

This paper, however, will consider a strange but real possibility that the problem of preparing the masses for advanced cognitive labor may actually solve itself, and not in an entirely good way. It may do so because, regardless of the skills, we may simply run out of jobs because of technological advances. It is immediately apparent that the automatic solving of the skills problem will create another, and perhaps more profound problem of how to educate for mass unemployment. We simply do not know how education should function in a society where only a minority of people gets jobs. It is because we do not know how such a society will look like, let alone how it will educate its citizens.

Philosophically, the story I am about to consider is a case of dealing with the unprecedented. How do we deal with the unprecedented? In traditional fields, like education, people tend to deal with it one of two major ways. The first is in finding a major precedent anyway, finding something in the unprecedented that resembles the past, and thus recasting the new as a return of the old. The second way consists of slipping into irresponsible speculation, by assuming that everything is going to be different now, as if the fundamentals of human life are going to change drastically.

Neither of the two ways strategies is, in my view, very productive. The sensible way of dealing with the unprecedented is paying attention to the small and early manifestations of the unprecedented, the precursors. One should avoid understanding the unprecedented through the lenses of the past or the future; it is to be understood through the careful examination of the present.

---

<sup>3</sup> Griffin, Patrick, McGaw, Barry, Care, Esther (Eds.), *Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills*, Springer, 2012.

## The Jobless Economy

In the middle of the Great Depression, in 1930, J. M. Keynes wrote an essay “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren.” He asserts that “in the long run ... mankind is solving its economic problem,” and that the latter is “not a permanent problem of the human race.”<sup>4</sup> He continues:

If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose. Will this be a benefit? If one believes at all in the real values of life, the prospect at least opens up the possibility of benefit.<sup>5</sup>

In 15 years or so we will be nearing the year Keynes allocated for solving the economic problem, or having it, as he put it, within sight of solution. How are we doing so far?

In the Spring of 2015, NPR’s “Planet Money” produced several episodes with telling titles: *When Luddites Attack*, *Humans vs. Robots*, *The Machine Comes To Town*, *I, Waiter*, and *The Last Job*.<sup>6</sup> The last one portrays a holder of the last job that consists of enforcing a ban on production by humans. In the not-so-distant utopian future, everything must be produced by machines, in a safe and consistent manner. An underground network defies the law by making things by hand. Our hero busts an underground trinket shop: “What are you all working on? Everyone, stop the work that you’re doing right now. I’m with Quality Control. This—this is an illegal facility. Step away from that table.”<sup>7</sup> The underground workshops make imperfect objects in order to return humans to their nature, which is work. Irony aside, the workless future seems to be somehow disturbing, infringing on something essential about human beings. The dialogue of David, the Quality Control man with a neo-Luddite goes like this:

- A long time ago, we used to keep cats around because they would hunt for mice. Eventually, human beings invented mousetraps. But cats still needed to hunt. Cats have to hunt mice. It’s what they do. It’s in their nature. So we invented toys to keep the cats occupied—Mylar ribbon to tackle, laser pointers to chase around.
- OK, is there a point to this story?
- Look around, David. Our entire world today is just a world of laser pointers and Mylar ribbon and no meaning whatsoever.<sup>8</sup>

And it is not just radio; in the last few years, serious economists began to wonder about an exotic issue that previously bothered only marginal ones, or philosophers, or the sci-fi writers. It is the problem of jobless economy, made more plausible by several actual jobless recoveries (where GDP recovers and grows, but jobs never fully recover). An influential report by Sui and Jaimovich<sup>9</sup> vividly demonstrates how the jobless recoveries work: “routine occupations do not recover afterwards. In fact, employment in this occupational group never recovers: these occupations are disappearing.” Even though the US economy is in full recovery now, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the employment-population ratio at 59.2 %, and that “1.9 million persons were marginally attached to the

<sup>4</sup> Keynes J.M. (1930), “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren”.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Episode 625: The Last Job*, Planet Money, NPR, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=408292388>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thirdway.org/report/jobless-recoveries>.

labor force.”<sup>10</sup> Keynes called this *technological unemployment*: “due to our discovery of means of economising the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour.”<sup>11</sup>

Is it too early to worry about it? I don’t think so. A child born today will graduate from college in 2037, by which time the jobless society may become a reality in some parts of the world. But consider the present. I have recently visited a friend who has lost his good banking job some fifteen years ago, at the age of 45, and was never able to find anything comparable. He had little desire to deliver pizza or sell shoes, so he chose the life of a discouraged worker, doing odd singing gigs, spending time with friends, and living in his mother’s basement while minimizing expenses. Many of us know of people like that. Some are, like my friend, have adjusted to their situation, while others suffer from depression, addiction, social isolation, and poor health.

Experiments on the minimum basic income are catching on in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland.<sup>12</sup> The justification is partially linked to the premise that jobless economy may become a reality. For example, the author of the German experiment Michael Bohmeyer is quoted saying “Machines are going to be taking care of just about everything for us over time. So to be able to work creatively, people need some security, they need to feel free. And they can get that with a basic income.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the economy has already begun to shift to the optional labor. Interestingly, the idea seems to be popular on both the Left and the Right sides of the political spectrum, although for different reasons. The former sees it as a social justice issue, while the latter—as a way to optimize the welfare system.

Other economists believe that such worries are a contemporary version of the “Luddite fallacy.” While some jobs disappear, others develop, and eventually most people find employment, as it happened more than once before. The industrial revolution is the major case in point. The phenomenon responsible for regaining employment after technological innovation is called the “compensation effects.”<sup>14</sup> The effects may include new products, new investments, lower prices, and changes in wages, all of which tend to create more employment, albeit of a different kind. The results of the debates are not clear yet. In August 2016, the employment rate in the US is very close to normal 5 %: “In August, the lowest unemployment rate was in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 2.1 %. Yuma, Arizona, and El Centro, California, had the highest unemployment rates, 24.6 and 23.8 %, respectively.”<sup>15</sup> There is no real cause for immediate concern.

Yet, let us entertain the thought that eventually it may change. It may one day actually be the wolf, for real, regardless of what people have cried on earlier occasions. In his seminal 1983 paper, Wassily Leontief wrote:

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Keynes.

<sup>12</sup> Hamilton Nolan, “The Brilliant Simplicity of a Guaranteed Minimum Income,” *The Gawker* 12/28/15, <http://gawker.com/the-brilliant-simplicity-of-a-guaranteed-minimum-income-1749933197>.

<sup>13</sup> Erik Kirschbaum, “If you were handed \$1,100 a month, would you amount to anything?”, *Los Angeles Times* 12/27/2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-germany-basic-income-20151227-story.html>.

<sup>14</sup> For a literature review, see, for example, Marco Vivarelli (January 2012). “Innovation, Employment and Skills in Advanced and Developing Countries: A Survey of the Literature,” *Institute for the Study of Labor*, <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6291.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/sioux-falls-south-dakota-has-lowest-metro-area-unemployment-rate-in-august-2016-at-2-point-1-percent.htm>.

[...]the introduction of the new computer-based technology can be expected to provide continuous support for rapid expansion of the total output of goods and services initiated by the invention of the steam engine 200 years ago; however, while the technology that dominated the scene in the course of the last 150 years secured at the same time, through automatic operation of the competitive price mechanism, a socially acceptable system of income distribution, the new technology diminishes the role of human labor in production to such an extent that it is bound to bring about not only long run technological unemployment, but-if permitted to operate within the framework of the automatic competitive price mechanism-also a shift toward a more skewed and, because of that, socially unacceptable distribution of income.<sup>16</sup>

If those who worry about jobless economy are right, our societies are faced with a huge challenge. Human societies evolved to value one's work, or another form of occupation, such as military or civil service. We may have millennia-old dreams of the age of leisure, but in fact, we treat the unemployed terribly, and the unemployed themselves often do not show great coping mechanisms. As Leontief shows, the income inequality itself will produce a very difficult social problem of increasing income gap and associated with it social instability. And so far, his predictions seem to be correct.

## Education Without Jobs

In education, the problem of jobless society presents itself in a unique and peculiar way: How do we convince kids to come to school, if in the future, there will be no employment for all or even most of them? If we lose the use of the preparation for work discourse, what will motivate children to stay in school and apply effort to learning?

It is important to mention that in education, there has always been an alternative point of view that emphasized the non-instrumental value of education. One example would be Dewey's understanding of the purpose of education as "to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities."<sup>17</sup> Such ideas have remained largely philosophical and penetrated neither popular opinion, nor policymaking circles. Importantly, we are not returning to some mythical past where the broader, more Deweyan purposes of education was dominant. In other words, this problem is unprecedented. We cannot attempt to find a precedent anyway. Dewey argued against narrow, utilitarian understanding of education. However, he had not specifically considered the situation where the society will no actually *need* most people's capacities for anything. It is one thing to envision education in a broader sense, and quite another—experience the removal of its core—preparation for productive life. Keynes, who viewed the jobless society as a good thing overall, nevertheless added: "Yet I think with dread of the readjustment of the habits and instincts of the ordinary man, bred into him for countless generations, which he may be asked to discard within a few decades."<sup>18</sup> He feared social disruptions that would come with transition to jokes societies, and we actually may witness their beginning.

<sup>16</sup> Wassily Leontief, "Technological Advance, Economic Growth, and the Distribution of Income," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Sep., 1983), pp. 403–410: 408–409.

<sup>17</sup> John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *School Journal* vol. 54 (January 1897), pp. 77–80, cited via <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

High drop-out rates among the inner city youth can be better explained by the (correctly perceived) low probability of good employment than by social and cultural factors. The problem of education for the low-employment society may be alternatively presented as the threat of an expansion of the inner-city schooling model into a wider segment of the population. Now we are at least trying to pretend that schooling is a ticket to the middle class life. We do that by exaggerating kids' chances of converting their education into good jobs. If the number of jobs keep shrinking, the pretense will be much harder to sustain.

The pragmatic side of the problem I am trying to address is that of a schoolmaster, who welcomes students on the first day of school, and is struggling to articulate what school is all about. "Welcome to school," she says. "It is a place where we learn how to read, write, understand math in order to become...." The end of the welcoming speech will have to be rethought, when actual unemployment reaches the 50 % mark.

Will schooling as an institution survive the transition to the jobless society, or will it be replaced by another institution or institutions? My guess is that schools will endure, because education is so ingrained into our collective imagination. We usually construct the future out of what we already have. Human institutions are few, they are difficult to build, and we should try to recycle. Yet schools' and colleges' survival in the jobless society is not guaranteed; it is predicated on their ability to reinvent themselves for the world of optional labor.

Waged labor is not something that was with us or likely to remain forever; it is but one of many possible institutional arrangements for getting people to do something useful they would rather not do. Historically, there have been many kinds of unwaged labor. The primitive communism of hunters and gatherers, the tribal patterns of work and exchange, ancient and modern slavery, bonded labor, peonage, domestic labor of women, volunteerism, army conscription, labor taxation, and many other kinds of unwaged labor existed and continue to exist. Note that the unwaged labor can be some of the most exploitative, because it usually renders the economics invisible. Within the capitalist mode of production, unwaged labor has not completely disappeared, and includes, primarily the domestic and child-rearing labor of women. Moreover, unwaged labor seems to be making a spectacular comeback in several forms, which is connected to the advent of the future jobless society. The future is always already there; it just exists in smaller pockets of the present, and looks marginal. This is what I mean by the middle way of dealing with the unprecedented—it is a search for "small" precedents within the future without assuming that the world will fundamentally change.

I will now consider three examples of the optional labor. Each presents the problem of education for optional labor in different ways. However, by overlapping the three pictures, we can start seeing a fuller pattern in the emerging vague image of the future education.

## Prosumtion

Prosumtion (production + consumption) is a phenomenon made visible with the advance of Web 2.0. According to Ritzer and Jurgenson,<sup>19</sup> early capitalism in the first two centuries after the Industrial Revolution was dominated by production. After the WWII, developed countries' economies gradually shifted toward consumption. They place the emergence of the prosumer society at the crisis of 2007. Alvin Toffler has actually invented the term

<sup>19</sup> Ritzer, J., Jurgenson, N. (2010), "Production, Consumption, Prosumtion: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer'," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2010 10: 13. doi:[10.1177/1469540509354673](https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540509354673).

“prosumption,” and argued that the separation of production from consumption was a temporary aberration.<sup>20</sup> It did not exist in pre-capitalist societies and will not exist in the future economies.

Despite the clear origins of the terms, it came to mean a family of phenomena. Below is my own attempt to break them into groups. I borrow some of the examples below from Ritzer and Jurgenson.

1. In the narrowest sense, prosumers create content within the Web 2.0 framework. For example, Facebook, blogs, Wikipedia, twitter, Instagram, etc. it is simply content that people create for free for others. These are the active prosumers. Their motivation can differ, and perhaps difficult to pinpoint, from the pure pleasure a creative act to the need for attention. But in any case, these are the intentional prosumers.
2. A little more exotic subset prosumption is when a person unintentionally produces value for others through the act of consumption, without actually intending to produce something of value. For example, every time we use Google, it learns something from our use, and updates its algorithms. Similarly, Netflix and Amazon learn not only about our preferences, but also build predictive models of other people’s preferences. The distinct feature of these prosumers is that they create value for others, along with creating value for themselves. Most people are vaguely aware that they create value by using the services, but they can hardly be labeled voluntary. Strictly speaking, there has always been a productive element in consumption, for any act of purchasing a good or a service plays a signaling role in encouraging further supply. This is nothing new, but the way Google and others learned to use the signaling data beyond monetary exchange is truly remarkable.
3. The third kind of prosumers creates value mostly for themselves. It can be done either by exchanging a bit of one’s own labor for discounted prices (e.g. the IKEA warehouse, Home Depot and DIY culture, scanning and bagging one’s own groceries). This kind of prosumption still may feel like work, but it is experienced as self-serving work, where results are immediately consumed by the same person who acted as producer.

Zitzer and Jurgenson make far-reaching conclusions about the emergence of an entirely new economic system, based on abundance of content created by prosumers for each other for free. I am more interested here in a narrower question about the changing nature of labor. Prosumption in all three cases solves what Marx has described as alienation of labor.<sup>21</sup> Prosumption indeed removes the need for a specific extrinsic motivation. It also removes the need for highly specialized skills, and for the resulting significant division of labor. Both of these are factors contributing to alienation of labor. Prosumption allows people to use such skills as they find enjoyable, and exactly at the level they were able to develop, and feel good about applying. Those are not the rigorous demands of the labor market. Prosumer may appear to be deskilled, but I doubt it is indeed the case. Prosumption occurs where people already have the motivation to be active and creative. It converts the intrinsic passions into a real economic value.

Most occupations contain elements of enjoyable activities and drudgery. Technological revolutions have been gradually reducing the share of drudgery in many occupations and eliminating the overwhelmingly dull ones altogether, and thus increasing the share of

---

<sup>20</sup> Toffler, A. (1980) *The Third Wave*. New York: William Morrow.

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive review, see Istvan Meszaros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1975).

pleasurable components. Some of the most creative occupations like art can serve as a model for the future. Yes, there is effort, discipline, and struggle in artistic endeavors. But many people are fine with the personal costs, because the self-motivating part of the work is so powerful. If we simply extrapolate the current trend, we can see a world where it is no longer necessary to bribe people into accepting the dull parts of their work. As the balance between enjoyable and dull elements within an occupations shifts, it does not have to shift all the way. It just needs to reach a point where many people will find it worth suffering the dull and difficult for the sake of enjoyable or otherwise satisfying. At that point an occupation does not need the help of wages to incentivize participants. Of course, those tipping points are different for different occupations. But my point was only to illustrate that occupations need not to be fully automated and replaced; we just need to learn to cut out the dull bits.

All the types of prosumption described above still do require a certain level of sophistication, including literacy, numeracy, and the motivation to consume complex products created by others. A good prosumer is someone who has the taste for life, the will to consume broadly and creatively, and does not mind applying an effort working to make their consumption more fulfilling. The schoolmaster's welcome word may sound something like this: "School is a place where we learn how to read, write, and count in order to be able to do what you enjoy most for the rest of your life."

## Volunteerism

In her 2011 essay, Andrea Muehlebach paints a picture of what she calls the unwaged affective labor in the post-Fordist Italy. The large and ever growing circle of civic organizations recruits unemployed youth and forced early retirees into volunteer work of care for the elderly and the sick. The recruitment is heavily mediated and partially subsidized by the state. She implies, in effect, a heavy moral pressure from the state for people to participate in the volunteer activities. The specific cultural mechanism may involve the appeal to the Catholic and the patriotic traditions in what is a relatively secular society.

In the US, similarly, there is a special federal agency with over \$1 billion annual budget, the Corporation for National and Community Services. It commands a volunteer corps of 5 million Americans through its core programs (Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Social Innovation Fund). That is not all, of course, for over 25 % of all Americans volunteer somewhere sometimes.<sup>22</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics report that 62.8 million people volunteered through or for an organization in 2013, and they spend an average of 50 h volunteering. The monetary estimate of their contributions is \$173 billion.<sup>23</sup> Considering that American GDP is about \$17 trillion, that's roughly 1 % of the entire GDP. The ability to organize millions of people into productive activities is the testimony of viability of the mode of production based on unwaged labor. The existence of a large and growing sector of the economy gives some credence to the idea that it may grow further, and partially replace some of the waged labor.

As the jobless society becomes more real, we can tell it is not going to be filled with leisure. This is where I refuse to embrace the no-precedent fantasies of the society of leisure. More likely, it will be a world with very few people holding very good jobs, while most people volunteering under moral pressure from and with intensive involvement by the

<sup>22</sup> Corporation for national service (2006), *Volunteer Growth In America: A Review Of Trends Since 1974* [http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/06\\_1203\\_volunteer\\_growth.pdf](http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/06_1203_volunteer_growth.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/pressroom/value\\_states.cfm](http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/pressroom/value_states.cfm).

state. The cultural mechanisms that extract tremendous quantities of domestic and child-rearing labor from women are all here, and they are expanding. I don't want to portray the jobless society as one that solved its social problems and obtained justice. Rather, the prediction is that the phenomenon of the invisible labor will endure and expand.

Such a world may look more or less appealing, depending on one's values and fears. And yet it seems to be the natural evolution of power technologies that were exposed by Michelle Foucault. His works demonstrated the expansion of the softer, less dramatic applications of pain among people. In the *Care of the Self*, he goes further, implying that the very structure of the self is an extension of the power technique. The waged labor does not fit neatly in Foucault's narrative. It seems to be an entirely different class of power technologies, based not on gentle, hidden allocation of pain and surveillance. Wage labor seems to be mainly contractual. The shift from unwaged compulsory labor to the waged labor looks to be outside of, or parallel to the Foucauldian theoretical framework. It may be the case that the Foucauldian power technologies are reestablishing themselves within the world of mainstream labor. Contemporary volunteerism more resembles the medieval notions of service than waged labor. It is fueled by moral considerations, the sense of duty and honor. Those qualities require cultivation.

What makes a good volunteer? It is someone susceptible to the moral pressures in the first place. A volunteer is someone moved by ethical considerations, and capable of empathy. At the same time, volunteers must be able to extract enough pleasure from their work to make it motivating. They can do it through social contacts, or simply by engaging their minds and creative impulses. In other words, volunteer is someone who is able to want to be engaged.

Volunteers should also have some skills, of course. The schoolmaster's welcome word can also include: "School is a place where we learn how to read, write, and count in order to help other people who need your help."

## Self-Design

Boris Groys examines the problem of self-design in art, and makes the following observation about the contemporary culture:

Today, this has become a general, all-pervasive problem with which everyone—and not just politicians, movie stars, and celebrities—is confronted. Today, everyone is subjected to an aesthetic evaluation—everyone is required to take aesthetic responsibility for his or her appearance in the world, for his or her self-design. Where it was once a privilege and a burden for the chosen few, in our time self-design has come to be the mass cultural practice par excellence. The virtual space of the Internet is primarily an arena in which my website on Facebook is permanently designed and redesigned to be presented on YouTube—and vice versa. But likewise in the real—or, let's say, analog—world, one is expected to be responsible for the image that he or she presents to the gaze of others. It could even be said that self-design is a practice that unites artist and audience alike in the most radical way: though not everyone produces artworks, everyone is an artwork. At the same time, everyone is expected to be his or her own author.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Boris Groys, "Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility", *e-flux* 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/self-design-and-aesthetic-responsibility/>.

The main point of Groys' essay is different; it has to do with the production of sincerity and the symbolic suicide of the author. I want to take, however, expand on his idea that most people now create their own lives as an artistic object for the purposes of this paper. A piece of art is by definition a way of escaping the utilitarian purpose of an object produced by an artist. The dream of aesthetization of human life has a very long history indeed. For just one illustration, John Adams in his famous letter to Abigail, wrote:

I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine.<sup>25</sup>

Adams was anxious to get to the arts right away, but then crossed them over and inserted a whole generation between himself and the arts. It makes a better rhetorical sense, and of course, Adams was very conscious of the probability that other people—many other people—will eventually read his paper. In this respect, he was not unlike a contemporary Facebook user. The utopian thinkers of the past who imagined people of the future preoccupied with arts could not have imagined how right and how wrong they are. It turned out to be not tapestry or porcelain, but an exhibitionist and yet profoundly democratic art of self-creation. The vanity of self-presentation was not, of course, something completely unknown to the old thinkers. And I suspect Adams would have been an avid Facebook user if it were available.

Groys' larger point is that there cannot be traditional art anymore, not in a sense of producing things of beauty. He points out that such a regime requires the sacred in art. "Poorly made idols and badly painted icons were in fact also part of this sacred order, and to dispose of any of them out would have been sacrilegious. Thus, within a specific religious tradition, artworks have their own individual, "inner" value, independent of the public's aesthetic judgment... By contrast, the secularization of art entails its radical devaluation."<sup>26</sup> The value is now infused exclusively by the audience and is contained only in the relational space between the artist and the audience. The artistic sensibility has now migrated twice—from the artistic creation to the creator and from an elite creator to the mass creator.

The mass self-design presents itself through a new kind of activity on the social media platforms. Facebooking a profoundly social activity, because each individual post or comment requires spectators, and is meaningless without the "like" button. The ecology of selective mutual liking consists of social gestures of approval or dismissal. The process is not at all new; it has been described in Charles Taylor's influential work on the identity formation within the multicultural society: "People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us."<sup>27</sup> But even later in life the significant others keep forming our identity, because they are included in our personal life experiences and our ongoing internal dialogues. "If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes part of my identity."<sup>28</sup> There is little new about the

<sup>25</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, post 12 May 1780, <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17800512jasecond>.

<sup>26</sup> Groys, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* 32.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* 34.

interplay between recognition by others and constructing one's own identity. Perhaps we should only mention that the circle of significant others tend to expand and we keep them in our lives longer. It seems obvious that social media has allowed for a much richer range of possible identities. Social media is a world of expansive sociality that for the first time transcended the limitations of physical proximity.

Facebooking is a careful construction of the self-image, primarily through three kinds of roles and associated with the activities. It is easy to see that the roles are difficult to distinguish, and they are merely directions, not separate categories.

1. *Curator* (reposting) an act of pointing to content, created by others (news items, trivia, pictures, sayings, etc.). In this capacity one is positioned as a curator, who invites others in one's own media gallery space. A curator should be able to sift through numerous items, make a judgement on what is what is not amusing to his circle of friends, what fits with one's own identity and also what is constitutive of one's identity. In a sense, I am what I repost. This may become a very time-consuming, skillful, and instantly gratifying activity.
2. *Content creator* (original posts, blogs, quips, photos, poems, observations, comments on other's postings). This role is closer to that of a traditional author, although the key difference is that the content is presented within the constraints of self-design, and therefore cannot deviate too much from other original content in tone, philosophy, and aesthetic sensibility. Producing original content is the most labor-intensive kind of self-design, but it creates an explicit claim to craftsmanship, to an ability to produce. Some of the original content can look like scholarship or political thought, but it does not take away the aesthetic aspect of social media production, for its main purpose is to solicit the approving gaze of the audience.
3. *The adventurer*, or a reporter is a person in whose life something happens—birthdays, and marriages, birth of children, graduation from school, new jobs, illness and recovery, but also tragedy and catharsis, travel, new experiences, foods, encounters. Those who happen to be present at extreme situations like wars, revolutions, or natural cataclysms, will sometimes get access to large adventure resource. While the basis for the adventurer narrative is in events largely not under direct control of the adventurer, it is no less an authorial activity that the first two. It is the adventurer's selection and presentation of events, his evaluations that contribute to self-design. For example, a man may want to include the story of colonoscopy to contribute to the concept of a funny and self-deprecating guy. While another person may use the episode to critique the health care system, and a third will skip the mention of it altogether. In all cases, the adventurer serves as a means for others to increase the level of eventfulness in their lives. An eyewitness account of someone personally known has always been distinct from storytelling by fiction, or by people personally unknown to us? Like writers or professional reporters.

All three essential Facebook activities intermingle and weave one complex, highly intentional comic strip of one's life. They seem to confirm Groys' hypothesis about the shift towards self-design as a mass phenomenon. Indeed, active users of Facebook seem to be engaging in a life-long project, organized as a construction of an autobiographic multimedia narrative, with no other motivation than presenting it as an artistic endeavor. Of course, plenty of people subsume this activity to other aims, as a means of public relations and advertisement. It definitely can help sell whatever one is selling, raise Hirsh, or find a mate. But all three roles are focused on creating a compound self-image, minutely calibrated against the audience's perception. It is very similar to what contemporary artists

do, manufacturing the story of their own lives, for which objects or texts they produce are mere illustrations.

The massification of artistic self-creation represents an important new development. We no longer produce an identity for the sense of self-worth, so we may be better citizens, parents, workers, or consumers. Self-design takes on a whole new, larger meaning of a monumental art piece, created out of one's own entire life. The means is becoming the end. The identity we produce is a life-long project, a continuous memoir. And it does not have to be "authentic" as Taylor imagines; it has to look good and acquire some coherence. It is not a matter of choice, but a matter of work. The logic of replacing meaning in a behavior when the old one becomes irrelevant, described in the previous section, is also applicable to the entire human life. Self-design no more and no less than a new quest for the meaning of life.

The mass self-design promises our civilization a chance to fly over the abyss of self-destructing hedonism and consumerism without the recourse to the archaic religious forms of meaning-making. It gives another kind of discipline and structure to human life, and extends the lease on dignity for individual and social human life. One does not need to be a hero, an exception to treat one's life as a worthy project.

Facebook, like other media platforms, is an incidental instrument in the aesthetization of human life, although its emergence in time for the plausible jobless society is not an accident. It certainly gave many people new sources of meaningful existence, especially for people who suffered from underemployment, social exclusion, limited mobility, or limited social contacts. I doubt Facebook's product developers have read Groys and understand the promise of the self-design. Yet they keep adding certain features that make the task of creating the story of one's life easier and more meaningful. For example, within a couple of years, they have added a more navigable timeline, the thorough (although editable) record of one's posts and engagements, and flashbacks "you posted this a year ago."

In the future, they could think of features that could imitate other literary genres: for example, a special feature for linking disjointed adventure into series, so it is easier to follow. I should be able to find all food postings of my friend, but not his theater commentaries. Fb should create vehicles for safe and sanctioned trolling, if they were paying attention to Bakhtinian theory of carnival. We need different modes of existence, among which carnival is one of the most important. It is a place of irreverent laughter and reversal of social roles, but it can only work if limited in time and space. They would need to figure out how one can tag postings with significant events of one's life in accordance with the anthropological markings of life cycle events: proms, weddings, children, funerals. And finally, Facebook can actually help people create their online versions by pointing out what is lacking, and what is too much, or where one's strengths and weaknesses are.

I am not sure if kindergarteners would understand, but help me think of a simpler way of saying: "School is a place where we learn how to read, write, and count in order to write a story of who you are so others can understand."

## The Twenty-First Century Motives

My claim here is that we can address the problem of education for optional labor. We can do it by looking closely at prosumption, volunteerism, self-design and whatever other kinds of optional labor we can find. It is important to note that the optional labor is less visible

than the waged labor; it is disguised as leisure or service, or art. The increase of invisibility opens up additional possibilities of exploitation, just like the invisibility of domestic labor of mothers or the affective labor of teaching. Let us be aware of the dangers. Consider the child-rearing labor of mothers. It is both fulfilling and enjoyable, and at the same time may be oppressive and diminishing, if it is rendered in terms of service, if it prevents women from developing their other capacities. In a similar way, the gentle pressures of the new labor regime may become overburdening and in some way limiting—both despite and because they pertain to optional—and in theory free—labor. I am afraid, real solutions lie beyond education, but we can and should prevent students into becoming too deeply immersed with one or another form of optional labor. Education should prevent them from becoming a one-purpose person, even if they enjoy or feel obligated to pursue their own passions. In other words, Dewey's concerns, mentioned above do not go away just because the labor arrangements change. And education does not necessarily become more Deweyan, when humanity solves its economic problem. And we still must try to prepare education for changes. Today's children will grow up to be not as much good producers, but good prosumers, volunteers, and authors of their own life stories. Let us consider how we can help them to do that.

It seems to me that the focus on skills in the twenty-first century skills movement may be limited to a certain segment of education that prepares minority of people for traditional jobs. The economy of tomorrow will deal with the choosy all-volunteer work force. If I was in the big business, I would stop pressuring public education into delivering a particular set of skills. Rather, I would think about what kind of product and work environment I can create to attract people who really don't have to come to me. Some of the most innovative employers started to do that some time ago, and the trend is likely to expand.

If I was in government, I would plan how to move the educational system away from the discourse of skills and closer to the discourse of motivation. This is not because of some fanciful theoretical speculation. Far from it; we have a concrete problem to solve. We have very little expertise in preparing a person to be active and engaged without the disciplining pressures of labor market. Keynes warns us that what he called the idle classes of the past also *do not* provide a good model for the life without labor:

To judge from the behaviour and the achievements of the wealthy classes to-day in any quarter of the world, the outlook is very depressing! For these are, so to speak, our advance guard—those who are spying out the promised land for the rest of us and pitching their camp there. For they have most of them failed disastrously, so it seems to me—those who have an independent income but no associations or duties or ties—to solve the problem which has been set them.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, the past experiments in living without work have shown how difficult the task actually is. Now we must repeat it on a grand scale for a much larger group of people. If we fail to do that, we risk turning our very advantage into a social calamity. If we simply expand 20-fold our current class of unemployed, one can expect an unprecedented escalation of social tensions. Those problems are only partially a result of absolute poverty; they are also significantly related to a loss of meaning by individuals, by the inability of social systems to cope with the unemployed beyond feeding and sheltering. Education has a fortune or misfortune to deal with the future in an immediate and direct way. People of the future sit at their desks in our classrooms. We have to be the forerunners, not catchers-up.

---

<sup>29</sup> Keynes.

Education must instill in children the lust for life, the drive to engage, and be active, sophisticated prosumers with rich aesthetic and ethical values. Education is to produce a more discerning person, attuned to difference; a more self-aware person. It is not a stretch to imagine how curriculum can focus around one's storyline on Facebook, Renren or whatever future digital canvas of human life will be available. The question for children will not be "What will you do when you grow up," because they may not end up doing anything productive. The entire rift between the future and the present that is so problematic for schooling may be diminished. Instead, the question should be—what will you be able to put on Facebook? What should you know, can do, can evaluate and select, what experiences must you have to become someone interesting? What will you do to contribute to the society, if it had nothing to do with wages? What is your cause and your passion?

School as it is now is an adventure, a series of trials: from kickball in elementary, to lockers of the junior high, through friendships, fights, and loves to the prom, and the exams. A careful design of school experience will make it more eventful, more adventurous, more documented, more socially engaged, and more self-directed.

Studies in Philosophy & Education is a copyright of Springer, 2017. All Rights Reserved.